

**Wednesday
24 January 2024**

**Volume 744
No. 37**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 24 January 2024

House of Commons

Wednesday 24 January 2024

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Horizon: Prosecution of Postmasters

1. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with the Advocate General for Scotland on the prosecution of postmasters using evidence from the Horizon IT system. [901048]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): As you know, Mr Speaker, the Secretary of State has suffered a family bereavement this week, so will not be with us today. I am sure that the whole House will wish to send him and his family our deepest condolences. Can we also pause to think about the communities, including those in my own area in the Scottish borders, that have been devastated by the recent storms? I know that the emergency services, council and power company workers are supporting them as best they can. Lastly, Mr Speaker, I wish you a happy Burns night, which will be celebrated around the world tomorrow.

The ongoing situation with the Post Office and Horizon is clearly very serious. We need to ensure that all sub-postmasters wrongly prosecuted finally get justice, no matter where they reside in the UK. I assure the hon. Lady that my officials are working at pace with the office of the Advocate General and other key UK Government Departments to consider the issues around wrongful convictions.

Mary Glendon: In Scotland, these prosecutions were carried out by the Crown Office and the procurator fiscal. Ministers of the Crown were made aware of concerns around potentially unsafe prosecutions in 2013. Can the Minister tell the House why it took so long for the prosecutions to be halted and for previous convictions to be reviewed?

John Lamont: The Horizon scandal is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in this country's history, with hundreds of people having their lives ruined and reputations dragged through the mud. The Prime Minister has announced new laws that will be introduced to ensure that those wrongly convicted are exonerated and swiftly compensated here in England. As the hon. Lady will know, the administration of justice is devolved, but the UK Government are in contact with the Scottish Government to explore the most effective way to exonerate and compensate those innocent people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): I pass the thoughts of the Opposition to the Secretary of State at this difficult time, and join the Minister in his comments about all those affected by flooding.

The scandal of the unjustified prosecution of sub-postmasters the length and breadth of this country is almost beyond words. Although it should not have taken a TV drama to get action, it is good that those found guilty in England will now have their convictions quashed, but meanwhile, in Scotland, we are no clearer on how those wrongly convicted will get justice. The First Minister initially claimed that he would be happy for this Parliament to legislate for every victim across the UK, but his Lord Advocate then said that she does not support blanket exoneration. What is the Minister doing to ensure that those who were wrongly convicted in Scotland finally get the justice they deserve?

John Lamont: Officials from the UK Government are working with their counterparts from the various devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, to fully understand the legislative options that are available across the respective jurisdictions. I reassure the hon. Member that it remains a priority for all concerned to ensure that those sub-postmasters receive justice, and the compensation to which they are entitled, as quickly as possible, irrespective of where they live in the United Kingdom.

Oil and Gas Industry

2. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the oil and gas industry in Scotland. [901049]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Oil and gas is, and will remain, a vital sector for the UK. The UK Government are committed to supporting the industry. That is why last week I attended the Grangemouth future industries board with other UK and Scottish Government Ministers on the transformation of the Grangemouth oil refinery. The introduction of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill demonstrates our ongoing investment in the industry.

Alexander Stafford: My hon. Friend knows that Scotland has the potential to be one of the world's most advanced producers of hydrogen, and oil and gas companies are playing an important role in that transition. What is the Department doing to support oil and gas companies, which employ a huge number of people in Scotland and in my seat of Rother Valley, in building their hydrogen production, transmission and use capabilities, to ramp up the production of hydrogen so that we can get more of the low-carbon energy that we so need?

John Lamont: We anticipate that by 2030 the UK's growing hydrogen sector could support more than 12,000 jobs and unlock £11 billion worth of private investment. Our hydrogen production delivery road map sets out proposals for annual hydrogen allocation rounds from 2025 to 2030, helping to provide certainty for the industry. In December, we announced the results of hydrogen allocation round 1, with Scotland fielding two successful projects.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The renewables sector provides the greatest job growth for Scotland's energy sector, with the number of jobs in the renewables sector in Scotland growing by more than 50% in 2021. The future of Scotland's job security, energy and economy lies with renewables. When will the UK Government finally match support for the Scottish Government's £500 million just transition fund?

John Lamont: The SNP's position on energy, particularly in relation to oil and gas, is frankly all over the place. We do not know where the First Minister of Scotland stands on this. He described developing Rosebank as "the wrong decision", but now seems to think that oil reserves can fund capital investment in an independent Scotland. We fully recognise the importance of the energy sector to Scotland. That includes oil and gas and renewables. I will continue to work with all parts of the energy sector to develop that for the Scottish economy.

Levelling Up

3. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of levelling up in Scotland. [901050]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The UK Government's funding for levelling up has now reached more than £2.9 billion in Scotland. That includes almost £900 million of new funding announced last year. That is the equivalent of £535 per person in Scotland, and the total is set to rise with millions of pounds of further investment in 2024.

Chris Law: The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), will meet me on Friday, but sadly that is not a courtesy that has been extended to the leader of Dundee City Council, who has repeatedly invited the Minister to a roundtable in the city to discuss funding that is critical to projects such as the Eden Project, and the life sciences innovation district among others. I have sought to continue the long-term investment and regeneration of the city through those projects in the Tay Cities region deal. Will the Minister assure me that he will urge his colleague to include those in our discussions on Friday and that his dreadful lack of engagement is from a UK Government that are committed to levelling up, not an outgoing Government winding down?

John Lamont: The UK Government are investing more than £60 million in projects in Dundee, and those projects have been identified as key priorities by Dundee City Council and other local partners. The hon. Member mentions the leader of Dundee City Council. After receiving £20 million for Dundee from UK levelling-up funds, the SNP leader of Dundee council recently said,

"This is just the UK Government element. I'm pursuing the Scottish Government as well, because we need both governments to work with us if we're to make significant economic inroads into the challenges we face."

I hope the hon. Member will agree to write a joint letter with me to his SNP colleagues in Holyrood asking, "Where is the money?"

Mr Speaker: We now come to SNP spokesperson.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On behalf of myself and my colleagues, I ask the Minister to also convey our condolences to the Secretary of State. We were given assurances prior to Brexit that the structural funds that provide the capital funding for Scotland would be replaced by specific levelling-up and shared prosperity funding after Brexit. Can the Minister say how that funding from those sources compares to what it was prior to leaving the EU?

John Lamont: Four years since the United Kingdom left the EU, the UK Government have announced more than £1.4 billion for new levelling-up initiatives across Scotland. That exceeds the entire seven-year budget for the EU structural and investment funds for Scotland for 2014 to 2020—roughly £780 million of funding—so I do not accept the analysis the hon. Member presents.

Tommy Sheppard: Well, no, it does not actually, because this Government have a tendency to draw all sources of capital funding into its levelling-up myth. I am talking about the specific levelling-up fund and the shared prosperity fund. They have given Scotland £471 million and £212 million respectively. That is exactly £98 million short of the £780 million that came from the EU structural funds, so when can we have the money please?

John Lamont: The hon. Member is simply not correct: £2.9 billion has been invested by this Government into communities the length and breadth of Scotland. I know that SNP Members have fought tooth and nail to stop that investment being delivered to those local communities, but this Conservative Government will continue to invest directly into Scotland.

Nursing Bursaries

4. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Scottish Government on funding for nursing bursaries for those studying in Scotland. [901051]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Funding policies for those studying in Scotland, including nursing students, is a matter for the Scottish Government. The UK Government support collaboration between our nations to share best practice and provide better healthcare services. We would be open to future discussions with the Scottish Government about this matter.

Karin Smyth: My constituent has been denied additional funding for her nursing degree because she is domiciled in England but studying in Scotland, whereas those studying in England can access the funding regardless of where they are domiciled. What advice can the Government give me to help my constituent?

John Lamont: Nursing bursaries for those wishing to study in Scotland are a matter for the Scottish Government. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government only provide bursary support for Scottish-domiciled nursing students, and only if they are enrolled in a course that leads to a diploma in Scotland. In contrast, the UK Government ensure that the learning support fund is available to all UK students studying at English universities, regardless of where they are domiciled. I will be happy, on behalf of the hon. Lady, to set up a meeting with my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to see how we might be able to pursue the matter further.

Leaving the EU: Import and Export Requirements

5. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Whether he has made a recent assessment of the impact of import and export requirements following the UK's exit from the EU on Scottish businesses. [R]
[901052]

12. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Whether he has made a recent assessment of the impact of import and export requirements following the UK's exit from the EU on Scottish businesses. [901059]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The latest official figures speak for themselves and show sustained increases in both the import and export of goods between Scotland and the EU, with healthy results for services too.

Douglas Chapman: The Brexit pain continues, with £140 billion wiped off the UK economy and more regulation making it tough for exporters. Relative to similarly sized countries, Scotland's exports are under real pressure. Two themes in the First Minister's industrial strategy were to become an independent nation and to rejoin the EU. All the evidence points to the fact that that is the correct course of action, does it not?

John Lamont: No, it does not. Scotland continues to punch above its weight in exports, goods and services and foreign direct investment. Trade is now well above pre-Brexit levels.

Carol Monaghan: According to the Government's own figures, new Brexit controls will cost the UK £330 million. Businesses in Glasgow are telling me they are already suffering from increased costs and red tape when importing parts and exporting goods. Can the Minister explain to businesses in my Glasgow North West constituency how Brexit is good for them?

John Lamont: The hon. Lady and the SNP really do have a brass neck speaking about business costs, given their own policy of setting up a hard border at Berwick, next to my constituency. That would risk thousands of jobs and force thousands of companies out of business—it would be a most damaging and reckless economic step. We will work through any short-term issues, but the answer is not the long-term decline proposed by the SNP.

Scottish Economy

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to help support the Scottish economy. [901053]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Supporting economic growth in Scotland remains a core priority of the Scotland Office. We are focused on long-term economic growth, generating more jobs and boosting business investment. That is exemplified by investment of up to £372 million in the Scottish freeport and investment zones programmes, on top of our £1.5 billion-worth of investment into growth deals across the whole of Scotland.

Kerry McCarthy: The former right hon. Member for Kingswood and Government net zero tsar, Chris Skidmore, said that what businesses and investors need from the Government is certainty, clarity, consistency and continuity. Never has that been more true than in Scotland, where there is huge potential for businesses and communities to flourish as a result of the green transition. However, they are not getting the certainty, clarity, consistency and continuity that they need from this Government, are they?

John Lamont: I do not accept that analysis. For example, the UK has a world-leading ambition to deploy up to 50 GW of offshore wind by the year 2030, with up to 5 GW coming from offshore floating wind. Offshore wind provides secure, domestically generated electricity and will play a key role in decarbonising the UK power system by 2035, achieving net zero by 2050. I do not share the hon. Lady's analysis of this Government's focus in that area.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does the Minister share my frustration that, while his Department is working to support the Scottish economy, the SNP is hitting it with higher taxes and is not supporting vital sectors such as hospitality in the way that is happening in England?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Sadly the SNP's sole focus seems to be independence referendums and making Scotland the part of the United Kingdom with the highest tax. I see that every day of the week in my constituency, as people find it increasingly difficult to justify remaining in Scotland when they are paying so much more tax compared with the rest of the UK while getting less good public services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I join the Minister in passing on our condolences to the Secretary of State and his family on their bereavement. I also wish everyone a happy Burns day for tomorrow. I thank the wonderful Ayrshire musicians in the Public Gallery, who treated us to some entertainment last night.

Since the Government have been in power, working people have paid on average 10p on the pound more in tax. The supposed party of low tax has created the highest tax burden on working people in 70 years, making this the biggest tax-raising Parliament since records began. In Scotland, the SNP has looked at that tax burden and said, "Hold my beer," as everyone earning more than £28,000 pays even more tax than they would in England. What impact does the Minister think that historically high tax burden has on the Scottish economy?

John Lamont: The Government remain focused on reducing the tax burden when it is prudent to do so, but as the hon. Gentleman identifies, we have an additional challenge in Scotland in the high tax agenda put forward by the SNP Scottish Government. I share his concerns about the impact that that is having on the ability of the Scottish economy to perform to its full potential.

Ian Murray: The Minister seems to think that having your pocket picked for £10 and getting £2 back is something to be grateful for. The fact is that working people all across the country, including in Scotland, are

paying for the Tories' crashing of the economy. We know that the Barnett formula results in an additional £19 billion of public spending in Scotland's economy, but last week *The National* reported that the SNP was being encouraged by its sister party in Wales to join the campaign to ditch the funding formula.

Sixteen years of SNP Government have left Scotland's public finances with a £1 billion black hole. We are in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis in generations, yet historically high taxes are already being imposed on working people to pay for it. Losing the Barnett formula would devastate Scotland's public finances and economy like nothing we have seen before. Will the Minister join me in demanding that the SNP rule out the policy to bin the Barnett formula?

John Lamont: The biggest enemy of the Barnett formula and of devolution in Scotland is the SNP. It wants to rip up the devolution settlement and stop the Barnett formula, which results in millions of pounds of extra investment going into Scotland each year. The Conservative Government remain absolutely committed to devolution, the Barnett formula and more investment into Scotland.

Co-operation with Northern Ireland Businesses

7. **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Whether he is taking steps to promote co-operation between businesses in Scotland and Northern Ireland. [901054]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The United Kingdom Government have taken action to make trade between Scotland and Northern Ireland easier. The UK Government have also committed to providing funding to deliver targeted improvements to the A75. That will provide better links between the Cairnryan ferry terminals serving Northern Ireland and south-west Scotland, benefiting businesses on both sides of the north channel.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will, like many, understand that the economic powerhouse of the United Kingdom is usually centred in the south-east of England, to the detriment of the south-west of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Will he do more to ensure that that small 12-mile stretch of water between Scotland and Northern Ireland is bridged in business terms by greater co-operation and expansion opportunities for people on either side of it?

John Lamont: The hon. Member makes an important point. I fully recognise the strong links between south Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the potential to enhance those economic ties is great. Improved transport links, including the A75 and ferry links, are undoubtedly part of that. I look forward to working with him to see how we might be able to enhance and improve those links.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Scottish businesses would give their right arm to have the arrangements that Northern Irish business have,

with their access to the single market and all the competitive advantages that that brings. The Prime Minister has described Northern Ireland as one of the "world's most exciting economic zones".

Does the Minister agree with that, and what is he doing to ensure that Scotland gets the same arrangements?

John Lamont: I thought that the hon. Member was going to stand up and tell me how great the House of Lords is, a bit like his colleague the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), in a sort of pre-emptive job application.

Scotland is not Northern Ireland and does not share a land border with an EU country. It is disappointing that the SNP is seeking to play party politics with the situation in Northern Ireland, which, as the SNP well knows, has a unique place in the United Kingdom, and we will protect that.

Promoting Scotland Overseas

8. **Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on promoting Scotland overseas. [901055]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The UK Government work tirelessly to promote Scottish interests around the world through our extensive diplomatic network, forging business links and generating trade and investment. Our response to the Scottish Affairs Committee's recent inquiry on Scotland's international position highlights the extensive efforts we undertake to achieve this.

Alyn Smith: I am afraid that I do not share the Minister's Panglossian view of this issue. Does he share my concern about recently published figures that show that, in the years 2019 to 2021, Scottish exports to the EU fell from £16.95 billion to £14.97 billion? Whatever the UK Government are doing, it is not working, so the Scottish Government have a pressing need to promote ourselves overseas for the sake of our economy and our society. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to increase that overseas promotion, not cut it back due to domestic wrangles?

John Lamont: Given the hon. Member's interest in this area, perhaps he could speak with his SNP colleagues in the Scottish Parliament. They are cutting funding to South of Scotland Enterprise, which will mean less support for businesses in the south of Scotland to grow, innovate and export. Perhaps he could tell the First Minister of Scotland that promoting Scotland overseas begins with supporting businesses at home in Scotland.

Ambulance Waiting Times

9. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on ambulance waiting times in Scotland. [901056]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The UK Government recognise the important job that all NHS workers do, including those in the ambulance service. I see that every day of the week in my own constituency in the Scottish Borders.

The UK Government would be open to exploring with the Scottish Government how we can work together and share best practice to reduce ambulance waiting times in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Jamie Stone: Last year in Scotland, almost 3,000 people had to wait more than eight hours for an ambulance, but in recent days, women who might have to travel a two and a half hour drive to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness to give birth or for specialist treatment have not been able to travel at all, because the roads have been closed owing to the terrible weather we have had. Does the Minister share my deep anxiety for any woman who lives over 100 miles from Raigmore Hospital?

John Lamont: I share the hon. Member's concerns and agree that those long distances are not acceptable, but it tells us all we need to know about the NHS in rural Scotland. NHS Highland has said that it will need to substantially reduce spend following the SNP Government's budget in December. The SNP Government are taking a slash-and-burn approach to the rural NHS across Scotland.

Scottish Economy: Autumn Statement 2023

10. **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the autumn statement 2023 on the Scottish economy. [901057]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): The autumn statement supported families and set out measures to grow the Scottish economy. With a stronger fiscal outlook, the Government have the space to cut taxes for hard-working people and businesses. That is highlighted by cuts to national insurance, benefiting 2.4 million people in Scotland, and the extension of full expensing, ensuring that the UK has one of the most competitive business tax regimes in the world.

Mr Speaker: Order. Will Members please not walk in front of other Members while they are asking questions?

Douglas Ross: The Minister is correct that the autumn statement from this UK Conservative Government provided tax cuts for millions of Scots, provided support for businesses and invested to grow the economy. That was in stark contrast to the SNP's budget last month, which hiked taxes on hard-working Scots, failed to pass on support to the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors, and has been widely criticised across Scotland. Does the Minister agree, as I do, with Sir Tom Hunter, who said at the weekend that the business community in Scotland does not believe that the SNP has its back, and does he agree that that must change?

John Lamont: I agree with my hon. Friend, and Sir Tom is right too. Traders in Scotland have accused the SNP Government of undermining the rejuvenation of high streets across Scotland with their tax hike of 6.7% through business rates. The SNP must stop attacking employers and high-street traders who are already under tremendous financial strain because of the SNP's mismanagement of Scotland's economy.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Despite devolution rendering it pointless, the budget of the Scotland Office, along with that of the Attorney

General, has jumped by over £3 million since 2018-19—it leapt up by £1.2 million just last year—while the Scottish Government's budget allocation suffered a real-terms cut. Around 80 people currently work for the Scotland Office in Queen Elizabeth House alone, along with around 30 civil servants from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. What on earth are they doing, and how does the Minister justify that to the Scottish taxpayer?

John Lamont: The team at the Scotland Office, both in Dover House and in Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh, are doing a tremendous job supporting Scotland across the United Kingdom and around the world. I would be very happy to welcome the hon. Lady to meet some of them with me, so that she can understand more clearly the important work that they do on our behalf across the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. That completes Scottish questions. We now come to Prime Minister's questions, but I just want to announce to the House that we are joined today by the President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic—welcome.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [901168] **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 24 January.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I know that Members across the House will want to join me in offering our best wishes to His Majesty the King and Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, this afternoon I shall be meeting the extraordinary 100-year-old holocaust survivor Lily Ebert. Lily promised that, if she survived Auschwitz, she would tell the world the truth of what happened. Never has such a promise been so profoundly fulfilled. As we prepare to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on Saturday, I am sure the whole House will join me in reaffirming our promise to Lily that we will never forget the holocaust and we will carry forward her life's work for generations to come.

Richard Thomson: Can I echo the Prime Minister's comments on International Holocaust Memorial Day?

My constituents, like all of our constituents, rely on the Royal Mail to deliver important items of mail and packages, and for people to run their businesses, so they will be very alarmed to learn of the proposal from Ofcom that Royal Mail might be allowed to cut the number of days that it will provide that service. Will the Prime Minister give a commitment to me here today that, on his watch, there will be no reduction in the postal services provided by the Royal Mail in Scotland or anywhere else?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of the Royal Mail's universal service obligation. As the hon. Member will have heard this morning from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), we remain absolutely committed to ensuring that it remains as it is.

Q3. [901170] **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): The Lib Dem-run council in Eastleigh has just received a report from its external auditors warning of the possibility of fraud and ignoring whistleblowers who tried to warn it. Does the Prime Minister agree that Lib Dem leaders who shun accountability, shun transparency and simply say, "Not me, guv," should start showing some remorse and responsibility, or make way for those who will?

The Prime Minister: My—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the answer.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important matter to the people of Eastleigh, which I was pleased to discuss with him on my recent visit to his area, and I know that the contents of the report are deeply concerning. It is disappointing to see this Lib Dem-run council rack up debt with absolutely no plan for how to fund it. The council has been issued with a best value notice, and I know that he is talking to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which will be monitoring this situation closely.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I join the Prime Minister in his comments about His Majesty the King and Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, and in his comments about Holocaust Memorial Day? "Never again" must be said more defiantly this year, as it is said every year.

Last week, we lost Sir Tony Lloyd, a true public servant who touched the lives of many people across the House and across the country. I am glad that his family were here yesterday to hear the many tributes to and memories of Tony. He will be greatly missed.

The Prime Minister has had quite a week—from endlessly fighting with his own MPs to collapsing in laughter when he was asked by a member of the public about NHS waiting lists—so I was glad to hear that he managed to take some time off—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I wanted to hear the Prime Minister, and I am certainly going to hear the Leader of the Opposition. Those on the Conservative Benches who do not want to hear him can certainly leave. That is how it is going to be, so get in order. Some of you will be wanting to catch my eye again, and that is not a good way to do it.

Keir Starmer: I love this quaint tradition where the more they slag him off behind his back, the louder they cheer him here.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: The same goes for those on the Labour Benches. You can have a joint cup of tea.

Keir Starmer: I was glad to see that the Prime Minister managed to get some time off yesterday afternoon to kick back, relax and accidentally record a candid video for Nigel Farage. The only thing missing from that punishing schedule is any sort of governing or leadership. So was he surprised to see one of his own MPs say,

"He does not get what Britain needs. And he is not listening to what...people want."?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about what Britain needs, what Britain wants and what Britain values—and that from the man who takes the knee, who wanted to abolish the monarchy, and who still does not know what a woman is. Just this week, one of his Front Benchers said that they backed teaching divisive white privilege in our schools. Looking at his record, it is crystal clear which one of us does not get Britain's values.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister spouts so much nonsense, no wonder they are giving up on him. Even now, as his Government crumble around him and his own MPs point out that he is out of touch and has no plan for growth, crime or building houses, the Prime Minister is sticking to his one-man Pollyanna show—everything is fine; people should be grateful for him! The trouble is that no one is buying it. Does he actually understand why his own MPs say that he does not understand Britain, and that he is an "obstacle to recovery"?

The Prime Minister: Again, the right hon. and learned Gentleman calls it nonsense, but these are his positions. He does not want to talk about it, but these are the facts. He chose to represent a now-proscribed terrorist group. He chose to campaign against the deportation of foreign national offenders, just like he chose to serve the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). That is his record, those are his values, and that is exactly how he should be judged.

Keir Starmer: In 2008, I was the Director of Public Prosecutions, putting terrorists and murderers in jail. The Prime Minister was making millions betting on the misery of working people during the financial crisis. We have seen this story time and again with this lot: party first, country second. Safely ensconced in Westminster, they get down to the real business of fighting each other to death. The country is forced to endure their division and chaos—the longest episode of "EastEnders" ever put to film.

Meanwhile, this week we discover that Britain is going to be the only major economy that no longer makes its own steel, that the Government are handing out £500 million to make 3,000 steelworkers redundant, and that the parents of thousands are being told that his free childcare promise is nothing but a mirage. Is he not embarrassed that the Tory party is yet again entirely focused on itself?

The Prime Minister: Yet more sniping from the sidelines, Mr Speaker—you can see exactly why Hizb ut-Tahrir hired him in the first place. The right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to talk about these things, but even

members of his own party are now realising that he simply does not have a plan for this country. The hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) said that it is difficult to “identify the purpose” of his leadership, and long-time celebrity backer Steve Coogan recently said that

“he licks his finger, sticks it up in the air, sees which way the wind is blowing”.

Even the Labour party knows that he is not a leader, he is a human weathervane.

Keir Starmer: It is not the sidelines but from behind him that the fire is coming. The Prime Minister can try to blame the Labour party all he wants, but the difference is that I have changed my party; he is bullied by his party. Has he found time in his busy schedule to work out why thousands of parents are being told by their nurseries that they will not get the free childcare that he promised them?

The Prime Minister: Let us see what the Labour party is offering the country. We all know that he does not have many ideas for our country—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: One thing that we do know—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members do not want to push it, do they? No.

The Prime Minister: We do know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is committed to his 2030 decarbonisation promise, which the Opposition say will cost £28 billion. I was reading about it this week. He says that he has changed the party, but one of his team called that promise “an albatross” hanging around their neck—that might have been the shadow Chancellor. But he said they are doubling down on it, and all this is ahead of a crunch meeting this week, we are told, for the Opposition to work out how they will pay for that. I can save them some time, because we all know the answer: higher taxes for the British people.

Keir Starmer: There is only one party that crashed the economy, and they are sitting right there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Holmes, you have had your question already. Obviously you do not want to remain for the rest of questions.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is Mr 25 Tax Rises, and he has nothing to say on childcare. Millions of families will have been listening for an answer, and they got absolutely nothing. He announced the scheme a year ago, claiming that it would get 60,000 parents back into work. Only on Monday this week did he notice that there were, in his words, “some practical issues” with that. Eight weeks before its launch, parents cannot budget, plan for work or make arrangements with their employers. The Prime Minister’s response is to say, “It’s all fine. It’s the fault of the Labour party.” Is this merely a practical issue, or is it yet another example of him simply not understanding how life works for other people?

The Prime Minister: We are delivering the biggest ever expansion of childcare in this country’s history. While millions of parents will benefit from that, it is right that the right hon. and learned Gentleman should come clean with them about the cost that his plans will impose on all of them. He goes on and on about the green promise. He says he wants to keep it, but he does not have a plan to pay for it. What he is really saying is that he will scrap the borrowing associated with it, but he wants to keep the £28 billion of spending. For all those working families who are benefiting from our free childcare, why does he not come clean with them now and be clear that his plans mean it is back to square one and higher taxes for British people?

Keir Starmer: Making steelworkers redundant and failing to provide childcare is not a plan, Prime Minister; it is a farce. He may soon discover that with childcare there is an IT problem, nurseries do not have the spaces, they have not got the staff, there is a black hole in their budgets and there are eight weeks to go. That is not a plan. *[Interruption.]* Government Members can laugh all they like, but families are making plans now. Families are struggling with the cost of living crisis, trying to work out the household budget, balancing spiralling mortgages, prices and eye-watering bills, and then at the last minute they are thrown into chaos because their nursery says that it cannot deliver the free childcare that he promised. He calls that a practical issue, but I prefer the honesty of whichever of his colleagues briefed *The Times* that it was, and I quote, a complete “shit show”. *[Interruption.]* Who was it who briefed that to *The Times*? Hands up! Will the Prime Minister finally realise—

Hon. Members: Too long!

Mr Speaker: Order. I will decide how long the question goes on for. For those who wish not to hear it, I have told you the answer, and I will help you on the way.

Keir Starmer: When will the Prime Minister finally realise that the biggest practical issue facing Britain is the constant farcical incompetence of the Government he leads?

The Prime Minister: Another week with absolutely no ideas for the country and absolutely no plan. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about the cost of living and the economy, but he never actually brings it up, and we all know why: because things are improving and we are making progress. Wages are now rising, debt is on track to be reduced and inflation has more than halved from 11% to 4%. He knows that our plan is working and that his £28 billion tax grab will take Britain back to square one. That is the choice: it is back to square one and higher taxes with him, or a plan that is delivering a brighter future with the Conservatives.

Q4. [901171] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Changing gear, Mr Speaker. Too many oligarchs and kleptocrats are living off ill-gotten gains that are beyond the reach of domestic courts here or in countries such as America. Ever since the 2016 London anti-corruption summit, moves to create an international anti-corruption court have been gathering momentum to plug the gap. It already has support from countries such as Canada, Holland and

Nigeria, and it would fund itself from the fines it charged. Will the Government take the lead in getting it under way, ending impunity for those crooks once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on this issue. As I am sure he will appreciate, establishing a new bespoke institution is a significant endeavour, but I know that he has discussed it with the Foreign Secretary, who will look at the proposals in more detail. In the meantime, as he knows, our Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 has a raft of new measures to crack down on dirty money, and we will shortly publish our second anti-corruption strategy. We will set out ambitious plans for combating corruption both here at home and internationally.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Last night, as Tory MPs were once again fighting among themselves, the public were at home watching John Irvine of ITV News report on footage from Gaza of an unarmed Palestinian man walking under a white flag being shot and killed by the Israel Defence Forces. Such an act constitutes a war crime, does it not?

The Prime Minister: We have been absolutely consistent that international humanitarian law should be respected and civilians should be protected. I have made that point expressly to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the Foreign Secretary is in the region this week making exactly the same point.

Stephen Flynn: I do not think it is unreasonable to expect the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to rise to that Dispatch Box and tell the people of these isles and elsewhere that shooting an unarmed man walking under a white flag is a war crime. In recent weeks, the House has acted with urgency and intent following an ITV drama. The question is, will the House now show the same urgency and intent following this ITV News report and finally back a ceasefire in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: No one wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer than necessary. We do want to see an immediate and sustained humanitarian pause to get more aid in and, crucially, the hostages out, helping to create the conditions for a sustainable ceasefire. I have set out the conditions for that in the House. The Foreign Secretary is in the region today, and we will continue to press all our allies and partners to make sure that we can bring about that outcome.

Q10. [901177] Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Access to NHS dentistry is a key issue in Ipswich and Suffolk. Locally, we have done something about it, and the University of Suffolk and the local NHS deserve great credit for establishing a new dental centre that will carry out 18,000 hours a year of NHS dental appointments. However, a source of great frustration for me and a number of constituents is that many people who train to be a dentist at university for five years and have their training heavily subsidised can immediately go private or go abroad without giving anything back to the NHS. That seems wrong to me. Will the Prime Minister support the view of many of my constituents that those dentists

should work in the NHS for, say, five years and give something back? That would make a huge contribution to addressing the problem.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner for better dental access in his constituency. I congratulate him on the new dental centre that is opening, which I know he worked hard to deliver. I agree that it is right and fair that we seek better value for the significant investment that the taxpayer makes in the education and training of the dental workforce. That is why, as our workforce plan outlined, we are exploring whether a tie-in would ensure that dentists spend a better proportion of their time in the NHS. We will launch a consultation on that policy later this year.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): In the week of the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, people in Derry are watching unarmed Palestinians being gunned down by Israeli soldiers. Over 25,000 people have now been slaughtered in Gaza. The Prime Minister has said—he has said it again today—that he wants to see a sustained ceasefire. My question is a very simple one: the next time there is a vote at the UN for a ceasefire, will his representative vote for it?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will engage with all UN resolutions on their merits. I have been clear that no one wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer than is necessary. We want to see an immediate pause so that we can get aid in and hostages out, because the situation is desperate for many people there, but a sustainable, permanent ceasefire needs to fulfil a set of conditions, which include Hamas releasing all the hostages, Hamas no longer being in charge of Gaza with the threat of rocket attacks into Israel, and an agreement in place for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza to provide governance and services. The Foreign Secretary is in the region. Those are the principles on which we are working, and I believe that those are shared by all our major allies.

Q11. [901178] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): In 1859, Brunel opened his rail bridge over the River Tamar. In 2022, I met Network Rail and others to celebrate the agreement to build a simple footbridge over the railway line in Lostwithiel. That bridge still does not exist and I have no completion date. Can my right hon. Friend help?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner for the footbridge at Lostwithiel station. I recognise her concerns and the pressing need for the construction of the footbridge. I am told that Network Rail is currently working on a funding solution, so that it can take forward this important project in the next financial year. The Rail Minister will keep my hon. Friend updated on progress.

Q2. [901169] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): A report released yesterday by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that one in four people in the north-east are living in poverty; the child poverty rate for every local authority in the region is higher than the UK average. Too many of our people are being hard hit. The Prime Minister says that his plan is beginning to work. Where does rising child poverty fit in his plan?

The Prime Minister: In fact, the plan is working because poverty is falling in our country. There are 1.7 million fewer people in poverty than in 2010, including hundreds of thousands of children. Of course there is more to do—there is always more to do—to make sure children do not grow up in poverty, but that absolutely would not be helped by Labour's £28 billion tax grab on their parents, which would take money out of their family's bank account.

Q13. [901180] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Bracknell Forest is a place of aspiration, opportunity and enterprise. Business occupancy rates and employment figures are, thankfully, high. Footfall at the Lexicon shopping centre is up and wages are up, but the cost of living continues to bite across the UK. What more can be done to put more money in people's pockets?

The Prime Minister: It is great to see, thanks to my hon. Friend, that Bracknell Forest is thriving, with people in work up and footfall in the town centre up and, as he knows, almost 100% of his schools are now good or outstanding. But he is right that we must do more to relieve the burden on working people, which is why we cut taxes for tens of millions of people in work earlier this year, worth £450 on average. We have to stick to the plan for lower taxes, a strong economy and a brighter future for the people of Bracknell Forest, and absolutely not risk going back to square one with the Labour party.

Q5. [901172] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): If everyone had the same good health as the least deprived 10% of the population, in England there would have been 1 million fewer deaths between 2012 and 2019, and 28,000 fewer deaths in the first year of covid. Those inequalities are not inevitable. Does the Prime Minister think that cuts in social security to 85,000 low-income households, including people in low-paid work in my constituency, will help to address those health inequalities?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are committed to caring for society's most vulnerable and that is why almost 20 million families will see their benefit payments increase this April. That will bring our total support over these few years to around £3,700 per UK household. The Department for Work and Pensions is looking very closely at how it can target its services precisely on the most vulnerable customers. I know the hon. Lady spoke to the DWP permanent secretary at length about that when he appeared before the Work and Pensions Committee earlier this month. I can assure her that he will be writing to the Committee on exactly that subject shortly.

Q14. [901181] **Mr Jonathan Lord** (Woking) (Con): The Post Office scandal has affected so many people, including my constituent Seema Misra, a sub-postmaster from West Byfleet who has an outstanding record of service to her community, and who was wrongfully convicted in 2010 of stealing £75,000 and sentenced to prison on her first son's birthday while pregnant with her second son. Does the Prime Minister agree with me, and more importantly with Seema Misra herself, who is in the Gallery today with her

husband Davinder, that she is due a full apology from the Post Office, a full apology from Fujitsu, and proper compensation as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has been a great support to his constituents over all these years, and has fought relentlessly for the truth to come out. As I have said, the Horizon scandal is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history, and, as I said a few weeks ago, we will introduce primary legislation within weeks to ensure that all convictions that were based on erroneous Horizon evidence are quashed. That will clear people's names, deliver justice and ensure swifter access to compensation. Innocent people such as my hon. Friend's constituents have waited far too long, and I am determined that they receive compensation as swiftly as possible. We have a clear moral duty to right these wrongs, and that is exactly what we will do.

Q6. [901173] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In 2021, 3,527 food parcels were given out by Bestwood & Bulwell Foodbank. Last year that number exploded to 6,500, with nearly half of those parcels going to children. The food bank is now having to buy food to supplement donations, which can only be sustained for a short period. Rather than pretending that things are getting better, will the Prime Minister apologise for the daily chaos in the Government which is leaving widespread destitution unaddressed?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to see anyone reliant on food banks, but while they are in place I have nothing but praise and thanks for the people who run them. However, it is wrong to say we are not making progress. When I came into this job, inflation was running at 11%, which has had the single biggest impact on families' cost of living. Now, thanks to the efforts of this Government—most of them opposed by the hon. Gentleman's party—inflation has been more than halved, at 4%, and we are combining that with significant tax cuts to put more money into people's bank accounts at the end of every month. That is the right way to go about supporting people, combined with our extensive cost of living support for the most vulnerable. All the statistics show that that support has helped and has made a difference, and that is what you get with responsible management of the British economy.

Q15. [901182] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): In November I held an Adjournment debate on the south Fylde line and the need for a passing loop to double its hourly service and increase resilience against the delays and cancellations which again caused misery for travellers over Christmas. The assurances that I received from the Rail Minister built on the positivity generated by the reallocation of HS2 funds. Since then progress has been desperately slow, and my efforts to advance this critical piece of infrastructure for the people of Fylde have been frustrated. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how the Government can help to get the south Fylde line back on track?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is correct: local transport projects are and must be prioritised, and every region of our country will have more transport investment as a result of the decision that we made on HS2. Work is under way to consider potential upgrades

to the west coast main line, including improvements at Preston station which may support additional local services from south Fylde. I know that the Rail Minister is considering these options carefully as we speak, and will update my hon. Friend in due course.

Q7. [901174] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Thames Water is a shambles. During the recent flooding in Oxfordshire, it dumped sewage from 270 sites along the Thames in one week. Waste was backing up into people's homes because of drains that it had not unblocked, and it could not even refill its own reservoir because the rivers were too dirty. Rather than offering a rebate for this shoddy service, Thames Water is intending to put bills up for everyone by 60%. Will the Prime Minister explain to my constituents why they are being asked to foot the bill for Thames Water's gross incompetence?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that the volume of sewage discharge by water companies is unacceptable, and that is why we have launched the most ambitious storm overflow discharge reduction plan. We have now achieved the monitoring of nearly every single storm overflow in England—under this and previous Governments—and introduced unlimited penalties on water companies. Where there is evidence of poor performance, the Environment Agency will not hesitate to pursue the water companies concerned, just as it did, I believe, a couple of years ago in the hon. Lady's constituency, when it specifically fined Thames Water £4 million following a serious incident.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Yesterday the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) and I published our report on TIDE—type 1 diabetes and disordered eating, a condition estimated to affect over a quarter of type 1 diabetics in the UK. It is life-shortening, life-threatening and can lead to death. I am pleased to say that Hampshire integrated care board has already responded positively to the report. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government not only look seriously at the recommendations that we have put forward but act on those recommendations, which would improve lives, save lives, and save money for the NHS?

The Prime Minister: Can I start by thanking my right hon. Friend, and indeed the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), for their important work on this issue? I know that both speak from personal experience. As my right hon. Friend says, it is important that people get the treatment they need. The Health Secretary will of course consider the report, and the NHS has already been piloting services to support those with this condition, as she will be aware. I understand that the NHS is now also expanding pilot sites to every region of the country so that even more people can benefit from the appropriate integrated care.

Q8. [901175] Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We entered 2024 with starvation and famine as acute as ever across the globe, much of it caused by the climate crisis, yet at present the world's worst hunger crisis is in Gaza, created by Israel's ongoing siege. The integrated food security phase classification has found that of the 600,000 people facing starvation globally,

95% are in Gaza. Starvation used as a weapon of war is a war crime. The Israeli Government have the power to end this starvation crisis by ending the siege of Gaza and opening all crossings—do they not, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I have been absolutely clear that we are incredibly concerned about the devastating impact of the situation in Gaza on citizens. That is why we have tripled our humanitarian aid for this financial year to the region and, as I said in the statement yesterday, we are working with partners such as Jordan and the United States to open up new aid corridors so that we can increase the supply of aid getting to those who desperately need it.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): This morning the press reported the tragic case of a 14-year-old girl who took her own life following horrific social media bullying, including on TikTok and Snapchat. Since 2010, across the English-speaking world, there has been a marked increase in poor teen mental health, teen suicide attempts and children addicted to pornography. The United Kingdom has a strong tradition of legislating to protect children from serious threats to their safety and welfare, so does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time to consider banning social media and perhaps even smartphones for under-16s?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the impact of what happens online on our children, which is why our Online Safety Act 2023 tackles criminal activity online and protects children from harmful or inappropriate content, such as bullying or the promotion of self-harm, and from accessing pornography, and also from exposure to eating disorders. Ofcom is now rightly developing and consulting on the guidance and the codes of practice for how those platforms will meet their duties, and if they do not clean up their act, Ofcom will be able to impose fines of up to 10% of global turnover on the social media firms.

Q9. [901176] Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Recently released documents reveal that the Foreign Office had serious concerns about Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law and its ongoing assault on Gaza. This assessment was hidden from Parliament while the Prime Minister boldly stated his confidence in Israel's respect for international law. Since then, the scale of Israel's war crimes in Gaza has been revealed to the world, thanks to South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice. Therefore, is it not now time for the Prime Minister to admit that he has the blood of thousands of innocent people on his hands, and time for him to commit to demanding an immediate ceasefire and an ending of the UK's arms trade with Israel?

The Prime Minister: That is the face of the changed Labour party.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I start by thanking you for commissioning the Holocaust Educational Trust's exhibition in Portcullis House, and for your unwavering personal commitment to Holocaust remembrance? As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day, will the Prime Minister join me in commending the Holocaust Educational Trust for its

important work, particularly its work with holocaust survivors who, despite living through the darkest moment in human history, continue to share their testimony in the hope of ensuring “Never again.” In the face of the appalling rise in antisemitism that we see on the streets of Britain, will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging all Members to sign the book of commitment and stand up against antisemitism?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust for its brilliant work, and I thank her for all her work on this issue. I will be signing the book of commitment this afternoon, during my meeting with Lily Ebert, and I encourage Members on both sides of the House to do the same and to reaffirm our shared determination to ensure that the holocaust is never forgotten, and to defeat the resurgence of antisemitism and all forms of hatred in our country.

Q12. [901179] **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I represent a proud steel community in Rotherham that stands with the steelworkers in Port Talbot at this very worrying time. My constituents do not want to see their

taxpayers’ money used to make British workers redundant, our primary steelmaking capacity decimated and our national security compromised, so will the Prime Minister change his destructive course, starting by looking at the credible multi-union plan to safeguard our steel industry’s long-term future?

The Prime Minister: I know that this is an anxious time for steelworkers in south Wales, but we are committed to working with the steel sector to secure a positive and sustainable future. The hon. Lady will know that, during the pandemic, we provided support to Celsa to safeguard jobs and ensure the sustainability of its steel plant in south Wales. The proposed complete closure of the plant would have seen the loss of 8,000 direct jobs in south Wales, and thousands more across the supply chain. Because of the Government’s investment, support and partnership with Tata, we have safeguarded 5,000 direct jobs and thousands more in the supply chain, and we have ensured the long-term sustainability of the steel plant so that it has a brighter future. Obviously this is difficult, but it is entirely churlish of the hon. Lady not to recognise one of the largest support packages that any Government have provided to any company, safeguarding thousands of jobs in the process.

Extreme Weather Events: Resilience

12.37 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the UK's resilience to recent extreme weather events, including Storm Isha and Storm Jocelyn.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I begin by saying how sorry the Government were to hear that four people—two in this country and two in Ireland—sadly lost their lives due to Storm Isha. I extend my sympathy to their family and friends. At the same time, I praise our emergency and utility workers who worked so hard to help the public in very difficult conditions.

Forecasters at the Met Office raised a rare whole-country weather warning for the wind over the weekend, in preparation for Storm Isha. The warning encompassed even rarer amber and red warnings for wind in the areas forecast to experience the worst of the storm. Indeed, wind gusts reached a peak of 99 mph in Northumberland and 124 mph across the Cairngorms. Although the storm had the potential to be extremely destructive, the vast majority of the transport and power infrastructure stood up well and recovered quickly, which is a credit to the resilience of our critical infrastructure and the response capabilities of our operational partners on the ground.

Storm Isha was closely followed by Storm Jocelyn, which reached a peak of 97 mph. I am informed that it was the 10th named storm to impact our country this season. Again, the impacts of Jocelyn in England were less than feared, with operational partners working around the clock to clear any disruption on our transport and power networks.

There is no doubt that the forecasting capabilities of our experts at the Met Office, and the accuracy and speed at which they can warn and inform the public of incoming severe weather events, saves lives and protects our homes and businesses.

My officials and those across government worked hard last week and over the weekend to co-ordinate the extensive preparation and mitigation measures that were taken. The fact that no escalation to a Cobra-level response was required for either storm is testament to our effective response structures at local and national levels. I am very grateful for the response from colleagues in the devolved Administrations and local resilience forums across the country. Our local authority and agency partners kept public services running and reacted to any local issues that emerged.

We are adapting to weather events not previously experienced in our country, and events such as these come with increasing frequency and severity. The UK is driving forward cross-Government action to respond to climate risks and their impacts on our economy and way of life. Our third national adaptation programme, published in July last year, sets out an ambitious five-year programme of work, driven by three themes: action, information and co-ordination.

We are ensuring a more integrated approach to climate adaptation over the next five years, through stronger Government engagement and co-ordinated policymaking. As part of that, we have established the right Government

structures not only to monitor progress, but to tackle strategic cross-cutting challenges that will drive the UK's resilience to climate change. This is all in line with the Government's broader strategy, as set out in the resilience framework, which committed us to strengthening the links between our understanding of the risks that the UK faces and the action we take to prevent those risks from materialising. We must continue to drive forward these initiatives, which help us to curb the impacts of climate change, and at the same time build systems that help us to withstand extreme events as they arise.

Mr McFadden: I thank the Minister for his response. Recent days have seen the UK battered by two severe storms, first Storm Isha and then Storm Jocelyn—the 10th named storm of this winter. Liz Bentley, chief executive of the Royal Meteorological Society, has said that these storms are

“some of the worst in the last 10 years”.

Our constituents across the country have been hit by widespread damage, flooding, power outages, and the cancellation of flights, ferries and trains. In the most tragic circumstances, four people are reported to have lost their lives. I want to pay tribute to the emergency service workers, electrical engineers and other response teams who have been working to help people, restore power and get transport moving, often at risk to themselves, in very severe conditions. We owe them all a debt of thanks.

Of course, Ministers cannot control the weather—indeed, ex-Ministers on the Conservative Benches cannot even control themselves—but the greater regularity and severity of extreme weather demands a response from the Government. Let me therefore ask the Minister: given the frequency of extreme weather events, why do the Government not have a standing flood resilience taskforce, as part of the Cobra system, with a specific responsibility for building up long-term protection? Local resilience forums have been neglected since the passing of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 under the Labour Government. What more can Ministers do to revive them and make sure they are properly supported? Last week, the Public Accounts Committee said the flood protection budget put in place has been underused since it was announced and is now expected to cover 40% fewer properties than was first claimed. That leaves more than 200,000 homes vulnerable to flooding. What is the Government's plan for them?

Jocelyn may be the latest storm, but it will not be the last. The very least the public have a right to expect is that their Government understand that, and are focused on the job and not on whatever is the latest episode in the Tory psychodrama that has distracted the governance of the country for far too long.

Alex Burghart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his warm words about our emergency services and utility workers. On his specific point about flooding, he will have heard the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which is responsible for this area, comment earlier in the week that, “Flooding resilience in England is a priority for DEFRA, as part of a whole-society approach to resilience outlined in the UK Government resilience framework.” For example, the Government are investing a record £5.2 billion in the

flood and coastal erosion risk management capital programme. Since 2021, over £1.5 billion has so far been invested in flood defence projects across England, with over 67,000 properties better protected.

Of course, the response to flooding is just one part of our resilience work that is co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office. Mercifully, very few families were flooded out of their homes in the storms we have just had, but we are absolutely cognisant of the need to prepare. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the National Audit Office report published late last year, which notes positively that since 2021 the Government have

“strengthened the arrangements to manage national risks”;

that they are

“taking steps to address extreme weather risks as whole-system risks”;

a point to which I will return in a moment; and that they have acquired

“good forecasting data for droughts, heatwaves and storms”.

Over the past few years, we have seen a noticeable improvement in storm preparedness and response. A few years ago, there were still about 40,000 people without power three days after Storm Arwen. The storms we have just had were very powerful and about 400,000 people lost power to their homes, but 99% of them had their power restored within 24 hours as a result of the planning and preparedness that this Government have put in place.

We have learned the lessons. We now have improved public warnings, we have hardened infrastructure and, crucially, we forward deploy repair experts. When we see storms forming over the Atlantic, we signal to local partners in the utilities and the emergency services, and they go out and get ready on the ground, doing everything from clearing storm drains to getting ready to repair infrastructure that might be vulnerable.

We have better public information. The public are much more connected with the activity of storms. Naming storms may seem like a superficial change, but we know that it has improved public awareness of what is going on. We have clearer travel advice and the Department for Transport is doing great work through our operators.

We also have superior forecasting. The Government have invested a great deal in compute capacity and forecasting capacity that enables us to see where storms are coming from. Better co-ordination and deployment of resources from the centre means that we are working better with partners on the ground and getting a better response when extreme events take place.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and I thank his officials in the Cabinet Office who do so much that is often unseen. On those with a higher public profile, will he join me in thanking the Environment Agency emergency response teams for the west midlands, the Shropshire fire and rescue teams, who have done such a great job, and all the officials at Severn Trent Water, Shropshire Council and Telford and Wrekin Council?

The Minister mentions national infrastructure; does he agree that highways fall under that? Will he call on Highways England to do more to ensure that the M54, an important road in Shropshire and in connecting

Wales and England, has less flooding in future and to put in place more mitigation and investment to do that?

Alex Burghart: I join my hon. Friend in his words of praise for those who have been working in the west midlands. I am sure that my DFT colleagues have heard what he said about the critical road in his constituency.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a little bit cheeky of the Government to take entire responsibility for the improvements. For example, SSE has put improvements in place and done a huge amount of work, for which it deserves credit, so it is not just about the changes to forecasting. I thank the resilience partnerships that improved the emergency services, the energy companies and all the individuals who stepped up to help others in their local communities. It was truly a community effort and people came together.

I wish the Government would take climate change more seriously, given the incredible amount of extreme weather events we are seeing right now. It is important for the Government both to talk the talk and to walk the walk when it comes to climate change. They should be leading from the front in developing a strategy to help to ensure that we are resilient in the face of climate adaptation and the changes that are happening, and they should put the funding in place to ensure that that strategy can be delivered.

The Scottish Government need funding to make the changes required for resilience. If there are massive geographical disparities in some of the weather events, such as with Storm Arwen, then Barnett may not be the appropriate method to fund some of the required changes. In the upcoming Budget process, it might be sensible for the Government to ensure that resilience funding is spread to the areas that are most likely to be hardest hit, so that rather than Scotland having a percentage share based on our population numbers, that share is based on the likelihood of extreme climate events. That would be most welcome, particularly when it comes to resilience.

Alex Burghart: That is a classic question from the SNP, isn't it? The hon. Lady did not listen to what I have said and then asked for more money. Central Government are absolutely not taking all the credit for everything that has happened. As she will have just heard me say, it is our partnership with the people who work in the emergency services, local government, utility companies and so on that has made the changes possible.

On climate change, I am sure the hon. Lady will be pleased to discover that, since peak CO₂ emissions in the mid-1970s, the UK Government by their actions have helped to reduce CO₂ emissions by more than 50%, which is more than any other G7 country. We take these things seriously and we will continue to do so.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I thank both the Minister for his statement and the Government for their clear actions to strengthen our nation's resilience. As these extreme storms again unleash damage right across the UK, will my hon. Friend join me in sending our thoughts to the people whose homes, businesses and farms have been affected, and in paying tribute to the Environment Agency staff, emergency services, local authorities, electricity companies and volunteer groups—such as the Appleby Emergency

[Dr Neil Hudson]

Response Group in my constituency—which do so much to help people and communities through the trauma and aftermath of storms and severe floods?

Alex Burghart: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the Appleby Emergency Response Group. So often, it is local community organisations, with their connections and awareness of and intelligence about what is taking place on the ground, that make a response possible, so I am very happy to join him in that. I am glad to hear that although his constituency was hit hard by the storms, it has managed to move on quickly.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) asked why the Government had neglected local resilience forums and, indeed, the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which they bypassed during covid. May I ask that question again? What lessons have the Government learned from covid and such issues in order to give greater sustainability to the local resilience forums that need to protect us?

Alex Burghart: We obviously learned a great many lessons from covid. As the hon. Lady will be aware from the documentation that the Government have published over the past couple of years, there has been a great deal of activity to improve our resilience and response to emergencies. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister gave a statement to that effect in this House in December.

The Cabinet Office assigns ownership of acute national risks to lead Government Departments, across risk identification, risk assessment, prevention, resilience, preparation and emergency response and recovery. The lead Government Departments may change between the phases as the impact changes and different competencies are required. None the less, the UK has adopted a bottom-up approach to managing emergencies, as most emergencies affect local areas. We have local responders such as the police, fire and ambulance services, which manage emergencies without direct involvement from the Government. The response to larger-scale emergencies is then led by lead Government Departments. It is only in the most serious cases that the response is escalated to Cabinet Office briefing rooms—known as Cobra—and senior Ministers from across Government are brought in. As the hon. Lady will have heard me say, this is very much about a partnership between centre and locality, and we are starting to see the benefits of that approach.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend to congratulate the good people of Repton and the other villages that came together to help with all the flooding that has been going on? In particular, they are holding follow-up meetings to get more flood wardens across South Derbyshire. I have never seen anything like the flooding that has taken place in South Derbyshire. We need to get the Environment Agency to move on with plans for installing holding ponds further up the Trent and the Derwent to stop the run-off from the fields that we have had this time

round. Anything that my hon. Friend can do to help me to get spades in the ground on those projects would be much appreciated.

Alex Burghart: I very much hear what my hon. Friend says. I know that my colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have heard likewise. She will have heard what I had to say earlier about the Department's position on flooding. On alerts, for instance, normal flood warnings were operated. We did not use the national alert because the situation did not reach that threshold, and our local partners did not ask us to use it. From what we can see at this stage, that local system worked well and helped to protect people and, where possible, property.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The consistent storms we have had this winter have meant that our communities have felt more consistently battered by flooding and winds than ever before. Sadly, as the Minister mentioned, lives were lost at the weekend. Tens of thousands of houses and businesses were left without power. Transport links were halted in my Edinburgh constituency—there were no flights out of the airport, no trains were going anywhere, and roads and bridges were closed. Thousands of homes were flooded, yet the National Audit Office has warned that the Government have not set a long-term target for the level of flood resilience that they expect to achieve, and there are no concrete plans to do so beyond 2026. That means that any investment could be misplaced and inefficient and that homes will not be protected sufficiently. Does the Minister see that this could be a lack of foresight? Will the Government commit to reversing the current cuts to flood protection and do more to ensure that investment is effective?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady will have heard me reflect on what DEFRA said earlier in the week about the £5.2 billion of investment in flood and coastal erosion risk management through its capital programme, and the fact that, since 2021, the Government have put £1.5 billion into flood-defence projects across England.

On the hon. Lady's first point about the level of disruption, we understand and sympathise with people who have been put in such situations. Although we cannot control the weather, we can, by degrees, become better prepared for events, both through the general resilience planning that the Government have been doing and by having better intelligence on storms forming over the Atlantic and making sure we have the right people with the right skills poised to act quickly when those storms strike. That, of course, means that we can minimise disruption to the public, even though we cannot eliminate it altogether.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): In my Broxtowe constituency, some businesses and homes that I have visited have been affected by multiple storms and have received the flood recovery grant but, as it stands, those who have been affected by Storm Babet and Storm Henk can claim after only one of the floods. Are the Government looking to put more support in place for individuals who have been flooded multiple times by separate storms?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises a very important question. We know how awful it can be for families to be flooded out of their homes. There is damage to their

property and effects, and sometimes to items with sentimental value. It is important that we have processes and procedures in place to make sure that we can help people out in those circumstances. On my hon. Friend's specific point, I will make sure that he gets a response from colleagues in DEFRA.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In Scottish questions, I spoke of how Caithness and north Sutherland were completely cut off. All the roads were blocked during the storms, so a pregnant mum whose contractions had started could not even begin her 100-mile journey to Raigmore in Inverness to give birth. People speak of the helicopter ambulance; there is one based in Inverness, but if that has to go to an emergency in Lochaber, on the other side of Scotland, what does the pregnant mum do? To be quite honest, we are faced with a mum and her child dying. When the Minister meets the Scottish Government, will he please point out the utter folly of centralising these services in Inverness, when we have a perfectly good, workable hospital in Wick, which should be upgraded and put into full use?

Alex Burghart: I am happy to communicate that message strongly to the devolved Administration. I have visited Caithness and seen its remote beauty, but yes, one can only imagine what it would be like to be a young woman giving birth and cut off from major services. I feel that the hon. Gentleman's plea for an upgrade at Wick is very important.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. Two weeks ago, Runnymede and Weybridge was flooded as a result of Storm Henk. When flooding happens locally, my constituents must navigate a host of organisations with different responsibilities, including Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, Surrey County Council, Runnymede Borough Council, Elmbridge Borough Council, Thames Water, Affinity Water, the Environment Agency and Surrey Highways. As part of my campaign to improve flood response and preparedness, and protection from flooding, I have been calling for a local flood control centre to be a single co-ordinated access point for accessible support and advice, and clear and consistent communication. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that?

Alex Burghart: I am glad that my hon. Friend has such a worthy campaign to support his constituents. I will ensure that his request for a meeting goes to the most appropriate Minister, who may be able to advise him on how possible his proposal is.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): According to the NAO, since plans were first unveiled in 2020 the Environment Agency has cut by 40% its forecast of the number of additional properties that will be better protected from flooding by 2027. In Feltham and Heston, the level of water on our streets during storms that is unable to drain away is getting higher and higher. I have to push the Minister on this: is he confident that his plans will be sufficient to keep homes and businesses across the country safe from flood-related damage? This is a huge and growing concern.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady will have heard me say a moment ago that the NAO was pleased that the Government have taken steps to address extreme weather

as part of a whole-system approach, which can have real advantages when floods are coming. For example, it enables appropriately trained emergency workers to be sent out to clear storm drains and ensure that anything that might make the floods worse is cleared out of the way. She will also have heard me say that DEFRA has committed a great deal of money to improving flood defences over the past three or four years, and that tens of thousands of homes are better protected as a result. We are not complacent, and are always looking at ways we can improve that.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement and the excellent work by the team at the Cabinet Office, who I know work extremely hard on these problems. As he will know, my constituency is home to some of our most precious chalk streams and winterbournes. I am sure that he is aware that water levels in the Bourne Valley and in villages to the west of Andover are perilously high. He will understand the ecological importance of those rivers, and the risk of the sewage system being overwhelmed and leaking into the chalk streams. The Environment Agency and Southern Water are doing great work. There is a huge pumping operation under way to avoid that calamity, but further significant rainfall might overwhelm the entire system. In his post-match analysis, once the weather calms down, will he consider giving special priority to identifying work that is required in areas of particular ecological sensitivity? Significant work has been done up and down my constituency over the past 10 years by the flood resilience group, Southern Water, the EA, and indeed riparian owners, but more could still be done, and it needs a certain amount of concentration.

Alex Burghart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his observations. As a former resident of 70 Whitehall, he understands the problems in great depth, and the chalk streams of Hampshire have no finer defender than his right honourable self. He makes a serious point about ecological sensitivity. It is right that we pay attention not only to the immediate threats to life or property but to our natural environment. As we know, if we do not do so, the damage can be irreparable and long lasting.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Barely a part of Oxford West and Abingdon was unaffected by the recent floods, but Abingdon remains unprotected. In 2007, we were promised a plan, which was cut because of a lack of resources for the EA. It is not just the River Thames; it is also the run-off from the new developments, where huge numbers of houses have been built. What is the Cabinet Office doing to connect DEFRA with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities so that the developers, who have promised to clear the culverts, can be forced by the local authorities to do so?

Alex Burghart: As the hon. Lady will have heard me say earlier, the Cabinet Office has a co-ordinating role that brings together lead Government Departments and local responders. It would be under that guise that different Government Departments would meet to discuss issues of the sort that she describes.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Even by the standards of what we are accustomed to in the northern isles, the last week has been exceptionally disruptive. I associate myself with the previous expressions

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

of gratitude to the road staff, electricity engineers and others who have gone about their jobs, and to those who are responding even though it is not part of their job. The response of farmers, who just get on with clearing the snow with a bucket on the front of their tractor, has been phenomenal. Is this not a moment to pause and reflect that some of the changes proposed in other parts of Government could weaken our resilience? The switch-off of the copper wire network for telephones and the proposed increase in the response time of the search and rescue helicopter provided by the coastguard from 15 minutes to 60 minutes will leave us in a worse position if they are allowed to happen. Can the Cabinet Office do something to ensure that they are not?

Alex Burghart: I have landed at Tingwall airport in a storm in the summer, and that was frightening enough.

Mr Carmichael: You would not have done that last week!

Alex Burghart: No. One can only imagine what it has felt like in the Shetlands over the past week or so. My sympathies are with the right hon. Gentleman's constituents. To his point about general resilience, the Government are trying to take a whole-system approach to understand exactly how we can work with emergency responders and those who are responsible for our national infrastructure. We are making progress, but there are always areas in which we can do more work.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As both the Minister and the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), pointed out, this is the latest in a series of storms that we have faced. In October, St Andrews harbour was significantly damaged as a result of the sea surges following Storm Babet. The harbour is run by a trust that dates from when James VI of Scotland granted the land to the people of the town, but as a result of the community ownership fund that the Government have run, and other funds generally, more and more of our assets are owned and run by local communities, which when faced with this kind of disaster have no source of funding to access support. Do the Government agree that they should be looking at ensuring that funding is in place, because St Andrews is a working harbour that is facing £3 million in costs. Without the repairs being made, there is a risk of other parts of the town being affected in the future.

Alex Burghart: I am pleased to have learned something about St Andrews harbour. I am sure that colleagues in other Government Departments, including DLUHC, are considering those issues. Community-owned assets can be a wonderful thing. It is important that assets such as local ports are governed by people who really understand the towns and cities in which they are based. I am happy to take that forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive answers to the questions. Farmers in my constituency tell me they cannot recall floods and rain quite like this; indeed, they tell me the volume of rain has been of biblical proportions. I hail from the coastal constituency of Strangford, where storms hit with a fury that is possibly not fully grasped. The coastline defences around Strangford loch and within my constituency have been subjected to a level of onslaught never before seen. Can the Minister confirm what discussions he has had with the Department in Stormont, to which Westminster gave substantial financial help to address coastal erosion? Perhaps the same level of assistance can be offered again.

Alex Burghart: I will ask Ministers from other Departments to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the specifics, but he will know that we are very keen to see a restoration of Stormont, and I believe that the House will hear more about that very soon.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Somerset is so often battered by extreme flooding and, in response, the River Cam flood warning system is being piloted in my constituency. A stretch near North Cadbury will be fitted out tomorrow with laser depth-measuring devices, which will send real-time messages and alerts to residents when the water levels start to rise. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Liberal Democrat councillors and Somerset Rivers Authority for that initiative and agree that we need to fund more extreme weather resilience plans for isolated rural communities?

Alex Burghart: I am delighted to hear about the initiative in Cadbury—I have fond memories as a schoolboy of walking around the hillfort there—and am well aware of the historical threats that Somerset has faced with flooding. I am glad that in recent incidences local government and central Government have been able to work together for the benefit of the people who live in that area.

Point of Order

1.11 pm

Sir Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Sir Roger. An organisation in my constituency where I had grounds to intervene on behalf of a previous pub tenant has issued its current tenant with a gagging order and verbally told them not to contact their MP. What can be done to protect my constituents from such bullying and to ensure that their constitutional rights are respected?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): First, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. The ability of constituents to communicate with their Members of Parliament is constitutionally important. I am very concerned about the matter he has raised. Constituents must be able to communicate freely with their Members of Parliament, and I trust and hope that urgent action will be taken to clarify that that is understood by all parties in this case. If the matter is not resolved satisfactorily, I trust that the right hon. Gentleman will seek advice from the Clerk of the Journals in the first instance about how this very important issue might be escalated.

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL

Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Oliver Dowden, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary David T C Davies and Mr Steve Baker, presented a Bill to make provision to extend the period following the Northern Ireland Assembly election of 5 May 2022 during which Ministers may be appointed.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time today, and to be printed (Bill 150), with explanatory notes (Bill 150—EN).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I advise the House that this is a very narrow Bill. If the House agrees the business of the House motion today, amendments may be tabled before the Bill has been read a Second time. I understand that the Chairman of Ways and Means has indicated that she will make her provisional selection of amendments soon after 2 pm. Members who are considering tabling amendments are asked to contact the Public Bill Office as soon as possible.

WHISTLEBLOWING BILL

Mary Robinson presented a Bill to establish an independent Office of the Whistleblower to protect whistleblowers and whistleblowing in accordance with the public interest; to make provision for the Office of the Whistleblower to set, monitor and enforce standards for the management of whistleblowing cases, to provide disclosure and advice services, to direct whistleblowing investigations and to order redress of detriment suffered by whistleblowers; to create offences relating to the treatment of whistleblowers and the handling of whistleblowing cases; to repeal the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February, and to be printed (Bill 151).

Road Traffic and Street Works

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.13 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about speeding offences on roads to which a 20mph limit applies; to make provision about the enforcement of moving traffic offences; to require 24 hour staffing of works on specified public roads; and for connected purposes.

As I am sure you are aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, life as a motorist has changed significantly over the past two decades. Cars have become safer, more efficient, greener and quieter, and yet despite the fact that the motor car is possibly one of the greatest contributors to human wealth, happiness and freedom, it has become seen by many as the root of all evil. Despite the enormous benefits that cars bring to our constituents' families up and down the land and, indeed, to people across the world, for many motorists, the world seems to be filled with councillors and officials who are dedicated to making their lives more difficult. Driving is becoming a minefield of potential traps and penalties, such that drivers are becoming paranoid and resentful about the entire system. When that happens, order tends to break down, and the time has come for a rebalancing.

In the Bill, I propose three modest measures that would achieve a better balance and would hopefully see better results generally for motorists and members of our communities across the board. First, I propose that anybody caught speeding between 20 mph and 30 mph does not receive penalty points, rather they would be required to attend a speed awareness course. Repeat offences would require repeat attendance at speed awareness courses. I should declare an interest, having been at a speed awareness course recently after I was caught unwittingly doing 24 mph on the Embankment, along with the Archbishop of Canterbury—not at the same time or in the same vehicle, but he was also done for a similar offence.

The roll-out of 20 mph speed limits across the country has brought benefits in terms of road safety, but it has left many thousands of drivers disproportionately punished for straying over the limit. The fact that drivers can receive three penalty points for doing 24 mph in a 20 mph zone and for doing 57 mph in a 50 mph zone seems unfair to many and is in danger of discrediting the system. In addition to penalty points and a fine, drivers so punished would also face higher insurance premiums at a time when premiums are rising significantly in any event. As it stands, it is possible for someone to lose their driving licence by driving at 24 mph four times in three years.

Two years ago, it was revealed that as 20 mph zones were rolled out across London, Transport for London was setting a target of a million speeding fines a year with the Met police. That represents a huge increase in prosecutions and the accumulation of points. Analysis of Department for Transport data by Claims.co.uk confirms that of those speeding in a 20 mph zone, 49% were exceeding the limit by 5 mph or more, and only 19% were driving above 30 mph. Those numbers, of course, imply that 51% of those caught speeding were doing less than 25 mph.

[Kit Malthouse]

In evaluations, speed awareness courses have proven to be significantly more effective in preventing reoffending than penalty points and a fine. If our objective is to improve road safety, particularly on residential roads, it would be more effective to put people through repeated courses, perhaps with increasing intensity and time required. That would be a more proportionate approach and would achieve better road safety. Points would of course still apply for those who fail to attend courses or, indeed, who fail their courses, which I understand is a possibility.

The second element of the Bill is for non-speeding traffic offences enforced by a local council or body other than the police. A first offence in those circumstances at a particular location should result in a warning letter, rather than a fine. A subsequent offence at the same location would attract a fine in the normal manner. Over the past few years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of traffic enforcement cameras operated by local authorities. In London alone, nearly 3.2 million tickets were issued in 2022-23, extracting about £200 million from motorists. The number of councils approved by the Government to operate enforcement in that way has increased steadily. There are regular reports in the media of the earnings of particular cameras. The most successful camera in Birmingham apparently pulls in £10,000 a day from drivers who stray into bus lanes.

A number of councils that have introduced enforcement cameras have started with a grace period, during which erring drivers have been issued with a warning letter for their first offence at a particular location, recognising that a sudden change may not be immediately appreciated by many. In Liverpool, the city of my birth, when cameras were brought in at one particular location, 1,400 drivers were caught out within the first 24 hours. Happily, they all received a warning letter first. That is a good and civilised principle, and it maintains public support for the enforcement system. It recognises that the vast majority of drivers will have made a genuine error, will learn their lesson and will not make the same mistake again.

This very British sense of giving people the benefit of the doubt should continue, and this Bill would make it a permanent feature. Anyone who commits a moving traffic offence—caught in the yellow box, straying into a bus lane or turning left when they should not—enforced by a local authority with a camera for the first time at a particular location would only receive a warning letter. Subsequent offences at the same location would attract a fine in the normal manner.

Finally, the third element of my Bill says that any roadworks on an A road should not be left unattended at any time. We know, as Members of Parliament travelling around our constituencies and to and from London, that the Government have struggled to control and minimise disruptive roadworks. Anyone who drives in any major city will say that unannounced roadworks with poor traffic management and inconsiderate positioning

are a source of huge delay and aggravation—even more so when those works are seemingly abandoned and lifeless, sometimes for days.

Even in the past few days Hyde Park Corner, one of the busiest junctions in the capital, has been beset with works and temporary traffic lights, with not a soul in sight after 5 pm. There is a polite Government consultation out at the moment on increasing fines and tinkering a bit with the current system. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) introduced his ten-minute rule Bill, the Roadworks (Regulation) Bill, last year with an imaginative and more radical set of measures to address the same problem, and his “Can the Cones” campaign hit the mark with many.

My proposal is simple. It would require contractors to ensure that no roadworks on any A road can ever be left unattended. Someone must always be on hand to deal with problems, speak to the public, alert authorities to traffic issues and generally manage the site. That obligation would also provide a powerful incentive for the work to be completed quickly and the duty could be satisfied by having at least one person always working on the site—a very efficient use of resources and one that would show the public that contractors are being as diligent as possible and works are being completed as swiftly as possible. Above all, motorists would know that their safe and smooth passage through the works was being supervised at all times.

These three simple measures would improve all our lives, with greater road safety, a greater sense of proportion and civilisation in the enforcement of non-speeding traffic offences and less aggravation for motorists going through abandoned works.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kit Malthouse, Royston Smith, Will Quince, Nickie Aiken, Sir Desmond Swayne, Philip Davies, Mark Menzies, Shailesh Vara, Julie Marson and Steve Tuckwell present the Bill.

Kit Malthouse accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April, and to be printed (Bill 152).

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) kindly mentioned in his speech that I brought in a similar Bill, or at least a Bill on the same subject, last year. I commend him on what he has done and put on the record that the roads Minister was here to listen. If my right hon. Friend or I put in for an Adjournment debate to give the roads Minister an opportunity to reply on the subject, perhaps the Chair might be prepared in due course to look favourably on such a request?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The right hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know how to apply for an Adjournment debate. However, it is just possible he might find favour with Mr Speaker, as he would probably find favour with me on this subject. Other than that, I do not think it is a matter for the Chair.

NORTHERNIRELAND(EXECUTIVE FORMATION)BILL(BUSINESSOFTHEHOUSE)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill—

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of Amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) As soon as the proceedings on the Motion for this Order have been concluded, the Order for the Second Reading of the Bill shall be read.

(3) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite 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.

(4) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair 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.

(5) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair 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 moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(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 (16)(a) of this Order.

(6) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (5)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (5)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on

any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(9) (a) Any Lords Amendments to 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 shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(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 to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (9) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(11) (a) 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 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 sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(12) 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 to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (11) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(13) 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.

Miscellaneous

(14) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(15) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(16) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, 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 sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(17) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(18) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(19) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.—(Chris Heaton-Harris)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Amendments, new clauses and new schedules for Committee of the whole House may now be tabled by Members at the Opposition side of the Table of the House. I understand that the Chairman of Ways and Means has indicated that she will make her provisional selection of all those amendments tabled soon after 2 pm. If any amendments are tabled and then selected by the Chairman of Ways and Means, an amendment paper for the Committee of the Whole House will be circulated as soon as possible.

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a very short and, I would like to think, perfectly formed Bill. I thank all those who have helped to expedite this simple but important piece of legislation to this point. As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my focus has always been on facilitating the return of devolved institutions and upholding the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all its strands. This Bill is no different, and hopefully plays a part in that.

The UK Government believe in the agreement. We believe in devolution. We believe in localism. We strongly believe in power sharing. That is why I am today legislating to extend retrospectively the Executive formation period to 8 February 2024. The people of Northern Ireland deserve locally elected decision makers and want them to address the issues that matter to them. This very short extension provided for by the legislation will create the legal means to allow the Assembly to sit and get the Executive up and running as soon as possible.

Importantly, a restored Executive will have access to the significant financial package that I announced before Christmas, worth more than £3.3 billion, to secure and transform Northern Ireland's public services. Ministers will be empowered to immediately begin working to address the needs of local people and unleash Northern Ireland's full and amazing potential. This Bill helps to deliver that outcome and support the return of devolved governance to the citizens of Northern Ireland. On that note, I conclude my remarks for now and commend the Bill to the House.

1.26 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Another year, and another Bill to postpone the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. It is worth noting that the last time we did this, something quite significant happened five days later, when the Windsor Framework negotiations were concluded, so let us live in a state of hope—tempered, as always, by experience.

I thank the Secretary of State for introducing the Bill in such a timely fashion. We support it and I have met no one who thinks that holding elections now would help to resolve the difficulties that Northern Ireland's politics are currently in. However, while we may be in agreement about the need for this Bill, I do not think we should let this moment pass without acknowledging

that the Assembly elected 20 months ago has still not yet been able to meet. In any other democracy anywhere in the world, that would be a cause of anger, not to say uproar. The very essence of a democratic election is that the representative body should be able to meet and do its job. I would just observe that Northern Ireland surely cannot continue to be the only place where that does not happen.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the discussions that we have had. It is a pleasure to do business with him. As my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), said just under a year ago:

"It would, of course, be better if this legislation were not needed. Northern Ireland is a valued part of the United Kingdom, and restoring the Stormont Assembly and Executive should be a priority for the Government."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 238.]

I know that is a priority for the Secretary of State, because he has spent so much time negotiating with the Democratic Unionist party to try to find a way forward, and from the moment I took on this role I have tried to support him and the Government in that objective. With the negotiations, it appears, having effectively concluded, we have now come to the moment of decision.

I hope the DUP will return to government. I think the DUP should return to government. I say that for a host of reasons, but above all because the people of Northern Ireland need to have their Government back. The consequences of having no Government for almost two years this time around—and, of course, for almost three years when Sinn Féin walked out of the institutions—are very serious for the people of Northern Ireland. As we know, the Assembly cannot even elect a Speaker so it cannot meet, difficult decisions are not being taken, the public finances are in a parlous state, and when the floods struck last year and affected so many businesses and homes, there was no Government in Stormont for people to turn to for help—none.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): When I was at home over Christmas, I took my uncle to the specialist cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. It was a humbling experience to see the care and dedication provided by the staff in that world-leading facility, but the stresses and strains of a lack of funding and direction were clear. When institutions and systems fail, people suffer. This has to be the last time that legislation like this comes before the House. Let us get the institutions back up and running, or the Secretary of State, with the Irish Government, should find something else to sort it out.

Hilary Benn: I agree with my hon. Friend that this is the moment to get the institutions back up and running. I wish the person he referred to all the best in their treatment.

The civil servants are left to make decisions that ought to be made by elected representatives. In the case of public sector pay, for example, some workers have not had a pay rise for almost three years—that should hardly bear repetition—and no decisions have been taken because there is not enough money in the budget to do so. That is why there was such a large strike last week, and I see that further industrial action is likely coming towards us. Everyone, including the Government, now recognises that that is not a sustainable position.

The proof on the Government's side is that, in announcing the financial package, they identified money for public sector pay, but it will not be released until such time as the Executive are restored. If I may be frank, I understand why the Secretary of State took that decision initially, but in relation to public sector pay, that moment has now passed. That is why I called on him last week to release that part of the budget package so that the disputes can be settled, workers can get their pay increases and public services can try to address the many challenges that they face.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Many public sector pay awards have been made—nearly 50 over the past year. The only reason the current one is not being made is that the Secretary of State is holding teachers, nurses and so on as pawns in the game that he is playing in his efforts to force us to make a decision that he wants us to make, but that we do not wish to make.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman links the pay question to his stance on the DUP's difference of view on the Windsor framework and the protocol. I say to him in return that it is equally true that if the DUP were to go back into government, public sector workers would get their pay increase. That is why I said a moment ago that I hope very much that that will be the case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Back home in the papers, with TV correspondents and in media statements, those in the unions say clearly that the problem does not lie with the politicians but—with respect—it lies with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has control of the moneys. He, in his own right, could settle the claims for those in education, healthcare and elsewhere. The moneys are there. The unions say, "Let the Secretary of State do it." Has the shadow Secretary of State heard the same story that I have heard in the news and media?

Hilary Benn: I have indeed heard the unions making precisely that point. I have set out to the House that I understood why the Secretary of State took that approach initially, but I do not think that public sector workers should continue to be held hostage to the failure thus far. I hope that it will change soon in order to solve this problem, which is why I am calling on the Secretary of State to release the funds now.

We need to be honest about how we got to the deadlock that the Government, and indeed the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), as the leader of his party, have been grappling with. One of the many consequences of leaving the EU was that a decision had to be taken about what to do about trade across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Everyone agreed that the border had to remain open—there were not many things on which everyone agreed when it came to Brexit, but that was one of them—and everyone agreed that the EU needed to be sure that goods crossing that border complied with the rules of the single market. There was no escaping that. The Government decided that the answer would be the Northern Ireland protocol.

Before I occupied this role, I was one of many people who argued that the implementation of the protocol would not work in Northern Ireland as originally intended, including for reasons that many in the Unionist community

had pointed out. In fairness to Maroš Šefčovič, he understood what the problems were and changed the EU's approach. That is why I genuinely believe that the Windsor framework represents a significant step forward, and why Labour voted for it.

Of course, detailed implementation will need to be worked through—that is another reason the Executive need to return—but most businesses tell me that the green lane is working reasonably well. As I said last week—I make no apology for reinforcing this point today—the framework is here to stay and will continue to be implemented by whoever is in government in Westminster. With respect, anyone who thinks otherwise has simply got it wrong, not least because any hope of negotiating future arrangements of benefit to Northern Ireland with the EU will depend on the Windsor framework being implemented. If the UK were to renege yet again on an international agreement that it has signed, which has happened before, no sanitary and phytosanitary agreement or anything else would be reached, because trust would once again have been destroyed—absolutely destroyed.

At the same time, of course, unlike the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland continues to enjoy ready access to both the UK and EU markets, which is a huge opportunity for jobs and economic growth in the years ahead. Those are facts that nothing will change. What the Government have been doing, as we all understand, is negotiating on measures that they could take to reinforce Northern Ireland's position in the UK internal market. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley has wisely and repeatedly said—and I support him in this—that any agreement has to be acceptable both to Unionists and to nationalists. That has shown great wisdom. In addition, there is now a financial offer on the table that I think provides a basis on which to go forward. After months of negotiation between the Government and the DUP, now is the moment to decide whether to restore the institutions.

On the detail of the Bill, of which there is not much, I have one question. In his press statement on 19 January, the Secretary of State said:

"I intend to introduce new legislation which will take a pragmatic, appropriate and limited approach to addressing the executive formation period and support Northern Ireland departments to manage the immediate and evident challenges they face in stabilising public services and finances."

I take it from those words that actually he was referring to another Bill that he thinks might be needed if the current negotiations fail. Can he confirm that that is the case? I am not asking for any further detail, but we all hope that the institutions return and that such a Bill will not prove necessary. Will he assure the House that, as and when there is an outcome either way, he will immediately make a statement to the House?

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman asks in his questions to the Secretary of State about plan Bs and alternatives, but does he agree that any alternative to restoration of the institutions is suboptimal and not the settled position of this House? All parties have as their primary policy on Northern Ireland governance the restoration of the institutions.

Hilary Benn: I agree 100% with the right hon. Gentleman. He anticipates a point that I am just about to make in my concluding remarks.

[Hilary Benn]

Northern Ireland has come a long way since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in 1998. It is unrecognisable in so many ways, and for the better. In all of my meetings and visits, I have been so impressed and encouraged by the energy, enterprise and industry of those I have met, who are working hard to build a new and better future for the people of Northern Ireland. That really matters when we know, for example, that families in Northern Ireland have the lowest disposable incomes in the United Kingdom.

The longer there is no functional devolved Government, the harder it will be for those businesses to seize the opportunities that are available anyway, including because of access to the EU market. Businesses that are thinking of investing do not like uncertainty. They want stability—they want to know that a Government are in place—so the absence of a Government undermines the bright future that otherwise faces the people of Northern Ireland.

The basis of power sharing, which was at the heart of the Good Friday agreement—including devolved government—was essential to the making of progress. Of course, there have been bumps and difficulties along the way and periods of no Government, but a generation on from 1998, I simply want to echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith): we cannot give up on devolved government. It is what we in this House believe in, and it is the responsibility that we all take on when we stand for elected office. We cannot have a system where any of us chooses to put down conditions and does not take part if those conditions are not met. That is not how a democracy works.

As I am fond of saying, we have to deal with the world as it is, as we seek to change it into the world we wish it to be. It cannot be, surely, that politicians from all parties and communities in Northern Ireland are somehow unable to come together to establish the Assembly, form an Executive and get on with the task of governing.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I am very much enjoying the tone and the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's speech. Of course, he is dancing between a majoritarian and a power-sharing arrangement in his comments, which are perhaps not quite as aligned as he might suggest.

This is not the first time that Stormont has been suspended. In the past, Sinn Féin refused to come back to the Assembly. As I understand it, that was due to concerns over the language, and the UK Government have taken steps in that regard in recent years. As such, would the right hon. Gentleman support the UK Government taking measures to address the current impasse over the Northern Ireland protocol, as modified by the Windsor framework? Could he support alterations that might be helpful in restoring power sharing and alleviating the concerns of the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful for that intervention. I believe strongly in Northern Ireland's place as part of the internal market of the United Kingdom. Since I took up this position, I have repeatedly made it clear that I will support any measures that reinforce that

place and make it clear, but that are also consistent with the international commitments that the Government have signed up to.

Can I just pick the hon. Gentleman up on what he said initially? I am not arguing at all for a majoritarian position. I believe in power sharing—I am as wedded as the Secretary of State to the letter and spirit of the Good Friday agreement. I am making a point about the responsibility of politicians to participate in that power-sharing arrangement, and I would make those remarks equally to those who have collapsed the institutions previously and the current cause of the collapse, because in the end it is not in the interests of Northern Ireland to not have a functioning Government. I would like to clarify that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will give way, and then I will finish.

John Redwood: The right hon. Gentleman is raising a very important point. The whole point of the agreement and of power sharing is that it is based on consent, so how can the Unionist community consent to lawmaking by the EU in which that community does not participate and has no influence?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman asks a very pertinent question, but that is a consequence of a course of action that I personally did not think was a terribly good idea and he thought was a good idea. The moment we left the European Union, everybody knew that there would be a problem that had to be addressed. To keep that open border, there were only two practical propositions. The first was proposed by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister: she came up with a scheme to try to keep the whole of the UK within the arrangements of the single market, having announced that we were leaving the single market. That did not work out, so the second option was to do the same in respect of Northern Ireland. That is where we are, and the Government eventually negotiated the Windsor framework, which is an important step forward. These things are going to have to be worked through.

Really, what we are talking about is the operation of the green lane. Everybody agrees with the red lane: if goods are coming into Northern Ireland to then head off to the Republic, of course they should be checked, and that is what the red lane is for. We are debating the operation of the green lane. The question is whether it makes sense for there to be no power-sharing Government institutions—no Assembly and no Executive—in Northern Ireland because of a debate and an argument about the operation of the green lane. My very strong view is that that is not sufficient reason not to have a functioning Government.

I will conclude just by saying that the people of Northern Ireland have been waiting long enough, and now is the time for everyone to get back to work.

1.45 pm

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I want to make a few remarks in support of my right hon. Friend the Minister who introduced this Bill. I think it is

absolutely the right thing to be doing, and I pay tribute to the patient work over the past few months that he and the officials have done—those here in the Northern Ireland Office, in the Northern Ireland civil service and in the different political parties at Stormont.

There is a huge need for the institution of Stormont to be restored. Whether it is regarding public sector pay, which has already been mentioned, health waiting lists, creaking public services, charities and others relying on the public purse, or the limited offer of childcare in Northern Ireland, that institution needs to be back up and running. Divergence on medicines and other issues is also happening as a result of Stormont not sitting. The deal that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister put forward before Christmas is really good: it provides over £3 billion and will unlock many of the challenges currently facing Northern Ireland.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and his team seem to have negotiated a very good deal with the Government on issues around the Windsor framework. I hope that we will be able to see the results of that work in the coming days and weeks. I am sure some in his party will still have concerns. The deal will not be perfect, but it will be much better now that so much work has been done over the past few months to enable the DUP to go back into the Executive and make further arguments. For Unionism generally, being in the devolved Assembly is the key route to making the case for the Union—for the NHS, for the fact that being in the UK defence and security system is better for Northern Ireland, and for making sure that any remaining concerns on the post-Brexit arrangements are dealt with.

The Secretary of State has given an end date of 8 February for this Bill. My understanding is that the Government are supporting the final stages of the DUP negotiations. There is no bullying or any hard demands; there is just support for the work that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley is doing with his party and the discussions he is having. There is a real hope that, in making the decision to get the institution back up and running and to go back into Stormont, if the DUP does so, the future for Northern Ireland, and for young people and generations to come, will be best served, with local Ministers making decisions in the best interests of this key part of our country.

1.48 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I will begin, as is sadly becoming customary, by saying how much it is a matter of regret that we are back here discussing a postponement to elections. I am very firmly of the view that Northern Ireland is governed best when it is governed locally, and that for the sake of all the people of Northern Ireland we wish to see the Assembly return in early course. Having said all that, however, we see no utility in or prospect of progress being made by holding an election at this point.

There were opportunities last year to reflect on the 25 years of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I remember with great pleasure the special meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in Belfast. There were meetings across Stormont itself, and also at Belfast castle, at which those charged with the care of affairs and relationships between our islands and jurisdictions had the opportunity to benefit from

the breadth of experience of those who were involved in the peace process, the Good Friday agreement and establishing devolution. As a temporary custodian of that role, I certainly found it incredibly valuable to have that transfusion of knowledge and experience. It was also a tremendous opportunity to reflect on how far all parts of the UK that have experienced devolution over that quarter of a century, particularly Northern Ireland, have advanced and progressed. It also brought into sharp focus how much is missed by Stormont sitting empty at present. I very much share the sentiment of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) when he speaks about hope being tempered by expectation.

I always very much enjoy the opportunity to visit Northern Ireland, whether in a private capacity or in my role as the SNP spokesperson and, when I can, to engage with businesses, community groups and representatives of wider civic society. I have had much cause to be grateful to elected Members across various parties in Northern Ireland for the opportunities they have given me to do that, for the doors they have opened and for the insights I have gained. What I have observed from many of those visits is the sense of frustration at how politics is presently failing in Northern Ireland. I say politics rather than politicians deliberately, because it is a failure of politics across many strands that has brought us to this point.

We saw that bubble up most obviously with the recent strikes. In the debates we had in this place on the Northern Ireland budget, I highlighted the problems caused, and the potential solutions deferred, by civil servants having to cheesepare budgets within the confines of the ghosts of ministerial decisions past. I remember from my time in local government the frustration of council officers if we were unable to provide any clear political direction about what we wanted to happen. While it was always possible under different circumstances to set balanced budgets, how much better it was to be able to set them in the context of clear political leadership on the choices we wished to make within the resources at our disposal. That is certainly a consideration, because it is impossible to set the strategic budget directions that are needed in Northern Ireland right now in the absence of a working institution at Stormont.

When it comes to public sector pay, the Secretary of State says that using part of the £3.3 billion cash allocation to settle claims ahead of Stormont being reconstituted is a political decision, and therefore not one that he is willing to make. I would just say as gently as I can that deciding not to act is taking a political decision in its own way: the decision not to act is also political. I would join the voices in previous debates—I am sure we will hear them later—urging the Secretary of State to reconsider his stance on that. Public sector workers in Northern Ireland, on whom the brunt of the pressures caused are falling, really do deserve the pay settlements that their counterparts elsewhere in these islands have been able to get.

I mention in passing that it was said that the absence of a functioning Stormont was the reason why the UK Government were unwilling to make progress on providing funding for levelling up. I had a wry chuckle about that given the UK Government's disinclination to work with the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales. There seems to be a certain amount of cherry-picking in the

[Richard Thomson]

excuses offered. Punishing the people of Northern Ireland to try to bring to bear some additional political leverage on politicians has not been a conspicuous success so far. Neither do I believe it is an appropriate lever to use where public sector pay is concerned.

As I say, this has been a failure of politics. The fundamental problem that has led us to where we are stems from Brexit and the manner in which successive Governments chose to take that forward—against the express wishes, lest we forget, of clear majorities both in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. Again, I allow myself a wry smile, because during debates about the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 we were told that we would apparently be creating a trade border with the rest of the UK. Yet only two years later we saw the UK Government themselves going hell for leather towards creating a trade border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I remember very much enjoying causing consternation on the Government Benches by pointing out in a Backbench Business debate about the Northern Ireland protocol, perhaps a little indelicately, that if Scotland were once again independent and in the European Union, we would be able to enjoy free trade with Northern Ireland. Neither can currently enjoy that as part of the Union, based on the deals that have been put in place.

In closing, I am very clear what my preferences are for the constitutional future of these islands, but short of that, bringing the UK back into the single market and the customs union would make this problem go away. Accepting that that is not politically realistic, given the stance of the current Government and the aspiring Government, closer alignment, on sanitary and phytosanitary matters especially, would be of enormous benefit, not just to people in Northern Ireland but right across these islands, particularly my constituents—speaking selfishly—and for those involved in agriculture and the food trade. That closer alignment would be much better, because the closer we align, the less significant these issues become, and that would be manifestly in the interests of all of these islands, whatever constitutional future we choose in future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

1.56 pm

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). I listened very carefully to his assertions about an independent Scotland being a member of the European Union. I am not sure that that assumption is actually the right one, bearing in mind the view of some member states of that Union, notably Spain. That provides a reality check on some of the loftier rhetoric of the SNP about its position in Europe and the world, should it choose to separate from the rest of the United Kingdom.

I make that point, because the consequences of Brexit inevitably meant that an arrangement for the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic would always be difficult. I certainly bear the scars on my back, having been involved as a Law Officer throughout that process. Indeed, I helped to put together the Malthouse

compromise—anybody remember that?—back in early 2018. I know DUP Members will remember that time very well, when we tried to work together to get somewhere that would satisfy everybody.

As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, we have to work in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. The one way we can actually find out about the operation of the Windsor framework is for the Executive to be able to operate it and to see how the green lane works—and if there are operational problems, then let us deal with them. I am as anxious as anybody to make sure that businesses and individuals, and everybody who wants to trade in Northern Ireland or through Northern Ireland, are able to do so in as free and uninhibited a way as possible. I do not want to see Northern Ireland cast adrift from the rest of our United Kingdom in that way.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The right hon. and learned Member makes reference to Northern Ireland being set adrift from the rest of the United Kingdom. Businesses in the United Kingdom are finding it difficult—bureaucratically difficult—to trade with Northern Ireland. As a consequence, the divergence of trade is continuing daily, and it is increasing. Everyone says, “Oh, the Republic of Ireland is booming”, but that is simply because its supply chain has changed. Goods are no longer coming through the UK, but straight from France. There is one point I want to find out about: what engagement has the British Government had with the EU on the changes that need to be made to the Windsor framework and the protocol in order for them to work?

Sir Robert Buckland: Obviously, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will answer on any engagement that the UK Government have had with Brussels. He is right to cast it at that level, because it is a matter between that Government and the EU, bearing in mind the Republic of Ireland’s membership of the EU, and the fact that the EU has that competence to negotiate a treaty. However, it is barely a year since the Windsor framework was agreed and in reality, coming back to the world as it is, it would be wrong of us blithely to assume that somehow that can be reopened here and now. I am not saying that it can never be reopened—of course everything can be reopened, and there will be an opportunity in a few years to look at the whole trade agreement that we reached with the EU in the 2025-26 review period.

My point is that unless we see a functioning Executive with responsibility for the operational aspects of Windsor being able to identify and highlight the problems and to raise them with the UK Government, at an appropriate level, we will not move the process on in the way that I know right hon. and hon. Members want to happen, as do I.

As I have said many times, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which we debated long and hard when I was Lord Chancellor, contains some measures that have been helpful and are now on the statute book. However, putting aside the “notwithstanding” clause, more was intended to be done legislatively to help cement the place of Northern Ireland in our UK internal market. I think that we should legislate, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) very much agrees with me on that point. We want to see

that happen, but we are here in January 2024. I note the shortness of the period that the Secretary of State seeks to extend in the Bill, and I think that is sensible and right. Tempting as it is to have longer periods—I will not call them blank cheques—I do not think that would be right. I wish the Secretary of State, and everybody in the negotiations, well in coming to a sensible and pragmatic solution that allows the Government of Northern Ireland to continue.

I will not repeat the points made by right hon. and hon. Members. I see in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I chair weekly, the inability of the institutions of Northern Ireland to plan ahead in a multi-year way, and to provide the level of public service that I know they want but which they cannot do, bearing in mind the constraints under which we have to operate. Unlike previous periods of direct rule, this time there would need to be legislative change on the Floor of the House for that to happen. It has been made clear by the leadership of both main parties that that is not the policy of the British Government.

That is the world as it is, I am afraid, not the world as some would like it to be. I certainly do not want a situation where there is again an imbalance in our UK constitution that will only lead to more tension being stoked in the communities of Northern Ireland, rather than less. It therefore seems to me that the most obvious way forward now has to be the restoration of the Executive.

Robin Millar: There has been much use of the phrase “the world as it is” in the debate, which I think is helpful because we must be pragmatic about this. Is it the intention of my right hon. and learned Friend’s Committee to look at Northern Ireland as it is now, including levels of inward investment, for example, or how business has responded to the 12 months in which the Windsor framework has been in place?

Sir Robert Buckland: We are in the process of preparing a report on the state of public services in Northern Ireland. We have taken a wealth of evidence, and I am grateful to the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who are active members of the Committee. They will have heard the same evidence we have heard. We are looking into the energy market and the move to net zero in Northern Ireland. That is a very important issue, bearing in mind hard-pressed bill payers, and the particular pressures that they are under given the way that energy is supplied. We are also looking at issues as varied as education right through to paramilitarism.

On the Windsor framework, I sound a bit like Zhou Enlai, in that in some respects it is still “too early to say” precisely what its effects are. There is no doubt that, as the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said—I am sure he will intervene again—there is already evidence of excessive bureaucracy and problems that are real for businesses on the ground.

Paul Girvan: Because Northern Ireland sits under EU rules and laws, the carbon tax offset for energy costs is twice what it is in the rest of the United Kingdom, simply because we are having to take on board European law as opposed to what is passed in this House.

Sir Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out some of the facts about the situation we find ourselves in. I will not labour the point, but I am afraid that the consequences of Brexit were always going to be complex and difficult for Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the particular importance of the border and the clash, if you like, between the irresistible force of the logic of a single market that wishes to police its border rigidly, and the immovable object of the fact that the border has a particular status and sensitivity that means that to make it excessively hard creates other problems and issues that we are all familiar with. That, I am afraid, is the difficulty that we all have to wrestle with. I know that this place sometimes risks sounding rather portentous and nannyish in the way it talks about Northern Ireland, and we have to be careful about that. But in resisting that approach it is logically correct to say that the best way to cure this issue is for the institutions of Stormont to function, and to function well.

John Redwood: Does my right hon. and learned Friend have a message to the Unionist community in Northern Ireland regarding why they should put up with EU laws that they do not influence, and why they should put up with border controls when they are trading within our own country?

Sir Robert Buckland: The message I would give is simply that we still need a functioning Executive to work out and bring to account, with proper scrutiny, issues with the framework, so that at a Stormont level it can be understood and debated in far more detail than with the time and capacity we have in this House. That work should be done thoroughly by the institutions of Stormont, so that this place, and the Government in particular, are even better informed about what they need to do to correct some of the problems that have been thrown up by the anomalous position that Northern Ireland finds itself in. That is where we now stand. We have to get on with exercising those institutions in order to solve some of the problems that right hon. and hon. Members quite rightly raise.

Before I finish, I will simply say this: I commend the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) for his forbearance, his patience, and the way he is approaching these issues. It is not an easy position for anybody to be in. All of us will have to make compromises in our political life—goodness knows that is something I have had to wrestle with. On behalf of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I have the honour of chairing, I say simply that he goes with all the good will and support that I can muster on behalf of the Committee. I hope that 2024 will be a moment not of more pause and political vacuum, but a moment when responsibility can be taken up, the reins of government can be held firmly by my friends in the DUP, and we see the progress for the people of Northern Ireland that I know everybody wants.

2.9 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I thank the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) for his comments, and I wish him well in his ongoing and important work as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

I say to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who is no longer in his place, that we recognise the pressures on our public services at this time, and we want to get to a place where we see our political institutions restored on a sustainable basis. As the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), reminded us, that must be on a basis that Unionists and nationalists can support, because that principle of cross-community consensus is at the heart of the Belfast and successor agreements. It is the key principle that enables those institutions to operate in what remains a divided society in Northern Ireland.

To be absolutely clear, the Democratic Unionist party supports devolution. We support the concept of the people of Northern Ireland being able to elect their representatives and to have good government delivered through the institutions of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. We are clear that our objective is twofold: to address the issues and problems created by the Northern Ireland protocol as part of the withdrawal agreement of 2019-20; and to provide the basis for the restoration of our political institutions.

We are approaching the two-year mark since my party took the decision to withdraw the First Minister, which then precipitated a process that ultimately resulted in the institutions not being able to function. That was not a decision we took lightly. For months in advance, I and my party made it clear that we wanted to see a negotiating process under way between the Government of the United Kingdom and the European Union to address the very real problems created by the protocol. Sadly, those pleas were ignored and there was no process. In fact, we were told variously by Irish Government Ministers, EU representatives and so on that the protocol would not be renegotiated.

I stand today and recognise that, as a result of the actions that my party took, the EU was brought back to the table, there were negotiations, changes have been made and further change will come. I watch the political discourse back home in Northern Ireland and I listen to the commentary of some who share our concerns about the protocol and its impact on Northern Ireland, but who are talking up that some deal has been done—clearly, they think they know the detail—and that it falls short of what they need or require.

My party can stand on its record of the change we have delivered and will deliver. I say to those who point the finger at us, “What have you delivered? What has the Traditional Unionist Voice party delivered by way of change to the protocol?” Absolutely nothing—not a single thing—yet TUV members put up posters in the dark of the night, before any deal has been done, talking about a sell-out. What have they sold? What have they delivered for the people of Northern Ireland? What has been their contribution to securing the change that we need to restore our place in the United Kingdom and its internal market?

We read lots of other pearls of wisdom on social media about what is needed and required. We hear all kinds of speculation from commentators about what has been agreed, despite the fact that they have not seen the detail. There is undoubtedly an attempt to orchestrate opposition to a deal and agreement that are not yet

concluded. The very fact that we are here today in the House of Commons extending legislation reflects the reality that no agreement has yet been reached. If it had, we would not be here.

There are some, though, who are putting it about for their own narrow purposes that certain things have been agreed, the deal is all there and they know what it is. They are entitled to their view—everyone is entitled to their perspective—but they should wait until an agreement is reached before they make their final verdict and assess the progress that has been made before they reach their conclusion. I suspect what is going on is not about that.

The truth is that there are some—a tiny minority, but there are some—who do not want Stormont back or an Assembly in Northern Ireland. They would rather have imperfect direct rule than an imperfect Stormont. That is what they say, yet they are the same people who constantly berate the Government of the United Kingdom and this Parliament for selling them out. They constantly point the finger at the United Kingdom Government and say, “You have sold us short. You have betrayed us. You have let us down,” yet they want to hand all the power back to that Government. That is not the view of the vast majority of Unionists or people in Northern Ireland, and we understand that, which is why we are committed to getting a solution, moving things forward, making progress and resolving the issues that have harmed Northern Ireland—our economy, our businesses and, yes, our place in the United Kingdom.

I am a proud Unionist. I am proud to be part of this United Kingdom. I am proud to have served my country in this Parliament for almost 27 years. I am proud of the service that I have given, unlike some others, to my country, when I put on the uniform of the Ulster Defence Regiment to protect everyone in the community from terrorism and violence, yet today, because of the stirring up that is going on, I was threatened by those who never put on a uniform and who have not served our country. I checked out one of the people who threatened me on the register, and they did not vote at the last election. They cannot even come out to vote for our future in the Union, never mind doing anything about it, yet they are threatening me, and people like me who are working day and night to try to find solutions and to move Northern Ireland forward on a basis that the vast majority of people can support.

I say this to those who stir up and threaten: the Provisional IRA attacked me in the past, and it did not deflect me from the task that I and my colleagues have to do our jobs and get the best we can for Northern Ireland, and I will not be deflected now. I will continue on the course. I will continue to engage with the Government until we get the progress needed to enable us to take a decision about whether the deal is sufficient to restore the political institutions.

Let us not forget that when we took the decision to come out of the institutions, it was about the protocol and restoring Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom and its internal market. It is about ensuring that goods flow freely from Great Britain to Northern Ireland when they are staying within the United Kingdom. It is about ensuring that our place in the economic and political Union is respected and protected in law. That is important, and that is what we are striving to achieve, to ensure that Northern Ireland’s place in the United

Kingdom is valued, respected and protected, and that our right to trade within our own country is respected and protected.

That is what we are aiming to achieve, but I make no apology for us also aiming to strengthen our ties across this United Kingdom. Devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has altered the way in which we govern in this nation. Brexit—our decision to leave the European Union—has altered things, which is why, as part of what we are proposing, we want to see a more joined-up, cohesive approach across the Union, working together on economic issues, trade issues, education and health. We are working to make progress on that.

I want to talk about something else, which I found quite insulting: when the Secretary of State convened talks at Hillsborough to discuss the funding of our public services in Northern Ireland. I did not ask him to do that. I am very clear that for me this is not about the money; this is about Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. When we have made the progress that I hope we will make, we will sit down with the Government and finalise arrangements in relation to the future sustainability of our political institutions and the funding of our public services.

I want to echo comments made by other colleagues in the House. Our public services are only as effective as the people who work in them. During the covid pandemic, we saw our healthcare workers—our doctors, our nurses, our ancillary staff and our care workers—on the frontline working hard, taking risks and putting themselves on the line. In education, our teachers are investing in the future of our young people, and many others work across our public services in Northern Ireland. They deserve their pay rise. They have earned their pay rise. It is essential to the delivery of our public services that they get their pay rise.

In advance of reaching an agreement on the outstanding issues—whenever that might be; I believe we are moving towards finalising them—I hope that the Secretary of State will transfer the funding for 2023-24 that the Treasury has committed to and enable our public sector workers to have the pay rise that they deserve. I urge the Government to do that; we do not want to see politics played with them. I note that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland has today come out with yet another statement calling on the Secretary of State to act. I echo those comments. Those people deserve the pay rise. I hope the Secretary of State will reflect on that.

In conclusion, some have said that they hope this is the last time we have this type of legislation, but that requires us to reach agreement. It requires us to resolve and finalise the outstanding issues so that we can move forward. We can assess the progress that has been made and we can take decisions around the restoration of our political institutions if that is the way we are to go. But I am clear, and my colleagues are clear, that this is not about any price. We have fought hard and will continue to fight hard to get the outcomes we need for everyone in Northern Ireland, to restore the cross-community consensus that is essential for the proper functioning of our devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. We will work at that.

I simply say to my fellow Unionists in Northern Ireland, whatever their political persuasion or background, that the notion that a Unionism that turns in on itself is

a Unionism that can deliver for Northern Ireland, to make Northern Ireland work and to secure the Union for the future, is not the way to go. We will provide the leadership that is required—because that is what is necessary to make Northern Ireland work—to ensure that our place in the Union is valued, respected and protected in law and in practice, to remove the barriers to trade so that we can trade in both directions with the rest of the United Kingdom, and to ensure that our Union is stronger and that Northern Ireland's place within it is both respected and protected. That is what we are aiming to achieve.

We will assess the outcome against our seven tests, which we have set out clearly, determine the progress made and make our decisions based on these matters. We will do so rationally and clearly, recognising that we are the custodians of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. On our shoulders rests a huge responsibility. We will not shirk that responsibility, and we will not be found wanting in continuing to defend Northern Ireland's place in the Union.

2.25 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): This will probably not do the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) many favours, but I congratulate him on the tone of his speech. I found it to be encouraging in that respect. Obviously, Northern Ireland is currently in an incredibly difficult place. In terms of the overall situation we find ourselves in, it is fair to say that there is disappointment, anger, frustration and indeed bewilderment that we do not have functioning institutions. That view is shared by the vast majority people in Northern Ireland and, indeed, by businesses and civic society organisations.

When the January 2024 date was set in the previous Bill, it was so far off into the future that it seemed inconceivable that the institutions would not have been restored by that point, but here we are. It is in a sense bizarre to see a piece of primary legislation going through this Parliament essentially to extend and facilitate a negotiation by two weeks. Decisions could have been taken at any stage in the previous year—indeed, in the previous weeks and days—to avoid this situation.

On the surface, this is a simple Bill, but beneath it lies a much bigger story. This may well be a pragmatic extension in the hope and expectation of a breakthrough, and I sincerely hope that that happens, but the people of Northern Ireland have been patient—overly patient in many respects—about bringing matters to a conclusion. There will always be a degree of scepticism until we see a positive outcome. For others, however, the Bill amounts to kicking the can down the road for another couple of weeks and potentially deferring the much bigger decisions that will have to be taken in the event that we do not see the speedy resumption of devolution.

One aspect of the situation we find ourselves in is the story of Brexit, which was alluded to by both the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). It is about how the DUP backed a hard Brexit and did not reconcile that with the implications for Northern Ireland in terms of the special arrangements that had to be put in place. There is no perfect solution to the challenges that Brexit poses to Northern Ireland. The Windsor framework offers perhaps the best approach to putting

[Stephen Farry]

a square peg into a round hole, short of a wider reassessment of the UK's overall relationship with the European Union, but I must stress that whatever residual issues exist with the Windsor framework—I fully accept that businesses have frustrations with certain aspects of what they see; the same applies for consumers in some respects—they all pale into insignificance compared with the absence of functioning institutions and the ability to take decisions on health, education, our economy and protecting our environment.

As the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), said, we are also seeing real consequences in the wider trust and confidence in politics itself in Northern Ireland. Politics is not working, and that is a dangerous place to find ourselves in. It is not simply that issues are being parked for the eventual resumption of the Assembly to pick up where we left off. Every day the impasse goes on, more and more damage is being done to Northern Ireland's public services and we are losing economic opportunities.

I do not want to get into too much politics today—there has been a lot of that—but nevertheless I have a responsibility to say that there are other options we can consider. The DUP has been allowed to essentially hold the process to ransom with impunity over the past 12 months, in terms of blocking the Executive. I understand the point about cross-community confidence in any Executive, but blocking the functioning of the Executive goes against 75% of the people of Northern Ireland. There is a world of difference between checks and balances on individual decision making with the institutions, and a party pulling them down and stopping them from functioning and having no Government at all. The fact that we have to legislate for direct rule—if that is where we end up; I stress again that I hope we do not find ourselves in that situation—shows that previous legislators did not envisage a situation where the Assembly would not be functioning.

The space for negotiations around the Windsor framework is narrow. We have to be realistic. The Windsor framework is an agreement between the UK and the European Union, and there will be consequences from unpicking it unilaterally. Equally, we cannot unpick the Good Friday agreement, so the space is narrow and centres around implementation. I want to again stress from the Alliance party's point of view that we would be open-minded on any solution that comes forward. For us, the key element is that Northern Ireland maintains dual market access to both the UK internal market and the wider European market. Outside that red line, we are open-minded. If checks across the Irish sea can be reduced or limited in some cases, we are all for that. None of us wants to see them, but at the same time we recognise that due to the fact that Northern Ireland has special arrangements, and there is a good reason for them, some degree of checks across the Irish sea might be needed. Northern Ireland has always had special arrangements throughout its entire history, right back to the foundation of the state in the early 1920s, and they were accepted with pragmatism for very good reasons. I urge that that is the case today.

On the financial package the Secretary of State referred to, I again put on record my and my party's thanks to him and his wider team in the Northern Ireland Office

and the Treasury for putting it together. It is a bigger financial package than we have seen in previous breakdowns of devolution. At the same time, however, I have to say that the glass is somewhat half full. It will buy some time for a restored Executive, perhaps a couple of years of stabilisation, but there is still a much bigger conversation that we have to have in conjunction, potentially, with the next spending review on a proper fiscal floor for Northern Ireland. I appreciate that there are reasons why the current Government cannot go down that particular avenue, in terms of their wider spending commitments and the Prime Minister's five pledges, but it is important to stress the point that that wider discussion still needs to take place.

I join colleagues from Northern Ireland in stressing that we would like to see the Secretary of State moving ahead with the public sector pay issue, which has no leverage whatever in the negotiations. The money is there and it should be released. Equally, while we all might wish to dump on the Secretary of State and put pressure on him—he is a player in this regard—frankly, that release would be quicker and smoother if DUP colleagues returned to the Executive tomorrow, next week or whenever. There are two ways we can address the rightful claims of public sector workers: through the action of the Secretary of State or a speedy resumption of devolution.

In the event that we do not see an outcome in the next couple of weeks, we must look at alternatives. Perhaps that is a debate for another day, but there are two directions of travel. For me and my party, reform is the key way forward. The Good Friday agreement was never meant to be set in stone. It was always envisaged that it would evolve with circumstances and changing demographics. Indeed, many of the architects of the agreement—people no less than Senator George Mitchell himself—recognised that review and evolution would be important. Reform is important to facilitate restoration, or, if we get restoration, to learn the lessons of the instability, lack of cohesion and unfairness of the past 25 years and prevent a further collapse from happening. But the principles of the agreement, the structures, and the set of relationships across these islands remain sound.

To conclude, I think it was the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who made the point that all the parties in Northern Ireland are committed to devolution. Reform of the agreement keeps devolution alive. If we end up with the presumed default of going for direct rule, we move outside the Good Friday agreement. It might be the pragmatic solution in the circumstances, because Northern Ireland must be governed and public services have to be funded, but none the less we must recognise that that is a big step away from devolution. Reform is consistent with the agreement; direct rule is not.

However—this is an important point to stress to those people who are again opposing a deal and the way forward—in the event that we do not get restoration and we end up with direct rule, that direct rule must have an Irish dimension to it. That Irish dimension will be consultative and build on existing structures within the agreement. We have to recognise that direct rule, in a divided and diverse Northern Ireland, will be controversial. We have to recognise that in our governance and put in place mechanisms that balance it out. That is the reality. [Interruption.] I say to the hon. Member for Belfast

East (Gavin Robinson), who is muttering from a sedentary position—I am happy to take an intervention from him on this point—that the principle of consent remains in place. However, the principle of an Irish dimension has been established for quite some time, going back to the Anglo-Irish agreement. Of course, the Good Friday agreement acted to take much of that away, but that is the direction of travel. Those people who are arguing against progress in Northern Ireland and saying that we have a cover blanket of direct rule to fall back on, need to think very carefully about what they are calling for. What I am setting out is not what I want to see, and it is definitely not what they want to see, but that is the trajectory they will find themselves on if we do not see the speedy restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive.

2.37 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and I have not agreed on much recently—in fact, he kind of drives me crazy—and we do not agree on much of what we have debated today or over the past couple of years, but I strongly believe that he comes at this from a position of strong belief. He comes at it in an attempt to represent his constituents. He comes at it from a good place. It is a different place from me and we want to end up in a different place—and I might argue that he is helping us along in that regard—but I say this very clearly: those people who have threatened him today could not lace his boots, and every single democrat in this House or elsewhere should stand in solidarity with any of us who are being attacked like that. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

I think we are in a more hopeful place today than we have been. Last week, I was expecting to debate a much wider piece of legislation that would have seen us going in a different direction. If today’s Bill symbolises that we are getting closer, at least, to a resolution, we must welcome that and give it space. Nobody is more frustrated at the slowness of the process than I am. Nobody has expressed frustration more than I have about how we got into this situation. It is nearly two years since we had a Government in Northern Ireland; before that, we had covid, which was a very strange time, and before that we had three and a half years, after Sinn Féin brought the Government down, of having no Government. People in Northern Ireland now feel that the default setting is to have no Government. That is not good enough. Any of us in this place who believes in devolution and put their shoulder to the wheel around this peace process, should ensure that, very soon, we have democratically elected politicians in Northern Ireland dealing with these issues.

I find the state of our health service embarrassing. According to figures that I saw the other day on dementia diagnoses, some people in the western part of Northern Ireland are waiting nearly six years for a diagnosis. In what modern democracy should that be seen as acceptable? We are very lucky that people are not out on the streets in uproar over such figures. The public sector is tied together with a string, and our health service is at the point, if not beyond the point, of collapse.

That is not the fault of the people who have been asked to go into the tough places and do the tough work for very little pay. We proposed an amendment—and we understand that the scope of the Bill is very narrow—

calling on the Secretary of State to pay those workers. Last week 175,000 people were on picket lines across Northern Ireland, in the cold and the snow. I think people will know that my preference is for the DUP to return to government as soon as possible, so that we have democratically elected politicians making these decisions and we can get the money into those people’s pockets, but I am furious that ordinary workers have been used as a political pawn because of our political failure. That is absolutely unacceptable.

Those people need their pay rise today. They are the people holding this thing together. They are the people whom we have asked to go and do the tough things for very little reward, and there is no longer any excuse for that money not to be paid. If there is a technical reason for it, I will come back tomorrow and we can debate a Budget Bill if the Secretary of State wishes, so that we can get money into those people’s pockets, but I do not believe there is any technical reason why they cannot be paid.

We have talked about solutions, and a great many have been proposed. The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) talked about reform, and we are up for that conversation. In fact, I think that our amendment would have got the Assembly back up and running, if we used a different mechanism for electing a Speaker as at least a first step, although we also understand that we must have properly reformed institutions in Stormont. I strongly believe, however, that the best time to have that conversation is when we have a Government and an Executive in Stormont, because I fear that otherwise we would end up in a five-year negotiation about what reform would look like, and all the while we would still not have a Government in Stormont and locally elected people dealing with people’s concerns.

Some of us who are in the Chamber today have been through many long negotiations. I know that it is possible to go into a negotiation wanting to fix one little thing, and five years later not to have fixed it and to have done three or four other things that nobody asked for in the first place. We need to be cautious about that, and we need to be committed to reform. However, the first thing that must happen is that those who are elected to represent the people of Northern Ireland, and the person who is elected to be the First Minister, should be in place and allowed to do the job that they were elected to do. Then we will be able to have a proper discussion about how we should reform our institutions. A blind man on a galloping horse could tell you that we must reform those institutions, because they simply are not working.

Let me make one plea today to all the other political parties, and I will make this commitment myself. If we do get Stormont up and running, the next time a particular political party has a major disagreement, can we have a discussion about it, and can we all commit ourselves not to pulling the institutions down? The edifice of government should not be the first thing that goes when we have a difficult decision to make. I think that that would take us a long way.

I am glad that we have arrived at this point. I think that it tells us something about the direction of travel. The history of our place should remind us all that at some point we must take on our own dissidents wherever they may reside—in our own party, in our own community, or on social media. They need to be taken on because

[Colum Eastwood]

the representatives of a broad swathe of opinion—whether nationalist, Unionist or “not interested”—want ordinary people to be looked after. They want their health service to be properly resourced, they want their schools to function properly, and they want their public sector workers to be paid properly. The broad population want a Government in Stormont, and they want it now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before I proceed, let me remind hon. Members that the Second Reading debate must end at 3.23 pm. I assume they will want to hear the Front Benchers wind it up. I am not going to impose a time limit; it is up to hon. Members whether they choose to hear the Front Benchers or not.

2.44 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Without encroaching on the advice that you have just given, Mr Deputy Speaker, am I right to assume that there are three Back Benchers still waiting to speak? If that is the case, I think we can pass the time well between us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As things stand, yes, but one hon. Member left the Chamber and came back in, and another who indicated that she wished to speak has left the Chamber but is entitled to come back in because she heard the opening speeches, as did one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues. All I am saying is that I urge brevity. I know that that is difficult, but speeches are currently running for more than 10 minutes, and that is too long.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I certainly do not take those comments personally, because it is a trait among those of us who are of Ulster-Scots lineage that we sometimes add a few extra words or phrases.

I am proud to speak in this debate. Let me first acknowledge the constructive tone adopted by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood). He was right to say that should we find ourselves in circumstances like this in the future, we should talk. If I were not willing to follow the constructive tone of the debate, I would gently remind him that at the time when we tried to have those conversations, some were chiding us, encouraging us to take the action that we did and mocking us for not doing so; but I will leave it there.

I am also proud to follow the remarks of my party leader and the leader of Unionism, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), who very carefully, clearly and thoughtfully articulated not just where we have been or where we are today, but the aspiration that we have outlined for a number of years. We have been to the electorate, and we have highlighted the difficulties and the deficits within the arrangements foisted on us, but the challenge for us all is to recognise that the prize for restoring Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, for reducing the constitutional harm and for removing the democratic deficit, is the ability to return to a place where Northern Ireland functions as well as it has in the past: a place where people in Northern Ireland are confident of their position within this United Kingdom irrespective of

their constitutional outlook, and a place where people in Northern Ireland can recognise that it is through their elected representatives directly and locally that they can shape their own future. It does not matter what passport they hold; they live in Northern Ireland and can benefit from, and do benefit from, a relationship that has spanned centuries on these islands.

My right hon. Friend referred to custodians of the future. I remind Members that our place in politics is to protect and promote our place within this United Kingdom. That is our first and foremost principle. To those who have raised questions in the last number of days, and who will no doubt continue in the next number of days to raise questions or sow discord, let me say this: the Democratic Unionist party is united in the task that is before us.

We highlighted the pitfalls and the dangers of what was proposed to us back in 2019, at a time when others dismissed and demeaned our position. When we asked for change and indicated the consequences that the proposals could have for power-sharing arrangements in devolution, we were dismissed. We were set aside. Yet through our actions, when changes were delivered in the Windsor framework, what we had been told were mythical unicorns suddenly became something that, while being far from rigorous implementation, constituted changes that recognised the problems and brought solutions. The very same people who had ridiculed and dismissed us turned round and said, “Of course all this is sensible and pragmatic, and we should move forward.”

When faced with the choice between religious observance of that which was agreed with the European Union and the importance of devolution, sadly there are those within Northern Ireland political society who chose religious observance of the EU. They lost sight of the prize of power sharing in Northern Ireland, where communities with different aspirations could work collectively together. That is where we find ourselves.

The Secretary of State and I have engaged on this, as he has with a number of colleagues over a considerable period of time, and I commend him for a number of things, including for delivering a speech that had fewer words than are in the Bill before us today. That was a remarkable achievement. But he did not have many choices that were workable, other than to present the Bill today. Of course, he could have brought forward legislation that addressed a budget for next year. He could have brought forward legislation that assumed powers from Stormont to here in Westminster. He could have brought forward legislation that set a regional rate of around 15%. I think it is fair in the context of this debate to recognise that he still may need to bring forward such legislation. While others speculate about the intentions of this short Bill—I have my own views on it and what it should have been—I think it is a recognition that there is still work to be done and that there is a commitment to do that work.

I cannot say where this will end. I know where I think it should end. I cannot say what the ultimate outcome will be, but what I see and hear and read in the papers at home bears no resemblance to reality. My party is at one in our position. We have stood together through worse times than this. Anybody who thinks they are going to come at one member of our party over the coming days and weeks comes at us all, and they do so for their nefarious ends, not for our collective future.

The choices will become stark, but let us make a choice on the basis of where we are, not where others who do not wish anything to work think it is. That is the challenge for us, for the people of Northern Ireland and for the people we represent.

In standing in the position that I do today, with nine years as an elected representative in this House and 14 years as an elected representative and as someone who has lived in Northern Ireland benefiting longer from periods of peace than seeing troubled times, I can say that nothing will shake our resolve to get this right. I say that with only this in mind: the Secretary of State has taken the choice available to him today in proceeding with this Bill, and it does not end today. It cannot end today, and our commitment for the future needs to be emboldened further still.

2.52 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am not too sure why we have the Bill in this form today, with the suggestion that we could have further legislation on 8 February. I suppose the generous interpretation is that the Government still recognise that a lot of work needs to be done to deal with the concerns of the Unionist population. The other interpretation is that this is an attempt to put short-term pressure on my party to come to an agreement on the basis of terms that are unacceptable.

I know that the Government are intent on trying to put the failure of their negotiations with the EU behind them because they have so much internal division with their own party about how they have failed to deliver on the promises of Brexit, but cementing this agreement into the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is not good for a Government who claimed that they wanted to take back sovereignty, and it is not acceptable to Unionists in Northern Ireland who have gone through terrorist campaigns, and shown resolve in terrorist campaigns, in order to stay within the United Kingdom.

We have had all kinds of pressure put on us. We have had threats. We have even heard more of those threats today, such as, “If you don’t go down the route of getting a resolution here, we will have to re-examine the Belfast agreement. We will maybe have to take away the safeguards that were put in place.” With Unionists now not being the dominant parties in the Assembly, it is easy for those who said safeguards for minorities were important in the agreement to dismiss them now. I listened to the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), and it is little wonder that many people in North Down regard him now as a Sinn Féin cuckoo in the constituency nest, because he talks and argues so much as though he were coming from a Sinn Féin position, rather than from the position of a constituency that is predominantly Unionist.

We have had the threats, including that there might be a change in the agreement that would take away the consensus, or that we might have direct rule that involves the Irish Republic, even though there is no provision for that in the Good Friday agreement. Of course, the Secretary of State has sought to say this at times—or through surrogates. I notice that the hon. Member for North Down echoed the words of the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in threatening that there could be big change that would be detrimental to the Union if we did not come to an agreement quickly.

We have had the bribes, and of course we have also had the bullying: “If you don’t go back into the Assembly, people will not get their pay rise.” I have to say to the Secretary of State that it does not become the current Government to use the workers in Northern Ireland as pawns in trying to push us into a situation. He well knows that this is unnecessary, because nearly 50 public sector pay agreements have been awarded in the last year. However, because there is now an opportunity to use public sector pay agreements, they are being used to exert pressure.

As far as we are concerned, and as our leader has made clear, we want to see devolution restored. In fact, devolution stopped only because the Government refused to listen. Furthermore, not only did they refuse to listen but they expected Unionists to stay in positions in Northern Ireland where they would have had to implement the very thing that we believe is destructive to our economy and will destroy the Union as well. That was an act of last resort. Nevertheless, the Government must be aware that the economic impact of the border in the Irish sea must be removed. The shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said today that the red lane was only for goods moving into the Republic and that that surely showed the integrity of the UK internal market. That is not true. There are many businesses in Northern Ireland that will have to use the red lane until they show where their goods have gone.

I spoke to a businessman this morning in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who told me that he had a consignment of goods come in this week with 151 individual items for which he had to identify the country of origin, change the product codes and provide weights and a whole range of other information. He is a small businessman. He sent me a message he had received from a major supplier in Manchester, where he bought 10% of his goods, who had finally said to him, “I can’t trade with you anymore. It is not worth my while, given the amount of paperwork.” He operates in Newtownards and none of his goods sell in the Irish Republic, yet he is subject to all this. Now he has to look for new supply chains, and it has been pointed out here many times before that the Irish Government are not behind the door in exploiting that. In fact, he told me that officials from the trade body in the Irish Republic ring him up on a regular basis and ask why does not buy from such and such a supplier in the Republic. It is no wonder that we have already seen a 15% trade diversion as a result of this.

This is hurting us economically. In the long term, it is hurting us constitutionally, too, with the application of EU law in Northern Ireland. We have seen it in the last week on animal safety standards, which cannot apply in Northern Ireland even though the law was passed by this House. Regulations on illegal immigration cannot apply in Northern Ireland, and there is a danger of having to introduce passport controls if Northern Ireland becomes a magnet for illegal immigration. We now have Bills being passed by Parliament that extend to Northern Ireland but cannot apply to Northern Ireland, and we cannot tolerate that.

Unless those issues are dealt with, and as the Secretary of State well knows, how could any Unionist be expected to accept that trade within our country continues to be disrupted? It will hurt businesses and, in the long term, our constitutional arrangements, causing divergence between Northern Ireland and the country to which we belong.

[Sammy Wilson]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) indicated that he is prepared to work to resolve that challenge, and he has indicated that he takes personal abuse for working at it—that is the position in which politicians now find themselves in Northern Ireland. We did not create this problem. The Government created this problem, and courageous people such as my right hon. Friend should not be hung out to dry because the Government are not prepared to take on their masters in the EU.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Jim Shannon. I would be grateful if he tried to confine his remarks to five minutes.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will certainly do my best, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Over the past few days I have received correspondence, emails and text messages from the people I represent and, as Unionists, they are all concerned about where we are with the protocol. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) mentioned my constituent in Ards, who sent me a text message this morning outlining the concerning amount of bureaucracy he went through for each of the 300 items he ordered from a wholesaler in Manchester.

What is the point of the protocol? Many constituents tell me that the point is to press the DUP to give up and go back in; the point is to strong-arm the Unionist people by withholding the necessary money—the Secretary of State will not use his power to allocate it. The Secretary of State knows that I have the greatest respect for him, and I always try to be courteous, but I can understand why some constituents believe that, because they see the Government legislating for something as non-urgent as relationships and sex education in schools, yet they will not give a pay rise to public sector workers. The unions want it, the £3.3 billion is there and the £600 million necessary for the wage increases is there. I suggest that the Secretary of State allocates the money immediately.

The mindset of the Northern Ireland people is perhaps not understood. As a people who were bombed and attacked by IRA nationalists for 30 years, we are not easily pressured or cowed. When it comes to protecting that for which my family and many other families shed their blood, we will not be blackmailed. My constituents want me to make it clear that all those who gave their life for Queen and country, as it was then, or King and country, as it is now, died for freedom, liberty and democracy.

I am given to understand that progress has been made, which I welcome. We want to see constructive progress, but I understand that we are not there yet. We are perhaps far from it, but there has been progress. My constituents are concerned about how this has been handled. Instead of being anxious to hear about how far things have moved and what has been achieved, the result of the seeming blackmail is distrust.

There is a feeling that the DUP has done its best for the nation, and I believe we are heading towards something that, constitutionally and practically, would prevent our children from having to fill in reams of unnecessary

paperwork and allow them to operate in the UK as normal. Under the Windsor framework, our shopkeepers continue to have to sign off Trader Support Service declarations for goods from the UK, yet there is no paperwork when they purchase goods from the Republic.

Members will understand why we are a little less British in Northern Ireland than they are in Wales, Scotland or England. The presumption should be that Northern Ireland is UK-focused. We want to be UK-focused, and we want to continue buying from where we bought things in the past. Our traders, including those who trade with shops in Newtownards and Bangor, are paying accountants and spending money and man hours on something that need not be done.

One ridiculous example among many is pet treats that are deemed not to be safe to sell in Northern Ireland. They were safe before the Northern Ireland protocol and are still safe at the other end of the ferry journey in Scotland. We are working towards something that allows the health service to secure the same medications as NHS England, and that enables vets to access anything they need for their animals without additional costs or paperwork. This would reaffirm our place within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and stop reunification through the back door. These are the things that the DUP, ably led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), has been working towards.

The undoubted changes that have been secured will not easily be trusted by the Unionist people, not because the DUP has attempted to pull the wool over people's eyes but because the Unionist people, whom we support and who support us, believe the media hype, and the actions of this Government appear to underline that hype.

The Secretary of State is aware that we in the DUP will not be blackmailed, and that we have continued to negotiate and secure further changes is testament to the fact that we will not accept just any deal. We will only accept the right deal. I fervently hope that the next few weeks bring about the last complex changes required for the good of the Unionist people and, indeed, of people throughout the Province, no matter what their political persuasion.

There should be no doubt that, should we fail to negotiate the correct deal, we will not be afraid to face our electorate. I look forward to seeing the deal and how the words on the page will affect life in Northern Ireland. Although I support a two-week extension and understand the reasons for it, I ask the Government to get the messaging right. Instead of seeming to work against us, they should work with us to find a solution and to get this right for every person of every colour and creed in Northern Ireland. We want a restored Assembly, but it must be the right deal. The Conservative and Unionist party's Northern Ireland protocol has to be addressed. The power to make the necessary change lies at the feet of the Secretary of State and with the Government. We will do our best to bring about change and to find a deal, but we cannot, will not and must not ignore the voice of Unionism.

3.7 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank all Members who have contributed to this debate. We are united in wanting the best for the people of Northern Ireland. In

particular, we heard a very powerful speech from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and no one who heard it could be in any doubt about his determination to fight hard for Unionism. The whole House will be sorry to hear that he has been threatened. Anyone trying to bully him clearly does not know him.

As my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State outlined, Labour supports this Bill and supports the ongoing efforts to restore the Executive as soon as possible. In the short amount of extra time afforded by this legislation, the restoration of power sharing and devolved government must be the Government's absolute priority. While I commend the important work that civil servants are doing to keep the mechanics of the state functioning, the truth is that communities across Northern Ireland need the Executive and the Members of the Legislative Assembly to be back in their rightful place, taking the important decisions that are so desperately needed for the effective delivery of public services, health, education and to protect the environment.

On my visits to Northern Ireland, I have met many inspiring community groups that are struggling because of cuts and because of the cost of living crisis. Although all of these groups are making an enormous difference within and across their communities, they have all told me that the one thing that would make the biggest difference to their work, and for people who are suffering from the cost of living crisis, is a restored and functioning Executive.

Just last week we saw the biggest industrial action in Northern Ireland's recent history, with an estimated 150,000 public sector workers joining the strike. There is clear and obvious widespread dissatisfaction with the impact and consequences of the current political situation in Northern Ireland. Given that the Government are legislating only to push the deadline back by 15 days, it is vital that we see quick progress and that the limited time available is not squandered. As the shadow Secretary of State has said, whatever happens, the money for public sector pay, which the Secretary of State has made clear is available, should be released, so that workers in Northern Ireland finally get the pay increase they deserve. The current situation must not be allowed to become the accepted norm. A failure to restore devolved government could cause and is causing damage that could take years to undo.

Labour will support this Bill. I urge the Secretary of State to do all he can to ensure that an agreement is reached and to keep the House informed at every stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, I call Chris Heaton-Harris.

3.10 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to close this Second Reading debate. At the beginning, I spoke for a whole two minutes, because I wanted to hear what everybody had to say. I was hoping it would not go on quite as—*[Interruption.]* Quite as well as it did, but some important speeches were made, which I will come to in a moment. Clause 1 states:

“In section 1(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022, for “18 January 2024” substitute “8 February 2024”.

It provides for a short extension in time. Clause 2 deals with the extent, commencement and short title of the Bill. My two-minute speech was simply about keeping within scope, but we have managed to touch on Scottish independence, public sector pay, leaving the European Union, the Malthouse compromise, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs agenda and reform of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, all within two hours. I shall learn yet another lesson about Northern Ireland debates on the Floor of this House, and just say what I think all the time at the very beginning.

A number of excellent interventions were made in the debate. I will talk about the speeches we heard, but the interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) were all interesting and important. I wish to put on record for the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) that the whole House wishes his uncle well; the hon. Gentleman is not in his place, but it is important that we recognise that we are all human in this business.

I thank all those who made speeches in the debate: the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn); my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith); the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson); my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland); the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), who gave a fantastic speech and I associate myself with many of the comments he made; the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson); the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who made a characteristically passionate speech—I really appreciate the way in which he put his words and what he said—and, of course, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The stand-out contribution came from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and I thank him profusely for the conversations we have had over the course of the past weeks and months. I know that he really does want to get the best deal for Northern Ireland that works for both the nationalist and the Unionist communities, that is based on consent and that means that he can find the conditions to restore the institutions. I know that he and his party believe in devolution. He listed the number of things that he has managed to achieve during his leadership of his party, and he should be and can be rightly proud of what he has already achieved in that space.

The fact that the right hon. Gentleman has been threatened for doing the job he should be doing is a disgrace—it is extraordinary. Unfortunately, everyone in this place has to come across such things. The people making these threats are cowards and idiots, and I know that they will not deter him. I have noticed in my time as Secretary of State that the number of followers someone has on Twitter, or X, does not necessarily equate to the number of brain cells they might have or the amount of common sense or decency they display as a human being. Those characteristics are personal and ones that someone can display as a human being. Unfortunately, some people choose to have a different persona when they are on social media and when they are emailing some really stupid things. I promise him that I shall work with him and use whatever power I have to make

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

sure that he does not feel insecure in going about his business properly, because no parliamentarian should feel that. As I said, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

When we gathered to mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement last year, we noted that the hard-won gains of the peace process should be honoured by the restoration of the devolved institutions. There is broad agreement on the main substance of this Bill: that our priority must be to continue to restore devolution in Northern Ireland. I was asked about this by the shadow Front-Bench team, so let me say that that is the immediate issue on which I am completely concentrated.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central asked what other legislation there might be. There could be future legislation, but I do not want to be in that place. He asked me to make a statement if things move, in order to keep the House updated. I absolutely guarantee that I will do so, should things move forward. Of course, he would expect me to be prepared for all eventualities, and I will update the House on my plans if it does not prove possible to restore the Executive by the new deadline. But I really do hope that those plans will not be needed.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about public sector pay, and a number of other Members mentioned it. The Government recognise the vital work that public sector workers carry out and they should be fairly paid in recognition of that work. However, the UK Government do not have the authority to negotiate pay in Northern Ireland. I recognise that the uncertainty on pay awards is causing pressure on Northern Ireland finances, which is why the Government put a fair and generous financial package on the table, offering a new Executive a non-repayable injection of help to restore the Executive and manage that pressure.

Gavin Robinson: This is not intended to spoil the mood, but the trade unions would be quite upset if we did not take the opportunity to say that they are not asking the Northern Ireland Office to negotiate their pay; they will negotiate with their employers, as is right in the normal course of events. They are asking that the money that was secured and agreed in December be released to their employers, so that they can get on and have the negotiations.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but that is a complete package that is available for a restored Executive.

I promised at the beginning of this debate to be as brief as possible. I know that we have more work to do in this Parliament on different subjects, but I hope shortly to be in a position where I can return to this Dispatch Box celebrating the return of a wonderful institution of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Practically speaking, this step—to secure Royal Assent on this legislation—is the first step along that route.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Bill considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

3.18 pm

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind Members that, in Committee, the Chair should not be addressed as “Deputy Speaker.” Please use our names when addressing the Chair, although “Mr Chairman” and “Madam Chairman” are also acceptable.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman: It will stand on the record that my contribution was longer than anybody else’s during this Committee stage.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

3.20 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third Time.

I wish to place on the record my sincere thanks to everyone involved in the Bill’s passage through the House for their support for its expedited passage. I particularly thank the Front Benchers of all parties for their collaborative and constructive engagement.

On Second Reading, a whole host of issues concerning Northern Ireland had a reasonable outing. I would like to think that the tone of the debate we have had over the course of the past two hours will be reflected in the positive tone we can take in our negotiations and talks over the next few hours and days, or however long it may be, so that we can get to the wonderful place that I believe we all want to get to.

I reiterate my comments about the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and his words. I have really enjoyed working with him, listening to him and understanding the points he makes when he represents Unionism so powerfully, as he does. I know it is vital to him that we get this right. Occasionally, some of our conversations have been repetitive, but they all have a point.

I hope he would acknowledge that I have a deep and fundamental understanding of the issues that he and his party have been outlining during the past few days, weeks and months, and I would like to think that those issues are being reflected in the conversations we are having now. I do not think anybody in the House does not want to see Stormont returned, the Assembly sitting, the Executive up and running, and Ministers making the choices that the people who elected them would like to see.

Jim Shannon: I am mindful that the Secretary of State introduced his comments by talking about the good will that we have heard in the exchanges between Members as we try to find a way forward. Will he use some of that good will to ensure that the £600 million needed to address the pay agreement with the medical sector and teachers is found from the £3.3 billion that he has? He must build upon that good will, make that gesture and ensure that the unions have the pay increase they seek, on which there is consensus from all parties on the Opposition Benches. Will he use that good will, build upon it and make that gesture today?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contributions, but I have said all I am going to say on that matter for today.

It has been nearly two years since the institutions have been up and running, and a lot of water has passed under the bridge. Like the hon. Gentleman, I meet people from across Northern Ireland, those from both communities and those who are new to Northern Ireland, who have chosen to work and live there. They all want to see their institutions up and running, and that is important for democracy too. We all need to see the results of an election that was fairly fought delivered, because we are all democrats in this place. I prefer to win elections, rather than lose them—I very much hope I manage to maintain my lucky streak that I have had since I started to represent my seat of Daventry. Democracy is vital to our system, as is ensuring that every voter feels heard through the ballot box.

I place on the record my thanks to those who have engaged in the debate. I also place on the record my appreciation to the House authorities and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel for their continued expert advice. Right hon. and hon. Members involved in the debate know that there could have been a different piece of legislation laid today, and that is probably where we were progressing to, so the slight course correction that we have made involved a huge amount of help from the people behind the scenes who make this place function so well. I put on the record my thanks to them.

I thank my colleagues and officials in the Government Whips Office for helping us progress in a smooth fashion. As ever, I am grateful to them for everything they do. As a former Government Chief Whip, I understand their pain.

I conclude by repeating what I said on Second Reading. People in Northern Ireland rightly expect and deserve to see locally elected decision makers address the issues that matter to them. I agree with them, and I genuinely believe the House does too.

3.26 pm

Hilary Benn: Now I can see the relief on the faces of the Government Whips. I will keep my remarks extremely short.

Once again, I thank the Secretary of State for being punctilious, in the proper sense of the word, in his dealings with me and in keeping me informed about what he has planned. I echo his thanks to civil servants, although I should think in civil service careers this is probably the easiest Bill to draft because that one line cannot have taken terribly long.

I join the praise for the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) for the speech he made and the passion he showed, and his willingness to set out the argument that has united all parts of the House, namely that it is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland to have their Government back. In whatever further conversations they are due to have in the next few days, I wish him and the Secretary of State every success in bringing the situation to a conclusion. In the end, the people who will feel the benefit of an agreement are the people of Northern Ireland.

We criticise the Government, but we look to them when we want things to be done—when we want them to help us to deal with problems or to advance the interests of society. That is why the people of Northern Ireland have the same right as everyone else to see their Government in place. Let me refer back to the comments that I made at the start of Second Reading: I bring my contribution to the passage of the Bill to a close in, I think, a slightly better state of hope than when it began. I wish all those involved every success.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Situation in the Red Sea

3.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in the Red Sea.

Last week at Lancaster House, I set out why we are living in a far more dangerous world. Members will need no reminding that we are dealing with multiple conflicts at once: Russia has increased the intensity of its attacks on Ukraine; the appalling Hamas atrocities of 7 October have brought conflict to that region; and, most recently of all, international shipping is now being threatened by Houthi proxies aided and abetted by Iran.

Since November, there have been more than 40 attacks on commercial vessels across the region. It is salutary to think that it has been 30 years since the maritime law was codified in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. Some 168 nations back the UNCLOS treaty. The UK signed it, Yemen acceded to it, and even Iran is a signatory to it. There is a good reason why it has achieved such broad support. All nations rely on global trade, and none more so than the UK, given that a full 90% of UK commerce comes to us by sea.

Some 12% of international trade passes through the Red sea every single year, amounting to more than \$1 trillion-worth of goods. In addition, 8% of global grain trade, 12 % of seaborne traded oil and 8% of the world's liquefied natural gas all pass through this ancient seaway. Perhaps even more astonishing is that 40% of the goods that are traded between Europe and Asia go through the Red sea.

Sadly, the Houthis' unlawful and callous attacks are putting all that trade at risk. Twelve international companies have been forced to suspend the passage through the Red sea because of the attacks. The number of vessels transiting Bab al-Mandab was 54% below the level observed in the previous year, and diverting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope has had a crippling impact, not only adding days of delay to vital deliveries but driving up international shipping costs to prohibitive levels. Some reports suggest that shipping costs are up by 300%.

What these Iran-backed Houthi pirate thugs forget is that it is the least well-off nations and people who suffer the most from their illegal actions, starting with Yemen itself, where almost all food comes by sea. At times like these, nations must stand up. Attacks on Red sea shipping automatically make this a global problem.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his recent speech. According to the House of Commons Library, there are 12 Iranian proxy forces in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Yemen, so this is not just about the Houthis, although that is what we are dealing with now. To what extent are we able to keep tabs on and monitor, or to work with allies who can keep tabs on and monitor, those dozen proxy forces that, sadly, Iran is now using with increased repetitiveness to attack not only our interests but the interests of our allies?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; he is something of an expert in this area. Iran is absolutely behind all the different proxy groups that he outlined,

and many more. In a way, Iran is able to control this situation without getting too involved itself, and the world needs to wake up and recognise that. We are of course monitoring all of that incredibly closely. Appeasing the Houthis now, or all these other groups, will not lead to a more stable tomorrow, in the case of the Houthis, in respect of the Red sea. Being blind to the sponsors of terror will not benefit the international order in the long run, which is why it is so important that the world has acted.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I apologise for interrupting the Defence Secretary. On the shipping side of things, there has been an extraordinary reduction in confidence in that route. The only way to restore the confidence of ships to pass through the gulf of Aden and up through the Red sea is an increase in military convoys. I am sure he is coming to this, but what steps are being taken to drive up military convoys to escort vessels through that passage?

Grant Shapps: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an excellent point. That is what Operation Prosperity Guardian is all about: that taskforce enables shipping to be protected to an extent. He may be getting at the broader point of whether individual ships should be protected. The view that the world has taken is that Prosperity Guardian provides an umbrella to shipping more widely. The sheer volume of ordinary traffic through the Red sea means that we need that US-led international taskforce for the security of the Red sea and the gulf of Aden.

This is incredibly important. After all, we are part of defending the international rules-based order in the actions that we are taking. Last week, I was onboard HMS Diamond—which is right at the heart of the issue in the Red sea—talking to our brave sailors who are out there protecting our critical sea lanes. The House will know that this is the first Royal Navy ship's company for 32 years who have fired in anger—or in self-defence, in their case.¹ It was fascinating to talk to them about their experience and to witness their professionalism in dealing with this challenge.

It really did not have to be this way. We worked hard to warn the Houthis off. At the start of the year, the world sent a very clear message to the Houthis: “End your illegal and unjustified actions. Stop risking innocent lives. Please stop illegally detaining vessels and crews. Cease threatening the global economy.” All those warnings fell on deaf ears, and eventually enough was enough.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I completely support the Government's action, which is totally in accordance with international law and defending freedom of navigation on the high seas, but we can only do it with people; otherwise, there will be no one to maintain the Typhoons or crew the warships. People are leaving three times as fast as we are recruiting, as the Secretary of State is aware. Will he commit to coming to the House before Easter to make a statement on what we are doing about the retention of critical armed forces personnel? He knows why it is important.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend has been very solid on these issues, which he and I have spoken about in the Defence Committee and elsewhere. He will be pleased to know that I have recently held meetings with

1.[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 8MC.]

individuals he believes will help to resolve the issue. In common with many western militaries, I am working very hard to ensure that we have the men and women we need in our armed forces, skilled up to the right levels and capable of taking on this challenge. He will be reassured to know that I went to Akrotiri last week and met the Typhoon pilots. They are incredibly highly skilled, and backed by an enormous array of tanker pilots, ground crew, mechanics and many others. It is very important that we support them. I am working very hard on this, and will come back to my right hon. Friend, the Defence Committee and the House with future plans to back up what Haythornthwaite and others have proposed.

A fortnight ago, the Prime Minister, relevant Cabinet Ministers and I authorised the RAF precision strikes using four Typhoon FGR4s, supported by two Voyager air-refuelling tankers. They struck facilities at Bani in north-western Yemen and an airfield at Abbs. The sites had been used to launch reconnaissance and attack drones as well as cruise missiles over the Red sea, and they were destroyed. Let me reiterate what has been said before: this was limited, necessary and proportionate. It was done in self-defence in response to very specific threats and in line with international law.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution and for all he has been doing over the past few weeks. As he makes clear, this has been an increasingly difficult situation—we had no choice but to act. What is our assessment of the extent to which we need to degrade Houthi capabilities in order for them to change their intent and actions? As yet, I am unclear as to whether we have the ability to look into what the Houthis are thinking, let alone Iran's activities. We must also recognise that the Houthis are, at best, a disobedient ally and not really a proxy, so they do have their own interests that they are pursuing.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend, with her immense experience and perspective as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, is absolutely right about the formation of the Houthis, who, if we look back at their history, are actually opportunists. Only as far back as 2015, they did not support Hamas. Now they claim their entire programme is in support of Hamas' illegal activities. She also quite rightly asks what proportion of the Houthi equipment and machinery has been destroyed. We work with others to assess the battle damages, as it were. I can confirm that the attacks so far have been complete in their targets, but the Houthis' *modus operandi* is flexibility, and they will use launching sites as they see fit, which is why our US allies have been using what they would describe as dynamic strikes, as they ping up.

Sadly, as my hon. Friend and the House will know, the Houthis continued to persist even though they had been dealt a blow. A further 12 attacks followed, including anti-ship ballistic missiles and an unmanned aerial system that struck two US-owned merchant vessels. Our intelligence has continued to highlight an ongoing and imminent threat to our commercial and military vessels across the region.

As the Prime Minister told the House just yesterday, attempting to respond to the Houthis after they launch their irrational assaults is simply not a sustainable way to proceed, so on Monday night, working alongside our

US partners, but also with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands, the Prime Minister and I authorised a second wave of strikes. They were once again deployed using precision-guided Paveway IV missiles, and destroyed eight targets near Sanaa airfield, taking out clusters of Miraj surface-to-air missile launchers and further degrading the Houthis' ability to hold our seas to ransom. Our targeting was once again carefully planned and precise and we are not aware of there being any civilian casualties at all, and the operation was designed in that context.

It was a complex joint operation involving close co-operation between UK and US aircrews. I wish to pay tribute to our brave pilots and aircrews, who carried out the action so very effectively. Last week, as I mentioned, it was a real honour to meet those pilots and the support team in Akrotiri—each of them professional to the last.

The military track is only one part of a much more comprehensive Government response. As the Prime Minister set out in his statement yesterday, we are working diplomatically to reduce the regional tensions, making it clear, especially to the Iranians, that they must stop supplying weapons, intelligence, training and money to the Houthis. We are working with our allies to halt the illegal flow of arms to the Houthi militia. We are working and seeking to cut off the Houthis' financial support, and we are determined to help the people of Yemen, whom the Houthis are not friends of, to ensure that they receive the humanitarian aid they need.

Despite the Houthis' absurd claims to be the Robin Hood of Yemen, the reality is they are simply exploiting the turmoil in the middle east to their own advantage and in their own self-interest—a point made strongly to me when I spoke to the President of Yemen recently. Ordinary Yemenis have not benefited one iota from their malign activity. On the contrary, they are victims of the same Houthi thuggery as anyone else. It hits our trade and the world's trade, and will only in the end hurt the Yemeni population, damaging their security and driving up food prices.

However, the Houthis should be in no doubt that the world needs them to cease and desist their illegal behaviour. Today, as I said, we are living in what feels like a more dangerous world, but the UK will not be cowed. We will not retreat to our shores. Instead, we will continue to lead. As the whole House knows, we are already leading in Ukraine; we have increased our military support to £2.5 billion and signed a historic agreement on security co-operation, laying the foundation for a century-long partnership with our Ukrainian friends. We are also leading in NATO and have sent some 20,000 personnel to participate in Exercise Steadfast Defender. To put that into context, there are 32 countries involved in the NATO exercise and we are providing half the personnel.

Returning to the subject of today's debate, we are also leading in the Red sea. This great waterway is one of mankind's earliest trade routes, active since the days of the Pharaohs and through Roman times. We will do all we can to keep it active in the 21st century as well. We are working with our allies to deter regional danger, keeping those vital sea lanes open so that our ships and many others can traverse the ancient waters without fear.

[Grant Shapps]

3.46 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Today the House was set to debate the full sweep of defence and international affairs until the change of business yesterday, which gave this debate its focus on the Red sea. I know that Members on all sides will welcome the opportunity to debate and to question the Government on the UK's presence and the tensions in this part of the middle east, and I look forward to the contributions from all sides to the debate. Nevertheless, I hope Ministers will ensure that we get the opportunity soon to debate the broader aspects of defence, especially on Ukraine, as the Defence Secretary indicated in his remarks he is keen to do.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): In the old days—I have been here a long time—we had debates in Government time on defence, as we do this afternoon, but in recent times we have not done so and the debates have been down to the Backbench Business Committee. I very much welcome the Committee, which is a great organisation, but none the less we ought to have defence debates in Government time on a Tuesday or Wednesday, set by the Government. I hope the Secretary of State will ensure that that happens in future.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has great experience and he is right to say that Government time signals the importance that the Government give to the business they bring to this House. While the Backbench Business Committee does an important and useful job, it is Government time that matters. Since the Defence Secretary has been in post, we have not had that general debate on defence, and we should. We have not had a debate on Ukraine for four months, and we should, certainly ahead of the bloody two-year anniversary next month of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have also not had a debate since 7 October on Israel and Palestine, which is extraordinary. There is an irony that, had we gone ahead with the original debate on international relations, that could have been a subject for debate, but we are restricted by this debate. It is clear why the situation in the Red sea is a priority, but that is probably also a priority, which the Government might wish to take up, and which I have raised previously with the Leader of the House.

John Healey: At the risk of sounding a bit like the shadow Leader of the House responding to a business question, my hon. Friend is right. He is very experienced and I am sure he will find a way, as the Prime Minister did yesterday in his statement about the Red sea action, to talk more widely about Israel and Palestine without testing Mr Deputy Speaker's patience too far.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for his remarks about Ukraine. It is important, in the context of everything that is happening globally, that we take the opportunity once again to say that we stand in Ukraine, particularly in the light of the changing political landscape in North America. All of us here, and our allies in Europe, have a

responsibility to send a message that we will do everything necessary to support that country, which must prevail against Putin's aggression.

John Healey: I, for one, appreciated the right hon. Gentleman's leadership of his party when Putin invaded Ukraine. Like us, he has demonstrated that the UK has been and remains totally united behind Ukraine and in confronting Russian aggression. I say to the Defence Secretary that one of the important things that the Government do by organising a debate in the House is signal the importance that all sides of the House give to the support to Ukraine. It is also a chance to explain to the British public why this matters so much, and why defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. It is essential to our interests that Ukraine prevails, not Putin.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One way in which one can stretch the terms of the debate a little further than its precise wording without infringing any rules is to remark upon the fact that in the Red sea, British naval assets are particularly important. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that there should be no question, now or in the near or medium future, of our losing our amphibious assault ships, which are so necessary for the combined operations that one must engage in when taking on piratical opponents?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Perfectly done, Sir Julian.

John Healey: One other way of stretching the limits of a tightly drawn debate is experienced interventions of the nature that the right hon. Gentleman has just demonstrated. One advantage of debates such as this is that we hear from the Government not just at the start of the debate, but at the end, so we can look forward to the Minister picking up and responding to the right hon. Gentleman's question when he winds up.

Grant Shapps: But what do you think?

John Healey: What do I think? Well, it would be helpful to have access to the sort of classified information that the Defence Secretary has in order to make these decisions. It is his responsibility to do so, and it is our responsibility in this House to challenge and hold him to account when he makes those decisions—and, of course, if he fails to make decisions.

Perhaps I might return to the Red sea and the theme and focus of this debate. We now have around 2,500 military personnel in the middle east, and I begin by recognising their special service. Many were deployed at short notice—most were away from their families over Christmas—helping to supply essential aid for Palestinians in Gaza, working to reinforce regional security and reduce the risk of wider escalation, and, in cases such as those of the crew of HMS Diamond and the pilots of the Typhoons and air tankers, operating under great pressure and threat. They undertake their tasks with total professionalism. We thank them and are proud of them.

Bob Seely: At this juncture, I think it worth pointing out—the Secretary of State may want to refer to this—that Iranian proxies are regularly rocketing, or attempting to rocket, US bases in Iraq, some of which have a UK presence. It is only through good luck, and complex air defence, if I understand correctly, that there have not

been considerable US casualties or potential UK casualties. That is a point that we need to bear in mind when we talk not only about Iranian proxies but about UK forces in the middle east.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has insights into the situation that are rare, even in this House, from his own experience and his particular interest. He is totally right. It is not just about the risks of Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq: the Iranian interests in Iraq, and the attacks on American bases and personnel—as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, some of those bases are shared with UK personnel—constitute one of the flashpoints and risks of wider escalation. Mercifully, none of those attacks has led to any deaths, but they have led to some injuries. Given that we have 2,500 UK personnel in the region, and given the heightened risk they may face, it would be good to hear what additional protections and measures the Defence Secretary is ensuring are put in place.

Our UK military presence in the Red sea protects international shipping and strengthens regional security. If anyone doubts that, consider what the consequences would be of no action being taken to deal with the Houthi attacks. That extremist force, backed by Iran and with a long record of brutal piracy in the region, could attack commercial ships at will and attack our Navy's ships without consequence. They are targeting the ships of all nations, threatening the freedom of global trade and putting civilian and military lives in serious danger. That is why last month, 20 countries joined the Red sea maritime protection force, Operation Prosperity Guardian; it is why this month, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the Houthis' actions and demanding that their attacks stop; and it is why the UK and the US, with operational support from four other nations, have conducted joint strikes on Houthi missile sites, command centres and weapons stores.

We back the two UK-US joint air strikes carried out this month. We accept that they were targeted, necessary and devised to minimise the risk to civilian life, and we will judge any future UK military action on its merits. Ministers have said that the aim of these strikes is first to degrade Houthi capabilities, and secondly to deter their attacks. We accept that the attacks were justified, but we ask the Defence Secretary to confirm how they were also effective. We know that deterrence is a sliding scale, so we ask the Defence Secretary how the Government will guard against Britain being sucked deeper into the Yemeni conflict.

We also back the leading role that the Royal Navy plays in the continuing military defence of shipping from all nations against further Houthi missiles, drones and attack boats. However, the lion's share of the responsibility for protecting international freedom of navigation in the Red sea is being shouldered by the Americans, just as the US has been doing across the world for nearly 80 years. What action are the Government taking to persuade other countries to join the maritime protection force? What are they doing to persuade those already involved to deploy more ships? What efforts are they making to encourage other nations with a big global trade interest to play a part in protecting freedom of navigation and using their influence to stop the Houthi attacks, and how long does the Defence Secretary expect Operation Prosperity Guardian to be needed?

The US aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower has been essential to the operations to date in the Red sea. Is the UK carrier ready to deploy to the Red sea if required? Has the Defence Secretary made the decision to not deploy HMS Queen Elizabeth, and if not, why not? A UK destroyer, HMS Diamond—to which the Defence Secretary has paid tribute—has also played a hugely important and impressive part in the maritime task force. She has been in the Red sea for nearly two months and will need to be rotated out. Do we have a second UK destroyer available to replace HMS Diamond in the Red sea, and if not, what will replace her? If that is to be HMS Richmond, when will she arrive in the Red sea, and how will that change the capabilities that we can contribute to Operation Prosperity Guardian?

We must cut the illegal flow of arms to the Houthi militia. The US intercepted a weapons shipment about two weeks ago, and the UK has successfully done similarly in the past. What is the UK's capability and plan for doing so again now? Rather as the Defence Secretary indicated, military action on its own cannot solve the problems in the region, so what diplomatic action are the Government taking to pressure the Houthis to cease their attacks, to settle the civil war in Yemen, and to pressure Iran to stop supplying weapons and intelligence to the Houthis?

Like the Defence Secretary today and the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, I totally reject the Houthi claims that firing missiles and drones at ships from around the world is somehow linked to the conflict in Gaza. They have been attacking oil tankers and seizing ships for least five years, not just in the past 109 days since 7 October. These attacks do absolutely nothing for the Palestinian people. We want the Gaza fighting to stop, with a humanitarian truce now and then a sustainable ceasefire to stop the killing of innocent citizens, get all remaining hostages out and get much more aid into Gaza. This is what we have been calling for in public, and what we have been working for in private. Our leader, our shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and our shadow International Development Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), have all been out in the region in the last three months.

The humanitarian agonies of the Palestinians in Gaza are now extreme. Parents are starving, children are drinking dirty water and there are even reports of amputations being carried out without anaesthetic. More aid has to get to Palestinians now. Surely Britain can do more. There have been just four RAF aid flights and one Navy shipment in nearly four months. We got 100 tonnes of aid to Turkey in the first 10 days after the earthquake last year. In answers to parliamentary questions, the Armed Forces Minister has told me recently that the RAF and the Navy stand by ready to do more, but the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has not asked it to do so. What is going on? There should be a steady stream of aid from Britain. Our aid efforts must be accelerated.

For long-term peace, there has to be a political process, and one that has the capacity, conviction and commitment to turn the rhetoric around two states living side-by-side in peace into reality. Many across this House, like all in the Labour party present, will have found the Israeli Prime Minister's recent rejection of the two-state settlement utterly unacceptable and wrong. Palestinian statehood

[John Healey]

is the inalienable right of the Palestinian people. It is the only long-term hope for peace and stability, and for normalisation for both Israelis and Palestinians. If elected to form the Government, Labour will lead a new push for peace, working with international allies, in the confidence that, as the Prime Minister said to this House yesterday, we in this country and we in this House are

“united in support of a two-state solution.”—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 152.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

4.3 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): While much of this debate will rightly focus on the rationale, execution and objectives of the recent airstrikes against Houthi rebel military infrastructure, I want to begin with some comments on who the Houthis really are. I have been deeply disturbed by comments in our national conversation painting them somehow as a progressive movement, as freedom fighters or as some legitimate representative body of the Yemeni people. That is so disturbing not only because people are not taking the time to educate themselves, but because the Houthis do not deny who they are. It is out there for all to see. Their rallying cry and flag are quite explicit:

“Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse upon the Jews”.

These are the words that this group puts on their flag. That is their rallying cry, and every action the Houthis take is with that in mind, with hatred in their hearts. Yet we see people, often well-meaning people—it is concerning that even people in this House have made such suggestions—suggest that Yemen has freedom fighters on its shores, and that somehow because Yemen, they claim, was a British colony, the Houthis should be seen as anti-colonial freedom fighters. Unlike southern Yemen, North Yemen was never a British colony. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, North Yemen was ruled by the Imamate, a theocratic polity led by the religious leader of the Zaydi Shia.

The Houthis offer no vision for Yemen’s future. They seek a return to the past, free from ideals such as equality, women’s rights and democracy. What inspiration they draw from the modern world comes from the Ayatollah and the Islamic revolutionary movement of Iran. We can trace their violent rise to what was initially a moment of hope for Yemen. We all remember the Arab spring back in 2011, when Yemenis rose up together and toppled the dictatorship. Employing the Ayatollah’s handbook, the Houthis initially pledged themselves to co-operation and building a new Yemen, sending delegates to the national dialogue conference and building a deliberate façade, when they were actually working to reject the future that young Yemenis dreamed of. Armed by Iran, the Houthis blocked the 2014 referendum on the introduction of a new democratic constitution, and began a military campaign of conquest and repression. It is easy for us to pass judgment from afar, but the people of Yemen are the witnesses of their crimes.

Let me share briefly with the House the story of Baraa Shibani, a Yemeni democracy and human rights activist who sat on the Yemeni national dialogue conference and saw first hand how the Houthi used deception and

oppression to secure their powerbase. Baraa has since claimed refuge in the UK, and now works on the cause of Yemen as a fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. He shared with me that, after the Houthi coup in 2014, they banned all political parties, closed all media outlets and suppressed Yemen’s fledgling civil society, which was just beginning to bud. They rejected all calls for elections, and instead chose to govern through fear and intimidation. Baraa was an eyewitness to the Houthi method of conquest from 2014. He saw two small rural villages refuse to surrender to the so-called rebels. In response, they forced all the residents to watch as they summarily blew up all the houses in front of them. He observed as they kidnapped and murdered the family of Akram Al-Zurqa, a community leader in his province, before filming themselves blowing up those families for vile propaganda purposes.

The brutality of the Houthi leadership has been recognised by our Government, and UN security resolutions have been put in place against leader Sultan Zabin for the rape and torture of politically active women. Let that sink in, Mr Deputy Speaker: women who choose to have a voice in Yemen will be tortured. The head of the Houthi security services arbitrarily detained them and raped them for speaking their minds. Not content with merely brutalising villages and women, the Houthis detained two of Baraa’s friends from the Arab spring protests, young journalists Abdullah and Yousif. They locked them in a weapons depot, knowing full well that it would be bombed by the Saudi-led coalition to oppose the Houthis, and they left them there to die.

That was a clear breach of international law, as was the industrialised taking of children and forcing them to be soldiers. The UN estimates that, in just one year between 2020 and 2021, 2,000 children were killed after having been forced to be soldiers for the Houthis. Tragically, the Houthis also expelled Yemen’s 3,500-year-old Jewish community from their homeland, and banished the last Jewish family back in March 2021. Yet now they say that they are acting in defence of Gaza. Now they say they have always cared about the Palestinian cause, despite having hated Israel—yes—but done nothing in the interests of the people of Palestine. This conflict is merely an attempt to distract from their own brutal regime at home and gain clout because, let us be clear, among terrorists there is a pecking order, and they are fighting for who is the big man on the block. The Houthis think this is their chance.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very important points. It is worth mentioning that one of the other things that the Houthis have done is deliberately block humanitarian aid coming into the port, to starve the population. They might draw a parallel with the terrible situation in Gaza, but their actions show that they do not believe that at all.

Alicia Kearns: It is no surprise that my right hon. Friend makes an important point. Whether it is blocking aid, forcing children to act as soldiers or raping and torturing women, the Houthis have no interest in supporting anything but their own power. They have consistently lied to the people of Yemen, and we cannot allow them to act again. I urge anyone in this country who is suggesting in any way that the Houthis are acting in the

interests of the Palestinians please to take the time to look at things. If they will not, they should at least look in the mirror.

Moving on, I want to look at why we are absolutely right to take this action. These strikes were a strategic necessity. Article 51 of the UN charter is absolute on the legal right to self-defence for maritime freedom. In the days leading up to the airstrikes, we saw the UN Security Council come together and agree that action was needed. There was a motion calling for an immediate end to Houthi attacks on shipping. Leading up to the strikes, there were 26 attacks in those waters. That might not have been much reported in the media here, but it was elsewhere. Our Royal Navy has had to defend itself against the worst attack against our ships for decades, and the US is having to deploy Tomahawk missiles to protect itself. That was almost unheard of for a long time. We all heard the arguments from the Defence Secretary. We all know full well that almost 30% of all shipping containers pass through those waters, and 90% of ships are having to avoid the area.

I want briefly to look at the Houthi military capabilities, because there is a view held, particularly among some young people, thanks to a very unhelpful TikTok account. The House knows my views on TikTok, and it is unsurprising that it is helping to spread unhelpful narratives. On this account, a young man seems to be bobbing around on the waters outside Yemen—he could be the star of a movie, I admit—suggesting that the Houthis are working in the interests of Palestinians. The Houthis are incredibly well armed, beyond what many people think. They have Iranian support, and the Iranians have provided rockets and drones, but they also have their own domestic capabilities.

We have to remember that the former dictator of Yemen defected to the Houthi cause, and he brought with him ballistic and cruise missiles. Those are now being used against the Royal Navy, the US and allies. The Houthis have one F-5 jet. Some may say that it is only one jet, but it is attacking the Royal Navy; we have seen them using these weapons against us. They have helicopter pilots. They have so much more domestic capacity beyond what they are being given by the Iranians. Will the Defence Secretary at some point update the House on what assessment we have not just of how we strangle Iranian donations of equipment to the Houthis, but of how much more equipment the Houthis have hidden? We know they have buried it underground, and we also know that they took a great deal when they took control. We need to tackle how we strangle the supply of equipment from Iran.

Moving on to strategic concerns, I have already asked the Defence Secretary how we assess the point to which we need to degrade Houthi capabilities so that they change their intent. This is a deterrence mission; it is a mission to put deterrence back in place. How far down the process of attrition are we? How do we ensure that we do not become the air force of the Yemeni Government? How do we ensure that we have a point to which we are operating, rather than just continuing to try until we see the Houthis change direction?

I am also concerned because Yemen is still in a state of civil war. Although the Houthis control the majority of the population, they control only about 40% of the territory. Meanwhile, we have al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Daesh, both operating in Yemen. My

understanding is that there may be some sort of informal relationship between AQAP and the Houthis, because AQAP has been able to move equipment and matériel across the country to where it has its bases. However, as I touched on, terrorists have a pecking order, and they like to be the big man on the street. I am concerned that we will see these two groups step up their operations and capitalise on what they see as a competing terrorist group being under attack. How do we make sure that we are acting now so that other terrorist groups are not capitalising on those attacks?

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) rightly raised his concerns about Iraq. That was the first question I asked the Foreign Secretary when he rang me to talk about the airstrikes. I am deeply concerned by our significant footprint in Iraq, not least because over the past few months we have seen increasing attacks on our assets by Shi'a militias beholden to the Iranian regime.

We have also seen the IRGC commit an airstrike in Erbil, and that is concerning but an opportunity. For the IRGC to have taken responsibility for such an airstrike is a step change; we have not seen it do that in the past. That gives more credence to what we will hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox) about the need to proscribe the IRGC, and it also fundamentally changes how we can talk about the IRGC and its operations. What is the Government's assessment of how the Red sea situation is likely to escalate, particularly in Iraq? How are we working to protect our assets?

I will touch briefly on Syria. Many colleagues will know that, when the vote came to Parliament, the decision not to intervene militarily in Syria was one of the driving reasons for my joining this place. I still believe that a great mistake was made on that day. Syria has become—forgive me if this sounds flippant—the Amazon warehouse for terrorists. Whether it is narcotics, weapons, people, Shi'a militias or trafficking—you name it—all that is taking place in Syria. What are we doing to reduce the risks emanating from Syria to our assets and interests on the ground?

I turn to Iranian proxies. The Houthis are only one of Iran's proxies and allies. As I said earlier, different proxies have different relationships. I believe the Houthis to be more of a disobedient ally than a direct proxy, because the command and control is not as significant as it is with Hezbollah. We have Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias and the Assad regime in Syria. What work are we doing to ensure that we have a clear assessment of the differing relationships between different proxies and allies with Iran? Some will be receiving just intelligence. Some will be receiving matériel. With some, there will be direct command and control. Some will feel greater loyalty to others. We need to assess the extent to which Iran will conduct further conflict and chaos to defend each of those proxies. For example, I suspect that Hezbollah is far more happy to wage full-on warfare in defence of the clerics in Iran than the Houthis would be. How do we ensure that we get there?

I have severe concerns about Hezbollah's future actions. Nasrallah has so far decided to stay out of the action, but the reality is that that could change in a moment. Again, this goes back to who wants to be seen as the best terrorist on the block, and Nasrallah is deeply ideologically tied to the Ayatollahs—more so than any

[Alicia Kearns]

others. While in the past Hezbollah has acted almost as a trip wire to protect Iran's nuclear capabilities, now, unfortunately, while we may not see significant restraint, it has been showing significant restraint, given its capabilities. I am concerned about what we may see going forward.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Lady is outlining the scale of the challenge and the threats we face, and not just in parts of the middle east but in Africa and, as we know, Europe as well. Does that not bring home the responsibility we have to ensure that we have a strategic assessment of how we react to all of those threats, not just for those of us on these islands but for our partners as well? The threat we face today is perhaps greater than at any time since the second world war.

Alicia Kearns: I thank the right hon. Member—my friend—who is always generous in his thoughts and contributions to such debates. I agree entirely.

That takes me to my fundamental point: this may be a debate on the Red sea, but we are really talking about Iran. My assessment—colleagues may differ—is that Iran is willing to do everything but reach outright warfare. It will industrialise sub-threshold conflict and seek chaos wherever it can. My worry is that its current appetite—where it has set its threshold just below outright warfare—is too high. The message that we need to hear going out from our allies to the Iranians—I was pleased to see the Foreign Secretary meeting the Iranians to deliver this message—is that that threshold is too high and they must pull back. That must be our strategic priority.

I hope that the Government will bring people together. I am looking at putting together a half-day workshop for all MPs, at which we can look at what the policy solutions might be for tackling Iran, because all roads lead to Iran. My worry is that we are compartmentalising our response to Iran. It has nuclear ambitions and proxies, and it has given Russia the drones it needs. I believe that the relationship between Iran and Russia has become strategic; it has fully reversed from what we saw over the past two decades. We are seeing hostage-taking, assassinations, transnational repression and femicide at home.

We must stop treating those individual issues as if they can somehow be drawn away from each other and recognise that we need a strategic approach, working with our allies for all of them. At the moment, we see individual escalations in each of those areas and do not respond comprehensively. We see Iran massively increasing its drone production and giving them all to Russia, but we do not see a significant response. We see Iran taking more and more hostages, but we do not see a significant response. In isolation, all these things look like a small gradual ratcheting, but when we put them together, the situation is utterly untenable.

I hesitate to talk too much about IRGC proscription—I feel I would be stealing other colleagues' sandwiches, so I will leave it with them—but I think the record is well known in this House as to the position. I acknowledge that it is not a straightforward decision. Yes, Iran will see it as an act of war. Yes, we will likely have to close our embassy on the ground. However, we need to take action against the IRGC. Only this week we saw on the

BBC a video of sanctioned IRGC generals holding recruitment Zooms with British national student organisations. This is the same organisation that MI5 had to warn was conducting assassinations on our soil. And while I am here, I repeat my call for the creation of a special envoy or special Prime Minister's lead for those who are arbitrarily detained, because we need someone who can focus on that throughout the piece.

I want to touch briefly on Iran at home, because I believe we are dealing with the most brittle Iran that we have had for a long time. The way Iran rules is essentially a protection racket and people have started to see through that. It is splintering, but it is too early to see the actors for change who will escalate the situation. Looking briefly to the diplomatic effort, there has been too much focus on the E3 plus US. We need an Arab-led solution. We need to bring our Arab partners into the fold far more. There is an anxiety that the west is not a long-term strategic partner; that we will conduct this isolated activity, which is absolutely right, but not stay and be committed long term. So, how do we demonstrate a commitment to build a broader coalition that can meaningfully push back against Iranian influence in the region to protect us not just there, but at home?

That leads me to the threat to the UK from Iran. I am gravely concerned that we are not yet taking it seriously enough. Yes, we have now seen the Islamic centre closed, under a review by the Charity Commission. Yes, I managed to get its education centre in west London to no longer be accredited, but we are not doing enough to tackle transnational repression in the UK.

These strikes are both legal and proportionate, and a response to hugely damaging attacks by Houthi rebels on the rule of law and global commerce. A failure to act would result in global economic hardship, huge damage to the British economy, a resurgence in inflation and the risk of a successful Houthi attack on a Royal Navy or British maritime vessel. This is about re-establishing deterrence, but it is also about sending a message to Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. If we think that what we have seen over the past few weeks is concerning for global trade, it is absolutely nothing compared to what we could see.

I reiterate that these attacks have absolutely nothing to do with Gaza. We must reject that false narrative, which is designed solely to further the Houthis along their blood-soaked road to power in Yemen, and the Ayatollah's dreams of regional domination. What unites the Houthis and the Iranian regime is their willingness to sacrifice innocent people in their pursuit of power and their readiness to inflict unthinkable violence on anyone who opposes them.

I ask the Government to avoid the mistakes of the past and to think long term and strategically about how we go from here. We all want to see a two-state solution and a Palestinian state. What we need now is an international Palestine contact group and to launch track 2 negotiations, bringing together civil society, women and academics. I also urge all colleagues—those of us who would quickly condemn anyone who denied Israel the right to statehood—to also condemn those who deny the Palestinians the right to their own state.

A true friend seeks to end the cycles of war, not add more fuel to the fire. Iran and the Houthis are no friends of the Palestinian people. I asked Baraa Shiban,

the Yemeni democracy activist, to summarise what the Houthis have done to his country. This is what he said:

“The Houthis run a network of militias that terrorised the Yemeni people for more than a decade and their atrocities were ignored by the international community. The Houthis film themselves blowing up our houses and those of their opponents, and their top leaders have been sanctioned by the UK, rightly, for using sexual violence against women activists. The House of Commons should call for them to be held accountable, and recognise the plight of the Yemeni people.”

I hope we will not have to see many more strikes in the region, but I suspect that this is not the end of them. The Defence Secretary will continue to have my full support, because this is right and this is about bringing back deterrence.

4.24 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is always good to follow the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), and I actually agree with quite a lot of what they had to say—I might go into that in a bit more detail in the next few minutes.

It seems strange to be having a general debate of this kind on a Wednesday afternoon in Government time. As the shadow Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), suggested, a general debate on defence and security has morphed into a debate on the situation in the Red sea—a more current and certainly more substantive topic, but one that will, I have to say, allow me to make the same points that I was going to make in a general debate, albeit within the frame of what I hope I am wrong in thinking is looking increasingly like some type of long-term commitment.

Those of us who speak about defence on a regular basis—I see some familiar faces here today—can probably finish each other’s speeches by now, as Members will probably have seen on the odd occasion. Whether we are colleagues on the Defence Committee—and I see that the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) is present—or ordinary Members who are interested in the subject, we tend to be a very dedicated bunch. While I certainly do not agree with everything that everyone has to say, I certainly always learn a lot from the contributions of Members such as my friend the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who is also present, and indeed the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who has left the Chamber. It is safe to say that when it comes to debates such as this featuring as the last item on a Wednesday, Members usually have to care to take the time to participate.

That is why it is so frustrating, from my perspective, that time and again the Government’s rhetoric in relation to our defence and security, the current situation being a case in point, so rarely matches the action taken—again, from my perspective—and why I sometimes wonder, if His Majesty’s Government pay so little heed to the contributions of those on their side of the house, who exactly they are listening to.

Before I explore that much further, and perhaps add to what was said by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, let me state the obvious: the Houthi movement is an obscurantist, antisemitic and theocratic death cult that has violated human rights and international law

every step of the way. Not only does the Houthis’ current strategy continue these violations of international law, but they seek to use the suffering of the Palestinian people in a way that cannot be justified.

However, in my view—this is the point that may distinguish my remarks from not just those of the Government but those of the shadow Defence Secretary—the fact that current events in Palestine are not the cause of the Houthi attacks on shipping does not mean that they are not symptoms of the same phenomenon: namely, western indifference to the region, followed by periods of intense military involvement, and little effort made to address longer-term issues.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will, briefly, but I want to move on quickly.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I just want to probe the hon. Gentleman slightly on his comments about the west not being involved in the region until something crops up. It was the Royal Navy, and other navies, that were protecting shipping from Somali pirates, and it is the Royal Navy that has bases in Bahrain to support ships travelling through the strait of Hormuz. The west is involved in the region, and although that may be highlighted more now, I wanted the hon. Gentleman to clarify his comments: he is presumably not suggesting that we have not been involved in the region until now.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Perhaps he should refer to what was said by his hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee about the diplomatic effort. I thought that her point about Arab-led initiatives was well made. Perhaps the Government should listen to that as a future intention. I think that is more to the point than engaging in military action, which has been ongoing for some time.

My SNP colleagues and I gave the first round of strikes against the Houthi targets qualified support earlier this month, and we do so again in respect of the latest strikes, but as we begin to slide towards what seems almost like an inevitable longer-term commitment, it cannot be said often enough that the “what”, the “how” and the “why” of UK grand strategy are, at least from my perspective, dangerously out of sync. Let us start with last week’s keynote announcement from the Defence Secretary, who I see is no longer in their place, that

“The era of the peace dividend is over and 2024 will mark an inflection point.”

On the surface, that is a pretty banal observation, but whether we call it the polycrisis or the age of grey-zone conflict, those of us who come to these debates on a regular basis have been talking about the possibilities of this type of thing happening at least since I arrived in 2015. I am not sure how 2024 will be anywhere near the inflection points that 2014 or 2022 were; none the less, that is a bold statement from the Secretary of State. It is important to say that he also backed it up with the announcement of a £405 million investment in so-called drone-killing Sea Viper missiles.

On the surface, it would seem that the Secretary of State has got his why and his what sorted. We just need

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

a how, and that is where I think we begin to run into trouble. For all the high-falutin' rhetoric from the MOD main building, I am not sure that anyone here really believes we are going to meet the how in the form of an increase in defence spending to meet these new threats, given the disastrous state of the MOD's finances, as seen in the latest National Audit Office report.

We are in the middle of the cost of living crisis, as we all know well. Inflation seems to be coming under control; it is only worse in the defence sector, and the proliferation of US dollar-dominated contracts is not going to make things easier, especially with a soft pound and the reality that we are now living in one of the poorest countries in western Europe. Any increase in defence spending at this time means a cut elsewhere in the budget; that is simply a reality. Although there are those, particularly on the Opposition Benches, who are brave enough to say that they would like to make cuts elsewhere to do this, I have seen absolutely no indication from the Government that they intend to do so.

I am no economist—hard to believe, I know—but I believe that practitioners of that special art call it a “revealed preference”. An example would be when a potential leadership candidate advocates spending 3% of GDP, only to quietly drop the commitment when they become Chancellor. All our recent Prime Ministers have made all the right noises when it comes to the problems in international security, but none of them, at least from my perspective, has met that challenge with a significant increase. Indeed, I think we can all agree that if that redoubtable and dogged former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace)—I let him know that I was going to mention him in the debate—was only able to secure an increase to 2.5%, and even then only by the end of the decade, I do not think anyone is expecting his successor to be any more successful.

I should point out—I say this as something of a sceptic about increasing the defence budget or even the value in such arbitrary targets—that we judge Governments based on their record, and this is what this one has. Once we start to scratch at the how in the UK strategy, the what and the why also start to come unstuck. Let us take the Sea Viper order: what was presented as an announcement to counter this new and specific threat has actually been on the table since 2012, only to be constantly shifted to the right because of pressures elsewhere on the budget.

Sir Julian Lewis *rose*—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am grateful, and I regard him as my hon. Friend too. Before he leaves the issue of percentages spent on defence, would he not agree with me that, crude though they are, these are indicators of a national priority? The trouble is that if we do not spend enough on defence in peacetime, and then a conflict breaks out—we are now beginning to hear talk of having to be prepared for major conflict in the next decade or two—we will be spending vastly more than 3% or 4% on defence. So how much better is it to spend a bit more in peacetime

to prevent the conflict, and how much better than that is it that America should realise that investing in Ukraine's effort is also helping to raise the deterrence threshold?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I both agree and disagree. Had the Ministry made sustained investment in capability, we might not have found ourselves in this situation. The right hon. Gentleman is welcome to stay for my Adjournment debate on nuclear infrastructure, in which we might go into the number crunching in far more detail—he may try to pass on that.

Far from being a simple drone killer, Sea Viper is a sophisticated ballistic missile defence system that has been in development since the 1980s. Each Aster 30 missile costs £2 million a pop. Whoever in the main building thought it was a good idea to call it a drone killer evidently had not done the cost-benefit analysis on taking out mass-produced Chinese drones, costing £100, with a £2 million missile. That is before we even get to the platforms that deliver the capability.

The Minister might be able to correct me, but the MOD is now officially refusing to publicly disclose the size of its escort fleet, which the Houthis probably already know—maybe it is in one of the TikToks that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton mentioned. That refusal got a bit of play last week, although we should consider the why of it all.

If we can all agree that we are living in a world of increasingly complicated and interlinked threats, why is the Red sea important to the UK? I consulted two principal documents published since I became an MP—the 2015 strategic defence and security review and the 2021 integrated review—but, alas, there was no mention of the Red sea. Yemen was given a single cursory mention in each, and both in the context of other regional conflicts. The Government's defence is that both documents were written before the Ever Given accident reminded us that the Suez canal and the Red sea are an important bottleneck for global trade.

Ultimately, neither document, one pre-Brexit and one post-Brexit, tells a compelling story about UK engagement in that part of the world, which makes it harder for me, and certainly for the public, to see why sustained engagement, if it happens, is in our long-term interest. Do not get me wrong: even as a committed north Atlanticist who believes that the primary commitment of Scotland and the UK should be to our northern European neighbourhood, I am open to being convinced. But the mood music throughout that time was on global Britain, without elucidating what that actually meant.

Do not get me started on the Indo-Pacific tilt either. The integrated review made the incredible assertion that the UK wishes to be the European state

“with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific”.

That claim received very little interrogation at the time. Again, as a committed north Atlanticist, I was perhaps never going to be on board with the idea of an Indo-Pacific tilt, but the more I try to find out about it, the less convinced I become.

The Indo-Pacific is a big place and is home to two of the three largest oceans in the world and three of the five largest states. Any tilt towards it would surely require some sort of prioritisation, but we have never heard any talk of this. The Red sea region could have been part of

that, securing the freedom of maritime trade from the Indo-Pacific and bringing in European partners with a presence in the region, along with others, but there was a complete failure to communicate any of that to Members, never mind to the general public.

Forgive those of us who are sceptical about the what. With the strikes against Houthi targets, we can clearly see the how. The Royal Navy, which is doing a commendable job, is in its poorest and most diminished state for many years. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford alluded to that, and it is a consequence not only of budgetary pressures but of a complete failure of this and previous Governments to make the case for the why, be that in the Red sea or the North sea.

Instead, we have a manpower and retention crisis caused by over a decade of wage stagnation; the ongoing possibility that the two remaining landing platform docks will be mothballed, calling into question the long-term viability of the Royal Marines; and the admission in November that the entire fleet of SSNs was alongside at the same time. Yet if we were going by the MOD's spin on things, all is well, because we can still field two carrier strike groups, even though everyone knows we would never have the manpower to do so at the same time; the AUKUS deal will allow Astute-class boats to operate in the Pacific ocean, even though, as we have heard, they sometimes cannot even get to the North sea; and—who can forget, from last week—we now have a space laser, or at least we will in 10 or 15 years' time. So let me end with a general observation: when it comes to UK grand strategy in the Red sea, denial is not just a river you end up in if you take a wrong turn on your way there.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As Members can see, 14 Members wish to participate in this debate. Although I am trying not to put a time limit on people's speeches, if they could show some self-discipline, we will get everybody in with a decent amount of time. I call Sir Alec Shelbrooke.

4.40 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I have to say that I was disappointed by the approach the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) took to the operations we have had to carry out in the Red sea to protect international shipping. He makes the point, perhaps reasonably, that budgets and the finances of this country are under great pressure and that there has been a cost of living crisis. That crisis has occurred through instability around the world, whether we are talking about supply chains during the pandemic, Russia's illegal war in Ukraine or, now, the threats to shipping at the key point of entry to the Red sea. Those all have a fundamental impact at home, so investment in defence is not something that just takes money out of the pot that the Government need to spend: it helps to build the security that our constituents need.

Through history, people have too often looked at distant lands and said, "That's got nothing to do with me." That view never was true, but today it could never be less true. We see that when we look at exactly how

global supply chains end up with things in our supermarkets and when we look at the fuel crisis. Of course, it is not just the increase in the cost of shipping that will add to inflationary pressures, but the fact that modern industry works to a just-in-time system. Widget A may now take three weeks to get to widget B, which may only take a week to get somewhere. That will cause huge back-up production problems in the factories and production plants that move things on to the system. So the time constraints of having to go around the Cape to deliver the goods that are needed that have suddenly been hoisted upon global shipping will end up having a direct impact on our constituents once more. Therefore, it is important that we invest further, certainly in the Royal Navy.

I take issue with people in this House who want to do a disservice to the Royal Navy, which is one of the most advanced and finest navies in the world. We have replaced the vast majority of our capital equipment in this century alone. The technical ability of our Royal Navy outdoes that of a great number of countries, including in respect of many of the capabilities produced in the United States. The Type 45 destroyer was a visionary destroyer and allows wars to be fought in a way that was not feasible before. With the introduction of the Type 26s coming forward, the Type 31s, and the fact that we have renewed our hunter-killer submarines and are renewing Dreadnought, we have huge infrastructure. That is in addition to aircraft carriers, which have always had an important strategic aspect, especially when we are trying to operate alongside the allies. Comments have been made about it always being the USA picking up the burden, but Britain punches above its weight by having that capability.

Where I do think we run into a problem with the MOD and its funding is that, because of rules set by previous Chancellors and carried on as to the difference between borrowing for capital and not spending on revenue, and how that has worked out, it has always been easy to produce a capital spreadsheet in order to produce more ships, but no one ever looks at how much revenue we are going to need to keep those ships running, to keep them serviced and to crew them. That, in itself, needs to be addressed.

Be under no illusion: the situation in the Red sea speaks to the wider issue of the importance of maritime security, which affects the entire world. Although we are part of NATO and we can draw on the support of many allies from around the world to help police the situation in the Red sea, demand for such support will only increase, especially as the high north is used more frequently as a passage for trade during the summer months, in which China is already showing great interest.

The idea that an arc that seems to emanate from or be influenced by Iran is forming around the disruption of maritime trade cannot be dismissed. As has already been mentioned, Iran has an influence on the Houthis in Yemen and on Hezbollah, and we know it is arming Russia. The Russians are doing everything they can to stop grain getting out of Ukraine. The blocking of the Red sea will impede the ability of vital food stocks to get to many areas of the world, leading to starvation, not least in countries such as Lebanon, which is unstable as it stands and has a huge economic crisis. Lebanon has not recovered from the explosions at its grain silos

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

and relies heavily on grain from Ukraine, but it would suit Iran's overall objective in the region to cause instability in another country neighbouring Israel.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) made clear, we are not willing to tolerate these tiny activities in which Iran takes part. However, we have to be aware that we always look at the issues with western eyes. When those countries look east, they have allies—Russia has been able to trade with many countries to its south and east—and western sanctions only go so far.

I am confident colleagues want to speak in the debate and further develop these ideas. The situation in the Red sea is another flash-point warning that we must invest further in our maritime capability so that we can secure and keep open trade routes that affect the entire world. The investment that we make now has a direct impact on our constituents and their ability to deal with the cost of living crisis, because is not only those who are thousands of miles away who are affected by the situation; it has an impact on even the corner shops in our villages.

4.47 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The freedom of navigation, maritime security and upholding international law are fundamental principles, and this country, along with international partners, has a duty to uphold them. We have heard about the economic consequences. The disruption caused by what is happening in the Red sea affects peace not only there but throughout the region.

As the Defence Secretary and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee said, there are complex and historical issues that will need political solutions in due course. These are long-standing disputes with complex origins, whether that be the interference of colonial powers in the past; communal, religious or ethnic rivalries; or the struggle for oil and other natural resources. I do not claim to be an expert, but there are certainly parallels with what happened in the 1960s, with the North Yemen civil war and the Aden emergency—UK forces occupied Aden from 1839 to 1967—and many of the issues have ancient origins.

However, I add a note of caution. I know exactly what has been said by many speakers so far in relation to conflating the actions of the Houthis in Yemen with what is happening in Israel and Palestine. Nobody should be so naive as to think that the motives of the Houthis are humanitarian or unselfish. As the Defence Secretary said, the Houthis are entirely opportunistic in what they are doing, but that is not necessarily the way that it is seen on the Arab street, or by our constituents, so we must address that issue head on. The priority given to dealing with attacks on shipping in the Red sea should also, as many of my constituents say to me, be given to dealing with attacks on human life in Gaza and wherever else, including in Yemen.

Let us look at what the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions. If I understood him correctly, he set a number of tests that had to be met before there could be a ceasefire in Gaza: all hostages should be released—presumably he means Israeli and Palestinian

hostages; Hamas should disarm and disappear from Gaza, so as not to be in a position to threaten Israel or anyone else; and the Palestinian Authority should take over the role of governance there. Nobody would be more pleased than I if those three criteria were met. Indeed, I am sure that hostage release and swaps will be part of any ceasefire, even a temporary one, but how realistic is it to expect that Hamas will disappear overnight or that, to use their own phraseology, the Palestinian Authority will ride into Gaza on the back of Israeli tanks? I do not believe that that is a realistic assessment of where we need to go before a ceasefire occurs.

Today, the Prime Minister was asked by the leader of the Scottish National party—this question is often asked of the Government—whether he believed that war crimes had been committed in Gaza. That is not a difficult question. Yes, it is absolutely true that there are restrictions on journalists and international observers going into Gaza, but there is enough coming out of Gaza to see that it is not an exhaustive list. None the less, many leading international jurists have seen deprivation of life, collective punishment, arbitrary detention, denial of basic services including healthcare, forced displacement and ethnic cleansing. Simply to reply, as any Government spokesman does, that Israel should comply with international humanitarian law, is not sufficient. The question is: is Israel complying in that way?

Today, I noted that a 200-page opinion piece, published by Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights but authored by independent jurists, found that in Gaza, persecution—a crime against humanity—had been committed more intensely since 7 October, but that it goes back to 2007, when the siege of Gaza began. If the Government's position is to be credible they must address those events. What is happening in Gaza is extraordinary: 1% of the population—25,000 people—have been killed in three months under the most horrific circumstances. We heard the shadow Defence Secretary describe that in his opening remarks, and there are strong parallels with what is going on.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On international law, let us face it: international humanitarian law is the last resort, when other things have gone wrong. Perhaps the side that we politicians can take is that of morality. What is the right thing to do? What is the humanitarian thing to do? What should we do about human misery? That is why the immediate bilateral ceasefire is so important. There is a choice. The International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court will be looking at the war crimes, and it is right to let the courts do their job, but the Government could also have made a moral judgment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Andy Slaughter: I think I always agree with the hon. Member on this issue, if not on others. She has clear personal knowledge of it, and is under particular strain because her extended family are in Gaza. I pay tribute to her ability to maintain the objectivity that she has just shown in her comments.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): We have just had a debate in Westminster Hall on human rights, and Gaza came up. During the debate it was revealed that the Foreign Office had sought evidence from its legal advisers on the legality of actions that have been taken by Israel, going back to 10 November.

We did not receive a satisfactory answer from the Minister responding to that debate, but should the Government not publish that advice? I also understand that since the new Foreign Secretary arrived he has asked for a review of that legal advice.

Andy Slaughter: I also agree with my hon. Friend.

The deaths that continue to occur daily in Gaza have so far been mostly the result of military action, but we have reached a point where the number of deaths through privation and disease is overtaking them. There is a strong parallel with what happened in Yemen, where about 150,000 people—mainly civilians—have been killed over the course of the civil war that began in 2014. At least another 200,000 have died through disease and privation as a consequence of the civil war, and we are at that tipping point in Gaza. Yes, those are higher numbers, but they are from a much longer period. Many of the same arguments apply, and I do not think any Member present would not wish to see an end to the suffering in both Yemen and Gaza. We need a ceasefire and an end to hostilities, and pressure from the UK alongside partners could play a much bigger role in achieving that.

Secondly, we need aid and reconstruction, but that requires a more permanent peace, because many donors, including EU and UK donors, who have contributed to the reconstruction in the past have seen the money wasted as a result of further military action. Better governance is also needed, and support for civil society. One of the most cynical things that has happened since the terrible, tragic events of 7 October—we all feel for the people of Israel for what they suffered then—is that the response has been not just to go after Hamas but to destroy civilian neighbourhoods and civil society. Destroying law courts, destroying the Parliament, and destroying the records office appears designed to make Gaza ungovernable. That has to be addressed as well.

One could make exactly the same points in relation to Yemen. These are two of the great catastrophes going on in the world. There may be points where we do not want to link the two, but there are clear points where we do. What puts Gaza in a different category than Yemen, is that we are dealing with occupation. Following his statement yesterday, I asked the Prime Minister when the UK will recognise a Palestinian state. Unsurprisingly, he gave an answer that will be familiar to everyone present, and said that

“we will recognise a Palestinian state at a time that best serves the peace process.”—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 166.]

That time is now, or nearly now, because it is impossible to have serious negotiations towards peace unless they are between two sovereign states, notwithstanding conditions in Gaza and, increasingly, conditions in the west bank as well.

Let us not pretend that the recognition of a Palestinian state would put Israel and Palestine on an even keel, but without it as a precondition of the negotiations, they simply will not get off the ground. I hope we see that change in position. There is strong support not just for our military, but for the diplomatic initiatives that the UK is doing in the middle east.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I have given the hon. Member a lot of latitude, as he is focused on one aspect, but the debate is on the situation in the

Red sea. If he could direct his attention towards that subject, I would be extremely grateful.

Andy Slaughter: I should have taken your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, rather than the advice of the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), at the beginning of the debate. You interrupt me at an appropriate point, because I am concluding my remarks. There is strong support from all sides, but we need to go further. Britain’s historical responsibility in the region requires us to make that additional diplomatic effort.

5 pm

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on a very wide-ranging speech, albeit somewhat remote from the situation in the Red sea, as you correctly pointed out, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the new Defence Secretary, who is not in his place, and the shadow Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who both spoke with great care, diplomacy and sense. They fulfilled precisely what this place ought to be about, namely His Majesty’s Government laying out their views and the loyal Opposition scrutinising what they have done.

Before I say anything else, I make it clear that I strongly support the strikes in the Red sea and all the remarks made by my hon. Friends, most of whom are much better informed on these matters than me. I strongly support the strikes, the way they were carried out and the reasoning for them.

If I may, I will take a slightly different approach—rather than simply the diplomatic, foreign affairs and military approaches—and look at the way in which the strikes were ordered. Particularly after the first strike, a great many people, including a number of people in this House—perhaps we will hear from the Liberal Democrats later on—were of the view that it was quite wrong. “The House should be recalled,” they said. “We should have a vote in this House on whether the strikes were justified,” it was said. “It was quite wrong that Parliament should not have the opportunity to express our views on the most important matter facing us all, namely warfare,” it was said. I am glad to say that the Government resisted those calls, and the way in which the strikes were ordered seemed—I will come back to precisely why in a moment—to be absolutely right.

I have been talking about this subject for some time. Indeed, I wrote a book about it, which, if I may say so, is available in all good bookshops. When I expressed the view in a debate some 15 or 20 years ago that it was wrong that the House of Commons should vote on going to war, it was greeted widely with scorn. Everybody said, “That’s absurd; that’s a ridiculous thing to say.” We can check *Hansard* for that. Indeed, when Lord Hague wrote an extensive article on the matter, he said very straightforwardly and simply, “When we go to war, the House of Commons and the House of Lords must decide on it. It must be done by a vote.” I am glad to say that last week the noble Lord Hague went through a damascene conversion. He has changed his mind on the matter and now entirely supports my view. Equally in my view, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which wrote a report on these matters,

[James Gray]

got it wrong. It said that it thought the House of Commons should have a vote before deployment. I take a stringently different view, because there is a large number of very important reasons why that should not be the case.

First, all pretence of secrecy would of course be destroyed. We would have a debate in this place, and the enemy would know precisely what we were planning to do. Secondly, we could not take that kind of decision without consulting our neighbours. The decision might well be part of a NATO strike or, in this case, a joint UK-US strike. Are we ready to ask NATO, the United

Nations or the US to wait while we discuss the matter here? What happens if we vote against it here, but those wherever else vote in favour?

Thirdly, we are galloping down a very dangerous road if we ask the Prime Minister to come to this House and share with us the secret intelligence, legal advice and strategic knowledge on which he makes these difficult decisions, as he would be exposing many of our professional supporters to criticism or, indeed, to attack one way or another. It would be quite wrong if he did so. I do not want to know the secret intelligence. I do not want to know the legal advice. I want the right to scrutinise what the Government have done after they have done it.

It is also extremely important that warfare should not be politicised. If we vote in this House either to go to war or not to do so, we as MPs are taking a view of it. We are sending people to war while squabbling among ourselves about whether the war is right, wrong or indifferent. That seems to me quite wrong from the point of view of the families, particularly of those who are killed, who would then say, "Well, one party or the other took a strongly different view from you."

Before I come to the final reason for my strong views on this matter, I must point out to the House that, of the 274 wars that England has taken part in since 1750, we have voted in this House on only two. Only twice in all those years have we voted prior to deployment. The first time was in 2003, when Tony Blair asked this House to vote on Iraq and whipped the Labour party into supporting the war. The Conservative party was also whipped; I am glad to say I rebelled against the Whip, but none the less we were whipped into supporting the war, and what a bad decision that was—quite the wrong decision.

The second time in all that 300-year to 400-year history that we had a vote in this House on going to war was before a potential Syria strike in 2013, which did not then occur. The House voted against it, and very much of the bloodshed, the corruption and the disaster that we see in Syria to this day comes about as a result of those votes. America followed us the next day and equally did not strike against the use of chemical weapons. That was a wrong decision made by this House, as in my view was the Iraq decision of 2003, and those are the only two occasions when, prior to deployment, we have voted.

Sir Julian Lewis *rose—*

James Gray: My right hon. Friend disagrees with me.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am afraid I do. I agree with my hon. Friend's main thrust, that there is no doubt that the Prime Minister and the Executive have the right to take initial action and seek support afterwards. Having said that, the case of Syria in particular has become a byword for a wrong and terrible decision, because the ghastly Assad remained in power, but the alternative would have been another Islamist swamp such as we saw in Libya. It was because there was a strong feeling in the House that Syria would have been another Iraq or another Libya that there was such pressure to have a vote. For my part, I think the result was absolutely right.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point: he thinks we should not have had strikes against Syria, and therefore he thinks we should have had a vote on the matter, because the vote went against the strikes. However, let us imagine there was some other very important or essential war, in the moment before a general election, with a very small majority on one side or the other. That war would then become political. He might well find under those circumstances that a war that he strongly believed in and wanted to support was voted down by this House, rather than by the generals or the Prime Minister.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Perhaps both my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) will agree that, while it can be risky and dangerous to intervene, it can also be risky and dangerous not to intervene. Perhaps they would both agree on that point.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Incidentally, I forgot to mention that I very much welcome him to the Front Bench. He is doing a good job standing in for the Foreign Secretary. I hope he will take note of the Procedure Committee's report this afternoon on how a Secretary of State who is in the House of Lords should or should not be questioned by this House, and that the Government will accept the Procedure Committee's proposal, namely that the Foreign Secretary should be called to the Bar of the House to take questions.

Bob Seely: Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Gray: We must not get too far off the subject, but of course.

Bob Seely: I think I support what my hon. Friend says. Of the two times we voted on military action, the first time we were misled and the second time we were stung by having been misled, so we went the wrong way. As someone who was quite close to the Libyan conflict, as I saw it play out with ISIS in northern Iraq, I think we should have taken military action in principle over the use of chemical weapons. By not doing so, regardless of the outcome of the Syrian war, we weakened the idea of western resolve. I know it can be a bit of a cliché, but if we have a red line and dictators ignore it, we end up in a world of pain.

James Gray: Both my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) are seeking to involve me in a debate about a matter that happened some 10 or 15 years ago and is well beyond the scope of the debate. My point is not about whether or not striking against Syria was right, wrong or indifferent, but about the fact that we in this House chose not to do so. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), was absolutely right to say that not doing something is often as bad as doing something.

We in this House had a shortage of information—my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) knows a lot about these things, and I am ready to admit that I do not—of briefings, of secret intelligence and of legal advice, but we chose to take that decision. It seems

to me that, in the extremely dangerous world that we live in, we will see an awful lot of these decisions taken in the months and years to come. The way in which matters were handled this time shows that the pendulum, which had swung from the divine right of Kings in the middle ages, whereby the King decided on his own, to the time in 2003 and 2013 when we allowed this House to vote, albeit not necessarily sensibly, has swung back to precisely where it ought to be—namely, that if this House votes on something, it is, by that means, diminished. We cannot then hold the Government to account; we cannot come back and say, “You, Mr Government, have got that wrong,” because we voted for it. And if we had voted for it, the Secretary of State would surely say, “But you voted for it!”

Our whole purpose in this House and this Chamber is to scrutinise what the Government have done, hold them to account and, if necessary, remove them when they do the wrong thing.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Gray: Well, I am trying to wind up, but yes, of course.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend mentioned the world becoming a more dangerous place. We have known throughout the history of the NATO alliance that deterrence is one of the best ways to keep the peace. That is why we have the continuous at-sea deterrence: nobody knows where or when it may be used. To further his argument, if we want to keep the peace, is there not far greater deterrence in a decision being taken immediately rather than with 24 or 48 hours' notice?

James Gray: I am not certain that my right hon. Friend, whom, incidentally, I congratulate on his knighthood, has quite grasped the subtlety of the point that I was trying to make, which was not so much about the substance of defence but about the way in which we take decisions in this House.

The point I was making was that if we vote on something, as happened to the Labour party over Iraq in 2003, it then becomes extremely difficult to criticise the Government for what they do subsequently. It is right that we should scrutinise the Government, but we should not vote on these matters. We should have huge debates, statements and votes after deployment, but the moment that we allow ourselves to be forced into whipped votes before deployment, we are, by definition, emasculating this House. It is quite wrong from the point of view of defence and from the point of view of parliamentary scrutiny. We demand the right to scrutinise the Government, and we can do that only if we do not vote on the wars.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am getting slightly anxious about time. My advice is that colleagues stick to a maximum of eight minutes. If we cannot achieve that, I will have to put on a time limit, but I would rather not. I call Jeff Smith.

5.12 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you will be pleased to know that I intend to be brief. Originally, I was going to speak

[Jeff Smith]

about a number of issues, including the situation in Ukraine, but I am grateful to be able to comment briefly on the situation in the Red sea and the region.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) indicated from the Front Bench, Labour supports, as do I, the targeted and limited strikes on the Houthi military targets in Yemen. We should be clear about the nature of the attacks by the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, which were opportunistic, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has just pointed out. We should reject the Houthi claim that UK and US airstrikes on their positions are related to the conflict in Gaza.

Nevertheless, there are things that we must continue to say about the situation in Gaza. We watched in horror the attacks on 7 October, and have watched in horror the level of suffering and deaths in Gaza since. We urgently need a ceasefire to end that suffering, we need the release of hostages, and we need urgently to address the biggest humanitarian crisis in that region in a generation. People are facing starvation and thirst, and are without medical assistance. I pay tribute to all the organisations that are carrying out humanitarian work in the most difficult conditions. I have been getting regular updates from Medical Aid for Palestinians, which does great work there given the impossible situation that some of its workers have been put in. Of course, the situation is made worse by the fact that Gaza is not somewhere people can get out of. I encourage the Government to keep pressing the Israeli and Egyptian authorities to open the crossings for aid, but also to allow the people who need to get out to do so. I have raised with the Minister the particular case of a constituent of mine whose wife and baby daughter are on the border at Rafah. We need to keep pressing for them to be able to get out of that crossing and out of danger.

On the specific issue of the Red sea and the strikes on Houthi targets, the UN Security Council was strong in its condemnation of the attacks on shipping by the Houthis, and we join in that condemnation. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne said, we cannot afford for those attacks to continue and go unanswered, and there is a cost to non-intervention. Freedom of navigation is an important principle, and there are innocent seafarers from around the world on the commercial ships that pass through that vital route.

At this point, I need to declare an interest: I am very proud of my nephew, who is training to be a commercial nautical engineer. He is working for Maersk, one of the companies whose ships have been attacked, and as any family member from any country would, I want him and workers like him to be protected from terrorist attacks if they have to make a journey via the Red sea. Innocent commercial shipping workers from around the world are put at risk by the reckless and illegal attacks of the Houthis, and those workers need protection, as do our brave Navy personnel.

It may well be impossible to completely stop Houthi attacks. We know that the Houthis have been hardened by the long civil war in Yemen and have been subject to a long history of attacks by the Saudi-led coalition, so they know about being attacked, but that does not mean that we should not do what we can to degrade and limit their capacity to carry out attacks. Those attacks

cannot go unanswered. However, as a number of right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, we also need a diplomatic strategy to stop the risk of escalation, making it clear that these are targeted and proportional attacks that do not aim to escalate a wider conflict—that is something we need to avoid at all costs. Yes, we support targeted action to protect freedom of navigation and to protect civilians and our naval personnel, but we need a political process towards a sustainable peace and security in Yemen, in Gaza, and in the region. I encourage the Government to continue to work for that political solution.

5.17 pm

Sir Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to all of our armed forces personnel who have been involved in action in the Red sea. They always rise to any challenge asked of them with professionalism and courage, and are a great example of the fact that our armed forces are so much more than the hardware we invest in.

I accept the point that the Secretary of State for Defence made at the outset of the debate—there is no direct link between the conflict in Gaza and the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red sea—but we would be wrong not to accept that there is interconnectivity between the tensions in different parts of the middle east today, and we need to understand the context of those tensions.

Back in 2020, the Trump Administration brokered the Abraham accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and then Morocco. It was a great exercise in leadership to bring reconciliation to a part of the world that had seen too much conflict for too long. It has resulted in a big improvement: both economically, in terms of business and trade between the countries involved, and in people-to-people relationships. For example, around half a million Israelis visited Dubai in the past few years, something that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago.

However, there was always one country that did not want the Abraham accords to succeed: Iran. It did not want those accords to succeed because it did not believe in a two-state solution, because it did not believe that Israel should exist. Ayatollah Khamenei has been tremendously consistent in his views about the purity of the Islamic revolution, his detestation of the west, and his contempt for the existence of the state of Israel. Anyone who is interested should read the book “Reading Khamenei” by Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Iran was never going to want to see peace between the Arab states and Israel, because that threatened Iran’s hegemony—as it saw it—over the Islamic parts of the middle east.

The big question was always: what would Saudi Arabia do? It is a major player in the security of both the Red sea and the Gulf. When I saw the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia on Fox News saying that every day he believed Saudi Arabia was closer to peace and reconciliation with Israel, my first reaction was that Iran would react against it, whether through its proxies: Hamas in Gaza, funded and armed by Iran; Hezbollah in Lebanon, funded and armed by Iran; or the Houthis in Yemen, funded and armed by Iran. In fact, it turns out that we now see all three being active, and we need to understand that

that “axis of resistance” against the west, as Iran calls it, is something it will keep going as long as it possibly can. It will not seek peace; it will resist peace at all times.

In the Red sea, we are absolutely right to say—as many Members have done, and I do not want to go over that territory again—that the Houthi threat is a specific one that we must deal with. Some 95% of UK exports and imports go by sea, and in the whole global trading environment, 15% of all global trade passes through the Bab al-Mandab strait. As many Members have said, not to act would leave international maritime law in tatters, and having no deterrence there whatsoever would risk a bout of global inflation. We saw what the disruption from the conflict in Ukraine could do, and the same would be true were there to be permanent disruption in the Red sea. We would have disruption of vital supply chains, including food and the medicines that so many people depend on. So we were right to take action.

However, we need to come back to understanding the role of Iran in this and other processes. We have seen Iran develop drones that are sent to Russia by Iran Air to oppress the people of Ukraine, yet Iran Air still flies out of Heathrow airport in the United Kingdom. Why is it tolerated? We have seen the money moved around the global financial system by Iran to fund its proxies, but we still have two Iranian banks trading in the City of London within a stone's throw of the Bank of England. Why is that happening? As the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), said, we have videos of antisemitic speeches by IRGC generals being investigated by the Charity Commission. The regulator is looking at footage of “Death to Israel” chants on an Islamic charity's UK premises. Two of the videos show talks by IRGC leaders about an apocalyptic war on the Jews. Again as my hon. Friend said, the IRGC actually took responsibility this week for a military attack on a foreign territory, which is something they have not had the audacity to do before.

So I ask again: why is the IRGC not a proscribed organisation in this country? It is clearly involved in a wide range of activity that is dangerous to Britain's national interests and our security. I have never once, when I have raised this issue in the House, been given a clear answer from those on the Front Bench about why we will not ban Iran Air, why we will not stop Iranian banks in the City and why we will not proscribe the IRGC. I live in a little bit of extra hope that we may get an answer tonight.

Bob Seely: The answer that the Government have so far given on the IRGC is that it is an arm of the state, and it is very difficult to proscribe an arm of the state. I am not saying I agree with that answer, but that is the answer given. Is there a way around it?

Sir Liam Fox: It is an answer, but it is not a very convincing one. I hope we will get a better answer from the Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who I know is well capable of giving us answers in greater detail than that.

We face a choice in the Red sea and beyond: we are either going to deal with the political problems we face or, rather than the rosy future that the Abraham accords

offered, we can go back to 1971, with a radicalised generation in the middle east and return to all the problems of hijacks, Munich and all the things we thought we had left behind us.

We need to drive a solution. As the Prime Minister said earlier this week, there must be a commitment to a two-state solution, and it is not acceptable for anyone to put a political block on that. We need security guarantees to be given for Israel and the Israeli people, who have a right to live in peace, and for any future Palestinian state. That will require an international peace agreement. It will require the United States, Saudi Arabia and others all to be willing to commit to that peace. It will require a new way of looking at politics in the region, and it is right that Hamas cannot be part of that if there is to be any way forward, and there will need to be massive economic reconstruction in the area.

In conclusion, let me say what I have said before in the House: when we look at the whole region, we see that peace is not just the absence of war or conflict, but the freedom from the fear of conflict, oppression or terror. It comes with concepts of rights that have to apply to all people—not just rights and dignity, but enforceable rights and dignity. Only when all the people of the middle east and the wider region have access to all those things will we have any chance of achieving the peace that is not just part of their security, but part of our security.

5.25 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox), because I agree so much with what he just said, and in particular with the way he set out how Iran decides to back many different groups that will cause chaos. That root cause itself needs to be addressed.

Although I am half Palestinian, we lived in Jordan for five years just after King Hussein passed away, and we were in Egypt just after the Arab spring, so my link to the region is not just by blood; we were there. When we talk about the middle east, it sometimes feels as though we are playing 3D chess, while spinning around most of the time, trying to understand who is in, who is out and what is happening. It is fair to say that the region has been poorly led and poorly served by its politicians for very many decades. Arabs are proud, intelligent, capable people who have every right to live in dignity and security, as does anyone else. I am sorry to say that there have been elements of the debate about Israel and Palestine that seem to forget that. When we talk about peace in the region, we often omit that Palestinians need to be at the heart of it as much as Israelis.

We talk about Arab-led, and yes absolutely—Arab-led. Let me draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I went to the Manama dialogue at the invitation of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. When we were there, we heard from the Bahraini Foreign Minister, who made clear the case for why peace and two states is not just in the interests of Israel and Palestine, but is in Bahrain's interests as well. It is a regional interest, and the reason for that—this is linked to what previous speakers have said—is because this is the biggest toy that Iran and other mischief makers in the region have to play with, and they have been playing with it for their own nefarious ends for far too long. They have no real interest in the

[Layla Moran]

Palestinian people. Let me be clear: when I speak to other Palestinians, we know that. We know that they are jumping on the bandwagon now. We still talk about the paper tigers of the '60s, and lots of Arab states will say when it is convenient for them that they will come and ride in our defence. But when at that final moment it comes to who backs us, the answer is, "Well, no one", and so we rely on ourselves. That is the view of pretty much every Palestinian I know.

That said, it does not mean that we do not need help, so this is my plea for help. Two states is not just in the interests of Israelis and Palestinians. Let me emphasise Israelis as well, because the peace camp in Israel has taken an enormous blow. Let us remind ourselves that very many peace activists have been taken hostage and been disgracefully raped. Hamas is no friend to the Palestinian cause. But this war has driven ordinary, peace-loving people into the arms of the extremes of the debate, and when we look at the polls—one was done very recently—we see that people are now backing Hamas and backing Netanyahu, when before they did not. We must reflect on that.

Why has that happened? These are the same people as before 7 October. The reason it has happened is because we have allowed it to happen. The longer this war is waged in the way it has been waged, and in the way that it feels so one-sided, with the humanity at the centre of it not at its heart, by the western world in particular, the more abandoned ordinary people feel. And when people feel abandoned, that is when the centre ground where the dialogue happens is vacated.

My plea to this House continues to be to not forget the Palestinian cause. Yes, I am here with my Palestinian scarf and my blood, but I say that not for me but for regional security. I put it to the Minister that the cause is in Britain's security interests, and we can see that for ourselves. When we say that the region is a tinderbox, we do not mean that one thing is causal on another, but that there are multiple flashpoints, and all it takes is for one thing to go wrong and we find that they all blow up at the same time. That is why the debate and earlier vote were important. It is true that the Houthis wanted this to happen, but that risk of escalation is real. There was a true and legitimate concern that we had to act, and not acting is also acting. We back what the Government have done, but what happens if things start to go wrong? What if that nuclear reaction starts to get out of control and we end up in a situation where that tinderbox has been set alight? The worry I have is that whenever we have questioned the Prime Minister on how we come off this ledge, we have not had that assurance on what the plan is. We still do not have that plan.

On plans, the recognition of the state of Palestine has never been more important. I talk about an immediate bilateral ceasefire to bring the people from the extremes back to the centre and to start to heal some of the wounds, but a ceasefire is not the end; a ceasefire only ever freezes a conflict. If we want to say, "This is the last time"—I sincerely believe that across this House there is broad agreement on that point—we need to get serious about how we bring the two states back to the table, and quickly.

We have only to look at what is happening in America and the chances of Trump coming back to see that our

window of opportunity—that is in terms not just of public opinion, which is at its height, but of an America that is willing to be a willing partner—is fast diminishing. We know that the European Union is talking about a conference. We know that the Arab states are also talking. My question to the Minister is: who are we talking to? How quickly do we think we can get this twin track or whatever we want to call it off the ground? As part of that, I urge him, as I have in previous debates, to recognise Palestine sooner rather than later.

Putting my Palestine hat back on for a moment, all we Palestinians want is the power to have what all other countries have. We want our own votes at the United Nations. We want to raise our own money to rebuild and to educate our children. It is not the case that we are not capable; we just do not have the tools. What we want above all is to live in dignity alongside our Israeli cousins. It is the scars that we so sadly share that will bind us together. Like scars, they are not comfortable, but often when the bone grows back it is stronger than before. That is how both peoples feel. They need to be given the tools as equal partners to be able to resolve this conflict. Without a very early, full-fledged recognition of the Palestinian state—I argue that should be first, not last in the process—we will never get there.

5.33 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). She spoke wisely on many of the issues, and I suspect the Minister will have listened carefully.

I start by thanking all our personnel currently operating in the eastern Mediterranean and east of Suez. Even in peaceful times it is an area that calls for the highest professionalism and alertness. When we are facing the challenges that we now have, the stress on them is even greater. Our interest in the area around Yemen predates the Suez canal because of its place in our original sea route to India around the cape. The Aden protectorate, where I was born, was a major trading base. That has continued, with 15% of world shipping and 30% of global container traffic depending on freedom of navigation in the Red sea through the Bab al-Mandab straits.

We must be realistic about the Houthis' motivations in their attacks and piracy. The forgotten civil war in Yemen has been going on since 2013, with a ceasefire in place for much of the last 15 months, yet Yemen—even more so the Houthis—seemed to explode into our consciousness in this country only with the attacks on shipping, although it is regularly debated in this place.

The ceasefire in Yemen has not been perfect. Acts of violence have carried on at a low level. The Houthis have gained much from the peace talks, although they have an appalling human rights record, using sexual violence against women and the exploitation of children—the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee spoke about that. I am concerned that the entire ceasefire is now jeopardised because of the Houthis' actions and our response. In addition, the Houthis are clear that they see a linkage between their actions in the Red sea and the situation in Gaza. I say to them that attacking ships will not help the Palestinian cause.

Targeted strikes by the US, the UK and allies will continue to protect shipping. However, the consequences of a prolonged series of strikes on the Yemeni people

will be appalling. I cannot stress enough the catastrophe that will follow if the Houthis shut out humanitarian aid, if the ceasefire collapses or if navigation around the Yemeni coast becomes impossible. Yemen imports 90% of its food, and 17 million people are already at risk of famine. Seventy per cent the Yemeni population live in the areas that the Houthis currently control, and financing of the UN humanitarian response plan dropped from 55% of requirement in 2022 to 38% in 2023—and it has not even been announced for 2024. Most of Yemen's imports come through the Hodeidah port, so if the port becomes inoperable, the consequences will be severe.

I urge extreme caution about any move to proscribe Ansar Allah, because there is a risk that the following humanitarian effort may be destroyed. Fifty per cent of humanitarian funding comes from the United States, and most of that is needed in Houthi-controlled areas. The United States has been mindful of that in applying its special designation on the Houthis and, having raised that with the Prime Minister yesterday, I am sure that our Government will be cautious, too.

Even with a ceasefire in place, the threat has remained to everyone in Yemen because the economy is so badly damaged. Collapsing and insecure societies breed radicalism and become threats to global security, so we must keep up our diplomatic efforts to save the ceasefire, and we should be cautious about seeing Iran behind every action that the Houthis take. Iran does not have full control of their actions—they very much act independently—although Iran could stop providing intelligence, weapons and finance and work towards de-escalation in the area.

The Houthis are an organisation that includes many people who defected from the previous Yemeni regime, sadly trained and armed by the west. The remains of western munitions are being used against the coalition supporting the Yemeni Government. The Houthis co-operated with the UN on the Safer tanker, which posed a huge pollution threat to the entire Red Sea, and they have been allowing humanitarian agencies to carry on their work. It is therefore concerning that they are now threatening to shut those out agencies.

Equally, we must ensure that any sanctions that we impose do not stop humanitarian access. The UK has been a leader in aid, and I am grateful to the Government for their support for the Yemeni people. I pay tribute to the UN special envoy Hans Grundberg, whom I met last year, and who is working incredibly hard for a final peace process.

How we respond to a crisis at the pinch points either side of Bab al-Mandab will be watched by other potential transgressors eyeing other opportunities. This is a key test of our return east of Suez. It is a strategy that commits us to respond to threats on the Malacca strait, the South China sea or the seas around Taiwan. It requires our alliances such as AUKUS to be militarily effective and not just defence export opportunities. Those alliances need to be founded on a belief by our partners that we will show up to bolster them when they are the first line of defence.

We can only project power from a secure base in the UK. We are responding to our personnel challenges with the excellent work done by Rick Haythornthwaite. However, we need to see results, and the major issues of service accommodation persist, along with niggly things such as lack of free access to of wi-fi on bases. Our personnel need secure and happy family lives at home.

When they deploy, their effectiveness depends on knowing that their loved ones will be cared for. If we want people to fight for our values, we must ensure that they feel valued themselves. Ships, tanks and aircraft without crews are useless.

Finally, while we are right to act to deter Houthi violence against international shipping, I urge the House to remember that this is one chapter in a long and tragic civil war. So far, our attitude has been supportive to the Yemeni people who are suffering so much. I hope that will continue.

5.39 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). I hope the Minister and the House listened to her wise insights.

I think there is a broad consensus across the House that we are absolutely right to take action to defend international shipping. The Houthis have been called out this afternoon and it is right that we do so. We also need to recognise the humanitarian crisis that exists in Sudan and Yemen, and the wider security concerns that we have in the region. There have been no honourable actors in Yemen and it is the population of that country that has suffered. Famine has gone hand in hand with war in that country.

As has been mentioned by others, we need to guard against any threat of escalation across the region. We need to think about the nature of the threats we face together with allies, and the importance of leadership not just in dealing with terrorist threats from the Houthis but in diplomatic action across the region. Acting together with our friends and allies in Europe and, as has been mentioned, through the agency of the United Nations, we must recognise the dangers of sleepwalking into wider conflict and the bad actors we face; the intentions of Iran; the challenges we face with Putin and Russia; and the challenges we face with China and North Korea.

It is important to ensure that we deliver peace and stability throughout the world. When we add to that the threats of disinformation and misinformation, and the polarisation that has been seen through much of our politics, these are issues that go beyond the Red sea. It is important, whether we are talking about Yemen or the middle east, that we win hearts and minds, because we have to challenge the spiralling regional instability.

Today, when we consider the Red sea, it has to be seen as part of a broader landscape of instability and the geopolitical threats we face around the world. There is no link, as has been said by many others, to what is going on in Gaza, but we do need to reflect on what is going on there. The awful events of 7 October last year will forever remain with us all, and of course there must be peace and security for Israel, but it is time to recognise that Palestinians have rights and that the Palestinian state must be recognised. Dealing with that threat and removing Hamas does not mean having to flatten Gaza. We are now living with the humanitarian crisis that we see as a result of that.

It should shame us all that we are now talking about in excess of 25,000 Palestinians who have perished since last October—innocent civilians who have been targeted for what? We must not lose sight of the legitimate rights of the Israelis and Palestinians to find peace and harmony

[*Ian Blackford*]

together. To deliver a two-state solution is the only way to resolve conflict in that war-torn region. We must redouble our efforts to make sure that, out of this crisis, we deliver peace and hope for the Palestinians, Israelis and all of us.

Over the last few months, we have watched the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East seek to continue its valiant efforts to provide sanctuary for people in Gaza. Sadly, too many UN personnel, as well as civilians, have lost their lives in this conflict. The UN humanitarian agencies have done their best on the frontline, but the UN Security Council has been paralysed, as it has been for decades, through the power of veto. The time has come to provide proper leadership and to question how these agencies should operate.

How should we get the collaboration necessary to deal with the challenges in the Red sea, Gaza and elsewhere? We need to recognise that the effectiveness of the UN to deliver has been blunted by the power of the veto. My contention is that the UN faces barriers that inhibit its delivery. At its core, the problem is so often a lack of leadership and the use of the veto by any of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

When we consider that the provision of the veto was not part of the UN charter, it is right that we now question its use. When we consider that this power sits only with the five permanent members of the Security Council, we have to question the suitability of the existence of that power. Surely it is time to reform the Security Council and its membership, and it is certainly time to remove the power of the veto. We should bear in mind that four resolutions on the subject of Gaza have been stymied during the last few months.

When we look at conflict around the world, we should remember the threat that the influence of bad actors, be they Iran, Russia or China and North Korea, present to the maintaining of world order. The challenges in the Red sea cannot be seen in isolation; we face multiple threats across the globe. We must remind ourselves that in Europe, Ukraine must prevail against Russian aggression. We need to work in a spirit of collaboration, within Europe, with our NATO allies and globally through the United Nations, to support Ukraine.

We also need to recognise that democracy itself is being pushed back and is under attack in so many parts of the world. Tellingly, when so many people in the world face elections this year, faith and trust in democracy, and—let us be under no illusion—democracy itself are under threat throughout the world. The electoral cycle this year has enormous implications for co-operation, peace and security, but also for economic prosperity, for dealing with the challenge of climate change and making this an opportunity for sustainable economic growth. That is important here, and it is important in Yemen.

For us, NATO has been instrumental in providing peace and security in Europe, but now we face a threat of decoupling from our largest ally, the United States, on the back of indifference from political leaders in that country. When political leaders in the US are questioning supporting the cause of peace and stability in Europe against Russian aggression, alarm bells should be ringing. The question of UK and European leadership and the need to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine ought

to be self-evident. We need to recognise that taking it for granted that the US is an ally of Europe against Russian aggression in Ukraine may no longer be the default position, and we need to provide the support necessary to enable Ukraine to prevail. Ukraine must ward off Russian aggression, because failure to do so is not just a threat to the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, but a threat to the rest of Europe.

What does this mean for us in these islands? Europe and all of us in these islands need to think about our own strategic autonomy, and thought must be given to the mechanisms and forums that will allow that to take place. The first and most pressing priority is supporting and arming Ukraine. The central question must be this: what will it take for Ukraine to restore its sovereignty and independence, and how will it do that? We must go beyond the necessary announcements of support for now, and think through the strategic initiatives that will help Ukraine to win. Putin can never win. To put it simply, we provide the resources for Ukraine to win, and those in Ukraine provide our peace and security in Europe. That is the deal. Failure to secure Ukrainian freedom takes us into territory where our wider freedoms in Europe and around the world will be under threat, with an emboldened Putin pushing his expansionist agenda.

I have argued that we in these islands have a part to play in showing leadership, along with our partners and allies in Europe. We have a mutual self-interest in strengthening the capabilities of the United Nations in these challenging times. The risks to peace and security are at a level that we have not witnessed since the second world war. There is the situation in Europe, with the people of Ukraine bearing the brunt of Soviet aggression. There is the crisis in the middle east, in Gaza, with the potential for an ever-widening conflict. There is unrest in many parts of Africa. The drumbeat for war is ever increasing. Democracy is under attack, and indeed in retreat, in much of the world.

Intolerance and division are on the rise. We have to be a voice for good and a voice for reason. Standing up against tyrants and seeking peace, security and stability in a fractious world is the responsibility of all of us. Such leadership is greatly needed both here and abroad, and it is important in that regard that we have a full and informed debate here, and seek to build consensus here and leadership globally with others. History will judge us on how we accept our responsibilities to deliver peace and security in the Red sea and elsewhere.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members of my eight minute guidance.

5.49 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will try to wind up after seven minutes. I am mindful that lots of others want to get in. Lots of good speeches today; I just want to start by referring to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I completely agree with what she is saying about a two-state solution. Those friends of Israel who give Netanyahu and the Israeli right an easy ride on this are no friends of Israel, as far as I can see, because all they are doing is making Israel's long-term future significantly more precarious. Israel's existence is accepted and guaranteed when there is peace with the Palestinians, and until there is peace with Palestinians, Israel is always going to be under threat of some kind.

Where I differ from the hon. Lady is on her optimism. I would have agreed with her in the 1990s, but there has been so much more awful water under the bridge since then. On Palestinian statehood, I cannot see a good reason not to do it now, but if we had Palestinian statehood now and Hamas immediately took over that Palestinian statehood in the west bank, it would simply undermine the cause of Palestinian statehood. There is a significant problem there and, as the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox) rightly pointed out, Iran is behind so much of this.

I want to make a few points in the brief time I have. I want to make reference to the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and also the speech of the Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). There appears to be a growing, significant, provable link between the use of proxy warfare and non-state actors, often used by other states, and the rise in conflict-related sexual violence, which in some parts of the world and some conflicts is now endemic. We saw that with ISIS, which is a non-state actor, and arguably nobody's proxy, in the use of Yazidi women effectively as the spoils of war until they were raped to death. We have seen it with the abuse of Israeli women by Hamas, but Hamas are also increasingly intolerant in their Islamist attitude towards women in their own society. We have also seen it with the Houthis, with Wagner in Ukraine and with Russian troops. It occasionally involves state troops, as well as non-state actors and proxies, and there is an increasing casualness with which sexual violence is used in conflict, which I think should disturb us all.

The world is moving to a more dangerous place; that is quite clear. It has been becoming more dangerous since 2010. Putin declared his new cold war in his Munich speech in 2007, but we did not want to notice. Unfortunately, everything since then has progressed quite logically from Putin's point of view, although we have still feigned surprise. I do not know why we do that. Since 2015 we have had a growing China problem with an increasingly intolerant regime under President Xi. There is a battle for humanity under way in the 21st century between open societies and closed societies and between societies where AI and big data will hopefully be used to improve the quality of human life and places such as Iran, China and Russia where AI and big data will increasingly be used to control people and societies and, effectively, in an Orwellian state, to prevent people from rebelling because it will be possible to use algorithms to identify when they are about to rebel or fight back and do something about it. That is the bigger picture that we are dealing with.

It is particularly concerning at the moment that in several areas of the world we have conflicts between united axis powers, if I can call them that. Out of three potential conflicts that are under way at the moment or about to be, Ukraine and Russia is a hot war where the Russians believe that we are directly involved although we believe that we are indirectly involved. That war is fought with cyber, disinformation, espionage and poisoning, and some of that has been happening in the UK. We also have the expansion of China, with it trying to take territory in the South China sea and presenting an increasing threat to Taiwan. Xi has told his army to be ready to take Taiwan within the next three years, if I remember correctly.

In the middle east, Russia's ally Iran is behind much of what is happening, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset so eloquently said. Iran now has 22 proxies. In Bahrain it has two or three and in Iraq it has at least six, some of which are rocketing UK and US forces. Where else? In Lebanon it has Hezbollah, which is potentially its most powerful proxy. It is strongly aligned to the regime in Syria. That is not a proxy but the regime has been heavily dependent on Iran to fight its wars. Throughout the middle east, the Iranians have built up a web that is a significant threat to us.

We have had conventional wars that we prepared for and fought for, or that we prepared our armed forces to fight and hopefully win, and we have this very black-and-white notion that we are either at peace or we are at war, yet the nature of war is changing. We are living in a world in which we are effectively in a perpetual state of conflict with some nations. Russia sees itself in perpetual conflict with us. There will be periods of hot war and periods of cold war, and we must be prepared as never before. Likewise, we are effectively waging an indirect war against a series of Iranian proxies: Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and whoever was rocketing us this week in Iraq. China's power is more economic, but it is using "little blue men" to seize territory in the South China sea—that is in contrast to the "little green men" the Russians used in Crimea. In these key areas of the pre-global war phase, we are beginning to see a form of total war being waged by our adversaries in Ukraine, the middle east and the South China sea.

The Foreign Affairs Committee recently heard some interesting evidence on how Iran is, in many ways, both more unstable and more powerful than at any other time. It has 22 proxies, and it has the material to build and prepare a nuclear weapon within a week. Iran is at a potentially frightening stage but, at the same time, we know it is very unstable and we know that its young people, especially its young women, are hostile to the regime, as never before. Many people in Iran wish ill of the regime, so we are dealing with an Iran that is more aggressively adventurous in its foreign policy, potentially because of its weakness at home.

We have arguably not had enough deterrence, and we need more. Various Members have talked about that in greater detail than I have time to go into now.

All these things—the growing number of black swan moments and the growing instability in the world—are an argument for having a greater sense of strategy. Many people talk about strategy, and there are so many think-tanks in the UK dedicated to strategy. It would be wonderful to see politicians from both sides of the House engaging more in strategic thinking. One of my suggestions for global Britain is that, as well as having a National Security Council to deal with current problems, we should have a national strategy council that is always looking five, 10 or 20 years ahead to identify problems as they come.

5.57 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I fully agree with the last point made by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). We need those structures.

Before you came into the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker, we discussed the nature of this debate and whether we should have a vote. We are taking military

[John McDonnell]

action in a region that has been described as a tinderbox by virtually every Member who has spoken. There are just over 20 Members present, and I say this with respect and affection, but most of them are the House's defence nerds. The reason we do not have more Members present is that this is a discussion, not a debate. There is no decision to be made at the end and, as a result, I do not think the House is taking its responsibilities seriously. I think we are on the edge of real danger in this region, and it could spill over and affect the lives of our constituents. If we are to take military action, I want to take some responsibility as a Member of this House. I want to be able to go back to my constituents and explain how I have exercised that responsibility, which is why I believe we should have a vote.

I was in the Chamber one afternoon when, with even fewer Members present than now, John Reid reported that we were sending troops to Afghanistan. He gave the impression that not a shot would be fired in anger. There was hardly any debate and very little reporting back, but we lost 400 British troops in Afghanistan and tens of thousands of others, and the war went on for more than a decade.

I was also here for the vote on Iraq—we did have a vote then. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) said, "Yes, look at that, we made a huge mistake." It was a huge mistake, but the mistake was that it was a whipped vote. I think that had it been an unwhipped vote, we would not have taken that decision. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned Syria. I was here for that vote, when I think we made the right decision, because we could have been getting into another Iraq situation and still be stuck there, with a huge loss of life—a loss of British life, as well as of others. That is why I believe that on these issues we should be able to vote and decide on when to take military action. We should exercise our own judgments, on the basis of our own views and consciences, because no more significant decision can be made than to send someone to where they could lose their life. That is why we should vote on these occasions. I think we will have to have a vote at some stage in the coming period, because I fear that this situation will go on and on.

Unrelated to that issue, I wish to make a plea. The International Court of Justice's interim decision will be coming out soon, perhaps today, as some have said, or on Friday, and when it does come out it is important that we have a debate in this House. That would enable the Government to tell us what they will do in the light of that decision. The interim decision will almost certainly attach some conditions to the activities of Israel in particular, and it is important that we debate that in this House. It is also important that we have a decision-making process—a vote—on how we as a country can ensure that such a decision and its conditions are abided by and implemented.

My second brief point is that, time and again, the Prime Minister and others have said that there is no link between the Houthis' actions and what is happening in Gaza. That argument is unsustainable. I agree with everything that has been said, by Members from across the House, about the Houthis—I condemn them outright. The basis of their beliefs, as far as I can see, has to be

condemned. Their actions in Yemen and what they are doing at the moment have to be condemned. What they are doing is horrific, it is putting lives at risk and they are undermining their own people, but to say that it is completely unrelated to Gaza is unsustainable.

People have said, "Well, maybe it is 'connected' to Gaza." As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, what is happening in Gaza is mobilising the Arab street across the middle east, and understandably so. People are watching the reportage of the human suffering and reacting aghast at what they are seeing on the ground in Gaza. As a result, they are putting pressure on their own regimes, right the way across, for some form of action. It is because both the US and the UK have not taken effective action that desire for action gets distorted in other forms—it is the Houthis' excuse for their actions.

That leads us to the fact that we here have to accept our responsibility. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) talked about the House being shamed by the number of deaths—the 25,000 deaths that have taken place. We are shamed by witnessing on our television screens the operations and the amputations of children's limbs without anaesthetics. We should be shamed, but we should be more shamed by our refusal to act soon enough. I think we were complicit with Biden in basically saying to the Israelis, "You have more time to sort this out with military action, rather than looking at a real strategic plan for the future." We have a responsibility because of our history over the past century and a half in the region, so we should come forward with our own proposals soon. Some have been mentioned already and I do think that the recognition of Palestine is important, because that sends a message to Israel and elsewhere—

Bob Seely *rose*—

John McDonnell: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I am going to try to keep within the time if I can.

Recognition of Palestine will send a message to Israel that it has to come to terms with that reality at some stage. I know people have said that we have to get rid of Hamas, but, as soon as we can secure peace, Palestinians should be given the opportunity to vote for their leadership and be allowed to exercise democracy. I think people will be surprised at how the Palestinians will vote; I think they will vote for peace and for those who advocate peace. That might give us the opportunity to consolidate the Palestinian people, who have been so divided by Israel between the west bank and Gaza. We need to think creatively, for example like that, before we blunder even further. I hope the Government will now come forward with a more constructive plan, and let us vote on it.

6.5 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I will keep to time, Madam Deputy Speaker, as two hon. Friends will give me a seven-minute bell.

I strongly support the Government's move and the strikes they are taking in the Red sea. In *The Sunday Times* at the weekend, there was a rather amusing cartoon of Lord Nelson, with the telescope placed to his bad eye and the words "I see no ships" emblazoned across the top of the page. Hon. Members can guess that the article was about the lamentable size of our Royal Navy.

Over a week ago, the Defence Secretary, to his great credit, kindly asked me to attend a major speech he was making at Lancaster House. He warned that we were in a “pre-war” period, with the west facing very real and growing threats from around the world, as we have heard in the House tonight. The head of our Army is warning about calling up the public in the event of war—that is probably the likes of me, because there ain’t anybody else. NATO Admiral Rob Bauer went even further, saying we should prepare for “all-out war” with Russia, and Germany is predicting Putin could attack NATO in as little as five years. With all that in mind, why does the Royal Navy have only 18 frigates and destroyers, with only a small number able to deploy at any one time?

Having had the pleasure and honour to sit on our Defence Committee for four years, I could provide a number of answers to that question, but I fear many in the House are aware of them already and I do not want to labour the point. To be fair to the Government, some 13 new warships are planned and £31 billion is being spent on upgrading our nuclear submarine fleet, but we will not see those for some years to come. The threat is now and, as I have said, very real.

HMS Diamond, the latest Type 45 destroyer, and her crew are doing a courageous and professional job in the Red sea. They are an example of our armed forces at their very best, defending a vital international route that much of our trade goes through. Our thoughts and prayers are with them all.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Drax: I will keep going, if I may, because we are getting to the end of the debate and others want to speak.

The enemy are a rag-bag bunch of rebels using cheap drones, which the ship counters with £1 million Sea Viper missiles and, on occasion, 30 mm cannon. The operation is exactly why we have a Royal Navy. Meanwhile, the RAF is flying operations from Cyprus, a round trip of 3,200 miles. I ask the Minister: why? We have two state-of-the-art aircraft carriers lying in Portsmouth, equipped with the latest F-35 stealth fighters. It is true that we have only a few of those aeroplanes at the moment, but will the Minister explain why neither they nor the aircraft carriers are being used?

The current very effective threat to a vital international trade route is sobering. These are Houthi rebels, not some sophisticated peer adversary. What if they were? I accept that in that scenario we would be part of a NATO force, with the US doing much of the heavy lifting, but this relatively minor excursion in the Red sea is yet another wake-up call.

For 13 years in this place, I and many others have called for more money for defence. For 13 years, various Prime Ministers have reassured us that our armed forces are in good order and ready to fight. I have no doubt at all that our brave men and women are ready for just that, but do we have the resilience, numbers, reserves, ships, planes and armoured vehicles to fight a sustained conflict?

Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con) *rose*—

Richard Drax: I will, if I may, just keep going. Forgive me, but I do not want to go over my time.

This debate is about the situation in the Red sea. That puts the spotlight on the Royal Navy, which is so short of sailors that some ships are having to be retired early. As both my grandfather and father took great pride in reminding me, the Royal Navy is the senior service, and there is a good reason for that. There is no doubt that a very large fleet during the second world war played a significant part in saving this country from invasion and in keeping our vital trade routes open, not least to the US.

The much-reduced Royal Navy again played a vital role in re-taking the Falklands in 1982. Unfortunately, the peace dividend has continued to take its toll and the Royal Navy is critically short of ships and sailors—to the point that we are endangering the security of our country.

Expenditure is a matter of priorities, and this is where the Government have to state priorities. Can we please have no more arbitrary targets on defence? I am tired of hearing 2%, 2.2% or even 2.5%. Can we ask the military what it needs to play a prominent role in NATO and to defend our country and its dependants? Once we have that worked out, we can then see what we can afford. If we cannot afford it, I suggest that we reignite the economy, get growth going, raise the tax revenue by lowering taxes, and put more money into our armed forces.

In conclusion—I am within time—let us adhere to the warnings of a growing number of eminent people and prevent the situation in which we found ourselves in 1939.

6.11 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Undoubtedly, it is our duty to protect freedom of navigation not only for our own self-interest, but to defend a core tenet of international law. The question is how we go about it. First, we must recognise the limitations of our short-term interventions and remain focused on a long-term peaceful solution to the civil war in Yemen. That remains the best route to stability in the region. Secondly, we must build durable and lasting coalitions to maintain freedom of navigation in the Red sea and beyond.

The Houthis have been engaged in a decades-long civil war. Even in the face of extensive aerial bombardment by the Saudis and the Emiratis, the Houthis continued to make territorial gains, import more and more sophisticated weapons, and fire rockets at Saudi and Emirati cities, all this while thousands of Yemenis starved to death or were killed in the crossfire. Despite all their firepower, boots on the ground, understanding of the region, support from the UK and US, and ample political will, the Saudis and Emiratis have failed to weaken the Houthi movement. We should therefore be realistic that our actions will almost certainly not be a limited containment or restore a deterrent. All the signs point to escalation; it would be foolish to ignore them. Therefore, peace offers the clearest durable long-term solution to the Houthi attacks in the Red sea.

In recent years, considerable progress had been made in negotiating a lasting ceasefire in the country. There was true momentum to talks, which had reduced violence, ended almost all strikes in Yemen and in the Arabian peninsula and forced the Houthis to moderate their behaviour. A negotiated peace to the Yemeni civil war

[Wera Hobhouse]

remains our best hope for forcing the Houthis to abide by international law, let alone end the untold suffering in Yemen. But the brutal events of 7 October have derailed peace efforts. It is clear that only our strategic rivals have anything to gain from escalating conflict in the Red sea. Iran in particular has much to gain from crippling the peace process and demonstrating the havoc that it and its proxies can unleash on international shipping. Peace in Yemen pulls the rug from under those who use instability and conflict to increase their own power.

We must recognise that targeted strikes are highly unlikely to stop the Houthis in the long term and, instead, redouble our efforts to kickstart peace negotiations. On that basis, our Government should engage more closely with partners in the UN, the EU and our long-standing allies in the region.

I reiterate the importance of the UK upholding international law. However, the current American-led coalition is far too limited and looks too vulnerable to short-term political change. If the UK is to remain a true defender of freedom of navigation, we must start building broader alliances. The USA is becoming increasingly isolationist and is tiring of its role as the world's policeman—a trend that goes back to Obama and is embodied by the “America first” doctrine of the current frontrunner in the US election. While America remains one of our most closely aligned partners, we must foster other coalitions if we are to guarantee the long-term upholding of international law. There needs to be much greater involvement by regional powers in policing international laws in the Red sea. So far, only Bahrain has joined the coalition.

A coalition with greater regional and Arab involvement would undercut the Houthis' claim that they are supporting the fight of the Palestinians against America and the west. Greater engagement from big Arab states in defending international law would have the added benefit of not only making interventions more effective, but creating broader international norms that attacking non-military shipping cannot be a legitimate act of war. The UK should utilise its considerable influence in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo to push those countries into joining these efforts. Additionally, we must engage with our European partners, who have a like-minded and long-term interest in guaranteeing the free flow of global trade.

Lastly, I urge the Government to consider the successful global fight against Somali piracy as a model for what a longer-term project to protect shipping in the region could look like. The situation in the Red sea is unlikely to be solved in the short term by a few missiles. The Government must therefore consider long-term solutions to ensure enduring stability in the region.

6.16 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I rise to take what is obviously a minority view in the Chamber, given the views of Members from all parties, other than a few individuals. It is not, however, an insignificant view within the wider country. There are those who oppose an escalation in an area that is already a tinderbox, worry about a rush to war, and seek instead a push for peace. Of course we condemn the actions of the Houthis

—that has been done, as people have said, by the UN Security Council—as we rightly condemn Hamas. As I will go on to say, the issues are inextricably linked. This is, however, an escalation. We have not been bombing Somalia with regard to piracy, or Eritrea. Although it is a while since President Obama launched cruise missiles on al-Shabaab, it seems to be the Houthis who are being picked on at the moment, albeit they are breaching international law and have to be held to some account.

It is an escalation against a country that is already one of the poorest in the world, and this will inflict further harm. This country has endured 10 years of bombing from Saudi Arabia, which has been armed with the finest munitions that the US and UK could provide it with—and that has not managed to destroy the Houthis. Somehow, despite Saudi Arabia being provided with all that equipment, to the great benefit of many private corporations, the Houthis have continued to be able to cause harm and destruction. That will obviously continue—we have already had one set of strikes, and we are now on to a second. How many more sets of strikes will there be before there is either an escalation or a call to halt them?

I think the Minister himself stated that surface-to-air missiles had been taken out. I do not claim to have any military expertise, but surface-to-air missiles do not seem to me to have any logical relation to the Houthis attacking shipping; they appear to be more related to the USA defending its vested interests. This is a lurch towards wider war.

We have heard comments from Members across the House—shamefully, I would say—about Iran, and conflict with Russia and China. My grandfather fought in world war one. My father fought in world war two. Both fought to try to ensure that their children would never have to fight in another conflict. I do not wish to see my children or grandchildren end up in world war three, yet there seems to be an almost “Dr. Strangelove” tendency among some who are pulling us in that direction.

Even if we do not go down that precipitous route, with all the disaster that would envelop it, we also face a legacy of hatred, which we have seen from Afghanistan and especially from Iraq. We should not think that people will view this as neutral. People—not simply the Houthis, but people in the Arab world, the Muslim world and in our own country—will see this as one-sided, judgmental and picking upon one side, yet failing to do anything about the fundamental issue of what is happening in Gaza. We run the risk of worsening terrorism, both abroad and, indeed, home-grown.

That takes us to the question of why the Houthis are doing this. It is risible to say that it is not connected to Gaza—of course it is. The timeline speaks to that. Trade was going, although not without difficulties, prior to 7 October. The timeline dictates that that was the cause of it. Indeed, the Houthis have told us, in their almost webcam invasion of landing on the tanker, because they even flew the Palestinian flag. It was reminiscent of when Britain took a helicopter and landed somebody so that we could have a flag on Rockall. The Houthis made it clear that what they were doing related to what was happening in Gaza. That is why in order to get peace, as I said after the Prime Minister's statement earlier this week, we are required to look in conflict resolution not simply at the manifestations, but the fundamental root, and at the root is what is happening in Gaza.

We have heard today that the purpose of the airstrikes is to preserve international law. International law also covers stopping genocide. We have heard from other speakers eloquently pointing out that 25,000 Palestinians have died in Gaza—1.1% of the population, and 70% of them women and children. What would that be in UK terms? That would be almost three quarters of a million UK citizens wiped out since 7 October. Do we think that would go unnoticed? Yet what has happened? We have said, “Netanyahu is maybe going a bit far,” and, “Maybe Israel has to call it all back.” We should be supporting South Africa and other countries in pushing this at the International Court of Justice. I believe and expect that on Friday the International Court of Justice, as people have suggested, will rule against Israel, because what Israel is doing is fundamentally wrong, and we need to call that out.

If we want to ensure that we get maritime trade going, which we do, and ensure that we protect seafarers—not so much UK seafarers, because there was no rush to protect the P&O workers when they were gruesomely treated, and most of those sailing on the ships, of which only one had a UK flag, were not UK seafarers—we have to solve the problem in Gaza. That is where the solution lies, and that is why we must not rush towards escalation; we must have a push towards peace. In terms of enforcing international law, it is not enough to enforce international maritime law and the freedom of movement. What about protecting the rights of women and children—even children who are having amputations carried out without anaesthetic? We cannot pick and choose on international law, and it is about time that the UK stood up for the rights of the Palestinian people.

6.23 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am grateful to the Government for granting the debate, and to the Defence Secretary for setting out at the beginning of the debate the reasons for British military action in the Red sea region. He is right that this action was indeed limited, necessary and proportionate; in self-defence; using minimal necessary force; and for the freedom of navigation. I agree with all that, and it is good that it was set out in that way. Where I take issue with the Defence Secretary is that there is no vote associated with the debate. I know that a couple other right hon. and hon. Members have talked about the business of whether there should be prerogative powers or parliamentary approval for military action, and that is what I want to make the focus of my contribution.

I think it was the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) who talked about how only twice in 200 years has Parliament had a say before military action took place. I am not advocating for military action to take place following a vote. I recognise that there are plenty of occasions when parliamentary approval needs to happen retrospectively, after the event. Those scenarios include reasons of operational security and the deployment of special forces, which are definitely within the domain of the Executive and not necessarily the business of the legislature, and our international treaty obligations, as he said.

We can think of many scenarios and emergencies where there needs to be a decision by the Executive and the Government need to say what is going to happen, without consultation in advance. In those scenarios,

however, there is no reason why we cannot then come back to the House and have a retrospective vote on that action. If that were happening today, I would very happily vote in support of the military action that has now taken place twice in the Red sea.

James Gray: There are two problems with retrospective votes. The first is that the action would already have happened, so if the House has voted against it, what would we do about it? The second is that they emasculate this House, because if we voted for military action, how could we then criticise it? Only if we do not vote for it can we do what we are doing today and scrutinise what the Government are doing.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I intend to set out in my contributions the answers to both, so I hope he will listen out for them. He is very welcome to intervene at the end if he does not feel that I have answered them sufficiently.

If the Government are confident in their case, what is there to fear? Why can we not have a vote on military action if the Government are confident in their case and make that case in front of Parliament?

My particular concern is that this action sets a precedent for the future. We have gone over many times in this debate why it is the bread and butter of the Royal Navy. Freedom of navigation is something we can be very proud that the Royal Navy has secured for us for hundreds of years, but this could set a precedent for future military action where there is no prior vote or indeed retrospective vote.

I think that can be explained in part by the Foreign Secretary's experience, which others have talked about, of seeking parliamentary support for military action against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria but failing to get it. I think the opposition of some MPs in 2013 was reflective of the concerns of their constituents, who at the time felt a reticence due to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. We could see the 2013 vote as an overreaction or perhaps over-reticence.

Under this Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, we now risk overreacting in the other direction, by looking back at that 2013 vote and deciding that we are not going to have retrospective approval at all. Surely the lesson from the 2013 vote is that Governments must do better at explaining the necessity of military action, not only to MPs, many of whom are not experts in this area and would rather defer to people with more expertise, but, crucially, to their constituents. We need to convince the British public that military action is necessary. That is particularly the case after the debacle of 2003 and Britain's involvement in the invasion of Iraq.

I appreciate that there are situations, which the hon. Member for North Wiltshire spoke about, in which we do not have sight of secret intelligence and therefore the Executive need to make a decision without consultation. I appreciate that, but I think there is still a scepticism amongst the British public about the notion of secret intelligence and saying, “You can't know; you need to trust us.” Again, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has created a very cynical public on that subject.

The counter-insurgencies of the early part of this century have damaged trust. To restore that trust, we need this House to be able to vote retrospectively on military action.

James Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Foord: I will give way at the end, if I may.

What sets the UK and our western allies apart is that we practice democratic control of our armed forces. This is all about setting us apart from our adversaries, but we also need to demonstrate to our own service personnel not just that they can be assured of the support of their Prime Minister and their Executive, but that they have the British public behind them. It is not just about support for the troops—we all support the troops—but about support for the cause, which is so important too.

We need to guard against a future scenario—one that Members might be able to imagine—in which the Prime Minister is threatened by dissent on his own Back Benches. Imagine a future Prime Minister who seeks to distract from domestic challenges by exercising military force abroad. We might call it “domestic distraction”. I have no confidence that every Prime Minister will operate with the foresight to anticipate what escalation British military action might trigger.

As Clausewitz said, war is a dialectic. In 21st century terms, the enemy gets a vote. This is not just about the Houthis; it is about the Iranian sponsors of the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah, and about Iran’s partner and customer, Russia. We must be cognisant of all that context when we take military action. For that reason, we must return to the House and get parliamentary scrutiny and approval.

James Gray: Let us imagine that the strikes have happened—as they did last week and earlier this week—and that the House had a vote on the matter today and voted against them. What would then happen?

Richard Foord: The point of a retrospective vote is that it gives guidance to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on what action the British people think should be taken in future. That is very relevant in this case because, as we have already heard, these two occasions of military strikes are not likely to be isolated, and we are likely to see future British military action in the Red sea.

When we talk about future British military action, the Defence Secretary needs to think carefully about speaking softly and carrying a big stick. At this stage, as we have heard from Conservative Members, he risks having armed forces that are too small, and misplacing the stick and shouting.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Minister, I am concerned that not everybody who has contributed to the debate is here for the wind-ups. It is important that contributors do the House the courtesy of returning to hear the responses, because that is what they are: responses to the debate and the contributions that right hon. and hon. Members have made. I hope that that will be fed back, yet again. I call the shadow Minister.

6.32 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate. It is true that it has been wide-ranging on occasions, but it has also been thoughtful, frank

and, at times, passionate. I certainly hope that the Defence Secretary will take the trouble to read *Hansard* tomorrow to at least be aware of the excellent contributions that have been made.

It has been interesting to listen to the contributions about whether Parliament should have a say on military action beforehand or retrospectively, and I am sure that we will return to that debate in earnest. I give a commitment to read what I am sure is an excellent book by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray).

James Gray: I shall send you one.

Wayne David: Thank you.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Not free!

Wayne David: I will make no comment about that.

This debate is seriously important because, as I think we all agree, there has to be Government accountability for the action that they take. I am therefore genuinely pleased that the debate has taken place, and hope that further such debates take place in future.

Richard Drax: On the point about voting, which I think is ridiculous, during the bad period of the second world war when Churchill was very unpopular, if a vote had been taken in the House, I suspect that, on some occasions, he might have lost. What on earth would we have done then?

Wayne David: I am sure that Members have noted the hon. Gentleman’s comment, and am sure that when we have a detailed debate on that issue, his comment will weigh heavily on people’s minds.

This debate is important because accountability is vital. As we have made clear on a number of occasions, the Labour party supports this limited, targeted action. We do so because it is important to protect international commerce and to ensure security for maritime shipping in the Red sea. We uphold international law, and believe it would be quite wrong to ignore the disruption to the flow of goods, foods, medicines and much else, as well as the threat to human life, that is being caused by the Houthis’ actions.

I agree with the comments of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns)—with which many other Members also agreed, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—that the Houthis are a truly appalling terrorist organisation, and are most definitely no freedom fighters. It is also worth noting that the Houthis’ actions are harming Yemen itself, the country that has experienced the worst starvation in modern times. As the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) mentioned, 90% of Yemen’s food is imported, and those imports are clearly at risk.

Let us not forget, too, that the Houthis’ actions have terrible consequences for other countries along the Red sea. Eritrea relies on fishing, farming and mineral exports, all of which travel by sea. For Sudan, the Red sea is vital for aid, which has come to a virtual end since the Houthis’ attacks began. Further up the Red sea we have Egypt, a country experiencing severe economic difficulties. It stands to lose millions of dollars in revenue from the

Suez canal—money that is desperately needed—if the Houthis' actions are allowed to continue.

Sir Liam Fox: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. For the sake of completeness, would he also like to add that the Houthis have fired missiles into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which are sovereign states?

Wayne David: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which reinforces the essential point that action is not only justified and lawful, but necessary to prevent that kind of violence and aggression by this rag-tag of terrorists called the Houthis.

It is significant that the actions of the United States and the United Kingdom have logistical support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands, because the international community must be and act as one. It is worth stating that on Monday evening those four countries put out a joint statement, along with the UK and the US, which said:

“Recognising the broad consensus of the international community, we again acted as part of a coalition of like-minded countries committed to upholding the rules-based order, protecting freedom of navigation and international commerce, and holding the Houthis accountable for their illegal and unjustifiable attacks on mariners and commercial shipping.”

It is also important to acknowledge that the UN Security Council agreed a resolution that unequivocally condemned the Houthis' attacks. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) specifically referred to that resolution.

With Britain taking this targeted military action, it is important that the House recognises the professionalism and bravery of our armed forces—I am sure we are all united on that. I am referring, of course, to those who are serving on HMS Diamond and those flying RAF Typhoons. Of course, we recognise that military strikes can reduce and perhaps eliminate the immediate threat to free navigation but, as a number of Members have indicated, there needs to be a wider political strategy. The Defence Secretary touched on that subject at the start of the debate, but will the Minister indicate more precisely and in greater detail what the strategy is?

We all know only too well the horrific suffering that the people of Yemen have experienced over the past few years, with the terrible civil war and the appalling humanitarian crisis that unfolded as a result. The UK has a historical responsibility in the area, and we also are the UN penholder for Yemen, so I would appreciate it if the Minister elaborated on the Prime Minister's comments to the House yesterday about what further assistance can be given to the people of Yemen to help to alleviate their suffering.

A number of Members referred to the terrible situation in Gaza. The situation is truly terrible. I do not accept, however, the Houthi claims that attacking ships from around the world is somehow linked to the conflict in Gaza. There is a desperate need for a humanitarian truce leading to a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. Indeed, we must move as quickly as we possibly can to a two-state solution. That is in everyone's interests, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said very clearly.

It has to be said that the actions by the Houthis in the Red sea are an attack on the international community

and the rule of law, and they should be seen for what they are. Let me be clear: Labour supports proportionate airstrikes, but I would welcome clarification from the Minister on the points that I have raised.

6.41 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): This has been a thoughtful debate and, I think, a united one, and I will endeavour to respond to as many of the points made as I can in the time I have.

As my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary made clear at the start of the debate, the Houthis' illegal attacks on commercial shipping and British and American warships in the Red sea are completely unacceptable. Despite repeated warnings from the international community, they have carried out more than 30 attacks since 19 November. As I think all hon. and right hon. Members across the House have said, this is unacceptable, illegal and dangerous, and it cannot stand. That is why, amid the ongoing and imminent threat to British commercial and military vessels and those of our partners in the Red sea, the Prime Minister ordered the Royal Air Force to carry out targeted strikes against military facilities used by the Houthis, first on 11 January and then again on Monday. We acted alongside our US allies and with support from the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and Bahrain. The strikes were limited, necessary, proportionate and legal. We acted in self-defence, consistent with the UN charter and in line with international law to uphold the freedom of navigation.

On the specific issues raised in the debate, let me try to respond to the speeches we heard, starting with that by the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). He mentioned his agreement with and support for what the Government are seeking to do, and we are most grateful for that. He also called for a wider defence debate, and I completely take his point. However, he will also accept that, under the changes that took place, the Government basically gave that time to the Backbench Business Committee, so the Backbench Business Committee itself is the most likely target, in addition to the Government, to provide that extra time.

James Gray: Does my right hon. Friend not accept that His Majesty's Government have an absolute duty to provide debates in this House in Government time to discuss defence? Just to say that the Backbench Business Committee may or may not provide it if someone applies for a debate is not enough. We want proper debates here in Government time.

Mr Mitchell: No, no—I completely accept what my hon. Friend is saying. I am just pointing out that the reform made in relation to the Backbench Business Committee has eaten into that time.

I very much thank the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne for his support for the Government's strategy on Ukraine. It is a great strength, I think, that there is full and total unity across the House on that matter. He asked me about the two landing platform docks Albion and Bulwark, and asked for an undertaking that they will not be scrapped. I am able, on behalf of the Government, to give him the undertaking that neither of them will be scrapped. I know that will come as a

[Mr Mitchell]

relief to the great friend of many of us, particularly on this side of the House: Lord Llewellyn, His Majesty's ambassador to Italy, who is the honorary ship's captain of HMS Albion.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): My right hon. Friend was covering the point about the United Kingdom Government's strategy to degrade the Houthis. Looking at all the levers that we have militarily, economically and diplomatically, our key ally the United States has taken a specific decision that the United Kingdom has not taken yet. The United States has proscribed the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, with that coming into effect in 30 days' time. Why have the United Kingdom Government not done that?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will understand that we would not give a running commentary to the House on the issue of sanctioning proscriptions ahead of making any such announcement, so I cannot give him an answer to that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Mitchell: I will give way in a moment; I just want to finish dealing with the comments by the shadow Secretary of State. He also asked whether HMS Diamond will be replaced on the station. The answer is yes, she will be replaced by HMS Richmond, but he will accept, I hope, that I cannot give any operational details about that.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of Israel and Gaza, which is adjacent to this debate if not directly part of it. That issue was similarly raised by the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), whose son we thank for his service, by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox), and by the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), and for Caerphilly (Wayne David). Colleagues throughout the debate have raised this point, and I reiterate that there is no link between our action of self-defence in the Red sea, and the situation in Israel and Gaza. The Houthis are using events in Israel and Gaza as an excuse to destabilise the region further. They are trying to paint themselves as protectors of the oppressed, but their own track record of oppression shows them in a very different light.

Britain 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, and as a vital step towards building a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, without a return to destruction, fighting, and loss of life. To achieve that, we need Hamas to agree to release all the hostages. Hamas can no longer be in charge of Gaza, and an agreement must be in place for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza.

While I am on that point, may I say to the hon. Member for East Lothian a word or two about the reference to the International Court of Justice? The Government believe that the referral by South Africa to the International Court of Justice is unhelpful, but of course we respect the role and independence of the ICJ. I say to the House, particularly on Holocaust Memorial Day, that

the suggestion that Israel is engaged in genocide against the Palestinian people is both wrong and profoundly offensive. I make it clear on Holocaust Memorial Day that we also remember the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, in Bosnia in 1995 and in Sudan in 2003, as well as in Cambodia in the 1970s. If I may update the House, the ICJ has announced during the course of the debate that it will deliver its decision on South Africa's request for provisional measures at 12 o'clock UK time on Friday 26 January.

Let me return to the excellent speeches made by so many of my right hon. and hon. Friends and Members, and I will turn first to the speech by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee—

Sir Julian Lewis *rose*—

Mr Mitchell: Before I do that, I shall give way to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Julian Lewis: My right hon. Friend is, as always, the model of courtesy. For the avoidance of any lingering doubt—I am sure this can be avoided as I am getting very positive signals from the Defence Secretary sitting to his left—will he confirm that HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, whose planned out-of-service dates are 2033 and 2034 respectively, not only will not be scrapped ahead of time, but will not be mothballed either?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to detect the supportive view of the Secretary of State for Defence.

James Sunderland: As a former serviceman, I have a simple view that quantity has a quality all of its own. Can the Minister please assure the House whether the FCDO has asked the MOD for additional platforms to be sent to the region with a view to offering deterrence against aggressors and ensuring the safe passage of British shipping?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will have heard the Prime Minister's words explaining what the strategy is and how we are implementing it, and I can tell him that the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence are perfectly joined in every sense in pursuing that strategy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton, who in these matters is something of a poacher turned gatekeeper—perhaps it is a gamekeeper turned poacher, because she was previously a distinguished member of the diplomatic corps—delivered trenchant support for our actions. She spoke up for Arab-led initiatives in the region, and I thank her very much also for agreeing to organise a workshop on Iran in the House of Commons for half a day.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) asked who we are listening to. The answer is that we are listening to the House, and he will have heard today a House united. He set out the challenges facing the defence budget, and many in the House will understand and agree with him that the challenges are significant, but we are tackling those challenges.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) spoke warmly and rightly about the Royal Navy. We thank him for his support, and he gave the House a geopolitical discourse, in

particular on the challenges to the global food chain, and the whole House will have heard what he said.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) reminded us of the excellence of his book, and we authors must stick together. He also explained, as the Prime Minister did, why Parliament was not consulted in these circumstances. That point was also visited by two Opposition Members, and I will come to that in a moment.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: There has been concern about the change of registration for vessels going through the Red sea, notably those changing to the People's Republic of China. If the Minister cannot give me an answer today, will he write to the Defence Committee or its Chair, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin), on how many merchant fleet vessels are changing their registration from their country of origin to the People's Republic of China, and whether Chinese-registered vessels have been targeted?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman asks me a detailed question, and the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Defence will have heard what he said. I am sure they will be happy to write to him.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset spoke about the danger and the nature of the Iranian regime, and he eloquently set out the threat to international maritime law. As I have said, I cannot give a commentary on IRGC proscription, but I can tell him that we have heard his views and those of other right hon. and hon. Members.

Sir Liam Fox: My right hon. Friend will recall that I have asked on several occasions why Iran Air is still flying from Heathrow and why Iranian banks are still trading in the City of London. Those are separate issues, but none the less important alongside the proscription issue.

Mr Mitchell: I will ensure that my right hon. Friend has a detailed answer on where we stand on both those issues.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon spoke movingly and compellingly on the importance, as I think the whole House agrees, of a two-state solution being in the interests not just of Israelis and Palestinians, but of the wider region and all of us here in the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) gave powerful warnings about the dangers of starvation in Yemen; that point was echoed by the hon. Member for Caerphilly. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) supported working more closely with the region and mentioned the importance of tackling wider examples of instability. The whole House will have been grateful for his remarks, and in particular for the wise words he spoke about Ukraine.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) talked about the impact and the effect of Iran's proxies. He spoke with both experience and knowledge about the risks of warfare and the need for a greater sense of strategy, looking in particular at the work of the National Security Council. Some of us were involved with that when it was set up. I took a careful note of what he said.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) mentioned that he thought he was joining a debate with defence nerds. I want to assure him of a warm welcome to our number. He, along with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), spoke about the importance of having a vote. The Government have made it clear that it is neither practical nor sensible to publicise such an action in advance as that could both undermine the effectiveness of the action and potentially risk the lives of armed forces personnel involved. My view is that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire had the better of their interesting inner debate.

Richard Foord: What about the situation of retrospective approval?

Mr Mitchell: I think that was the point he raised, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire answered with great eloquence.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) spoke using his detailed military knowledge to the advantage of the House, with considerable historical analogy. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) warned the House about the importance of defending international maritime law.

Richard Drax: I did ask why the aircraft carriers are not being used in the Red sea, and I would be grateful if some answer could be given.

Mr Mitchell: The use of the aircraft carriers, one of which is heading to a NATO exercise anyway, will be kept under review. If the assets that they would bring to bear on our central aims in this matter are appropriate, of course the right decision will be taken.

I think I have already answered the point made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire engaged with specifically. I therefore think that I have covered every speech made, so I will draw my remarks to a close.

We have sent the clearest possible message that we will continue to reduce the Houthis' ability to carry out these attacks, and we will back our warning with actions. The Houthis should be under no misunderstanding: Britain and our allies are committed to holding them to account. Yesterday's statement from 24 countries condemned and demanded an end to the Red sea attacks.

Military strikes are just one part of our wider response. First, we are increasing our diplomatic engagement. The Prime Minister spoke to President Biden about these issues on Monday night. The Foreign Secretary, who even now is in the region and will be visiting a number of different countries, has a meeting today with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and he met his Iranian counterpart last week. He made it clear that Iran must cease supplying the Houthis and use its influence to stop Houthi attacks.

Secondly, we must end the illegal flow of arms to the Houthis. We have intercepted weapons shipments in the region before, including components of the very missiles used by the Houthis today. Those who supply such weapons to the Houthis to conduct these attacks are violating UN Security Council resolution 2216 and international law. 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.

[Mr Mitchell]

Finally, we need to keep helping the people of Yemen, who have suffered so grievously as a result of the country's civil war. The Houthis' actions make that suffering worse. We will continue to deliver humanitarian aid and to support a negotiated peace in that conflict—that is the position—and Ministers are absolutely committed to keeping the House fully informed, as the House sees fit.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in the Red Sea.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

[*Relevant Document: 245th Report of the Ecclesiastical Committee, HC 340.*]

CHURCH OF ENGLAND (GENERAL SYNOD) (MEASURES)

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

That the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure (HC 341), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to His Majesty for his Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(*Andrew Selous.*)

Question agreed to.

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

That the Church of England Pensions (Application of Capital Funds) Measure (HC 342), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to His Majesty for his Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(*Andrew Selous.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION Ceasefire in Gaza

7 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I rise to present a petition urging the Government to call on

Israel and Hamas to implement an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, and for the immediate release of all hostages.

Over the past four months, Gaza has been subject to unrelenting bombardment which, following almost two decades of siege, has created a humanitarian crisis. Almost 100,000 Palestinians have been killed and injured by the Israeli military, and millions more have been displaced and are subject to severe shortages of food, medicine, water and aid—with no end in sight.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on Israel and Hamas to implement an immediate”

—and sustained—

“ceasefire to prevent further bloodshed and damage so that a peaceful two-state solution may be achieved in Palestine and Israel.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Manchester Gorton,

Declares that an urgent, immediate and sustained ceasefire is needed in Gaza to prevent the humanitarian crisis from intensifying; further declares condemnation for the killing of the civilians, the bombing of public infrastructure, and the targeting of journalists; calls for the immediate release of Israeli hostages being held by Hamas; and notes that an immediate end to the violence is urgent to ensure the viability for a peaceful two-state solution.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on Israel and Hamas to implement an immediate ceasefire to prevent further bloodshed and damage so that a peaceful two-state solution may be achieved in Palestine and Israel.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002905]

Nuclear Defence Infrastructure: Parliamentary Scrutiny

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

7.2 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not know I was so popular with Government Back Benchers.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Now, now, now. We are not having any of that. That is not fair. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) is popular and it is very good that there are so many Members here to listen to him. We will tell him why later.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am very grateful for the opportunity that Mr Speaker has given me to raise an issue that I think we can all agree deserves wider attention and scrutiny. I do not think I have ever done an Adjournment debate on a Wednesday—or one so well attended, I have to say—and I am glad to be doing so at a relatively decent hour, not least because I know something is happening afterwards in this very Chamber.

I want to start with an appeal to those on the Government Front Bench and to anyone else who might be thinking of intervening. It is clear that I am a member of the Scottish National party and that this is a debate that concerns the UK's nuclear enterprise. On that level it might be fairly predictable, but I hope that in preparing for this debate the Minister left at home or in the Ministry of Defence all the customary stuff usually reserved for SNP Members discussing nuclear weapons in this place. It may be tempting to play to our bases and paint this debate as yet more—forgive me for saying it, Madam Deputy Speaker, so close to Burns night—haggis-munching, burst-bagpipe whingeing, but I hope we can all agree that the trigger for this debate was some very serious allegations from a senior official. People across these islands who live beside, or in the vicinity of, nuclear-regulated sites deserve to hear a response to those allegations. I am glad to see the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) in his place as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Not right now; if the hon. Gentleman would allow me to continue for a moment.

I am going to set aside my own and my party's well-known and understood standpoint on the morality and utility of the nuclear enterprise, in order to focus on the specifics of the allegations made in the blog of 30 December by a well-known former adviser, Dominic Cummings. I hope that the Minister will reciprocate and show the House the respect it deserves. As another small caveat, let me make it clear from the outset that I understand

three things about Dominic Cummings: that he certainly has his own well-publicised agenda when it comes to issues with the civil service, especially in relation to civil service reform; that he is demonstrably not as clever as he thinks he is; and that he has also been known to present “dead cat” arguments as a distraction from his own shortcomings—in this instance, the fact that the Prime Minister chose not to rehire him as an adviser.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman and I have different opinions about nuclear capability—I believe that we should have it, and the hon. Gentleman says no—but I think we agree on the issue of nuclear safety. Does he recognise that our nuclear defence is imperative to the security of the nation and to fulfilling international obligations, and also that that cannot be achieved without substantial investment? This is not optional; the money must be found, and found now, to ensure that we have not only nuclear safety but, just as importantly, nuclear capability.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: My answer to the hon. Gentleman is that he might as well stay for the rest of the debate to hear my view on that.

I have to say that Mr Cummings's former role, and the nature of the allegations he has made, are such that it is bizarre, frankly, at least from my perspective, that the only attempt to scrutinise them is taking place not in a parliamentary Committee but in what, I have to say, is usually the graveyard spot of parliamentary business. Parliament is sovereign in everything, I guess, apart from the nuclear enterprise.

I will, I am afraid, quote from Mr Cummings's blog quite extensively. I hope the Minister has already read it, but it is important for it to be read into the record of the House. There are two principal aspects to which I would like the Government to respond: first, the state of the defence nuclear infrastructure across these islands; and secondly, the decision-making process in the civil service and how it relates to democratic oversight. I should also say, before the Minister uses up some of the time for his response to say it, that I am not expecting him to comment, in any shape or form, on operational matters. I understand that much that is to do with the nuclear enterprise cannot be discussed publicly.

So let us begin. Unfortunately, I cannot leave out all the internal machinations of the Conservative party's psychodrama, as some of it is quite pertinent. Cummings begins:

“I did have two conversations with the PM, the first in 2022 just after he became PM.

The PM wanted an actual plan including how to grip power and get things done, a political strategy and a political machine to change the political landscape and beat Labour.

In 2022 I said I might do it but my conditions were the ability to ensure that urgent action is proceeding on a range of fundamentally critical issues including:

the scandal of nuclear weapons infrastructure which is a dangerous disaster and a budget nightmare of hard-to-believe and highly classified proportions, and which has forced large secret cannibalisation of other national security budgets,

building defences for natural and engineered pandemics,

the scandal of MOD procurement, ignored despite (even because of) the biggest war in Europe since 1945,

AI and other technological capabilities,

the broken core government institutions including the dumpster fire of the Cabinet Office.”

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Cummings ends this section by saying:

“In all of these areas I started crucial work in 2019-20. Most of this has stopped, slowed, or reversed.”

Not all of that is pertinent and, particularly in that last line, we see Cummings’s own agenda coming through. None the less, I would say that points 1, 3 and 5 are of the most interest to us here. Let us start with points 1 and 3, and return to point 5 later.

Cummings continues:

“For example, in 2020 we agreed (via a secret ‘tunnel’ process with the services, HMT and Cabinet Office, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and me, but kept secret from Wallace) the first agreed-by-everyone-to-be-honest MOD budget numbers since before 2010, agreed how to plug the massive black hole partly created by the nuclear enterprise disaster, agreed a range of disasters that should be stopped immediately (e.g. AJAX, Challenger), and agreed a plan for procurement reform and new capabilities to build. (Also NB. the Army did NOT lobby for a bigger army—in the world that seemed possible in 2020 of a serious plan and honest numbers and procurement reform etc, they preferred a smaller army with real capabilities to a ‘bigger’ but increasingly Potemkin army.) Instead, the MoD has been allowed to:

pocket the money for the black hole,

avoid stopping the disasters,

continue pumping more money down the drain of legacy disasters creating a new black hole,

continued to allow critical parts of the nuclear weapons infrastructure to rot creating further massive secret budget nightmares as well as extremely serious physical dangers (cf. the recent near disaster with a submarine),

continue as normal with disastrous procurement policy and practice, instead of taking industrial capacity seriously,

continue sacrificing critical new capabilities to fund legacy failures,

shred the honest budget numbers and return to the fraudulent numbers, and”—

most critically—

“continue lying even more to MPs and media about it all.”

Let me repeat that I do not expect the Minister to comment on operational matters or give away classified information, but can we at least agree that these are serious allegations on both a specific and a more general matter? Specifically, can the Minister comment on the suggestion that the nuclear enterprise is causing the

“large secret cannibalisation of other national security budgets”?

To add a little bit of context, while it would be tempting to pass this off as the ranting of a jilted former senior adviser, this tallies with a lot of what we have heard from recent National Audit Office reports. The latest report, received just in December, revealed not only that the plan was “unaffordable”, that the MOD acknowledged this fact and that the funding gap could range between £7.6 billion and £29.8 billion, but that

“Nuclear and Royal Navy Costs show the greatest increase compared with 2022”—

the Navy of course being the service that is responsible for the continuous at-sea deterrent.

Furthermore, paragraph 16 of the report’s key findings stated clearly:

“The creation of a ring fence around nuclear funding helps protect the MoD’s highest defence priority but puts greater pressure on programmes not included in it.”

Does the Minister acknowledge that the ringfence is putting pressure on the rest of the conventional budget? If so, do they think this is sustainable? Can they also tell the House what plans the Government have to mitigate the dead hand of ringfencing? There is an unfortunate logic to this nuclear ringfence within the Government’s well-intentioned ringfence around defence spending, be it at 2% or 2.5%. At this moment, every penny spent on the nuclear enterprise is a penny less spent on conventional assets, at a time when conventional threats are proliferating—a point I made in this very place only a few hours ago.

Cummings adds a dash of colour to the NAO’s necessarily black and white findings about MOD mismanagement and dysfunction. Taken together, they are a damning indictment of where Defence finds itself, and it is a shame that there is something of a taboo around discussing the contribution of the nuclear enterprise to this predicament. There are undoubtedly massive consequences and contingencies that need to be developed surrounding as large a transition as the one the nuclear enterprise is undertaking just now. We know this because His Majesty’s Government already went through a similar transition from Resolution to Vanguard. Because of “The Silent Deep”, the excellent and definitive official history of the Royal Navy submarine service, written by Peter Hennessy and James Jinks and released in 2015—a book I recommend to Members—we also know that extensive plans were made for worst-case scenarios during that transition, including

“moving a Polaris submarine into Loch Long, where it would dive and remain in a static location on Quick Reaction Alert.”

Again, I am not asking the Minister to comment on operational issues, but a pattern is emerging of events and scenarios that are consistent with reports and papers written by nuclear analysts dealing with the consequences of an ageing platform, against the backdrop of a defence budget put under pressure by an increasingly dire economic situation.

Whether it is the accident involving a Vanguard-class submarine, which we spoke about in November—an accident that Cummings attributes to poor infrastructure—or the pitiful sight of another Vanguard-class boat returning to HMNB Clyde in September, looking rather the worse for wear, only for the MOD to release a statement praising the crew for the longest SSBN patrol, something does not quite add up.

We sometimes stray too close to specifics, so I will return to another aspect of the Cummings blog—an aspect that, if anything, is more worrying. It brings me to the parliamentary aspect of the title of this evening’s debate:

“Since we left, No. 10 has allowed and even encouraged all this. The cycle of disaster, cheat, lie and classify even more has continued through successive defence reviews (e.g. the infamous ‘Heywood wedge’ overseen by Heywood, Osborne and McPherson in 2015). We drew a line under this systemic lying and delusions in 2020. After I left the line was immediately deleted and business as usual has continued. The system is preparing to give Starmer the same horrific choices on above-STRAP3 yellow paper and continue the cycle of classify, punt, and lie with everything becoming ever more hollow-Potemkin as a result.”

That is a lot, so let us focus on the idea that

“The system is preparing to give Starmer the same...choices”.

It is nothing more than an insinuation that senior members of the civil service and the armed forces, according to Cummings, seem to be planning to manipulate

an incoming Prime Minister who, if recent polls are to be believed, will have a significant mandate. Not only that, but it insinuates that they have used the protocols and security around the nuclear enterprise to manipulate the current Prime Minister and his predecessors, and have sought to remove any aspect of Cabinet decision making by excluding the then Defence Secretary from those discussions.

As I said, my party does not agree with this, or with the nuclear weapons policies of this Government and previous Governments. Regardless, this debate is not about that; it is about the way in which His Majesty's Government implement their own declared policy. It is an unfortunate but inescapable reality of the nuclear enterprise that many of the discussions around it cannot be held in public—[*Interruption.*] I will come to a conclusion. Do not worry, the Minister will have his 10 minutes—and then his photograph.

The whole number of discussions must therefore be taken in an increasingly tight series of concentric circles. The one fig leaf for our parliamentary democracy has always been that, at the end of it all, there is an element of democratic oversight, with the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and, on occasion, the Foreign Secretary having input into the nuclear strategy.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way? [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I must say to other Members present that it is simply rude to talk. If whispering has to be done, then whisper.

Deidre Brock: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a crucial issue. He talks about secrecy. Does he know about the MOD's response to my recent questions on safety at its nuclear bases? The response confirmed an alarming trend, with the number of incidents at Faslane and Coulport jumping by a third in 2022, and the figures for the start of 2023 suggesting further rises. Does he agree that surely we have a right, as Members of Parliament, to know why safety records are not improving, as well as the nature of these incidents and their effect on local residents and the environment?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I could not disagree with my hon. Friend at all.

Of course, if any of the allegations made by Dominic Cummings, crucially those on senior Ministers being manipulated, are without merit, I would be glad to hear it. Alternatively, those civil servants themselves should address them directly.

Let me bring my remarks to a close with a final plea for the Minister—[*Interruption.*] I know that Members are here to have their picture taken—it might be useful, as it might be the last parliamentary one they ever have. Let me bring my remarks to a close with a final plea for the Minister to stick to the substance of some basic questions I am asking him. We know the opinion about the nuclear enterprise, so let me make this a bit easier and keep to just two questions, if the Government do not want to address anything else that I have said. First, what are the Government doing to ensure that the nuclear enterprise does not continue to exert undue pressure on the rest of the defence budget? Secondly,

what safeguards are there to ensure that there remains a robust and genuine democratic oversight of all aspects of that enterprise?

7.21 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing this important debate. It is true that we differ fundamentally on the issue of the deterrent. Indeed, there is such passion and commitment to it among Conservative Members that we have a fantastic turnout this evening. The key theme of his speech was parliamentary scrutiny. He said that Parliament is sovereign everywhere, except in the nuclear deterrent. So let me remind him that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) became Prime Minister in 2016, one of the first key votes in this House was on the renewal of Trident, and the majority was 355 in favour.

To be clear, the UK's independent nuclear deterrent is a matter of the highest priority for the Government, as is borne out by the support on our Back Benches today. I welcome the opportunity to set out our approach and policies in this area. Our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent is the cornerstone of our national defence, and it is central to the Government's national security strategy. We place the utmost importance on the upkeep of all our nuclear defence infrastructure and its upgrades. His Majesty's naval base in Clyde has an establishment management plan with a 40-year horizon that covers both the Faslane and Coulport sites. The Government seek to be as transparent as possible about our nuclear defence infrastructure, within obvious national security constraints.

Deidre Brock rose—

James Cartlidge: I will take one intervention from the hon. Lady.

Deidre Brock: The Minister talks about transparency, but in 2017 the publication of the annual reports of the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator, the Ministry of Defence's internal watchdog, were stopped under his Government. Why was that?

James Cartlidge: I have enjoyed the fact that the hon. Lady has tabled a number of written questions on these matters. I have always answered them as transparently as possible, setting out the full facts, and will continue to do so. Indeed, the very point of being here is that we are transparent in Parliament about our deterrent. We engage fully with Parliament, including the Defence and Scottish Affairs Committees, and we will continue to do so. We publish transparency data for all major defence programmes annually, including nuclear infrastructure, and, in line with industry good practice, our nuclear sites have well-established and transparent systems for raising what are known in the industry as nuclear site event reports, about which the hon. Lady has asked a number of written questions. This open documentation of human error, procedural or documentation failings, and equipment issues provides the strongest illustration of our commitment to transparency. More importantly, it fosters a culture of continual improvement and enhances the rigour of our collective approach to safety.

[James Cartlidge]

The safety of our nuclear defence infrastructure is paramount. Our nuclear establishments fully adhere to current—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister. I have said this before but everybody seems to think it is funny to ignore it. It is fine to whisper if you need to communicate with one another, but it is simply rude to talk at the top of your voice, so that I can hear what people are saying on the Back Benches but I cannot hear the Minister. It is simply discourteous.

James Cartlidge: I think they are very enthused, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Our nuclear establishments fully adhere to current regulatory and operational requirements. They are subject to a painstaking programme of maintenance by highly trained experts. To ensure their reliability and safety far

into the future, we are carrying out a £1.4 billion upgrade of our nuclear facilities at HMNB Clyde, which will ensure they are ready to receive the next generation Dreadnought class of submarines. As colleagues would expect, all these improvements are being made in line with current and foreseeable future regulatory requirements.

To conclude, we cannot look after our nuclear infrastructure without highly trained people. To support our future submarine programmes, we are investing around £200 million in world-class training for our current and future submariners. The Government have robust maintenance programmes in place to deal with some of the challenges to non-nuclear infrastructure at HMNB Clyde. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure that our nuclear deterrent infrastructure both keeps us safe and continues to adhere to the most stringent safety and regulatory standards.

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 January 2024

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

Hedgerows: Legal Protection

9.30 am

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered legal protections for hedgerows.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Ms Elliott. I welcome the work of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its consultation last June, which sought to ensure that protections for hedgerows will continue, following the end of cross-compliance protections this January. I thank the Minister for her engagement on the issue and, as an advisory board member of the Conservative Environment Network, I thank the network for its help in relation to this debate.

Our green and pleasant land has been a source of national pride for centuries. Looking at the gently rolling hills of my North Devon constituency, it is easy to see why. The land is a green patchwork, stitched together by hedgerows. I am proud to be one of the 85 MPs and peers who are hedgerow heroes for the Campaign to Protect Rural England, continuously calling on the Government to commit to significant hedgerow planting and restoration.

The Government have made many welcome steps towards protecting hedgerows. The Environment Act 2021 introduced a mandatory biodiversity net gain requirement for new development, along with local nature recovery strategies to target the best places for nature recovery and wider environmental benefits. In January 2023, under the refreshed 25-year environment plan, the Government announced a target to create or restore 30,000 miles of hedgerows by 2037 and 45,000 miles of hedgerows by 2050. That target will result in 360,000 miles of English hedgerows, which is 10% above the 1984 peak.

Other positives include clear regulations prohibiting the removal of countryside hedgerows without approval, and our countryside stewardship schemes, which help to maintain and restore over 10,000 km of existing hedgerows and plant an additional 4,000 km across the country. Countryside stewardship provides financial incentives for farmers, foresters and land managers to look after and improve the environment. Under grant type BE3—management of hedgerows—farmers will be paid £13 per 100 metres for one side of a hedge. That is available for the countryside stewardship mid-tier and higher-tier options, and will go towards improving the structure and longevity of hedgerows and maintaining them as distinctive and historic landscape features.

Healthy hedgerows are visually appealing, but they are also unsung heroes. Their roots absorb excess water and help to reduce the risk of flooding. Their leaves provide a source of shade for livestock in the summer and shelter in the winter. Their thick, tangled branches are home to countless iconic British species, from the humble hedgehog to bats, turtle doves and yellowhammers.

Hedges are also home to precious pollinators, without which we would all go hungry. Over 1,500 invertebrates, including bees, beetles, spiders and hoverflies, have been identified in hedgerows in the UK. Spring-flowering trees and shrubs, such as blackthorn and hawthorn, which are often found in hedgerows, can be important sources of spring foraging for wild bee species in intensively managed landscapes.

The National Trust is very keen that I highlight its annual BlossomWatch campaign. Blackthorn and hawthorn blossom hedgerow is some of the most spectacular to be found anywhere in our countryside. The National Trust highlights that since 1945, the UK's hedgerow network has shrunk by about 50%. That is concerning because hedgerows are not just an iconic feature of our landscapes, but critical habitats for our wildlife that clean our air and help with carbon capture and reducing flooding. The National Trust welcomes the Government's target to create or restore 30,000 miles of hedgerows by 2037 and 45,000 by 2050.

According to the Government's independent adviser on climate change, the Climate Change Committee, hedgerows are key to meeting our legally binding commitment to reach net zero by 2050. The committee has recommended increasing the length of hedgerows by 40% by 2050. Studies suggest that England's hedges could already hold as much as 9 million tonnes of carbon. Unmanaged hedgerows are estimated to sequester over 140 tonnes of carbon per hectare, compared with 169 tonnes for a 30-year native woodland. If hedgerows are properly managed, they could sequester even more, both in their woody stems and in the roots below.

I am a genuine believer in our farmers as the best custodians of our countryside. However, we have lost nearly 118,000 miles of hedgerows in the UK since the 1950s, when farmers were encouraged to increase the intensity of their production.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She mentions the importance of the farming community and what they do to secure, promote and enhance hedgerows in our nation. Does she agree that we need to do as much as we can to support them in their much-needed task, which people often forget about and take for granted?

Selaine Saxby: I agree entirely, and I will speak further about what more we can do to support farmers. My North Devon constituency is home to a large number of farmers.

There are few legal protections to prevent poor hedgerow management practices. When I was a councillor, I was contacted every year without fail about the cutting of local hedgerows. The problem is that the lack of a landscape criterion means that locally distinctive hedgerows are not protected and local authorities are often powerless to retain them. According to CPRE, more than half of local authorities feel that existing exceptions for built development lead to unacceptable or avoidable hedgerow loss.

Prior to the UK's departure from the EU, cross-compliance rules governed eligibility for the EU's common agricultural policy and provided basic environmental protections. The UK has now replaced CAP, and the rules ceased to apply as of 31 January 2023. It is worth noting that the majority of rules under cross-compliance

[Selaine Saxby]

are now covered by domestic legislation, but although the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 protect some hedgerows from being removed, there are now no regulations to protect hedgerows from harmful management practices such as ploughing too close to the base, spraying them with chemicals and cutting them at the wrong time of year.

Perhaps this is an apt time to mention the no-cutting period. The Big Garden Birdwatch—the world's largest garden wildlife survey, organised by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—is happening this weekend. Every year, hundreds of thousands of nature lovers take part and help to build a picture of how garden birds are faring in the UK. If hon. Members have not signed up already, that is something for this weekend. A no-cutting period would ensure that hedgerows are not cut back during the important bird nesting season from early spring to late summer. Any reduction or loss of the no-cutting period would place severe additional pressures on farmland bird species that are already facing spiralling declines. A no-cutting period would benefit not just birds, but bees.

Colleagues have told me that there is a problem with highway authorities cutting grass verges and roadside hedges at the wrong time of year. Cutting roadside hedges destroys all the wild flowers, which have great benefits in helping bees to pollinate. It is also important to recognise that hedgerows need management, and that should be incorporated into any scheme, as many birds nest inside the hedgerows to protect them from predators, not on the bits that need trimming.

One of the UK's very rare bumblebees, the brown-banded carder bee, was spotted in Braunton last summer. Maintaining road verges with pollinators in mind can create a network of habitat that can connect populations of bumblebees, allowing them to find suitable flowers to pollinate. I want to give a big thank you to Braunton parish council and the local volunteers at the Bumblebee Conservation Trust for their work.

Recent research by CPRE has found that planting hedgerows on arable land can boost the production of pollinating insects, increase crop yields by 10% and reduce pesticide use by 30%. The study examines what it would mean for farmers if the UK's hedgerow network were expanded by 40% by 2050. It calculates that for every £1 invested in hedgerows, farmers would see a £1.73 return from higher crop yields.

A petition supported by North Devon residents states:

"All hedgerow cutting or trimming and non-essential tree felling should be banned between March and August to give declining bird species a chance to breed undisturbed by human activity."

The Hedgerows Regulations 1997 offer limited legal protection, as they apply only to narrowly defined important hedges. Broadly, a hedgerow is considered important if it is at least 30 years old and meets criteria based on the number of plant and animal species it supports, its historical significance, and associated hedge features such as a hedge bank, ditch or tree.

The 2023 DEFRA consultation on protecting hedgerows included questions about ensuring continued protection for hedgerows after the end of cross-compliance. That meant that to receive the basic payment scheme, farmers

and land managers were required to maintain overall standards and put in place hedgerow management measures. However, although the Department held a consultation last June on the shape of future regulations, no amendments have been made since their introduction in 1997. The Government have yet to respond, and they missed their deadline last year to replicate the previous rules in UK law. The Department has stated:

"We are determined to protect and restore vital wildlife habitats and have recently consulted on continuing hedgerow protections after the end of cross compliance and will publish a summary of responses as well as outline our next steps shortly."

I hope that the Minister can clarify when "shortly" is, as the delayed Government response to the consultation risks a regulatory gap in the protection of hedgerows under basic hedgerow management standards.

Farmers make countless sacrifices to produce the food we eat, and they care deeply for their land. They are as much a part of the landscape as they are custodians of it. Farmers are integral to rural communities such as mine in North Devon: they help to stitch them together, create jobs and produce high-quality food, all while caring for our much-loved countryside. I will always champion our great British farmers and ensure that their voices are heard.

I welcome the good news from the Secretary of State this month regarding the latest upgrades to the UK's farming schemes since Brexit to help support our farmers, including a 10% increase in the average value of agreements in the sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship schemes. A streamlined single application process for farmers to apply for the schemes is also to be warmly welcomed. I am pleased that the process has been made simpler for British farmers to access. Those upgrades underpin the Government's commitment to support farmers and take actions to boost sustainable food production while delivering positive outcomes for the environment.

Now that we are outside the EU, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a bespoke system of farm support that better rewards farmers, protects our natural environment and is unique to our national circumstances. The new environmental land management schemes are a step in the right direction. ELMS deliver much greater value for taxpayers' money and create a new revenue stream for farmers to complement the money they receive for food production. ELMS also help in tackling long-term threats to our food security by encouraging more sustainable farming practices and improving key assets for food production, such as soil health, water quality and healthy hedgerows.

It was great to visit the farm of my constituent David Chugg in Kingsheanton with the National Farmers Union and see the work being done to plant small trees into hedgerows as part of an ELM scheme. I am glad that the new ELM scheme means that farms such as David's will have their management of hedgerows funded, in recognition of their historic, cultural and environmental value to our countryside.

The Government's target is for 70% of farms to sign up to the sustainable farming incentive by 2028, and I welcome the good progress being made towards that goal. However, even if the target is met and all those farms sign up to the existing hedgerow options, it is estimated that 120,000 km of hedgerows will be left

with little meaningful legal protection. The Government's primary focus on incentivising good environmental stewardship over punitive enforcement is the right one.

Farmers have three relevant options as part of the sustainable farming incentive under ELM, with payments on offer for the measurement, management and planting of new hedgerows, but some level of legislative protection for our most precious natural assets is necessary. I therefore urge the Government to update the Hedgerows Regulations to include protections against harmful management practices. That is essential to replace the protections lost with the end of cross-compliance. We should also broaden our ambitions and think more carefully about the type of regulatory environment we want to create.

In 2018, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) commissioned the Stacey review. The review set out to rationalise the basis on which future farming regulations should be made to safeguard animal and plant welfare, ensure good land management and prevent hazards. Proportionate, smart regulation enables farmers to fulfil those goals, and the review contained a series of wide-ranging recommendations to strengthen and simplify regulation. Unfortunately, the Government have still not issued a formal response. I call on the Minister to do so.

Farming is an unpredictable business, and the hundreds of farmers whose land still lies under water after Storm Henk are a testament to that. It is our duty as policymakers to provide them with certainty and the tools they need to strengthen their resilience. North Devon residents have also signed a petition to make the protection of hedgerows a condition of ELMS and BPS subsidies. We need to ensure that farmers have the confidence to engage with that process. To ensure that farmers have that confidence in ELMS, to restore our natural world and to boost our food security, the Government should at the very least increase the ELMS budget in line with inflation and index future budgets to inflation. Consumer price inflation ran at an average of 4.18% from December 2019 to October 2023. The £2.4 billion annual budget should therefore increase by at least £400 million to restore it to its original value.

Whitehall could also be less prescriptive in the payments that it makes available to farmers. I would like to see more market-based payment rates for ELMS, reflective of our environmental needs and the demands from farmers. Options with the greatest environmental benefits or those with the lowest sign-up rates should have their payment rates boosted to increase uptake. To meet the Climate Change Committee's recommendations to increase the length of hedgerows, SFI options for the planting and careful management of hedgerows should be included.

Farmers also need greater advice on how to access the opportunities available. After speaking to farmers in my constituency, I know how important that is. I hope the Minister will look to appoint regional and local farm champions to provide peer-to-peer advice and training on sustainable and profitable farm practices.

To sum up, I have a few suggestions for the Minister. We should introduce a landscape criterion in the regulations to give local authorities more discretion to protect hedgerows that are important to the local landscape character, but might not meet the current criteria for importance. We should improve the Hedgerows Regulations so that they are easier for local authorities to implement: any simplification should strengthen hedgerow protection,

not weaken it. We should consider a closed season over winter for when hedgerow removal notices can be submitted to local authorities. That would allow comprehensive surveys of the hedgerow to take place, as required, before removal is permitted.

The key point that I want to stress is the need for those regulations that have been lost under cross-compliance, which relate to the management of hedgerows. Although I know that hedgerow planting is not a silver bullet for agricultural carbon emissions, it can play a significant role alongside good soil management, agroforestry and uptake of low carbon fertilisers.

We have just found out that our Lib Dem-run district council will miss its 2030 net zero target after having reduced its greenhouse gases by only 16% in the last four years. I hope that the Government can facilitate our farmers in filling some of the gaps that the Lib Dems have left, and secure, enhance and extend our stunning network of hedgerows across North Devon and the country.

I trust the farmers in North Devon to look after their hedgerows. They understand the link between good hedgerows, better biodiversity and improved productivity, but we must look at the next steps on protection. It is important that we boost our biodiversity to strengthen our rural economies and maximise the benefits of our beautiful countryside. We need to ensure that our hedgerows are legally protected.

9.47 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this important debate and for her technical recommendations, which should certainly help to improve things for hedgerows.

Hedgerows are essential to our agricultural heritage and the protection of our natural environment and landscape, as well as being essential carbon sinks to help us meet our COP and convention on biological diversity commitments. I welcome CPRE's research, which found that expanding the hedgerow network by 40% would create more than 25,000 new jobs over the next three decades, and that for every £1 spent on hedgerows a return of as much as £3.92 can be expected from the associated ecosystem services and economic opportunities.

I went to see Richard Bramley's farm near Tadcaster—he is the chair of the National Farmers Union environment forum. He had planted hundreds of metres of hedgerows and it was great to see the biodiversity increase, with the associated carbon benefits. He said that he wanted more hedgerows on his farm, but the barrier was the lack of a skilled workforce. That and other areas of green skills need to be tackled if we are to see an expansion of our hedgerow network.

I would like a national nature service to be brought in for young people from teenage years, to give opportunities for activities such as hedgerow planting and to work with agricultural colleges to widen and broaden the curricula, which would bring forward new skilled workers to undertake activities such as hedgerow planting and management. We need to invest in those skills and skills-based activities if we are to see the necessary hedgerow planting and maintenance to meet our existing targets.

[Alex Sobel]

Hedges produce crops and provide food for people and animals. The protection and management of the natural environment is crucial for the agricultural sector and the environment, especially under the growing challenges imposed by the rise in temperature and the climate crisis, with continuing chaotic weather patterns. As a CPRE hedgerow champion—I am pleased that the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned us—I signed up to call on the Government to commit to significant hedgerow planting and restoration and to increase the extent of the UK's hedgerows by 40% by 2050, as recommended by the UK Climate Change Committee. Under the nature recovery Green Paper, the Government have said that they are committed to protecting hedgerows, including through the ELMS scheme, but I would like to see them specify how they will encourage the creation of more.

When I attended the convention on biological diversity—the UN biodiversity conference—at COP15, Governments agreed a new set of goals for nature over this decade. Unfortunately, the UK is one of the most severely nature-depleted countries worldwide, and we have heard successive Government Ministers admit that that is the case. The Natural History Museum's biodiversity intactness index, probably the best indicator of global biodiversity, has revealed that the world has crashed through the “safe limit for humanity” for biodiversity loss and placed the UK's 53% score in the bottom 10% of all countries, well below China and last in the G7—not a record that we should be proud of. The Conservatives' Environment Act 2021 target on species abundance, which they were forced to concede by Opposition amendments, promised only to “halt the decline” in species by 2030. Just halting the decline—or getting a “net zero for nature”—is not good enough. Our ambition should be to be nature-positive, both at home and when working internationally. Going forwards, we need to focus on improving our rewilding, reforestation and biodiversity targets in which hedgerows are preserved, utilised and renewed.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) will tell us that Labour will take a different approach, which I will agree with. We need to be the change that we want to see. Action at home has showcased to the world how nature-positive policy can be practically delivered across Government. I am sure that my hon. Friend will tell us that Labour will have a robust, net zero and nature-positive test for every policy—we must do that now—and a green prosperity plan, with an investment of £28 billion in the latter half of the next Parliament, including funding for nature restoration. I hope that that green prosperity plan includes significant funding for the green skills needed for us to restore hedgerows and our nature-depleted environment.

9.52 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), because I know from prior experience as the DEFRA Minister responsible for nature that she really is a hedgerow hero. She was persistent and effective in implementing increased recognition across DEFRA of the importance of hedgerows. That was certainly recognised by Ministers, including my good friend the Minister for Nature, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane

(Rebecca Pow), and the Farming Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), and by all the officials working for DEFRA, and by Natural England and the Forestry Commission.

I am delighted that we published the environmental improvement plan on 31 January 2023 because it really recognised, across 277 pages, what we are doing to halt the decline of nature by 2030 and increase its abundance thereafter. Hedgerows most certainly featured in that, and the revised standards earlier this year featured not just their planting and protection, but their management and assessment and the earthy banks on which they grow. I commend DEFRA for recognising the benefits of stone walls, because in areas such as mine in Copeland, across the Lake District and throughout Cumbria, stone walls are incredibly important for biodiversity and provide the windbreaks and shelters also provided by hedgerows. I am really pleased that DEFRA has recognised that they are more than just something for our much-appreciated tourists to enjoy. They are more than the cultural landscape: they actually provide a real benefit for nature and will help to contribute to the halting of nature's decline, which is so important.

Think about the hedgerows that have featured across our landscape for thousands of years, initially formed for windbreaks, as divisions and as shelters. To divide the land in such a cost-effective, long-living, bountiful and beautiful way was a wonderful thing that our ancestors did. Grubbing up may have been Government policy many decades ago when the priority was to feed our nation in post-war Britain, but we have come a long way in appreciating that it was a bad idea to sacrifice hedgerows. I would argue that it was one of the worst environmental harms that our country has done to the countryside.

It is right to have an emphasis on farms and farmers, because on our relatively small island, which is densely populated, about 70% of our land is agricultural—is farmed land, so if we are truly to see the benefits that we need for biodiversity, it is right that ELMS and that £2.4 billion investment from Government prioritises farmed land. We are catching up, because the environmental improvement plan introduced that commitment to the planting of more hedgerows, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon set out, and the increased protections. I look forward to confirmation of that.

The new and improved standards will take us a long way, and there are now fantastic examples of farmers coming together. I give a particular shout-out to my farmers in the West Lakeland Community Interest Company, consisting of 50 or so farmers who have come together because they recognise that they can play a key part, predominantly in the Wasdale and Ennerdale area of west Cumbria, which is a truly outstanding landscape—Britain's best view and Britain's best farmers.

The farmers in the CIC recognise that working together, featuring more hedgerows and looking after the water quality in the area will not just be of benefit to nature and our environment, but make good business sense for them. The reason they see the business opportunities is that, across DEFRA, we have recognised the benefits of nature-based policies. One that I will reference now is biodiversity net gain. In early February, I hope, biodiversity net gain will be coming out for large developers, and for other developers thereafter. That will drive further appreciation of hedgerows—of not taking them out in

the first place; of ensuring that they are protected during development, in that two-year window; and of putting hedgerows back in, because the credits for hedgerow planting are considerable.

I also draw the House's attention to the benefits of gardeners and the role that gardening can play to increase hedgerows. To replace a fence with a hedgerow will go far in carbon sequestering, in cooling and in air quality. Hedgerows also offer a fantastic benefit for pollution capture, in particular in urban areas where about 10% of hedgerows are found. Hedgerows are of course bountiful—we can all forage from and enjoy them, and wildlife can forage and enjoy the shelter that hedgerows bring—and let us not forget their benefits in preventing soil erosion, as hedgerows will prevent flooding because their roots dig deep into the ground. The reason that hedgerows are so fantastic, however, is that they are often mixed, and that is where the benefits of gardening are as well.

A garden is a diverse landscape, which encourages multiple different plants and different layers to grow at different rates—but it is managed. The act of gardening, similar to farming, means that a garden is managed. Studies, especially those from the Royal Horticultural Society centre, RHS Wisley, now show that the benefits of our 30 million gardeners getting behind nature are absolutely phenomenal. We all know about the benefits of carbon sequestering, and if we are to fulfil our commitment of achieving net zero by 2050, gardeners will play a key role.

To conclude, I will talk about the benefits to physical and mental health from hedgerows. As the third most obese country in Europe, we have a way to go to improve our nation's health. About 25 limbs are amputated every day as a result of diabetes, and at the height of the pandemic, on one of the worst days for hospital admissions, 4,500 people were admitted to hospital on one day; but every day, on average, 3,000 people are admitted to our hospitals due to obesity-related issues. To go for a walk along a hedgerow—I cannot imagine a nicer way to spend the day.

As we dare to dream that spring is on the way, and as the hedgerows start to get colour and liven up, we can look forward to the bird nesting season. We absolutely need to protect our hedgerows. Most importantly, we can look forward to the sights and sounds that we find in our hedgerows, and find an excuse to go for a walk and enjoy the great outdoors, which is the most wonderful thing about this country. It is absolutely essential if we are going to tackle the obesity crisis and all of the many preventable diseases that are caused by having a less active Britain.

10 am

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing the debate, and the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) for her beautiful words about hedgerows and the joys of walking around the countryside. She really brought the scene to life.

My constituents know that I am proudly from a farming family. I am able to trace my ancestors back to North Cadbury, in my constituency, as far back as 1763. My family are rooted in the soil we live on. Like other small family farmers up and down the country, they are guardians of our beautiful countryside.

Hedgerows provide wildlife corridors and stimulate predators, which can reduce the need for pesticide use, improve soil health and sequester carbon. They may be artificially created, but they house and shelter some of the most enigmatic and endearing animals, from natterjack toads and horseshoe bats to tawny owls and hoverflies. The People's Trust for Endangered Species recently counted 2,070 different species of plants and animals in one hedgerow in Devon. It recorded an average of 3.6 woody plant species in 885 km of hedgerows nationwide. Some 84% of birds found in UK farmlands need hedgerows. Over half of them live there primarily, along with 500 native plant species and over 1,500 insect species.

I have spoken before about the importance of cider in my part of Somerset, and one of the best pollinators for cider apples are red mason solitary bees, which need hedgerow shelter to thrive. I recently spoke to a farmer who told me that he had seen the first nightingale on his farm in living memory in the last few weeks, and that he regularly enjoys seeing barn owls patrolling his hedgerows. We must dismiss the myth that farmers want to tear up our hedgerows and destroy key habitats. Encouraging farmers to actively manage and preserve hedgerows is vital for future conservation and the associated benefits but, as of 31 December, there is no cross-compliance in place.

Another farmer told me:

"It's all voluntary, it's all optional—I personally can't spend the required time submitting the silly forms."

The RSPB figures show that the arrangements could risk the management of 120,000 km of hedgerows. It is rarely a lack of community spirit or ecological sympathy that prevents farmers from conserving hedgerows; instead, it is because of the lengthy and laborious digital system, which is beset with flaws, and a poor return on investing time in maintaining hedgerows.

I commend the Department for the generous payments for planting new hedgerows, but £3 per 100 metres to assess hedgerows, or just £10 per 100 metres to manage them, is ludicrous. My brother recently shared some of his calculations with me. He estimates that assessing 100 metres of hedgerow would take him 10 minutes of his time, not including the travel to the site across the farm or recording the data. Admittedly, recording the data has been made a bit easier because we are lucky enough to have fibre broadband on our farm, but that is not the case for many. Managing 100 metres of hedgerow would take approximately 20 minutes. Going back to his calculations, if he valued his time at £50 an hour, he reckons that he would receive just half of what he should be paid. He said:

"The costs far outweigh the payments...SFI rates just do not compensate for the time that is required to do a proper job."

It is a shame that the Government did not include hedgerows in their welcome improved payment rates, which were announced recently at the Oxford farming conference. We all know that farmers are the most qualified and experienced people in this country to manage our hedgerows. However, we cannot take for granted farmers or, indeed, the volunteers in citizen science projects such as the Somerset Hedge Group. We need to increase sustainable farming incentive rates for surveying and maintaining hedgerows and have all digital and data issues ironed out with a dedicated support team.

[Sarah Dyke]

Our hard-working farmers are going through some of the toughest times of their lives. Yes, we need legal protections for our network of hedgerows, but we also need appropriate, accessible and worthwhile accompanying incentives to actively support our farmers to preserve hedgerows, thus contributing to landscape conservation, biodiversity and sustainable agriculture.

10.5 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this morning, Ms Elliott. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke), who made a fantastic speech, and others who have spoken commendably in the debate so far, especially the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby).

There is feverish political speculation at the moment, with all sorts of discussions about demographics, electoral movements, and blocs in the countryside or around the country. There is talk of how people will vote—red wall, blue wall—but we are very much focused on the dry stone wall where we come from. That is a particular Lib Dem demographic.

I am grateful to my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who raised an important point. People think about the lakes, the dales and Cumbria and they think of dry stone walls. Those walls are not all in open landscape. Many are historical, many are ancient and many are in the midst of what was once pasture but is now quite mature woodland. There is an awful lot of that around the Kent estuary near where I live, for example. Huge biodiversity benefits come from dry stone walls and they are also incredibly important to our cultural heritage, as has already been said. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that we still have miles and miles of hedgerows in Cumbria, which are of enormous significance.

I have been involved in judging hedge laying competitions at Arnside and Stainton, where I assure you, Ms Elliott, that I was guided by people who actually knew what they were talking about, as well as considering just what seemed nice to me. Also, the Westmorland County Showground regularly has national and international hedge laying competitions, so it is a major part of our culture, as well as being part of the agricultural skillset that it is so important we protect, export and maintain.

There can be no doubt that hedgerows are of enormous significance to our country and our nature. They are teeming with life and are vital. I will focus most of my words on hedgerows in agricultural areas. As the hon. Member for Copeland said, 70% of England is agricultural, so the land on which we farm will be a huge part of protecting, maintaining and expanding our hedgerow network. It is also worth bearing in mind, however, the importance of residential hedgerows in built estates, in people's gardens, and in public spaces, parkland and so on. We need to make sure that we have planning laws and regulations that support and promote those, and I might come on to that subject if I have time towards the end of my relatively few words.

If we think about the scale and size of Britain's hedgerows—there are more than half a million miles—they would stretch to the moon and back. They are of great

significance, bearing enormous biodiversity. They are an important wildlife habitat in their own right and the most widespread semi-natural habitat in the UK. They support a large diversity of flora and fauna and make a great shelter for animals and flowers. Their berries and nuts are a vital source for what are believed to be 1,500 different species of invertebrates in the UK that have their homes in our hedgerows. I think of the Government's biodiversity action plan and the 130 species that are closely associated with hedges, including lichens, fungi and reptiles. Many more use those structures for food and shelter, at least during some point of their life cycle. Bank voles, harvest mice and hedgehogs all nest and feed in hedgerows, alongside birds that include blue tits, yellowhammers and whitethroats, while bats use them as what we might call "commuter routes". We talk about nature corridors—they are so important.

There are many things we can say, and I will say, about the transition to the new ELM schemes. For those who have been able to get into them, there is the prospect of local nature recovery. Many farmers and landowners are involved in the project from Kendal to Penrith, which will potentially provide a continuous corridor, much of which is based upon the extension and maintenance of hedgerows. It will bring huge benefit to our biodiversity, by tackling climate change, and by providing an improved home for nature. Let us be honest, they are important boundary structures and really effective for efficient land use.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome set out so well, the loss of cross-compliance is really key. Like a lot of the current transition, a foreseeable mistake has been made. Alongside all sorts of other legal obligations, until last year every single one of the 85,000 farmers who receive basic payment also had an obligation through cross-compliance to maintain their hedgerows and do other environmental goods. I am not defending the direct payment schemes, but I will push back a little against those who said they were universally awful. They were not without environmental gain, and that was achieved through cross-compliance. I support the transition, but I think it is being done badly.

Under cross-compliance, 85,000 people were obliged to maintain their hedgerows, and 5% of them would have received an inspection from the Rural Payments Agency every year—so farmers knew it was coming. Now, barely 10% of people are in SFI. Of the 1,100 farmers in my constituency, fewer than 100 are in SFI schemes, and a minority of those will be in hedgerow options. As my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome set out very well, they are laudable and good, but they are also impractical, bureaucratic, and do not replace the money that has been lost. It is good that the options provided through countryside stewardship are there, but they will only be available to a very small minority of farmers, and a very small minority of Britain's current and potential hedgerows. We are losing a lot to gain a little.

I do praise the Minister when it comes to the development and granting through Natural England of the Kendal to Penrith countryside corridor—that is a really great thing. For every one of those, however, I can name several that got turned down. The Lynster Farmers' Group in Meathop and Ulpha bid for a scheme to protect their hedgerows from the totally avoidable flooding caused by the failure in managing the River Winster to

follow its proper channel out into Morecambe bay. I would really love the Minister to look again at that, to ensure those farmers can protect their wildlife, both flora and fauna, including hedgerows.

The hedgerow options and the approach to hedgerows through the ELM scheme transition is emblematic of lots of other aspects of this transition. While they are laudable and good, they are not remotely capable of replacing a fraction of the income that farmers are losing. I was with farmers in Appleby recently. The least badly affected of them reckoned that through the various ELM schemes he could replace 60% of what he had lost. The average figure for which farmers thought they could replace what they had lost through the transition was less than 10%.

What do those farmers end up doing? Well, they go bust or their mental health ends up in a terrible, terrible state. I am truly frightened for the state of the mental health of many of the farmers in my communities—really frightened. This is not helping at all. The pressure will also lead them to make poorer decisions. If someone sees their income receding, what do they do? What do they have to intensify? They may feel against all their better instincts that they have to rip out hedges in order to maximise short-term value from the land, which I fear is happening. While these are laudable schemes, they are not even remotely attractive enough to draw people into them. They are bureaucratic and do not replace the genuine income that has been foregone, and so people are voting with their feet—like I say, 10% are in SFI. Meanwhile, my upland livestock farmers have lost 41% of their income under the Government in this Parliament.

What are farmers? Principally, they are food producers and stewards of the countryside, and they are proud to do both those things. They do not need beating over the head or to be given huge wads of cash to do things that are instinctive to them. It is really important in all of this that we do not allow people to demonise our farmers, who are doing their best with what they are given—but they are being given far too little.

I have a few words to say against those who may well be “more” culprits—our developers, who will always ask for more lax planning rules to allow them to do whatever they want. I am the opposite of a nimby, but the evidence in the lakes and the dales is that if we are really prescriptive in planning law and say what developers can and cannot do when it comes to affordable homes, zero-carbon homes and protecting and extending nature, they will grumble for a bit, but then realise that that is the only game in town, and they either build or do not build. If the Government were to give to local councils, and not just national parks, the power to be far more prescriptive about protecting and extending hedgerows, local authorities would have the power to do that.

What are the options? We can give planners and local authorities those powers, and we can extend legal protections, as the hon. Member for North Devon rightly said, but let us also think carefully about whether in the short term we need to roll over cross-compliance, so we do not lose all the good that people have done over the past few decades for the sake of a mismatched and botched transition. Ultimately, we are seeing something that is an unintended but totally foreseeable consequence of the transition. The Government can do things now to protect our hedgerows, and I pray that they will.

10.16 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Elliott, and to listen to all the contributions this morning. It has occasionally felt like a DEFRA Front-Bench speakers’ reunion, but I have enjoyed all the speeches, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who helpfully contributed to Labour’s internal discussions. I can assure him that we will always be nature-positive in our approaches.

I also listened with great interest to other hon. Members’ speeches, particularly the last one. I can assure the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that whether it is the blue wall, the red wall or a dry stone wall, Labour’s ambitions are boundless now. I listened very carefully to what he was saying about the issues around the environmental land management scheme, and I found myself very much in agreement with a lot of what he said. I also enjoyed the speeches from the hon. Members for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke).

Most of all, I enjoyed the introduction from the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). Before the debate started, I was slightly intrigued because I always wonder what it is that motivates hon. Members to bring a debate to Westminster Hall. I was wondering which of the proverbial five tribes of the Conservative party the hon. Lady sits in. I always thought of her as belonging to the more beleaguered, sensible part of the Conservative party—I am sure that that is where she sits. I was hoping that probably means the Minister has something exciting to tell us at the end of this debate—that she will produce a proverbial rabbit out of the hedgerow, and explain how she is going to deal with what is not at all a good news story for the Government, for the reasons that have been explained.

I thought that, in her normal powerful manner, but gently, the hon. Member for North Devon introduced a considerable range of quite pertinent criticisms of the Government’s record. I will go back and read her speech closely, and hon. Members may find me echoing some of those criticisms in addition to my own.

I welcome the chance for us to discuss a way forward on the agricultural transition that enshrines the necessary protection required for hedgerows, ensuring that they continue to play their vital role in our natural environment. As we have heard, hedgerows are much more than just markers that neatly divide up our countryside and farmlands. They are highways along which wildlife of all shapes and sizes flow, and home to insects that thrive on the pests that are sometimes fond of farmers’ crops. Crucially, they also store carbon and work as a natural means of reducing the risk of flooding.

Experts from the Woodland Trust tell us that two activities are particularly bad for the health and resilience of hedgerows: first, the spreading of agricultural chemicals up to the foot of the hedges; and secondly, poorly timed and over-zealous cutting—already mentioned in the debate—that physically damages the hedges and their ability to play their role as a habitat at crucial times of the year.

We have heard about the cross-compliance rules. I remember the discussions that took place during the passage of the Agriculture Act 2020, when some of us

[Daniel Zeichner]

talked at length about good agricultural and environmental conditions, the standards of GAECs, and the fact that there were good standards under the old basic payment scheme mechanism. We all have our criticisms of those schemes, but as has already been explained, they did at least produce a structure and a system for 85,000 producers. That scheme ensured that land managers kept a buffer strip within two metres of their hedges and banned the use of pesticides in those spaces. To protect the crucial nesting period, land managers were also prohibited from cutting hedges for six months of the year, between March and August.

None of what we have heard comes as a surprise. We were talking about this during the passage of the Agriculture Act 2020 some four or five years ago; the Government knew the cross-compliance rules would come to an end on 1 January this year. I have regularly reminded both the current Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), and his predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), of these points and of the benefits of cross-compliance. Despite knowing the potential consequences, the Government have dithered, delayed and failed to act. Perhaps the first thing that the Minister can do today is explain why we find ourselves in this situation.

The consultation was carried out by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs last year, but the Department has still not responded. We were told the response is to come early in 2024. Well, here we are—early in 2024. Will the Minister tell us when we are going to get that response? Frankly, it is only a response to a consultation. With no cross-compliance rules, protection for hedgerows is now substantially weakened. Does the Minister accept that point? Can she make an assessment of how much damage is likely to be done between now and when new rules are put in place? Because, although I entirely agree with the previous comments and do not expect farmers to be abusing the situation, some can, and I fear some will. What assessment has been made of the damage that will be caused by the Government's negligence?

We are left with the Hedgerow Regulations 1997, which do offer some protection but only to “important” hedges. Sadly, the definition of “important” is so narrow that it rules out many hedgerows. The soonest we can hope to have greater protection—unless the Minister tells us something in this debate—is summer this year; that is not good enough. If the Government choose to introduce primary legislation to protect hedgerows, as some have suggested, we may have to wait until 2025 before protection is restored.

Of course, it is not just hedgerows. Cross-compliance rules on minimum soil cover, prevention of soil erosion and pesticide-free green cover near watercourses have all fallen by the wayside. History tells us that, without those protections, it is harder for us to meet legally binding targets on carbon and nature. Last week's report from the environment watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, shows that the Government are already failing to meet almost all their environmental and nature goals. They should hang their head in shame at that report. We can scarcely afford to make the situation worse. It is interesting that the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned the Stacey review of some years ago;

that was another example of things being promised and not delivered. I found myself thinking during her speech that there have been lots of targets—targets are all very worthy, but it is about delivery and action and measuring what is actually going on.

If the decline in species abundance is to be halted, the contribution made by hedgerows will be necessary. They also play a role in meeting the carbon goals that the environmental watchdog warns are in danger of being missed. Not only are they crucial stores of carbon in themselves but, as evidenced in research from the University of Leeds, the soil beneath hedgerows works as a sponge for carbon, capturing an average of 30% more carbon than intensively managed grassland parcels.

Two-metre buffer strips around hedges, which were protected by those cross-compliance rules, are also important to nature restoration. The strips host many threatened species and ensure the resilience of hedgerows. They act as corridors in what can often be inhospitable terrain for invertebrates and mammals. Significantly, buffer zones can also help stop the movement of pesticide and fertiliser away from their intended place of use and reduce run-off into our water system. Given that the Government have once again reneged on promises on neonicotinoids this year, that remains an important issue.

This is a sorry saga. The Government must act swiftly to provide clarity to the sector in the interests of land managers and nature. The first step should be finally to publish the consultation response on the future of hedgerow regulation. It is not good enough that we have yet to see it, over six months after it began. Legislation should also be brought forward at the earliest opportunity to, at a minimum, restore the protection that hedgerows enjoyed under cross-compliance rules. With support from wide across the sector for these measures, including voices such as the NFU and the Wildlife Trust, I urge the Government to move quickly on this issue. Every day without regulation risks more damage being done to these natural marvels.

10.24 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair for this fascinating debate, Ms Elliott.

We have our differences, but here we are obviously all true hedgerow lovers, having all got up to get here for the 9.30 am debate on hedgerows. All of us present can be proud of the hedgerows in our area, as well as our stone walls and the other beautiful and iconic features of our landscapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this important debate. She is passionate about hedges and has done a great deal of work with the CPRE, whose information I have read; I know that a number of other Members present are also hedgerow champions with the CPRE. Of course, I also thank the former nature Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for all she has done on hedgerows. She has shared a great deal of knowledge with us this morning.

I grew up on a Somerset farm, and hedgerows are something that was ingrained in me, which is why I have been working very hard in the Department to ensure that we have the full understanding of hedgerows. We have great officials working on this as well; the Department does recognise the importance of this issue.

The farm I grew up on was mixed livestock: we had dairy and arable rotations and so forth. My father, Michael Pow, who very sadly died just over a year ago, was a great planter of hedgerows. Wherever he went out in the Land Rover—I was very often with him, because we were constantly moving cattle from field to field—he would carry bits of baler string, which he would put round trees and hedges to mark them so that the hedge cutter left them and they would not get cut. We now have wonderful standard trees growing out of the hedges on the farm. My father was way ahead of his time in that he cut the hedges only every other year, to leave one side to grow, which is what we are advising farmers to do now, decades on! When I go home to the farm, it is just a burgeoning froth of blossom of hawthorn, as someone mentioned, blackthorn and all the other wonderful blossoms. The National Trust runs a wonderful occasion—I do not know whether it is a day or a week—to recognise blossoms in the hedgerows. They are so valuable to wildlife.

Members really do not have to tell me how important hedgerows are, because I absolutely recognise that. The Government recognise that too. Many colleagues have mentioned the benefits we get from hedges: they provide habitats and wildlife corridors; they are great for holding the soil and stopping water run-off; they are wonderful habitats for our pollinators to shelter and hibernate in; and of course they sequester carbon. Interestingly, hedgerows were not planted for those reasons; started off as boundaries to keep our livestock in, but they have morphed into this wonderful feature that brings so many more benefits. They are so important to our landscape. They have also become important as we adapt to climate change, because they are part of our net zero commitment. They store carbon, and they are really valuable for that.

It is for all those compelling reasons that our environment improvement plan is supporting farmers to create and restore 30,000 miles of hedgerows by 2037, and 45,000 miles by 2050. That will enable all of those multiple benefits to be multiplied even more. We have calculated how much carbon can be sequestered by all those hedges, and we have the figure for 2037. It is interesting that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon mentioned that her own Liberal Democrat council has failed its net zero target on hedges. It should probably look to its hedges and to see what it could do to get there. My hon. Friend is right: hedges can make a real difference on that agenda.

I will run through the strong legal protections for hedges that we have in law already. The Hedgerows Regulations 1997 prohibit the removal of most countryside hedgerows, or parts of them, without first seeking approval from the local planning authority. Important hedgerows with wildlife, landscape, historical or archaeological value cannot and must not be removed, and local authorities have powers to act should anybody break the law. Also, all wild birds, their eggs and their nests are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which prohibits killing, injuring or taking wild birds or taking or damaging their eggs and nests. Taken together, those legal protections safeguard most countryside hedgerows and farmland birds.

However, as we leave the EU's common agricultural policy and move to our new and, I would say, better system for paying for environmental benefits, we have considered whether we need additional protections to

manage hedgerows in law. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon mentioned, we ran a consultation last summer asking stakeholders how best to protect hedgerows through effective, proportionate regulation as we leave behind the EU's cross-compliance system, with which the Labour party is still very much aligned. The response to that consultation should not be a surprise to anybody here, because it showed how much members of the public and farmers share our love for English hedgerows. We received almost 9,000 responses—a huge amount. It will be published imminently—the shadow Minister asked about that—but the information in it has already been looked at and used to inform the recent rise in SFI payments.

We are analysing all the data. There was overwhelming support from farmers and non-farmers alike for maintaining our legal protections. The support and enthusiasm for good hedgerow management shown in the responses from the farming community—from both individual farmers and the industry—show how much hedgerows are valued.

We have to trust farmers to do the right thing. There have been one or two damning comments today about farmers wanting to rip out hedgerows, spray all over them or plough right up to them, should there be a tiny window in which the protections are slightly different from what they were under the EU system. I live among farmers; that is how I grew up, and my husband was an agricultural auctioneer. We have to trust them. As has been said, they are the custodians of the countryside. It is disingenuous to suggest that the farming community will go out and spray, or plough right up to, hedgerows after they have created these wonderful buffers with burgeoning wildlife.

Tim Farron: The Minister is talking to a straw man. I do not think anybody here has said what she suggests. A number of us have said that if farmers are pushed into a situation where they have no other source of income, they will make decisions that they do not want to, but nobody has said any of the things that she mentioned.

Rebecca Pow: We have to be careful. There is a suggestion that what I said might happen if there is a gap. I certainly got that impression from one or two comments, but that may not be how the hon. Gentleman understood them, and his point is on the record.

We recognise the importance of the legal protections in place to prevent any of the concerns that I outlined. We do not want any of those things to happen. Those concerns come from both stakeholders and farmers. I want to make it very clear that, as a result, we will seek to regulate to maintain hedgerow protections as a matter of priority, when parliamentary time allows. That is the rabbit that I am pulling out of the hat today. I hope that will be welcome news, because I think we all agree that this is a priority. We want to make sure that regulation is fair and proportionate to farmers. That has been very clear in all our consultations. We want to get the support of farmers, and we want them to comply with the law where they have to; but we want to work with them, not against them.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) mentioned that advice is important. Advice is critical, so that farmers know what they have to do.

[Rebecca Pow]

There must be guidance that ensures that they can protect hedgerows, and we should reserve sanctions for the most serious offences. On many occasions when I have been out and about, particularly in farming areas and protected landscapes where designated advisers were working with farmers, I have seen how useful it is for farmers to have someone to talk to. I met an adviser recently in the Kent downs area of outstanding natural beauty—now called a national landscape—who was an ecologist. She said that meeting and chatting with farmers was the best way to encourage them to sign up to the levels and different options in the SFI. It can seem a bit scary, or feel like there is too much paperwork, but we have simplified the whole scheme; we have listened to our farmers on that point.

There was a bit of negativity from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome about the increased payment levels that we have just given for hedgerows. I thought she might have welcomed that. Although they have all gone up, we need to remember that farmers can apply for lots of different levels. It is not just one sum; they can get a sum for recording the hedgerow, a sum for managing it and so on—there are various amounts that will add up, given all the other things they can apply for in the SFI. The idea is that cumulatively the scheme will be attractive; we really want farmers to understand that and apply.

Daniel Zeichner: I loved the Minister's reference to "burgeoning froth". I think it could be her epitaph, frankly, because this is burgeoning froth. Will she tell us how many people, of the 80,000-plus who were protected through cross-compliance, have picked up on SFI and are receiving it as we speak?

Rebecca Pow: That is a good point. First, let us look at what is happening in our other schemes; this is not just about SFI. We have seen a huge appetite for our countryside stewardship schemes. There are now 49,000 miles of hedgerow that have one or both sides managed under the countryside stewardship or environmental stewardship options; and farmers have already signed up for 2,300 agreements, including 5,474 hedgerow actions.

Lots of farmers have opted to do a number of actions through the SFI. Remember that this is a new scheme; farmers are rolling off their countryside stewardship schemes on to the new scheme, which is expanding every day. The best thing to do is to be positive and encouraging, rather than negative and damning. I think the former nature Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland, would agree that we need to be positive about what is going on. This is a new, positive scheme. Please encourage farmers to apply for it, because the money and the options are there. We want our farmers and land managers to make the most of their hedgerows, and we support them in taking actions such as assessing and recording hedgerow condition, rotational cutting, and even leaving some hedgerows uncut altogether, which is obviously great for our nature and wildlife, and for those frothing, burgeoning hedgerows full of blackthorn and hawthorn. As I have said, farmers and land managers created or restored 8,450 miles of hedgerow through countryside stewardship capital grants, which is a great addition to our reaching our targets.

I have a few minutes left to cover some other points. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) made a good point about skills. We obviously need skills; we are aware of that and have a green jobs taskforce, with which I am involved. Through a lot of our tree strategy and action plan to plant trees, we have a big focus on skills, training and apprenticeships, including Forestry Commission apprenticeships; new funding of £4.5 million from the nature for climate fund was put towards this issue. Last year, 1,000 people undertook training in skills connected with trees, which inevitably includes skills connected with hedgerows. That is really ramping up. Those people will be out there, working together, and able to help and advise on schemes.

Trudy Harrison: There has been an awful lot of good discussion about the importance of farming, but could I draw the Minister's attention to the importance of encouraging gardeners? There are 30 million or so gardens and gardeners in the country already bringing benefits, but they could do even more to plant and protect hedgerows in those gardens. She recently visited RHS Wisley, which I have also visited. I was blown away by the knowledge of Professor Alistair Griffiths there, who talked about the physical and mental benefits of horticulture. I would also like to draw attention to the work of the Horticultural Trades Association and the all-party parliamentary group on gardening and horticulture in this area.

Rebecca Pow: That gives me a great opportunity to talk about gardening; I used to be a gardening presenter and journalist. In my garden, I garden for wildlife. My hon. Friend makes such a good point. Our gardens in this country equate to a million hectares of land. Think how important that is as a wildlife habitat. I urge everyone to look after nature in their gardens and plant those trees. They should also take part in the big garden birdwatch, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon.

The shadow Minister was somewhat damning about nature, but we have a plan for nature. I cannot work out what Labour's plan for nature would be. It is all very well to keep saying that Labour will integrate its approach, but we do not know where its £28 billion, which keeps being bandied about, is coming from. We have a plan, which started with the Environment Act 2021 and the targets set in it, and includes the environmental improvement plan, which has been so well referenced by colleagues. That is a plan with a framework and targets. Without targets, there is nothing to aim at. The targets inform the policies.

Intense work continues at DEFRA on the biodiversity targets. We have to gather all the evidence on insects, birds and plants. That is an ongoing enormous task that is ever-changing, but we are doing that, day in, day out, to inform our policies. Where we need to tweak policies—for example, if we need to up the SFI payments for a certain sector that is not delivering enough for nature while also producing food—we will be able to do so. That is the beauty of this system. Nobody else has a system like this; it is globally leading. It is very complicated, because it involves nature and is ever-changing. It is not as easy as, for example, dealing with emissions from industry. A bit of credit for that would be welcomed. People out there need to understand that we are on the

side of nature, and we genuinely think we could hit the target of halting the decline of species, if we got everything lined up in the right place, and had the positivity of parliamentarians behind us.

There was a quick reference to Dame Glenys Stacey's report. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon that since that review, our work on regulation has responded to many challenges. There has been a huge amount of work on how we make farming regulation clearer, fairer and more effective—issues to which she referred. The Government have not published a formal response to Dame Glenys's report. However, in both the agricultural transition plan published in 2020 and the recent update published this month, we outline our vision for a regulatory system that helps the vast majority of farmers who want to and try to do the right thing, and supports them when things go wrong.

We have already made a lot of improvements to the regulatory system—improvements that farmers genuinely wanted. We have had a lot of engagement with farmers, stakeholders and the National Farmers Union in particular. The improvements include: reducing unfair penalties for farmers' minor errors, which is something that annoyed them about the CAP system—I am sure that the shadow Minister would agree; removing duplication of standards to make the system clearer for farmers; reducing administrative burdens and paperwork; and implementing a more preventive approach to monitoring and enforcement.

There is a huge amount of synergy in the room on the issue of hedgerows, which I think we all agree are very important. The Government are committed to introducing protections for hedgerows when parliamentary time permits. For me, they are a priority. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon, who is a great champion for hedgerows and will remain so.

10.45 am

Selaine Saxby: It has been a privilege to have you in the Chair today, Ms Elliott. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for his concern about the family disputes on our side of the House, and I reassure him that the Conservative Environment Network acts as an umbrella organisation and occasional mediator. It is the largest caucus in this place, and supports the party of rural Britain and the first Government ever to legislate to protect our environment.

I look forward to supporting new legal protections for hedgerows, and thank the Minister for pulling that rabbit out of the hedgerow this morning. I hope that the consultation response is imminent, which should be sooner than “shortly”. I also hope, for all the hedgerow heroes who care so much, that both those events will come to pass before the hawthorn and blackthorn blossom emerges.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered legal protections for hedgerows.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.

Books in Primary Schools

11 am

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): I will call Gill Furniss to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the availability of books in primary schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Elliott. I am delighted to have this time to talk about books, after raising this issue many times since entering Parliament and serving as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for libraries, information and knowledge.

If it were not for books I would not be standing here now. As a child, I started going to libraries and I have never stopped. In fact, I spent so much time in libraries that I ended up working in not just one but several over the years, from public libraries to academic libraries. I eventually earned my degree in information and library studies as a mature student. Books changed my life. I know that they have the potential to change the lives of millions of children, too.

As a former librarian, I have had the privilege of welcoming countless children through the doors of my local library, watching as they were whisked away to far-flung places, captivated by the magic of words. Children are whisked away to the land of Shakespeare, Dickens, the Brontës and many others. This is a country whose identity is steeped in story, which is why I find it so shocking that there is no statutory requirement for schools to have any library facilities. It is no wonder that one in six adults in the country have very low levels of literacy, rising to one in three in some of the poorest communities. I fear that those statistics could be even bleaker in future.

Research conducted by the National Literacy Trust found that 56% of eight to 18-year-olds do not enjoy reading in their free time—the lowest level since surveys began in 2005. More than ever, books are fighting phones and video game consoles for relevance at home. Although those have their place, it is vital that we do everything in our power to help establish a love of reading during children's formative years.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that libraries in primary schools are more important in areas of deprivation than in areas of affluence? It is essential that we listen to teachers in primary schools so that we know whether a child has not been spoken to and not been read to. If that is the case, they start at a terrible disadvantage, which can impact the rest of their lives. I support her debate and her ambitions 100%.

Gill Furniss: My hon. Friend is correct. It is crucial that people in poorer communities have access to public libraries.

Mr Sheerman: In Sunderland and Huddersfield, for example.

Gill Furniss: Yes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing a debate on an issue of great importance. I know that the Minister is not responsible for Northern Ireland, but it is an issue that I can support the hon. Lady on, because in Northern Ireland we have the same problem. Does she agree that it is unacceptable that we have teachers perusing charity shops at the weekend to scrape together lending libraries for children whose parents cannot afford books? I agree with the research that shows that the amount of time that children spend reading independently is the best predictor of their overall literacy and language achievement. It helps children to build fluency and become self-reliant readers. This debate is so important. Well done to the hon. Lady.

Gill Furniss: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I thank him for his intervention.

Last week, led by Sir Michael Morpurgo, the current and former children's laureates united to call for legislation to make it a legal requirement for all schools in Britain to have libraries. Some may question that as a priority and deride it as something that would be nice to have, especially during these difficult economic times, but the benefits of reading are innumerable, and support across the country for such a policy is overwhelming.

Eighty-six per cent. of parents said that they would support making it a legal requirement for every primary school in the country to have a designated school library on site—and for good reason. Studies from the OECD show that reading for pleasure has a more profound impact on a child's academic success than their socioeconomic background, while research by Farshore into the impacts of daily story time in primary schools found that 65% of boys and 76% of girls agree that story time makes them feel calmer. Those children went on to develop increased enthusiasm and motivation to read and, on average, their reading age improved at twice the expected rate over the period of the study.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important speech about an issue that is close to my heart. What she is saying is clearly demonstrated by an example in my constituency. Skerne Park Academy had a brand new library installed and started a reading lobster programme whereby children who said that they had nobody to read to were given a plush toy in the shape of a lobster so that they could have a reading partner. Reading has taken off there, and the children are doing really well.

I would like to follow up on the point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). My love of books grew from visiting charity shops and second-hand bookshops, because their prices are accessible with pocket money. I do not think there is anything wrong with people visiting second-hand bookshops. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Gill Furniss: I am not quite sure about that. I think it is nice to have a new book, if possible. All children should be treated as equals and not have to show that they maybe do not have as much money as others. I will dwell on that point, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Children are not the only ones to benefit from the impacts of daily story time: 91% of teachers said that they want to continue with daily story time, and 88% would

like it to be mandated in the curriculum to help mitigate the guilt of coming away from the statutory curriculum requirements to spend time reading stories.

It is clear from multiple academic studies and reports that a love of books can help to form the bedrock for a better life. However, we are in the midst of a national reading crisis. That crisis is compounded by the fact that one in seven state primary schools in this country do not have a library. In the most disadvantaged communities, that number rises to one in four. We must do more to help get books into the hands of children. Ensuring that no child is left behind when it comes to reading is worth every penny; it is an investment in their future and our country's future. However, there has been little growth in spending per pupil over the last 14 years. In fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted that the purchasing power of school budgets will be around 3% lower in 2024-25 than it was in 2010.

Schools have a great deal of autonomy when it comes to allocating their budget and, in recent years, they have been forced—as so many people across the country have—to make difficult financial decisions. When they are faced with buildings plagued by leaks, cold and reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, who can blame headteachers and governors for making extraordinarily difficult decisions about how they spend their budget? The lack of prioritisation of books means that two thirds of primary schools in the UK are without a designated library budget. When parents were polled, however, the library was one of the most important facilities that they wanted their children to have access to, second only to the playground.

We must remember that there is no guarantee that pupils who do not have access to books in school have access to books at home. A lack of provision in primary schools will simply exacerbate deep-rooted inequalities. We can provide the books that will help to create a generation of readers, but simply making books available does not guarantee that they will be read. Just as important as ensuring that we have fully stocked libraries in our primary schools is having the library staff. They are often overlooked, but they are vital for ensuring that the library is a welcoming and engaging space.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Lady may remember the Education Committee's winter reports on the importance of early literacy from the time that I chaired the Committee. A key thing to come out of one of those reports was the programme of Sure Start centres for children. Is it about time we went back to that, so that every community has Sure Start centres and community centres again? They were champions for reading at school.

Gill Furniss: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It would be good to see again the scope of what Labour provided in its last term.

Library staff encourage new readers and put programmes in place to ensure that reading is for pleasure, not just for study. However, a study by Great School Libraries found that only 41% of schools in the UK with a designated library area had library staff, down from 54% in 2019. We need to reverse the trends in childhood reading by ensuring that schools have well-stocked, well-staffed libraries.

We need to empower children by letting them choose what they want to read and ensuring that they have a wide variety of genres to choose from. We need to allow

teachers the ability to ringfence time so that all primary school children can enjoy reading for pleasure. The gift of reading is one of the most beautiful things that we can impart to the next generation. We need to ensure that primary schools are properly equipped to do so.

11.10 am

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): It is a pleasure, once again, to see you in the Chair, Ms Elliott. It is nice to be in a Westminster Hall debate in which we all overwhelmingly agree. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing the debate, and it is good to have others taking part. We have particularly benefited from hearing about the hon. Lady's experience. She mentioned her early childhood experience as a user of libraries, and then her experiences throughout her life as an employee, a professional and an academic in the library service.

The hon. Lady said that we should improve children's access to books. The Government wholeheartedly agree. Reading is the cornerstone of a brilliant education, an important part of growing up and adult life, and a core focus of this Government. She talked about being in competition with video games, consoles, phones and tablets. In the old times, we might have said that television was top of that list. There are good arguments and practical, useful roles for all those pieces of electronica, but there is nothing quite like a book for the physical, mental and emotional experience.

Mr Sheerman: Does the Minister agree that one of the real problems we all have—I have it in Huddersfield; everyone has it in their constituency—is early stimulation? We see so many parents now pushing their small child in a pushchair, with their headphones on; they are not talking to the child. That early learning of the language, then reading at night and taking them to the library to get their books is crucial, is it not? That is why this debate is so important.

Damian Hinds: What can I say? The hon. Gentleman is ahead of me, and not for the first time. I do not think he has seen my handwritten notes, but if he had, he would know that they say, "It starts with being read to." I remember previous debates we have had in this Chamber, particularly with our former colleague Baron Field, who was the right hon. Member for Birkenhead. For example, we used to talk about how those early experiences of being read to are so important, not only because of the reading experience, but because it is quite difficult to read to a very young child without holding them, and that early attachment is part of it.

We have a focus these days on the home learning environment, and some of the ways we can make everyday experiences—little moments—matter. Everyday experiences at a bus stop, on a train or in a supermarket are all part of that early literacy experience. Ideally there should be books at home, and I pay tribute to some of the organisations that have tried to make that more widespread, particularly in disadvantaged communities or for people on lower incomes.

Of course, there should also be books at school. School should be the great leveller. I have visited a lot of schools in my time. Like the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), I am a former member of the Education Committee. I am now and have been previously an Education Minister, and, like all of us, I am a Member

of Parliament. In those three roles, I have visited a lot of schools. I am always struck by the prominence that schools give to books and reading. They are an important part of school life, and that is true for reading time in school and for children taking books home to enjoy them there.

All pupils deserve to be taught a knowledge-rich curriculum that promotes extensive reading both in and out of school, and reading is a principal way to acquire knowledge. The texts that our young people read play a big part in their wider development, too, by broadening their horizons and introducing new ideas and perspectives.

We have strengthened the national curriculum to focus on developing reading. To encourage the development of a lifelong love of literature, we are requiring pupils to study a range of books, poems and plays. The national curriculum also promotes reading for pleasure, as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough rightly says, with evidence showing that that is more important for children's educational development than even their parents' level of education.

Charities such as BookTrust and the National Literacy Trust work tirelessly to raise the profile of reading for pleasure, and I thank them for their work. Of course, such organisations also do important work to raise awareness of the vital role of libraries, and we recognise the particular importance of libraries in increasing children's access to books and promoting reading for pleasure, whether in school or in the community library. I am grateful to the organisations and authors who are currently shining a light on the difference that libraries can make, such as Julia Donaldson, Michael Morpurgo, Philip Pullman, Cressida Cowell and others.

I also recognise the important work undertaken by a range of organisations to promote the work of libraries to children, families and schools. For example, Schools Library Services assists schools with everything from developing whole libraries to book stocks and staff training, and the Reading Agency's summer reading challenge, which I think many MPs also take part in directly or indirectly, motivates more than 700,000 children of all abilities to read for enjoyment over the summer holidays through their local library. It is for individual schools to decide how best to provide and maintain a library service for their pupils, including whether to employ a qualified librarian. Our reading framework provides guidance on that, including how best to engage children with the books that are available in school.

Public libraries have a strong offer to support children's development as readers beyond school, not just through books and resources, but through events such as Rhymetimes. The experience of visiting a public library these days is quite different from when we were children: there is so much more going on, and it is much more inclusive and welcoming.

Gill Furniss: Does the Minister agree that cuts to public services mean that there is less access to public libraries? Many have closed, and community libraries, which adults in particular used to rely on, are no longer accessible.

Damian Hinds: I accept that there have been strains on public finances. The origins of those are well known: when the Government came in in 2010, there was a recurring annual public deficit of £155 billion, which is £5,500 for every household in the country. That meant

[*Damian Hinds*]

that difficult decisions had to be made over time, but libraries remain an essential part of the fabric of our country. There are statutory requirements around libraries for upper-tier local authorities, and there were 2,892 static libraries in England at the last count. That does not include mobile libraries, of which there is not a similar count.

Peter Gibson: Talking of libraries gives me the perfect opportunity to highlight the fantastic work in Darlington, where our library was threatened with closure by the Labour-controlled local authority. The public were up in arms and they launched a campaign to save it. It is has been put in the hands of independent trustees, has just undergone a multimillion-pound revamp and is now at the heart of our community. Not every community has lost its library.

Damian Hinds: Well, I am pleased to hear of the good ending to that story. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that he does locally and for his championing of these causes.

In 2022, my noble Friend Lord Parkinson, the Minister for Arts and Heritage, appointed my noble Friend Baroness Sanderson to review the public libraries sector to help inform future work. Her review of public libraries was published last week and makes a number of recommendations, which will inform the development by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport of the new Government libraries strategy for England.

For children to develop a love of books, we need to build a strong foundation in reading early on, and the Government have introduced a range of measures to support the effective teaching of reading right from the start.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister is making some very good points, but this is not just about books, surely—it is about what those books are. I had the honour of knowing Benjamin Zephaniah, who opened the John Clare cottage, which I am chairman of, but we are struggling to get children to come out of school into places such as that to learn about poetry and to hear and read poetry. Reading poetry at school has diminished. Trips outside of school have diminished. This is holistic. Would the Minister not agree that many children in our country from more deprived backgrounds are missing out holistically, not just in terms of libraries?

Damian Hinds: I am not quite sure how the hon. Gentleman would or could know that. I certainly know that when I visit schools, I see and hear poetry being read, discussed and being written by children. I agree with him entirely that poetry is a really important part of our literature, and it is a really important thing for children to be exposed to. Like the study of music and learning a musical instrument or to sing, they can find ways to express themselves in ways they did not know existed. It provides ways to understand the world in ways they had not previously appreciated. I agree with him absolutely on the importance of poetry.

I was talking about the earliest years, and in particular the early years foundation stage. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we introduced landmark reforms in the early years foundation stage to improve early years outcomes

for all children, particularly disadvantaged children, in those critical areas that build the foundations of later success, including, importantly, language development and reading. The reforms will ensure that children receive the best start and develop a love of reading from early on. We have invested in early language intervention and are supporting parents through the home learning environment campaign that I mentioned a moment ago, which has been backed by further investment.

To drive up the standard of literacy teaching in primary schools, we have followed the evidence and focused on ensuring high-quality systematic synthetic phonics teaching for every child. Since 2010, we have turbocharged the effective teaching of phonics by placing it at the heart of the curriculum and introducing the phonics screening check in 2012 to assess pupils at the end of year 1. We have incorporated phonics into the teachers' standards, the baseline of expectation for teachers' professional practice. We have placed a greater focus on phonics and the teaching of reading in Ofsted's inspection framework and supported schools to choose good phonics programmes by publishing a list of schemes validated by the Department.

In 2018, we launched the English hubs programme, which is dedicated to improving the teaching of reading. The programme has so far supported over 1,600 schools intensively, with a particular focus on helping children making the slowest progress in reading, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It includes schools in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, which are supported by two of the hubs, Learners First and Saint Wilfrid's. The programme is having a measurable impact. Schools supported intensively as partner schools by English hubs outperform non-partner schools by around seven percentage points when comparing the change in year 1 phonics screening check results between just before the pandemic and 2022.

Mr Sheerman: May I make a final intervention? The Minister's colleague, the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), has rudely left him on his own.

Damian Hinds: Go on. The hon. Gentleman spoils us.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) wants the Government to say that every school must have a library. Is the Minister for that, or is he against it? When is he going to introduce it? He has not got much time before the election.

Damian Hinds: Look: schools have books. I do not know what schools the hon. Member may have visited that do not have books on shelves, but schools have books. Sometimes libraries these days get called "learning resource centres" and all sorts of different things. Sometimes they are laid out in different ways and not necessarily laid out as a set-aside room, but schools have books. We trust schools, headteachers, boards of governors and trustees to know what is right for their school and how to provide best for their children. We want reading and books to be at the heart of that and, in my experience of primary schools in England, that is indeed what happens.

The hubs that I mentioned are about more than phonics. In 2021, we rolled out the "Transforming your school's reading culture" programme, which was developed by hub schools and sector experts to support reading

for pleasure. Reaching around 600 schools last year, English hubs is now into the third year of delivering that research-based continuing professional development programme, which trains teachers in schools across the country to ensure that every pupil develops a love of books.

We know that the hub programme cannot reach every single school, so to ensure that all teachers had clear guidance to support their teaching of reading, we published a reading framework. Updated last year, the framework offers non-statutory guidance on best practice in the teaching of reading from reception to year 9. It recognises the importance of encouraging a love of reading, including the vital importance of pupil choice and access to a wide variety of books. More than 90% of schools have taken our first reading framework published in 2021 and 66%, or two thirds, have made changes to their practice as a result.

Our clear focus on reading is making an impact. England came fourth out of the 43 countries that tested children of the same age in the 2021 progress in international reading literacy study, which is an assessment of the reading abilities of primary-age children across the world. I am grateful to all the primary school teachers, teaching assistants and everybody in our brilliant school system whose commitment to reading and to our children has made that possible. The strongest predictor of PIRLS performance was the year 1 phonics screening check mark, with higher marks predicting higher PIRLS scores.

The Department is committed to improving literacy for all pupils because we cannot knock down barriers for children if we do not teach them to read well. We are determined to drive progress further still and ensure that all children can benefit from high-quality teaching, giving them a solid base on which to build as they progress through school.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

International Human Rights Abuses: UK Response

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK response to international human rights abuses.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I would like to start by thanking the many remarkable charities and non-governmental organisations that are working fiercely to protect the lives of oppressed people around the world. From Amnesty International to the British Red Cross, from Human Rights Watch to Islamic Relief: thank you. This is brave work in the face of terrifying opposition from terrorists, from oppositional Governments and, sadly, sometimes from Members on the Conservative Benches.

Last week in the Chamber, one hon. Member slandered judges in the European Court of Human Rights by calling them

“non-lawyers...guided by non-governmental organisations”—[*Official Report*, 17 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 900],

as though the work of NGOs were a scandal to be associated with. Far from it: on behalf of those on my side of the House, I wanted to begin this debate by paying tribute to them. It is our duty in this place to work towards a world in which their services are no longer needed. Sadly, that is far from being a reality.

This week, we will mark Holocaust Memorial Day in Parliament and in our constituencies. It is a sacred and solemn moment in the year, when we consider the depths of evil that can be reached by people in power. The regime of oppression against the Jewish people, as well as other minority communities, did not begin with the holocaust and it did not end there either. It is apt that, alongside our commemorations, we consider ways in which we can intervene in present-day attacks on human rights, particularly through a proactive, fair and—importantly—consistent foreign policy.

Human rights abuses are far and away the topic on which I receive the most correspondence from my constituents. My constituents rightly care about the most vulnerable people in our town, but also across the world. I have received thousands of emails regarding the Gaza situation alone, so that is where I would like to begin.

We cannot allow the tragedies happening each day and night in the middle east to fade from our mind. While rightfully condemning the brutal attacks launched by Hamas on 7 October that killed and injured thousands of civilians in Israel, our Government were shamefully slow to oppose the counter-attack that followed, in which violations of international law were plain to see. Does the Minister regret his Department's hesitation to intervene when the Israeli Defence Forces were known to be withholding food, water and other essential supplies from desperate Palestinians?

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. I recently put in a question to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make sure that it is constantly

[Mark Logan]

checking on Israel's engagement in the middle east when it comes to Gaza, to ensure that it is complying with international humanitarian law. Does the hon. Member agree that the Foreign Office has to be looking at this matter day in, day out, because many of our constituents across the country care about it deeply?

Sarah Owen: I wholeheartedly agree. I just wish that we had a Foreign Secretary who could actually be questioned by Members of Parliament face to face, rather than what we have currently, particularly in the volatile situation that the world is in.

To follow on from my questions to the Minister, aid routes were being blocked, hospitals were running out of fuel to treat victims, including babies, and requests to open the Rafah crossing were denied—all actions that were in direct contravention of international law. I would be interested to hear what corrections the Government would make to their approach, because it is not too late to learn from their mistakes. I strongly urge the Department to do so. As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, we deserve answers to these serious questions.

What does the Minister have to say about the horrific ITV News footage that shows a man who was waving a white flag in a supposed safe zone being shot and killed? Will Ministers be taking this up with their Israeli counterparts? When?

The human rights of Palestinians have been systematically violated for decades, from the creeping annexations on the west bank, and settler violence, to the 15-year-long blockade, which shows no signs of weakening, but 2023 saw a deadly escalation in violence and a deterioration in the standard of human rights in the region. The latest figures from Amnesty International tell us that some 24,000 Palestinians have now been killed in Gaza. Given that half of Gaza's population are children, we can therefore estimate that well over 10,000 children have been victims of this conflict. This is a gravely conservative estimate.

Much debate has taken place about whether the Israeli Defence Forces' actions have amounted to war crimes. I have made my views clear. We have seen collective punishment and arbitrary arrests. Amnesty reports evidence of illegal airstrikes against churches and refugee camps. UN human rights experts warned in November of signs of genocide. As we speak, South Africa is mounting a case against Israel in the International Court of Justice, which must be heard without prejudice and taken extremely seriously.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech in this very important debate. I find it shocking that when we look at all the facts of what has happened on the ground in Gaza, it seems that almost every rule of international relations and humanitarianism has been broken. A genocide case is being heard at the ICJ, yet our Government cannot even call for a ceasefire. Is that acceptable?

Sarah Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I asked the Minister whether he had regrets about his Department's approach in the earlier stages of the most recent conflict. How long will it take for contrition to

set in over the Government's stubborn refusal to call for a ceasefire on all sides? How long can this Government ignore all the warning signs of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians? When will the self-reflection begin regarding our continued supply of arms to Israel? There is far more within our power to influence Netanyahu's Government than Ministers are currently doing. We must also do what we can to encourage the release of hostages on both sides of this conflict and to lessen the number of Palestinian and Israeli civilian casualties.

Our approach to Israel must be in line with how we treat other countries. If a Government say that they are committed to human rights, they cannot pick and choose which humans' rights we stand up for and which ones we do not. We should not overlook breaches of international law by holding some countries to a lower standard. We have imposed sanctions on Russia and China to address their abuses of human rights, and our Government have also rightly sanctioned suppliers of arms to the Myanmar military; I would appreciate it if the Minister could divulge whether consideration has been given to similar action for the Israeli Government. Consistency should be key in our foreign policy, but consistency is what we are lacking.

I will move on to some other areas that I am sure colleagues agree deserve scrutiny. The people of Jammu and Kashmir continue their painful struggle for statehood. This is another area of international human rights that is close to the hearts of constituents in Luton North.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): With regard to Kashmir, many of my Slough constituents continue to be concerned about the safety, security and wellbeing of their family and friends. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent on both the Indian Government and the Pakistani Government to ensure that the human rights of all Kashmiris are protected, and that there finally needs to be a resolution to this long-standing issue that has the wishes, hopes and aspirations of the Kashmiri people at its very heart?

Sarah Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What happens in Kashmir is felt on the streets of Slough, on the streets of Luton and in all our constituencies.

Since having their independent status revoked by India in 2019, the population of Jammu and Kashmir have experienced an intensive crackdown on their rights. I have heard countless shocking first-hand testimonies of arrests, of abuses and of violence against women and girls. Kashmiris deserve the freedom, safety and self-determination that was promised to them over 75 years ago, as set out in UN resolution 47. Instead, they have been deprived of their rights of expression, their internet access is tightly controlled, they are arbitrarily detained, the Indian police force kills without accountability, and Amnesty reports that it looks likely that there will be demolitions of homes in Jammu and Kashmir. The people of Jammu and Kashmir live in one of the most heavily militarised areas on the planet. Will the Minister please tell us what dialogue, if any, is happening with the Indian authorities to address the abuses of Kashmiris? Why have this Government decided to include Indian-controlled parts of Kashmir on their safe list?

Last year's Supreme Court decision, which recommended the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission, was welcomed by charities and NGOs in the human

rights space, and rightly so. I am sure the Minister agrees that such an initiative could be powerful in bringing peace as well as oversight to the region. Will he commit to promoting it to Ministers' Indian counterparts?

Afzal Khan: My hon. Friend mentioned the horrific human rights abuses that have taken place in Palestine; she talked about Kashmir as well. There is also the brutal genocide against the Rohingya in Myanmar and the abuses against the Uyghurs by the Chinese Government. The one thing that all those examples have in common is that the abuses have largely been committed against Muslims for their Muslimness. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is the worst manifestation of Islamophobia and a prime example of what happens when Governments are not held to account for their demonisation of Muslims?

Sarah Owen: I thank my hon. Friend not just for his intervention, but for the work he does in this space to champion and fight for recognition of a definition of Islamophobia in this country. This is not just about holding our country and our Government to a standard, but about fighting against and tackling state-sanctioned Islamophobia across the world.

Last week, along with many colleagues, I attended an event held by Open Doors UK to highlight areas around the world where Christians are persecuted for their faith. One of the top 10 countries was Nigeria. Last year, the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief published a report warning that treatment of Christians was near-genocidal. Sadly, other minority groups are also at risk of torture and death. One of my own constituents was forced to flee Nigeria after months of being on the run because of his sexuality. After he managed to escape, the Nigerian authorities killed his brother for assisting him, and then they killed another family member when they would not reveal where he was. One would have hoped that his arrival to the UK would bring an end this trauma, but sadly, following his substantive interview, he had to wait more than a year for his asylum claim to be granted.

Another country on the Open Doors watchlist for the persecution of Christians was China. I welcome our country's leading voice in condemning the horrors that the Chinese Government have imposed on the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. We have been persistent in our opposition to the slave labour of the Uyghurs, alongside other atrocities amounting to ethnic cleansing. It was unfortunate that the UK's resolution at the Human Rights Council narrowly failed, but I ask the Minister and his Department to continue their efforts to pursue independent mechanisms to investigate human rights crimes through the HRC.

Jimmy Lai, a British citizen currently on trial under Beijing's national security law, could face life imprisonment for distributing a pro-democracy newspaper. Hong Kong Watch advises that his trial is partly based on the testimony of a witness who underwent torture while imprisoned in mainland China. I join Hong Kong Watch in calling on the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to raise Mr Lai's case and call for his immediate release.

Hongkongers are not safe from the oppressive regime of the Chinese Communist party either at home or abroad. We have Hongkongers seeking safety in the UK, with bounties on their head, who Ministers were reluctant to even meet. Here in the UK, we know of interference in our universities, violence outside embassies

and intimidation of Hongkongers who speak out against Chinese state policies. I know that the Minister will share my view that any infiltration from Chinese state agents in our public institutions and political establishment must be dealt with robustly, but we have a responsibility to protect the safety and rights of private Hongkongers who have made our country their home.

We also have a duty to ensure that proposed changes to our domestic law do not negatively impact our levers of influence. I am deeply concerned that the Government are failing to hear the Uyghur groups' warnings that the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will limit their own campaigns for justice.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I want to raise the case of two of my friends and colleagues in Hong Kong who have been detained for quite a while now. They are members of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, with whom we have worked over the years in different disputes. The first is the chair, Carol Ng Man-ye, a British Airways cabin crew worker we worked with in major disputes out there who founded the British Airways Hong Kong cabin crew union; the other is Lee Cheuk-yan, the general secretary of the confederation. They are both serving time simply for being trade unionists and representing their members. It is important that we ask the Government to maintain the pressure on the Chinese authorities for their release.

Sarah Owen: I wholeheartedly agree. We need to ensure that it is safe for people to speak up for democracy, workers' rights and human rights, and that we continue to voice their struggle when they are voiceless.

This is the tip of the iceberg internationally. If we were to cover the true state of human rights across the globe, we would be here all week, but I want to end closer to home, because we are far from perfect.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there are 14.5 million people living in poverty in the UK. More than 4 million of them are children. It is not just standards of health and living that are failing; basic rights such as the right to protest are being eroded. The Government are seeking to override our own courts, as we have seen with the Rwanda Bill that was voted down in the other place this week. It is not just the Government's action that is weakening our reputation for human rights on the world stage, but their inaction: there has been cross-party condemnation of the Government's weak response to China, and shock at the lack of acknowledgment of human rights abuses in India during trade talks. Tory MPs are even calling for the reinstatement of Donald Trump, the ex-President arrested on charges of plotting to overturn an election result.

We may look from afar at the humanitarian horrors that we see on the screens in our hands, but we must be able to answer the younger and future generations who ask, "What did you do?", and we must not turn a blind eye to the erosion of human rights that is happening in front of our eyes at home. From Luton to Lagos, from Gaza to Kabul, from Kabul to Kashmir, when people know about human rights abuses, they care about them. The peace, stability and safety of all are worth striving for, and we can only do that together.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to speak in the debate. Given the number of people on my list, Members will have seven to eight minutes to speak. I call Debbie Abrahams.

2.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on her absolutely superb speech, which was so broad ranging. It really was fantastic.

I want to focus on human rights abuses in Palestine and Kashmir. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group, and vice-chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group. My focus in both groups has been on human rights and our common dignity and humanity. We are all born free and equal in dignity and rights.

I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories back in 2014, when I was a relatively new MP. Quite frankly, I was absolutely horrified by what I saw and heard: healthcare being withheld from Palestinians, the destruction of Palestinian homes and schools on the west bank, the physical exclusion of Palestinians from their own farmland and the arbitrary application of law. By that, I mean that children who were picked up for throwing stones at cars and soldiers had the full force of an adult criminal justice system thrown at them, and were often detained without trial. It really was quite horrendous and draconian. All those actions are clear contraventions of rights associated with articles of the universal declaration of human rights.

I have campaigned for a two-state solution ever since, including by supporting the work of the Saddleworth Palestine Women's Scholarship Fund, which has funded Palestinian women in Gaza and the west bank through education. We had a presentation from somebody from the fund who visited Gaza in the summer to see how the women we had been supporting were doing. Back in November, she reported that, unfortunately, a number of the students we had supported had been killed in attacks. I cannot describe the sense of loss.

Since the heinous attacks of 7 October and the abduction of the hostages, there have been attacks on Gazan civilians by Israeli forces, with over 25,000 deaths, three quarters of which were women and children, over 60,000 injured, and many thousands missing. That seems to me to be disproportionate and collective punishment of innocent people. Human rights and the rule of law must apply to all, and at all times, not just when it is convenient, whether for the UK or its allies. Those deaths must be investigated by the International Criminal Court. Similarly, I await the judgment from the International Court of Justice on the potential genocide of Palestinian people.

The international community must do better, and we must do better. I have been working with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, on both Kashmir and, more recently, Gaza. I am also involved with the Global Compassion Coalition, trying to spread the message of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace. We all collectively want to see actions to support a ceasefire. Once again, I call for an immediate ceasefire, the safe return of each and every hostage, the delivery of unrestricted humanitarian

aid, and the end of the total siege on the Gaza strip. As I mentioned to the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister yesterday, the partner of one of my constituents is still awaiting evacuation from southern Gaza. If the Minister has any news, I would be very grateful. I mentioned yesterday that he was attacked over the weekend, suffered a broken leg and has not received any healthcare.

I turn to Kashmir. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has done some excellent work. Many Members here will be familiar with the reports it produced in 2018 and 2019 on human rights abuses in both Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The UN reports raised concerns about women's rights in particular, and reported the use of gender-based violence in Jammu and Kashmir in Indian-administered Kashmir. There are also considerable concerns about the detention without trial of Khurram Parvez, a human rights activist—we still have not had any news about his release—and the unsafe conviction of Yasin Malik. Those are just two examples about which a range of human rights agencies—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and, as I mentioned, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights—have raised concerns. They have advocated for the repeal of the public safety act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which contravene international humanitarian law. As the UN has stated:

“There are deep inter-connections between ending such blatant violations of those rights, providing freedom from fear, and the right to security, dignity, equality and justice.”

I want to talk about the case of Yasin Malik in more detail. The Supreme Court of India is awaiting a decision on whether his life sentence will be changed to a death penalty. That is imminent. It seems absolutely at odds with the fact that India is a signatory to the UN convention. I would very much appreciate a response from the Minister on that point.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work on the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group, of which I am a vice-chair. She makes a powerful point about Mohammad Yasin Malik, who has the threat of a death sentence hanging over him. However, there are many other political people in prison in Kashmir. Political life has been stifled in Kashmir. As we approach 5 February, which is Kashmir Solidarity Day, it is important to make progress on this. Our Government have many reasons for being more engaged, and not complacent about getting the issue resolved. Remember that three nuclear powers are involved in this dispute, and the risk they pose to world peace is incredible.

Debbie Abrahams: I totally agree. As we have seen, we were asleep at the wheel on Israel and Gaza. A few years ago when we visited Pakistan, we were warned by the high commissioner that Kashmir, at a geopolitical level, is the most significant concern for stability and safety. We cannot go on ignoring Kashmir; as my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, we must get resolution, together with the Kashmiri people, who are right at the heart of this.

I will not try your patience any more, Dame Maria. Human rights apply to every single one of us, wherever we are and at all times. We cannot dip in and out of them when it suits our purpose.

2.56 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on securing the debate, which is an important opportunity to raise very challenging situations around the world. She is right that it is even more appropriate to emphasise them in the week when we mark Holocaust Memorial Day.

I also pay tribute to the late Sir Tony Lloyd. He was a regular contributor to debates like this in Westminster Hall. In fact, some of us had the privilege of taking part in what turned out to be his last debate, on 7 December, which marked the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights and the UN convention on genocide. His commitment to human rights around the world was unwavering, and it was an honour and an inspiration to take part in any event or debate at which he was present. I got to know him particularly through his work on Colombia; I may say a bit more about that later. When Tony spoke out about the importance of protecting fundamental human rights, he did so—as all of us do—not just out of personal interest, or even as a result of witnessing such abuses at first hand or meeting people who had experienced them, but, as the hon. Member for Luton North said, on behalf of the people he represented and we represent in our constituencies.

Glasgow North, like Luton North, is home to a number of very active campaign groups—Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Global Justice Now—and many more people who belong to such organisations, even if they do not attend meetings, as well as thousands of others who take an interest in these issues and want to play their part as good global citizens. I hear from them regularly on many of the issues and country situations that have been raised today: the persecution of Christians in Nigeria; the brutal treatment of Uyghurs and other minority groups in China; violence against Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis and Christians in Pakistan; forced detention of protesters in Iran; and, of course, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and in Israel and Gaza. The UK Government have a role to play in all those situations.

In Nigeria, journalists and digital activists continue to face harassment, threats and attacks by the state, simply for expressing critical opinions. Boko Haram continues to act with impunity in many areas, and continues to kill, abduct or displace thousands of Christians and other minorities each year. What are the UK Government doing to raise these concerns with their counterparts in Nigeria? What support are they providing to agencies on the ground, both to protect people at risk of violence and to support improvements to governance and political participation?

Likewise, in their relationship with Pakistan, how are the UK Government using the long and historic links with that country to call out persecution, and to encourage the authorities to respect diversity and plurality and live up to their international obligations on freedom of religion and belief?

The situation in China has been addressed many times, and I continue to hear from constituents with ongoing concerns about its treatment of Tibet, its persecution of Buddhists, the interference with the leadership of that community, the education of children there, and the denial of rights to those who want to peacefully practice

Falun Gong and Falun Dafa. The UK Government need to continue to work with international partners, including through the UN Human Rights Council, to ensure that the Chinese Government are held to account.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is giving a great speech, and he mentioned a long list of places with human rights abuses. He mentioned the UN Human Rights Council. I know that he, like me, has a great interest in West Papua. Over half a million people have been killed since the Indonesian occupation of West Papua, and 70,000 are internally displaced. The Indonesians have agreed a UN Commission on Human Rights visit to West Papua, but it has not happened; it has been blocked. Should the Government not once more press Indonesia and the UN for that visit to take place?

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Those international bodies must have a purpose. If countries such as the United Kingdom will not show a lead, who will? I fully support and congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on behalf of the people of West Papua.

Coming back to the situation in China, we also have a role to play. As individuals, we have a responsibility to consider where some of the cheap consumer goods we take for granted and order online have really come from. Whose hands have made them? Market forces can play a part in driving change, if consumers, including all of us here today, are prepared to ask and pay for fairly traded, sustainably sourced products.

On the middle east, the consensus among residents of Glasgow North is clear: there must be an immediate ceasefire on both sides in Israel and Gaza, with the release of hostages, the opening of humanitarian corridors to let aid in and people who want to leave out, and the beginning of the process to negotiate a lasting, peaceful, just and democratic settlement.

Condemnation and speaking out against these situations is important and symbolic, but there is more that the Government can and must do. They have given themselves powers to impose Magnitsky sanctions on individuals who commit gross human rights violations, and they should not be afraid to use those powers. They are negotiating trade deals and disbursing aid funds, and respect for human rights should be at the centre of policymaking in both those areas.

In many situations where people's rights are not being fully respected, it is the behaviour not necessarily of Governments but of large multinational businesses that is responsible. I hear from many constituents who support legislation to hold companies and corporations to account. I mentioned Colombia earlier, and large extractive companies or agricultural conglomerates in many parts of that country are displacing whole communities to make way for gold mines or palm oil plantations, even where those communities are refused democratic consent or where displacement would destroy traditional ways of life or make a wider area uninhabitable because of the pollution these activities bring.

The Government should work here in the UK and with international partners to put the Ruggie principles on business and human rights on an enforceable legislative footing. Many of these companies are listed on the UK stock market or are based here, so they should be subject to a rigorous compliance regime. A wide coalition

[Patrick Grady]

of charities and NGOs are working hard on this issue, which should rightly be a consideration not just for the Government but for the official Opposition and for all of us who are preparing manifestos in this election year.

As will be clear from those who have spoken and those who will go on to speak, and as is clear from my mailbox, voters across the country care passionately about the human rights of everyone who lives on this planet. As many of us have said before, if one person's rights are disrespected, in some respects all our collective human dignity is diminished.

The Scottish Government and the Scottish National party are clear that, with independence, respect for human rights would be at the heart of Scotland's written constitution—with equal justice, equal opportunity and equal dignity for everyone who lives in Scotland—and the foundation of Scotland's role on the world stage as a good global citizen.

In the meantime, there are clear practical steps that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and all of us as individuals and voters can take, to call out human rights abuses, to seek justice and restoration, and to prevent abuses from happening in the future. That should be at the forefront of all our minds in the months to come, thorough the general election and beyond.

3.3 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on securing this debate. I am secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, and I want to place on the agenda the way journalists have become targets, particularly in Gaza, although this has been going on for a while.

In 2022, I attended the memorial event for Shireen Abu Akleh, a young al-Jazeera journalist. She had a reputation that was respected across the middle east for professional journalistic practice and for her courage. Although Palestinian, she was an American citizen. She was involved in an action covering a raid by the Israeli Defence Forces in Jenin. During that raid, there was no firing of weapons or engagement in the immediate area, according to various investigations that took place, but she was shot with an Israeli bullet. That indicated to many people that, although there exist specific protections in international law for journalists covering wartime disputes, they were being ignored by the Israel Defence Forces at that time.

According to the independent Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 83 journalists have been killed since then, during the recent activities of the Israel Defence Forces in Gaza, but others put the figure significantly higher. The International Federation of Journalists—the international trade union grouping for journalists—has called for an independent inquiry into the targeting of journalists by the Israel Defence Forces. There is a view now that the Israeli Government have not just turned a blind eye to this, but that there has been a specific policy of targeting journalists to prevent the truth from coming out of Gaza.

Thank God for the professionalism and courage of journalists there, as we witness the tragic scenes of human suffering taking place. Over the last few weeks, that human suffering has been best exemplified by

what has happened to al-Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief, Wael al-Dahdouh. He has lost his wife, three children and his grandson, and his son, who was a journalist, was killed by an Israeli drone two weeks ago. Virtually his whole family has been destroyed. This goes beyond the debate about the abuse of human rights and, as far as I am concerned, well into war crimes taking place. That is specifically because of the protection that there is in international law for journalists to enable them to report from wars.

I urge the UK Government to look at the evidence in front of us about what is happening specifically to journalists in Gaza and to consider whether that is right or acceptable. In the past, they were part and parcel of establishing the very laws that were meant to protect journalists. Figures show that more journalists have died in this conflict than in every conflict since the second world war. For me, that is evidence that the Israel Defence Forces are targeting journalists, so they should be held to account.

I would like the UK Government to raise this issue with the Israeli Government, to work towards an independent investigation and to work with international agencies such as the International Federation of Journalists and the Committee to Protect Journalists to establish the truth and, just as importantly, to establish accountability for the perpetrators of what I believe is a war crime.

3.8 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for securing this important debate.

The debate is wide-ranging, but I would like to focus on the situation in Palestine. Like my hon. Friend, I voted for a ceasefire in November last year, because my constituents asked me to. I shared their concerns, and I still do. In addition, hundreds of non-governmental organisations, the United Nations and the Pope all called for a ceasefire.

On that note, something happened before Christmas to reinforce my view that a ceasefire was absolutely necessary: two Roman Catholic women, a mother and a daughter, were shot dead inside the Holy Family parish church in Gaza. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said:

"They were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the parish".

Pope Francis condemned the attack, as did the Archbishop of Westminster. Cardinal Vincent made a point we should all reflect on:

"the people in Gaza and the Cardinal Archbishop of Jerusalem, they're not given to tell lies".

The cardinal was absolutely right. The Palestinian people are not liars and they deserve to be listened to.

I raised the issue with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), earlier this month, when he said:

"We are not clear about the full facts of what happened."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 46.]

I wonder whether, two weeks on, the Government are now clear about the full facts. Those two women did not deserve to die. They were in a place of worship—something that is recognised under international humanitarian law

and the Geneva convention. I am no expert, but like so many people outside this place, I know that what happened at the Holy Family parish church was wrong. Those women deserve justice, as does everyone else who has suffered.

The United Nations has described the situation in Gaza as “a living hell”, and the under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs said:

“Famine is around the corner...For children in particular, the past 12 weeks have been traumatic: No food. No water. No school. Nothing but the terrifying sounds of war, day in and day out.”

The last time I checked, the death toll in Gaza was over 25,000—it may be more by the end of this debate. According to the United Nations, it is estimated that 70% of those killed are women and children. Two mothers are killed every hour, close to 3,000 women have been widowed, and 1 million women and girls have been displaced. To add another layer of misery, caesarean sections are performed without anaesthetic, and women and girls have little or no access to period products. My constituent, Dr Thomas Butts, who teaches development neurobiology in the School of Medicine at the University of Sunderland, told me:

“The extent and severity of trauma-related psychiatric illness in Gazan children’s future will be horrific and will get worse the longer that the bombardment continues.”

What are the Government doing to relieve the pain that so many Gazans are experiencing? Cynics say, “What will a vote in a Parliament, thousands of miles away from Palestine, do for Palestinians?” For one, Britain is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council—we have enormous influence on the world stage. More importantly, it would give those innocent Gazans, whose lives have been torn apart, a glimmer of hope that the world has not forgotten them. I repeat today the call for a ceasefire, in the earnest hope that the Minister will reconsider his position.

3.13 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on securing this important debate.

I would like to talk about the Government’s response to Israel’s violations of international law in Gaza and about revelations that I believe should be a major news story but that, as far as I am aware, have been covered by only one mainstream outlet. They relate to recently released court documents that reveal that, from very early on in the war, the Foreign Office had major doubts about Israel’s compliance with international law—a fact the Government have hidden.

The documents show that, on 10 November, just a month into the war, the Foreign Office had made an internal assessment of Israel’s compliance with international law and judged that

“the volume of strikes, total death toll as proportion of those who are children, raise serious concerns.”

It went on to say that His Majesty’s Government’s “inability to come to a clear assessment on Israel’s record of compliance with IHL poses significant policy risks.”

However, those serious concerns were kept secret from Parliament and the public.

Instead, Ministers continued to give reassurances about Israel’s commitment to international law. For example, just four days after that assessment was made,

I asked the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, in the main Chamber whether Israel had used British-made weapons for war crimes in Gaza. He replied that

“the President of Israel...has made it clear that his country will abide by international humanitarian law.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2023; Vol. 740, c. 523.]

That was despite the fact that, as shown by these documents, his Department doubted the Israeli President’s words.

The documents reveal that another assessment was made by the Foreign Office on 8 December, expressing “concerns regarding” Israel’s

“commitment to comply with the obligation not to arbitrarily deny access to humanitarian assistance”

and saying that it was “possible Israel’s actions” in relation to the provision of humanitarian relief

“were a breach of International Humanitarian Law.”

Those damning judgments were, again, not made public. Instead, Government Ministers continued to reassure the public about Israel’s commitment to international law, and they continue to do that.

The documents show that, a few days after that assessment, the Foreign Secretary

“decided he was satisfied there was good evidence to support a judgment that Israel is committed to comply with International Humanitarian Law.”

On that basis, he continued allowing arms sales to Israel, despite the fact that, according to our Government’s policy and international law, arms export licences should not be granted if there is a clear risk that they could be used in violation of international law. That recommendation was accepted by the Business Secretary on 18 December, and arms sales to Israel were allowed to continue.

When questioned about these matters at the Foreign Affairs Committee this month, the Foreign Secretary failed to disclose the fact that his Department had carried out a formal review of Israel’s compliance with international law, and he denied that he had made a ministerial decision about allowing arms sales to continue. Members will be unsurprised to learn that the Chair of that Committee is writing to the Foreign Secretary to ask him to clarify his comments.

What does this tell us? First, it tells us that, early on in the war, the Foreign Office had serious concerns about Israel’s breaches of international law. Secondly, it tells us that Ministers hid that fact, pretending in Parliament and in the media that they had confidence in Israel’s commitment to international law. Thirdly, it tells us that we should have absolutely no confidence in the Government’s arms export licensing regime, which Ministers boast consists of

“the toughest regulations anywhere in the world”—[*Official Report*, 27 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 565.]

but which are clearly grossly inadequate.

To finish, I would like to ask some questions of the Minister. Why did Foreign Office Ministers not reveal that their Department had serious concerns about Israel’s behaviour from as early as 10 November? Was that because they wanted to give Israel the green light for its bombardment of Gaza and they thought that revealing this assessment would simply make that too hard? Why did the Foreign Secretary recommend continuing with arms

[Zarah Sultana]

sales to Israel even though his Department had those concerns? Was it because this Government are too cowardly to stand up for international law, or is it because they do not care about international law when it does not suit them? Finally, will the Government comply with their own rules and with international law and the basic humanity at the heart of it and stop arming Israeli war crimes?

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I call Alyn Smith.

3.18 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): You bounced me out of writing my speech, Dame Maria. [Laughter.] It is a pleasure to wind up for the SNP in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on securing the debate; it is a very timely discussion, and a pretty bleak one for those of us who believe in international co-operation and the rules-based international order.

This is close to the SNP's heart. Our objective as a party is for Scotland to be an independent state. In order to be a global citizen, there is a need to look after our folks at home but also to be a voice for internationalism, progress, multilateralism, co-operation and the rule of law in the world. As a party, we are heavily invested in making the rules-based international order function. We believe in an international community—not global governance, but an international community and structured permanent co-operation—and we believe that that architecture should operate to a series of values that are universally applied against our friends and others.

This debate is close to our hearts. It is a bleak time that we find ourselves living through. It is important to remember a bit of historical context to this. As an SNP Member and an out and proud nationalist for Scotland, I would say that the UK has a good story to tell on the creation of the international human rights architecture. It was English and Scots lawyers who were absolutely integral to the creation of the Council of Europe's human rights framework and the international court in Strasbourg. UK lawyers have been instrumental in helping to promote the case of human rights worldwide, particularly through the Commonwealth mechanisms, such as they are; we could improve on them, but they do exist and they have made progress. The UK has a good story to tell on this, and I want to see the UK do better than it has done lately.

I will come back to some concrete suggestions, but the fact that the original genesis of human rights—the idea that an individual should be empowered against their Government with rights, which should be protected by an international community—is a genius idea of international co-operation, which we should all cherish and aspire to. This has been adopted, of course, by the EU and the international NGOs, particularly the UN. Human rights have not been universally applied, but that is something that we should aspire to as an international community.

As an aspiring member of the international community as an independent Scotland and part of the international community as part of the UK, I want to see all of us do better. I want to work across borders. I will work

with anybody to those ends from any political perspective because the baddies are organised; the baddies are working well. Those on the right side of that ledger—I would include all in this room in that—need to co-operate better, focus more and apply international law wherever we find it being infringed.

It is a bleak time. The SNP was very proudly part of the coalition in support of UK Government policy. We had questions, but we did support UK Government policy on Ukraine, because Ukraine suffered a grievous invasion from a foreign power and the rights of the people of Ukraine have been grievously infringed and continue to be infringed daily. I am sure the SNP is part of the coalition in defence of Ukraine's liberty and the rights of the Ukrainian people to live without fear from their neighbours.

It would be difficult to say that the UK has been so active in the case of Israel and Palestine. If human rights are to be applied everywhere, they need to be applied universally—against our friends as well as everybody else. So, I strongly support the South African referral of the actions of the State of Israel to the international frameworks. There is a case to answer. I do not believe that individual politicians should use words like “genocide” lightly. I think there should be proper investigations and it should be proper authorities making such decisions, but there is surely cause for concern; surely the evidence that we have seen coming out of Israel and Gaza and Palestine should give us all cause for concern that there is a case to answer—that the State of Israel has committed war crimes, and that must have consequences—so I strongly support the referral by the South Africans to the international framework.

The executive director of Human Rights Watch, I think, puts it best:

“The Human Rights System is Under Threat”

—worldwide. There is not a continent where human rights are not being infringed, either by the state, by non-state actors, or in various places by proxy actors. It's a messy world out there. I think it was Adlai Stevenson who said that to every question there is an answer that is clear, easy to understand and entirely wrong. I do not expect the UK to be the world's policeman. I do not expect our Minister to be responsible for solving all these problems, but an international coalition needs to be put together to work on them. The UK could do rather more than we have seen to date in those efforts.

I have a few concrete suggestions. I am about to make some criticism of some UK Government Ministers. I would specifically exempt the Minister present from that criticism; I have not heard him put a foot wrong on these matters, and I do believe that he deeply shares these values. But where we see UK Government Ministers talking about breaking international law in a “limited and specific way” with regard to the Northern Ireland protocol, that is just not how serious Government Ministers and serious Governments talk. That is not how we should be discussing these things. Where we see leading Members of the Government party talking about “unelected foreign judges” in Strasbourg—somehow unqualified judges, as well—as if our judges are elected and as if the members of the court in Strasbourg or Luxembourg are not deeply qualified individuals, it is just not how serious countries talk. The reputational damage to the UK—I am an SNP member, so I should

be enjoying this, but I am not. The UK needs to do better with this. We know it is loose talk from loose cannons, but the very worst people worldwide are taking the very worst lessons from this and that should give us all pause.

We are also seeing, as a matter of Government policy, the Rwanda Bill, which has deep implications for international law, yet breaking international obligations to some of the most vulnerable people in the world is being trumpeted as if it was a mere bagatelle. It is a deeply significant piece of legislation and it gives the very worst example to the baddies in the world, who are looking to undermine this international structure that we are all surely invested in.

Speaking of investment, I appreciate that all budgets everywhere at this time are difficult, but we still need to see greater investment from the UK, not only in international aid and development but specifically in the international human rights architecture. That is supporting NGOs in the field; I echo all colleagues who have specifically praised international NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and many others that are active in this space.

We also need to see specific funding for NGOs that are working on investigations and accountability mechanisms, greater support for UN mechanisms for accountability and support for journalists, who have been mentioned by a number of colleagues today. If we do not know what is going on, we will not be able to hold the baddies to account; journalists have a privileged and special place in law, so we need to see that being applied by the international community. The UK really is in a position to have much more influence in that respect.

We also need to see prioritisation of human rights in trade policy. One of the oft-stated advantages of leaving the European Union is that the UK has an independent trade policy, so let us see human rights being put far higher up that agenda than we have seen so far.

I remember that during my time in the European Parliament there was always a human rights component of all EU trade deals. My group almost always voted against trade deals on the basis that the human rights component of such deals was not strong enough. We were not against the trade deals; we just thought that the EU could do more to nudge partner countries in a better direction. The UK really has not prioritised human rights in trade deals at all and we must see much better efforts in that respect. So far, we have seen too little progress.

We also need to apply the values that we all support equally, whether it is difficult to do so or not. We are very vocal about the infringement of the rights of the Ukrainian people, but we have been posted missing on the infringement of the rights of the Palestinian people. We need to do so much better than we are doing currently. However, where there is an international coalition that will work in that direction—I believe that, on balance, the UK has a better story to tell than many other countries—I will be part of that coalition. I believe in working across borders and across parties, because there is an international architecture that is fragile and under attack from all sides; and I believe that those of us who are on the right side of this discussion need to work more closely together to promote these ends.

3.27 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Maria, and I must say to the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) that if his speech was a half-written one, it was a remarkably good one.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for securing this debate. Like many colleagues, she has rightly exposed the depths of the horrors being inflicted in our world today, which include the abuses of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Hongkongers here in the UK having bounties put on their heads, and the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, where the people have lived for far too long in a limbo of injustice and insecurity.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of people around the world being persecuted for their faith, which I will address in tomorrow's Westminster Hall debate on religious persecution, and I am keen to hear privately more details about the constituency case that she mentioned regarding Nigeria.

All these issues are worth so much more consideration than I can give them in 10 minutes. Consequently, if hon. Members will forgive me, I will focus on those suffering in Sudan and give them a voice, because the conflict there is not being given the attention that it rightly deserves.

Before I do so, however, I will talk about Gaza. What is happening in Gaza is an intolerable horror and a disgrace to humanity, and it must end. In Gaza, 85% of the population have been forcibly displaced, but nowhere is safe for them. Hundreds of thousands of people are living without shelter in cold weather, with precious little access to food, water and healthcare. Famine and disease epidemics are way too close now. Humanitarian access is being limited in a way that even Ministers here are clear is completely and utterly unjustified.

The siege must end. None of this is compatible with the universal human rights that all our faiths and all our traditions hold dear, which are rights that we, in turn, see as a foundation for our own peace and security. We need an immediate halt to the violence in Gaza, with a sustained ceasefire; we need a genuine process to bring about a fair and just two-state peace; and we need accountability through the independent international system, within which the same rules apply to all.

Many of these calls apply equally to Sudan, where tens of thousands have been killed and 7.6 million people have been forcibly displaced since the conflict began last April. If hon. Members will forgive me, I want to spell out some of the conclusions from the recent report of the UN panel of experts on Darfur. The report details some of the absolute horrors that the Sudanese people have been subjected to over the past months, because of a conflict between two generals.

Last summer, we raised the alarm about what was happening in the city of El Geneina in Darfur: targeted massacres; the burning of refugee camps; women and girls raped because of their ethnicity, as a weapon of war; and families deliberately trapped, and shot if they tried to flee. It had the obvious and terrible echoes of the acts of genocide alleged in Darfur 20 years ago.

The new report states that the death toll in that small city alone is likely to have been between 10,000 and 15,000 people. A girls' boarding school and its neighbouring school were sheltering 4,500 civilian families. They were

[Ms Lyn Brown]

bombed with heavy artillery. Every hospital in the city was looted and destroyed. A convoy of thousands of women and children, injured elderly people and animals fleeing the city was attacked indiscriminately when it reached a bridge. An estimated 1,000 people were killed in that attack alone, and 100 are reported to have drowned in an attempt to flee the attacks on the bridge. Human rights monitors were killed while reporting on the atrocities taking place.

The report sets out some very clear details and assessments of where the weapons used in those attacks came from. Although I know that the Government will not comment on ongoing sanctions work, I would like an assurance that the evidence from this report is being taken extremely seriously, because we need to see further action in response to these atrocities.

I also say gently to the Government that we need a more concerted and consistent approach to the atrocities being committed in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, too. That conflict is an open wound. Young children are being subjected to brutal violence of all kinds by armed groups, including rape, and are recruited as soldiers in their hundreds. Some 720,000 people have fled their homes just since October, adding to almost 7 million local refugees. More than 11 million people are going hungry in just the three most affected provinces.

Many armed guards have been identified as responsible for the atrocities, but I believe that it is important to highlight the M23 militia, because it has clearly played the biggest role in the violence over the last two years. Time and again, credible reports from the UN and human rights organisations have assessed that elements within the Rwandan armed forces and intelligence services are responsible for materially supporting M23. Our closest allies have noted that, too. They have noted, equally, the Government's apparent reticence to play our part and to follow their suit.

Understandably, there is a suspicion that the reason for our inconsistency and inaction on this issue is the Rwanda migration deal, Tory infighting, and foreign policy that is effectively being run from the Home Office. This massively damages our relationship with the DRC, which is really an important partner across so many issues. Equally, how can we say that the UK is genuinely supporting the human rights of all when we are being seen as utterly inconsistent on this issue? I believe we need a Government who can more effectively support human rights abroad.

I will not pretend that any of this is easy. I know that our influence is limited and that sometimes symbolic acts of rejection and disengagement do more harm than good—I honestly get that, but I believe that we need to rebuild our connections with countries around the world and recognise how the world is changing. If we do not, our actions in support of human rights will have precious little impact. We will be shouting into a void while being heard by no one.

I know that we are not solely responsible for righting all the wrongs of the world, but surely we must do our part. The Opposition believe that if we are smarter, more strategic and more consistent in our engagement around the world, we can have greater impact within our partnerships, but that requires our words and actions to be aligned in support of human rights.

On arms exports, for example, a Labour Government would reform the system so that it is transparent and committed to upholding international law. The criteria say that licences should not be granted where there are clear risks of UK arms being used for internal oppression or violations of international humanitarian laws, but the Minister will recognise that just having those criteria is not enough. The judgments that are made when applying the criteria need to be clear and accountable, and they need to be credible.

It is frankly difficult to believe that the criteria could have been applied robustly in some cases. Israel has faced very serious allegations from bodies including the United Nations and is the subject of ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court. That raises very serious questions about how licences could be granted to Israel. It is not just about the quality of judgments being made in some cases; it is about the quality of the assessments available to inform these judgments. In a number of cases, whether it is Myanmar, Ethiopia or Sudan, I believe that there have been clear weaknesses in our foreign policy—because we simply have not been monitoring the warning signs well enough, or we do not have joined-up policy structures that can respond quickly and effectively, or we have not had the capacity to map the perpetrators and the sources of atrocity risks and have not identified their lines of support, shut them down and held them to account.

The international development White Paper pointed in the right direction, and we welcome that. We want to build on it, should we win the next election. But frankly, only a smart, strategic, cross-Government approach can truly help to prevent atrocities, systematic abuses of human rights, and the dire, sickening, shameful consequences of those abuses, which we are seeing in so many places around the world—in Sudan, in DRC and in Gaza.

3.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to see you in the Chair, Dame Maria. We have known each other a long time, but I do not think I have had the chance to say “Dame Maria” in public, so that made me feel good.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), and I congratulate her on securing this really important debate. Some who have participated have recognised the important contribution of Tony Lloyd on this subject and many others. His passing is a very sad loss.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government on these very important issues, which have been raised with passion and conviction. That was very clear. I will seek to respond to as many points I can, but I cannot promise to respond to every single one. This is probably one of the most wide-ranging debates I have ever been involved in, for understandable reasons, and that in itself is a concern.

The Government believe, as the House believes, that human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. This was clearly enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights 75 years ago. The UK has long championed its importance, and as we marked its anniversary last month, we renewed our steadfast commitment to protect and promote the rights that it

enshrines. We demonstrated the depth of our commitment to that around the world by making five human rights pledges, which we submitted to the United Nations as part of its anniversary celebrations in December. We used the opportunity to highlight our long-standing and ongoing support for human rights defenders, and for equal rights for women and girls, disabled people and LGBT+ persons. We also cemented our commitment to defending freedom of religion or belief, combating modern slavery, and raising the standards of public and private security organisations.

My noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who is the Minister responsible for human rights, also hosted an event last month to celebrate Human Rights Day, where the Foreign Secretary outlined three ways in which we can help deliver those five pledges. First, the UK will continue to stand up for the rights of all, including by holding human rights abusers and violators to account, offering support and sanctuary to victims, and defending the open international order. Secondly, we will champion the open societies that guarantee those rights in the first place. Thirdly, we will stand together with allies, friends and partners—old and new—to realise the universal declaration of human rights.

As the Foreign Secretary underlined, if we show international strength and unity, there is no reason why we cannot prevail in the fight for human rights around the world. That theme has resonated across both sides of this debate. I heard it from the hon. Members for West Ham (Ms Brown) and for Stirling (Alyn Smith), who both made important contributions to the debate.

As we strive towards that aim, we must overcome horrific global challenges, including humanitarian crises, conflicts and fierce opposition to human rights. They have all been catalogued today. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned Colombia. In my brief, the Americas, I have seen at first hand the devastating impact that human rights abuses and violations can have on individuals, particularly women, in times of conflict, and on communities, democracy and freedom. These cruel injustices serve only to strengthen the UK's resolve to promote and protect human rights in every corner of the world.

One theme that has come out of this debate loud and clear is freedom of religion or belief. I will not spend a huge amount of time on that because we will cover it in a three-hour debate tomorrow, but I will just highlight the excellent report and presentation last week from Open Doors UK about the plight of Christians in Nigeria and Pakistan, which has been touched on today. We have also heard about the persecution of Muslims, Buddhists, the Baha'is—the list goes on. There must be more tolerance in the world, and we need to work hard for that. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about the importance of freedom of expression and a free press. I will not go on; he is no longer in his place, but I think we all understand the importance of that.

The UK will remain one of the most active and influential states on the international stage when it comes to human rights, including within the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. At the UN Human Rights Council last October, the UK led resolutions on Sudan—a point that was raised earlier—Somalia, and the importance of

girls' education. We also strongly supported resolutions to renew the mandate of the special rapporteurs on Russia and on Afghanistan.

We have also made important strides on sanctions. In December, linked to the 75th anniversary and the five pledges that I talked about, we announced 46 sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, against individuals and entities linked to human rights abuses around the world. We targeted individuals linked to authorities in Belarus, Haiti, Iran and Syria for their repressive activity against civilian populations.

I pay tribute to a brave individual I met in Peru, Quinto Inuma Alvarado, who was tragically murdered after I had the honour of meeting him and other human rights defenders in that country. He talked passionately about his work to protect the Amazon, but he was not allowed to continue taking those views forward, and his life was tragically cut short. My thoughts and prayers continue to be with him and his family. There is too much of this violence in the world.

Zarah Sultana: The Minister has yet to come to the topic of what is happening in Gaza, but I repeat the question that I asked: why did Foreign Office Ministers not reveal the fact that their Government had concerns about Israel's compliance with international law as early as 10 November? I want to hear a response to that specific question.

David Rutley: I will come on to Israel and Gaza, and I will not be long. I will get there very quickly.

The issue of Ukraine is important for all of us, and I am grateful for the support across the House on it. We are nearly two years on from the illegal invasion, and Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General has recorded more than 120,000 incidents of alleged war crimes, murder, rape and the deportation of children. Those are matters of international humanitarian law, which is separate and distinct from the legal obligations that regulate armed conflict. We will continue to hold Russia to account. I want also to mention some of the persecution that goes on within Russia, including the imprisonment of Vladimir Kara-Murza for his opposition to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. We have constantly called for his release since his initial arrest and will regularly raise his imprisonment with Russian authorities and in multilateral fora.

Gaza is a hot subject, and I am not going to duck the issue. There are strong opinions on both sides. My hon. Friend—I will call her that, but I should probably call her the hon. Member for West Ham—talked about the need for a ceasefire. We want a sustainable ceasefire, and we are working hard towards it.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) raised important points. What I can say at this point—she will probably not be happy with the answer—is that Ministers review the advice they receive carefully and act consistently with that advice. We work hard and continue to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and for civilians to be protected. As the Foreign Secretary outlined, we assess that Israel has the capability and commitment to comply with international humanitarian law, but we are also deeply concerned about the impact on the civilian population in Gaza. Too many civilians have been killed.

Zarah Sultana: Will the Minister give way on that point?

David Rutley: I will give way one more time on that point.

Zarah Sultana: The Minister is being very generous with his time. If there are concerns in the Foreign Office, as per the internal assessment, why did the Foreign Secretary recommend continuing to allow arms sales to Israel? That goes against our current policy, which is that where there is a risk that human rights violations will take place, we should not continue selling arms licences to countries.

David Rutley: The Foreign Secretary outlined on 8 January that he has not received advice that Israel has breached international humanitarian law. On export licences, the UK supports Israel's legitimate right to defend itself and take action against terrorism, provided that it is within the bounds of international humanitarian law. All our export licences are kept under careful and continual review, and we can amend, suspend or revoke extant licences or refuse new licence applications where they are inconsistent with the UK's strategic export licensing criteria. It is important to note that, as I think hon. Members are aware, the regime is among the most rigorous and transparent in the world.

On the topic of Israel and Gaza, a number of people talked about South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice. The Government believe that this development is not helpful, and we do not support it. As previously stated, we recognise that Israel has a right to defend itself against Hamas, and we do not believe that calling that genocide is the right approach. Ultimately, it is for the courts, not states, to decide on matters of genocide, and of course we will respect the role and independence of the ICJ.

Many other subjects were talked about, including Kashmir. Our long-standing position on Kashmir is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the long-standing and ongoing dispute. The UK recognises that there are human rights concerns in both India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Sarah Owen: The Minister is being generous with his time, but he has been asked a number of specific questions today—I myself asked specific questions about Gaza, Kashmir and China—and I know that with the limit on time, he is unlikely to get through them all. Could he please give a commitment that he will provide written answers to any questions left unanswered today?

David Rutley: I will do my best, but the questions that have been asked today are genuinely numerous and very wide-ranging. It is the hon. Member's debate; if she would like to write separately and pick a number of questions to which she would like further answers, could she please get in touch, or can we talk afterwards and decide how best to take that forward. Would that be all right?

Sarah Owen *indicated assent.*

David Rutley: Let us move on to another important subject. Issues have been raised about Rwanda. The Home Secretary has made it clear that the legislation on

Rwanda does not challenge the UK's relationship with the European convention on human rights. We have a long-standing tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected and of abiding by the rule of law, both domestic and international. We are talking to the European Court about the interim measures issues that have come up, and the Court has proposed reforms to rule 39 that build on our constructive discussions. We look forward to the Court's adopting amendments to that rule in line with this approach.

We have also talked about China today. Every day, people across China face violations of their human rights, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet, and rights and freedoms have also been eroded in Hong Kong. We consistently raise these matters at the highest levels with the Chinese authorities. We also conduct independent visits to areas of major concern wherever possible and support NGOs in exposing and responding to violations. We raise the reputational and diplomatic cost to China of its human rights violations regularly on the international stage. We were the first country to lead a joint statement on China's human rights record in Xinjiang at the UN, and we have sustained pressure on China to change its behaviour.

As the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), made clear during yesterday's debate—it has been a busy week on human rights issues—we urge the Chinese authorities to repeal the national security law in Hong Kong, which has had such a damaging impact on so many individuals and on the city. The Foreign Secretary has also called for Jimmy Lai's release.

Iran has not come up so much in today's debate—partly, I think, because there are so many areas to discuss. With one minute remaining, I would just like to highlight that we have witnessed a shocking repression of human rights in Iran, from oppressive hijab laws to the reprisals against women and human rights defenders. We have responded to these acts by sanctioning 94 individuals and entities for human rights violations. At the 78th UN General Assembly, we co-sponsored the Iran human rights resolution calling for an immediate moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty. The UK will continue to work with partners to deter and challenge Iran's human rights violations at all opportunities.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I will. This will be the last time, because there is not much time.

Debbie Abrahams: I want to mention the death penalty sought against Yasin Malik, who is a freedom-fighting activist. Why are we not talking about him?

David Rutley: We abhor the use of the death penalty and we call it out wherever we can. I can talk separately about that case with the hon. Member.

The UK has not only a duty but a deep desire to promote and defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect around the world. We continue to stand with partners across the globe to uphold freedom, democracy and the sovereignty of nations, and to call out violations and abuses of people's fundamental rights wherever they occur.

3.54 pm

Sarah Owen: I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate for their thoughtful and heartfelt contributions. When it comes to people's safety and security, things are getting worse, not better, at home and abroad. In some places, human rights are being eroded bit by bit; in others such as Gaza, they are being completely demolished. We all know where it ends when good people do and say nothing, so I am asking the Government to be brave and do good before—not in the very distant future—we have to remember the genocides of the Palestinians, the Uyghurs, the Rohingya, the Kashmiris and people of faith in various parts of the world. We know how to prevent that already. We have already learned those lessons. The time has come to act.

I thank all those who have contributed to the debate. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group and for highlighting gender-based violence. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) rightly reminded us of the importance of the Ukrainian fight against Putin. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about how Palestinians are not just fighting a war, but now fighting famine.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) rightly highlighted the lack of scrutiny that we have as parliamentarians because the Foreign Secretary is in the Lords. Indeed, the Minister responsible for human rights is also in the Lords. It is a bizarre situation.

I thank both Opposition Front Benchers: the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), for her continued hard work and commitment to her constituents and for protecting the rights of vulnerable people across the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK response to international human rights abuses.

Mentoring

3.57 pm

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I will call Dr Lisa Cameron to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for a 30-minute debate, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of mentoring.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Dame Maria. I believe that mentoring can help us to work together collaboratively so that everyone reaches their full potential across the United Kingdom. I thank colleagues for attending the debate; this is a critical issue that demands our attention and commitment as Members of Parliament.

The impact of mentoring can be very profound not only on young people, but on people of all age groups. I have drawn on my experience as a consultant clinical psychologist prior to coming to Parliament. I have witnessed at first hand the crucial role of support, particularly in helping young people to overcome mental health issues and the challenges that life brings. I think we all agree that the recent disruptions to people's education posed by the covid pandemic and the cost of living crisis have disproportionately affected disadvantaged youth.

One of the groups I want to speak about in a bit more depth is care leavers, who face significant disparities in health, social circumstances and education. We can all try to work with them and ensure that they have the best support possible, including mentoring, across their lifespan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. The importance of mentoring cannot be underlined enough, and she is doing that exceptionally well. I look forward to the rest of her speech.

The Prince's Trust, the Diana Award and other such schemes have shown the success that results from coming alongside our young people to give them the hand of friendship and advice, and the feeling that they are not alone in the world. So often we find young people who think they are very much alone in the world. We should encourage more people with a love for young people to get involved. That is why we need this debate. Well done to the hon. Lady!

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He is so fastidious in representing and intervening on behalf of constituents and people across the United Kingdom. I totally agree that the organisations that he mentioned have contributed significantly to the benefit of young people across the United Kingdom. I had the privilege of visiting the Prince's Trust locally to see at first hand the work it was doing in building self-esteem and confidence among young people, some of whom felt that their mental health had become low. Further to the hon. Gentleman's point, I have also noticed that there is a campaign to end loneliness. Young people are one of the significant age groups reporting increased feelings of loneliness; as usual, the hon. Gentleman is entirely right in his comments.

[Dr Cameron]

The challenge is clear. We can impact the life of young people through mentoring, which emerges as a powerful solution to address many challenges. Consistent support from a caring mentor has the potential to significantly alter the life trajectories of young people. That can happen through volunteering and through businesses. I have had good opportunities to meet local organisations and businesses in my constituency of East Kilbride. They have been helping with the special needs school to try to get mentoring under way and young people with disabilities into the workplace. That is very much needed because often what people require is opportunity. When they are in the workplace and given the opportunities that they deserve, they can really shine and all their potential can show through.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, mentoring also helps young people to become more engaged in their communities—to feel less lonely and much more connected. That is particularly the case for people in rural communities who might feel that fewer opportunities are available and for people from more disadvantaged backgrounds who find it difficult to engage in school or different aspects of the support structures already available to them.

The “Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023” report was published recently by NHS England. It found that one in five young people has reported probable mental health conditions, so it is very important that we try to address their needs. In Scotland, the “Health Behaviour in School-aged Children” study recently revealed the lowest levels of adolescent confidence seen in 28 years—a stark figure. Only 42% of adolescents reported feeling confident often or always and about one fifth of young people reported feeling lonely all or most of the time. The report noted that feelings of loneliness were highest among 15-year-old girls—31%, a very high figure. The challenge is clear, as is the impact that we can make. It is important that we give time to consider what more we can do to support people through mentoring, because young people in particular are suffering. Their mental health might be deteriorating and, as we have heard already, loneliness is on the rise.

I want to speak about some different programmes that I have had the privilege to engage with. I used to be chair of a very important group in Parliament, the all-party parliamentary group on mentoring, which had the secretariat provided by the Diana Award. We were able to engage with MPs, which was a valuable part of our programme. During covid, we managed to pair up more than 100 MPs with young people in their constituencies across the United Kingdom to offer mentoring support during National Mentoring Week. We put a great deal of effort into that. I became a mentor myself for that period, and the responses that we had showed that the MPs benefited as well as those who were mentored.

The experience gave us a much better understanding of and empathy towards people’s plights locally, in addition to the connection to what was happening on the frontline, which we are not always afforded as MPs. I remember after being elected wanting to visit a hospital where I had worked previously. I was offered a tour, but I wanted to speak to patients and staff. They said,

“Usually, MPs get a tour of the hospital,” but I said, “I don’t really need a tour—I used to work there, so I could probably give the tour.” That shows that as MPs we need to build a connection to the frontline. What people might think we want to hear about or engage in means that that connection is not always afforded to us.

One of the programmes that we have been engaged with and which contributes to mentoring is the Grandmentors programme by Volunteering Matters. It is an intergenerational mentoring programme for care-experienced young people—possibly the strongest and most resilient people in any community because they have often faced many more challenges during their early lives. Through the skill of mentoring, care-experienced young people have been supported to want to achieve their goals.

The programme was established in 2009 and now runs in 14 locations in England and Scotland. Interestingly, a mentor is typically aged 50 years or over—I have to admit that I fall into that category—and, importantly, the mentee is a young person, typically aged between 16 and 24 years old, which means there is an intergenerational transfer of knowledge and support. The programme tries to recruit older volunteers to use their life experience and skills to provide emotional and practical support to young people, particularly when they are transitioning from the care system to independent living.

As of October 2023, 169 mentors had been matched with mentees, with many more ready to be matched. Their impact is measured in employment, education and training; housing and finance; and health and wellbeing. It was found that everything really is relational, with the primary focus on nurturing and strengthening through the relationship and connectedness as individuals to the place where they live.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing today’s debate. In Suffolk, we have found that mentoring tends to be taken forward on an altruistic basis with a limited formal framework. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful to hear from the Minister about what the Government can do to encourage and foster that form of altruism among businesses? What is her reflection on the role that chambers of commerce could play in supporting the many businesses that want to do this, and taking that forward at a county-wide or regional level?

Dr Cameron: My hon. Friend makes an insightful intervention. One of the key things on which we could work together across the House is having more of a mentoring strategy moving forward, to help organisations that wish to pursue that and provide help in the world of business, in communities and in the voluntary sector.

As my hon. Friend says, a great many organisations wish to lend their knowledge, expertise and support and to be there for people and pass on their experience. I have accounts from young people, which I will mention briefly today, who say that that has been invaluable in their lives. The more we can do, the better. If there can be a structure moving ahead, engaging key organisations such as the British Chambers of Commerce, that would be extremely valuable. According to the Home for Good report 2022, care leavers currently make up about 25% of the homeless population and 25% of the adult prison population, which shows we need to do much more to

support them. Some 41% of them are not in education, employment or training, compared with 12% of other young people.

New research from the universities of Oxford, York and Exeter has demonstrated that one third of care leavers are not working or studying, compared with just 2.4% of comparable young people who have never experienced the children's care system. Data from the Office for National Statistics also demonstrates that more than half of those who had been children in care had a criminal conviction by age 24, compared with 13% of children who had not been in care. Early intervention is crucial for young people who may have experienced trauma or be at a critical period in their lives.

Some 59% of the mentees on the Grandmentors programme who had support as care leavers were independent or stable in sustaining education. They had sustained training, education or employment, with 62% independent or stable in terms of their wellbeing, which had dramatically increased from the start of their mentoring. The figures speak to the power of mentoring. As many as 75% were stable with regard to housing, which is a huge change, given the figures we heard about homelessness. We should never underestimate the difference that having such support at a critical time can make.

I want to mention Saliou's story, which I have been granted permission to share:

"I arrived in the UK at 17 from Guinea. I've been part of the Grandmentors programme...and I am now 19. I'm at college full time building up my skills and language. I aspire to be an electrician, and I am doing some work experience in this. My volunteer mentor really listens, and we work things out together. I share things that are bothering me, but I also talk about my plans for the future. My mentor has been...supportive since we have met, and I feel grateful to have met such a wonderful person. She puts smiles on other people's faces. I don't want to lose our friendship."

I also want to mention the Diana Award, with which I had the privilege to work in relation to the all-party parliamentary group that was organised a few years ago. I thank it for the powerful work it does across the United Kingdom. It offers mentoring programmes to support young people to develop their career skills and make positive changes in their communities. It celebrates not just mentoring young people but enabling them to make changes and contribute to their communities, which is so valuable.

The Diana Award collaborates with volunteers from all backgrounds and levels of experience to deliver mentoring programmes for young people aged 14 to 18 who are deemed to be at risk. Young people who have taken part in the programme have shared that it allowed them to grow closer to their peers, and feel comfortable sharing their opinions. One said:

"My confidence and skillset has changed. I understand different skills required in the workplace more."

Another said that the programme had helped them

"to realise the vast majority of my classmates experience similar issues to me."

A teacher whose comments I am allowed to share said that their student had

"grown in confidence about his own ability to interact with others in unexpected social situations."

The results were not just about the experiences that the mentees expected; the skills transferred to all other types of experiences. I have not been able to include

all the fantastic organisations, but I will mention some that I have been in touch with: the Kids Network, the Mentoring Lab, Volunteering Matters, She Stands, Bloomberg, The Girls' Network, the Youth Endowment Fund, the Patchwork Foundation and Chance UK.

We hope to re-establish formally the all-party parliamentary group on mentoring. We should continue to support it as Members of Parliament, across parties. We can offer vital opportunities to young people in our constituencies right across the United Kingdom. Of course, they also offer us great experiences and engagement in return—everybody benefits. I hope to work with Members of Parliament in the near future to re-establish that group. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what more we can do together.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this debate on such an important subject. I am familiar with the Diana Award, and have been for some time. I will talk more about the APPG, but I appreciate my hon. Friend's great work in championing mentoring. I have seen at first hand the difference that mentoring can make to a child or young person, because I spent 16 years running organisations for disadvantaged young people before I became an MP, and I ran mentoring programmes as part of that. I also volunteered to be a mentor through various other organisations, including Chance UK, which my hon. Friend mentioned.

Education is a key determinant of young people's life chances and social mobility. That is why this Government are committed to providing a world-class education system for all children and young people. We have invested significantly in education and undertaken a number of important reforms to ensure that, whatever their background or circumstances, all young people have the opportunity to reach their potential. Much of the Department for Education's work prioritises giving children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, or those who have been in our children's social care system, the additional support they may need to ensure that they are prepared for adulthood and to achieve positive outcomes.

I have a keen interest in working to ensure that all children and young people fulfil their potential and that we are promoting social mobility, which was the theme of my pre-politics career. A key part of that is the role of mentoring, and of effective programmes more widely. That is why we re-endowed the Education Endowment Foundation with £137 million in 2022. It has been a key part of ensuring that what we do is effective, and that we have programmes which work for the most disadvantaged in particular. The EEF identifies, develops, supports and evaluates projects that raise the achievement of disadvantaged children and young people. That has included an evaluation of mentoring and how it can be used to improve outcomes for those that need help reaching their potential.

One of the ways we are helping people to achieve their potential is through funding mentoring programmes in various areas of the Department for Education's portfolio. I will start with children in care. We are committed to

[David Johnston]

quite a big programme of reforming the system for children in care. We set that out in the “Stable Homes, Built on Love” strategy we published last year, which puts stable, loving relationships at the heart of the care system. By 2027, we want every care-experienced child and young person to feel that they have those strong and loving relationships. As part of our commitment to helping local authorities with family finding for children in care, we are funding 24 befriending and mentoring programmes for children in care and care leavers. Those are all designed to enable children and young people to improve their sense of identity and community and create and sustain consistent and stable relationships.

As part of our work to remove barriers to people with special educational needs, a learning difficulty or a disability starting apprenticeships, we have been developing a pilot to test the value of targeted and specific mentoring support for apprentices who have learning difficulties and disabilities. The pilot will offer targeted expert support, advice and training to the people providing mentoring to apprentices, and measure what impact it has on the cohort’s level of satisfaction and on key performance measures, such as retention and achievement, for those apprentices.

More widely across the education system, mentoring is supporting children and learners to reach their full potential and prepare for the world of work. For young people leaving school, mentoring can be a great way to support effective transitions and empower them to make positive decisions that lead to fulfilling careers. We are running a pilot targeted transition fund in a number of schools this academic year to help young people to make successful transition choices that they feel confident about. The project delivers a wraparound programme to young people eligible for free school meals and with low school attendance, giving them careers guidance, counselling, mentoring and employability support.

As has been touched on, some careers hubs also use employer mentoring to support young people when they transition from school into further education or employment. To improve the work readiness of all young people, employers are engaging in greater numbers than ever before, helping to connect careers information and advice with the world of work and enabling opportunities for young people to experience a variety of workplaces.

I come to two or three of the initiatives that my hon. Friend mentioned. I have explained that I am familiar with the great work of the Diana Award, and I enjoyed hearing about the specific programme that she described.

On Grandmentors, some of the local authorities that we are supporting through our “Stable Homes, Built on Love” strategy use that programme to support their care leavers, which is good news. For businesses, which have been touched on by a couple of Members, part of our careers strategy measures the Gatsby framework for employability, including by looking at what they do on mentoring. Given my experience of running such programmes, I should say that it is incredibly difficult to get a consistent relationship in mentoring. We have to acknowledge the great work that all these organisations are doing, because it does not just happen naturally; it requires a lot of support.

I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for raising the issue of mentoring and social mobility today. The Government agree with her that mentoring can transform the lives of children and young people. I was particularly struck by her point about its importance in rural areas and in helping to develop young people’s confidence. She also said—we clearly both know this from personal experience—that it helps the mentors, not just the mentees, which is absolutely true.

Dr Cameron: I was really interested to hear the Minister talk about people with disabilities. He will be aware that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for disability. Could we work together on some of the programmes to look at how young people with special needs could be engaged as apprentices or interns here in the House of Commons and with MPs? That would help us to reach out to young people right across the UK.

David Johnston: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. This is one of many areas where we ought to lead by example and not just preach to other organisations about what they should be doing. We should demonstrate that we are doing it ourselves, and I would be very pleased to work with her on that.

Mentoring would not be possible without all the people up and down the country who volunteer to be mentors and who are working to support children and young people. I personally thank them and the organisations that co-ordinate such activities, and I assure them that I will keep working with the education and children’s social care sectors to ensure that we use mentoring as effectively as we can. I will work with my hon. Friend and support what she is doing to reinvigorate the APPG on mentoring and promote mentoring more widely.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Shared Rural Network Implementation

4.30 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of the Shared Rural Network.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Maria. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I support the shared rural network, which aims to increase 4G coverage from 91% now to 95% of the UK landmass by 2025, and to ensure that there is coverage by all providers of 84% of the area by the same date. The Government are investing £0.5 billion in new masts in total notspot areas, which is very welcome, and the industry is spending about the same on ensuring that rural areas now covered only by one provider—partial notspots—get a signal from all providers by that date. None the less, there are concerns that roll-out is not progressing as quickly as we would like. The purpose of today's debate is to ask the Minister to consider further steps to ensure that the objectives are achieved and that our constituents get the mobile signal they need and deserve.

Improved rural coverage for everyone is important for all sorts of reasons. First, it enables people to work from home in the modern economy, increasing job opportunities and business productivity. The rural region, accounting for about 20% of Britain, is one of the least productive economic areas of the whole country. One fifth of our people live in rural areas, and we want to give them every opportunity they can to be productive and to access the job opportunities they need. Where I live, lots of young people move away to access better job opportunities in cities. Our countryside is becoming populated primarily by retired people, and while we love them, we could do with some younger people as well to keep our schools open and communities thriving.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that in some rural areas—I am thinking particularly of Mordon and Killerby in my Sedgefield constituency—people move away from villages not only because they cannot get broadband, but because transport is a problem? With no transport options, they desperately need broadband to be there.

Helen Morgan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman entirely. We have spoken about public transport a lot, which is related to this problem. In rural areas like ours, when people are working they are often not stationary in an office, but moving around the area. A plumber or an agricultural worker relies on the mobile signal to operate their business on a daily basis. They need the mobile signal to work wherever they are, not just in their home. That is a key point that I will return to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this important debate. I apologise to you, Dame Maria, and to the hon. Lady, as I cannot be here that long—I have to chair a committee meeting at 5 o'clock. We have seen massive progress in rural broadband across the whole of the United Kingdom. Through the confidence and supply agreement, the Democratic Unionist party secured a deal with the Conservative party for £200 million for this very purpose

in Northern Ireland. Moving forward, while 4G might be the commitment of the shared rural network, what we need now is 5G. Does the hon. Lady agree that progress has to match technological advances?

Helen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right that progress in rural areas is so slow that we end up with yesterday's technology. I will come on to that towards the end of my speech. The roll-out of broadband and Project Gigabit in North Shropshire is very welcome, but the mobile signal is extremely important.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good start on her speech, but there are examples of positive development across the country. In Devon, for instance, we have reconstituted Connecting Devon and Somerset. It has worked extremely well: in the last four years, we have gone from about 84% connectivity up into the high nineties percentile. That modern technology is also following suit. There are pretty good examples of where the private sector and public sector—Devon County Council—have done extraordinary work to make sure we are reaching the hard-to-reach areas, eliminating the notspots and ensuring connectivity for all. It is not a complete tale of woe.

Helen Morgan: I am pleased to hear that it is going well. Ensuring that we get to that stage across the country is what I hope this debate will achieve.

A survey for the Country Land and Business Association found that 80% of rural business owners said that improved connectivity would be the single largest improvement to their business. Mobile phones have been cited as the default back-up option for people when the copper landline network is switched off in a power cut. We are probably ultra-sensitive to that after the last couple of weeks, when people have been without power for extended periods. It is entirely right that electricity companies get power back on in urban areas sooner, because that is where the greatest number of people need to be connected, but we also need to ensure that the back-up option for rural people works, and that is the mobile phone signal.

It is important that people have a choice of provider to ensure that they have mobile connection when they need it. Interestingly, respondents to a survey conducted by Building Digital UK cited poor mobile coverage as a major factor exacerbating poor outcomes from agricultural injuries. That is vital in a very rural constituency where there is a large number of agricultural workers and where a couple of years ago there were several combine harvester fires. It is really important that people can call 999 when they need to, or call an ambulance if they have suffered an accident anywhere in a rural area.

Mobile coverage is also one of the top issues faced by constituents. I ran a series of open meetings over the summer, and constituents were genuinely angry that they could not use the same mobile signal at home as at work. It caused them huge problems—for example, they could not do simple things like phoning home to get someone to pick up their kids from school if they were running late. There was a real impact on people's daily life from not being able to access the same mobile phone signal wherever they went in their local area.

It is important to note that partial notspots, which are the main issue where I live, effectively mean that people have only one choice of provider, so we are not

[Helen Morgan]

seeing the competitive market that our urban counterparts have when they are choosing who to buy their phone or SIM from.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): My rural constituency of North Norfolk has exactly the same problems with notspots. One of the fundamental problems seems to be the planning process, in which planners or the mobile phone companies and their agents put together applications for completely inappropriate locations. They get turned down by the local community and the local planning authority, not because local people do not want a mobile phone signal but because they do not want a lattice structure of 50 metres in an area of outstanding natural beauty. How can we get to a situation in which planning applications can be made and approved, and not opposed all the time?

Helen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Obviously we want to improve the signal, but not blight the countryside with big, ugly lattice masts. A key ask of the debate is that we look at the way in which the companies share equipment to reduce the amount of additional infrastructure that has to be built across the countryside.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) makes a very good point: we have to take into consideration the concerns of communities when we build infrastructure. However, a notification of a planning application has come across my desk today that is not about building a new structure but is about upgrading the transmission equipment at the top of a structure. Very often, it is a case not of putting up anything new but upgrading what is already there. That should not be a problem.

Helen Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, and I will come on to it. The importance of mast and equipment sharing is that hopefully we can streamline the process to upgrade the sites where the equipment is now, and limit the number of additional sites that are applied for.

Some 15.1% by area of North Shropshire is a partial notspot for data, and one in five premises can use only one operator for a phone call. There is a problem of competition, or the lack of it, in rural areas. We all understand that there are logistical challenges with putting masts in wild areas: a power supply is needed, and it might be an area of outstanding beauty, for example. There are all sorts of reasons why it might be difficult. We see the effect of that every day.

In North Shropshire less than 60% of premises have indoor coverage from all operators, compared with the UK average of 86%. The situation is worse in our villages than towns. Less than a third of people who live outside the towns have a choice of more than one mobile operator. That is all based on the existing data maps of coverage, but we know, because the Minister acknowledged it in oral questions recently, that these data maps are extremely optimistic and do not always reflect the lived experience of people on the ground. I mentioned that I had some open meetings with constituents in the summer, and that was one of their key gripes. The map said that they had a signal, but the reality was nothing like that. Accurate data is really important to

ensure that when the providers “meet their obligations”, that is actually what is happening on the ground and not just a theoretical outcome.

The shared rural network involves the four mobile network operators spending £500 million of their own money to end partial notspots. Those areas are deemed to be commercially viable because one operator has already decided to put a mast there and provide a service to the people living there. EE announced that it has already met its obligations under the shared rural network to reduce its partial notspots by June 2024. It did that a couple of weeks ago, so it is running six months ahead of schedule, but as reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, the other three providers have requested a delay and say that they will not hit the 2024 target. This is where the concern arises.

Some of that is down to planning resource. As discussed, planning resource is very difficult. Lots of councils have high levels of vacancy and their planning departments have logistical challenges. There is also resistance to new infrastructure. That all causes a problem.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): As the hon. Lady may be aware from her constituency—it is the case in my constituency and rural parts of Suffolk—church towers are often used to support broadband masts. To speed up the roll-out of this programme, I wonder whether something could be done with planning policy nationally to give a presumption in support of broadband masts being put into church towers where there is a desire to do so.

Helen Morgan: Suffolk is famous for its spectacular medieval church towers. We are perhaps not so well blessed with those structures in North Shropshire, but I think it is a fair point. Easing the planning process is something that definitely should be considered.

Apart from all the logistical issues, the mobile network operators failed to reach an agreement with EE to share their existing equipment. The reason that EE has achieved its objectives so far in advance is because it has an extensive network of existing equipment. This is a commercial issue, because this was a commercial investment. I guess it depends on one’s point of view whether EE was asking for too much money or whether the other operators were not offering a sensible amount, but the reality is that they have failed to reach an agreement. That means that the roll-out by the other three mobile network operators is delayed, and they are potentially building masts where they do not need to.

It is also worth noting that the difficulty of the planning process means that not a single mast has yet been built for the total notspots. The Minister will correct me if my data is out of date and I am wrong about that, but according to the briefing I have seen, that is the case. Masts are going up in the wilder areas using public money.

There are lots of issues. We have a commercial failure to share equipment. We have a planning problem. We know everybody would benefit, so let us have a look at what the potential solution could be. Infrastructure sharing is absolutely key. We should be looking at how we can ensure that the commercial operators do better on that front.

I also want to speak about the potential solution of rural roaming. Rural roaming is what happens when we travel to the continent, or indeed anywhere in the world. Our phone links up to the signal that it can find, and we go about our daily business without noticing what we are connected to.

The industry strongly opposes the idea of rural roaming. It says that it is technically inferior; phones would have a shorter battery life because they are seeking a signal. Obviously, rural roaming does not deal with total notspots where there is no mast to produce a signal for phones to connect to. The industry also says that rural roaming would undermine future investment in the network, which is obviously critical, particularly because the technology moves on all the time, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said.

Having said all that, there is support for rural roaming. A 2019 report by the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs Committee said that it would be a good solution, because it could be implemented in under 18 months and would give between 90% and 95% landmass coverage, which is comparable to the aim of the shared rural network. The Country Land and Business Association has described rural roaming as a common-sense solution, and I can assure the House that there would be a huge amount of support for it among my constituents in North Shropshire. Since that EFRA Committee report in 2019, the shared rural network has been signed up to, but there are significant concerns about the speed of the roll-out, and there is no plan to go further and provide 5G coverage, including stand-alone 5G coverage, in the countryside.

In conclusion, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of having better data when we assess the success of the roll-out of the shared rural network, because there is a real risk that notional targets will be met without the consumer experience being improved. People in North Shropshire and other constituencies do not care whether a map shows that they have coverage. They will be worried sick if their mum goes into hospital, and no one can get in touch with them because they are in a part of the constituency that the phone signal does not reach.

Will the Government consider not only making sure that the data is improved, but taking further steps to improve areas that have partial notspots by requiring mobile network operators to share their equipment more effectively? They should come to an arrangement whereby that can be done, so that the number of masts and the planning process are not major factors in slowing up the roll-out of the shared rural network. If that cannot be done, will the Minister consider requiring the industry to provide rural roaming? As we often say, if it is not acceptable for people in Birmingham to have only one choice of mobile network provider, it is not acceptable for people in Shropshire.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. This is a 60-minute debate. I need to move to the Front-Bench contributions at 5.8 pm, and I have about six Members rising to speak—do the maths. Please bob if you want to speak. If we are to get everyone in, I suggest a limit of three or four minutes for every speech. If Members adhered to that, it would be amazing.

4.47 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria, and I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing this important and necessary debate on the implementation of the shared rural network.

Looking around, I think that we all have particularly rural constituencies—well, nearly all of us—so we know very well the value and importance of having consistent and reliable mobile coverage in our villages and countryside, and of course, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire said, on our farms, for both connectivity and safety.

Through the shared rural network, the Government have an ambitious target of ensuring 95% 4G coverage by 2025, and that target is backed up by around half a billion pounds of Government investment. Clearly, this is a Government who are committed to levelling up and our rural areas, and who aim to ensure that everybody in the UK, no matter where they are, can reap the rewards of that investment.

Ensuring that coverage reaches our rural villages is crucial. I have some beautiful villages in my patch, including Hanslope, Ravenstone, Stoke Goldington and Weston Underwood—crikey, I will have to mention them all now! But you have said that there is a time limit, Dame Maria, so I cannot mention all the beautiful villages. We have thriving local businesses, farms and communities, which all ultimately depend on consistent mobile coverage.

My rural constituents often tell me that they have a restricted choice of networks, compared with people living in the more built-up urban areas that I represent. The shared rural network will address that problem directly by arranging for the UK's four main mobile operators to upgrade their infrastructure and share access with each other. I know that will be welcome news for rural constituencies and communities across the country, giving businesses and our communities more choice and driving competition, which is crucial. That is the key message that I took from the hon. Member for North Shropshire: it is about competition. The economic angle in this debate comes to prominence here. Consistent and complete mobile coverage across the UK is one of the missing pieces of our ability to unlock and unleash economic growth outside the UK's big cities and populated areas. Better coverage will help businesses to increase their efficiency, which is obviously useful for consumers and customers.

The other important side to this debate is the issue of inequality. Improving rural connectivity is about tackling regional inequalities and the digital exclusion that we been fighting during this Parliament. It is about levelling up. With the shift towards more working from home since the pandemic, the need for consistent coverage is more important than ever for working families in rural areas. With these types of national projects, it is important that we take a sustainable approach, and that is why the shared rural network is so effective. The masts will be shared by the network providers. When new masts are built, they will have to go through planning, so that communities get their say. I look forward to seeing how this project develops.

4.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Maria, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this debate. It is hardly a new one, sadly, and of course we have been around this issue many times. I was struck by what my hon. Friend said about the attitude of the industry to rural roaming. The exact same arguments were advanced over 10 years ago, when we were trying to persuade the operators to share masts. Frankly, like many present, I would have a lot more sympathy for the companies if, in the intervening years, they had got their act together and made the necessary investment in the rural network; we would then not be where we are today.

On data, my hon. Friend is right in saying that access to networks is critical. I would even go one step further and say that what we really need is accurate signals inside buildings. So often with partial notspots, a person will get a signal, but they have to be prepared to go to the bottom of their garden at 4 am in a howling gale. To my mind, that is not meaningful access. As the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) said, there have been significant changes, and we should accept that there has been progress, but it has been absolutely glacial. People in cities and towns would not accept it, so I do not understand why people in rural areas should be expected to tolerate it.

There has been significant progress on the emergency services network in recent years, and I should declare an interest, in that I have an EE mast on my land, which was constructed as a consequence of the ESN development. We should now look at the fact that the ESN is limited to land, and up to the 12 nautical mile limit. There are good and valuable reasons for extending the ESN beyond that; emergencies do not just happen on dry land. We could all say a lot more on this issue, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire for securing the time for this debate, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

4.54 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this very important debate. I am lucky enough to represent a constituency that is 335 square miles of pure, beautiful, rural Buckinghamshire. Mobile signal is critical, day to day, in many walks of life. There has been a growth in the number of people working from home, and many try to take Zoom or Teams calls in local cafés. My children endlessly demand that we stream all sorts of dreadful songs to make the journey go a bit quicker, but often, as we go through the villages, Siri delivers that dreaded message: there is a problem because it cannot get a data signal. That comes up time and again when I talk to constituents.

On my summer surgery tour last year, I went to the village of Cuddington, which is not far from my village of Chearsley, in which people also struggle to get mobile signal, particularly inside buildings. Constituents in Cuddington were saying that they literally could not get a signal on any network in that village. That is absolutely devastating for people. They may need to make an emergency call, or they may have an urgent work commitment—they need to get that email out—and

they simply cannot do it. It is a huge problem. While the shared rural network is a brilliant idea and a fantastic initiative, we need to put a rocket underneath it to get it working far more quickly.

There really is not a technological excuse for this. Many moons ago, on my honeymoon in the middle of the Masai Mara, I was struck by the fact that there was not a building to be seen, yet there was still a strong 4G signal on my mobile phone. I was part of a delegation to rural Israel just a couple of weeks ago. We went down to the Gaza border. Some of those places had been so brutally attacked that they were literally in ruins, yet there was still a solid 4G—and at times 5G—signal on my mobile phone, but when I am waiting to pick up my son outside the school gates, I cannot even check my WhatsApp messages.

My message to the Minister is that this is a brilliant initiative, but it needs the Government to put a real boost underneath it, and to put pressure on industry. I fully accept and congratulate EE for being ahead of the curve on this, but we need all the networks to be ahead of the curve on this, and we need to get this right for all of our rural constituents.

4.57 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this important debate. What we are discussing, as we do in many debates on rural areas, is the feeling and the reality of being left behind. Rural areas encounter additional challenges and are so often forgotten. That is felt in my constituency of Somerton and Frome.

The shared rural network pledges to bring 95% 4G coverage by 2025, yet 39 postcode areas in Somerton and Frome do not yet even have the soon-to-be-phased-out 3G coverage. The shared rural network mythology sets the minimum required coverage signal strength at the equivalent of just a single bar on an iPhone 7 Plus, if anyone still has one of those. The Local Government Association states that it has often found a disconnect between the coverage that mobile network operators claim, and the experience of residents. As the world is rapidly moving away from 4G and on to 5G, my constituents could be left with a single bar of 4G after the successful roll-out of the network.

There are reports circulating that three of the mobile network operators in the shared rural network are struggling with the requirement to meet their 4G interim coverage targets by the end of June 2024. As we have already heard, this is leading to reasonable fears that rural residents will have to wait even longer for reliable mobile connectivity. In Somerton and Frome, the lack of mobile coverage means that rural businesses struggle to set up mobile payments and may be more reliant on using cash, which is difficult as some of our market towns, including Castle Cary, do not have any bank branches left. That makes rural areas less attractive for people to move to, or move their businesses to.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire said in her powerful opening speech, the lack of mobile connectivity also compromises the safety of lone workers and of those who work in rural agricultural businesses, who often operate large equipment in notspot areas.

David Duguid: The hon. Lady is making some excellent points. What she says brings to mind a point that I almost raised when my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) was speaking. Does the hon. Lady agree that as there is more and more of an assumption that we are all digitally connected—whether it is through online banking or through annoying songs for our children—people who are not connected are made to feel even more remote as the digital world develops without them?

Sarah Dyke: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. A recent report from the National Farmers Union confirmed that by stating that four out of five farmers do not have reliable mobile signal throughout their farms, and one in 20 has no outdoor locations with reliable mobile signal.

My constituents have been in touch with me to relay their fears of being left unconnected to mobile networks. In West Bradley, an elderly couple who suffer from numerous health issues told me that they have no mobile reception in their home. Their telephone provider is looking to switch them to a digital landline, meaning that in the event of a power cut they would be left unable to contact emergency services. That is a very real and scary prospect for many people living in rural areas.

Swathes of Wincanton are 4G partial notspots, meaning that they are not served by any of the mobile operators. Currently, that means that residents who may receive coverage with EE, for example, do not receive any coverage when they cross the town and surrounding areas as they go about their daily lives. That problem could be resolved with the introduction of rural roaming, which would allow residents to connect to any network active in their area even if 4G is not available through their operator. Back in 2018, Ofcom stated that rural roaming could be a solution for the notspot issues that plague our rural communities, yet the Government and the operators have simply refused.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire stated, she has tabled a Bill that would incentivise operators to allow customers to rural roam. I fully support those sensible measures to help my constituents who suffer the plight of unfair mobile connectivity, and I hope to see quick progress with the shared rural network to ensure that rural areas are not left any more behind than they are already.

5.2 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this excellent debate.

There is a common theme here, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith). I want to take everyone to a community called Borgie, which is on the north coast of Sutherland facing the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). In Borgie, an elderly gentleman fell over in his garden. Exactly as we have heard already, he did not have a mobile signal and had to crawl some distance to a landline to call for help.

In the same community, I also have a constituent named Jean, who had a mast installed on her ground in 2019. I give credit where it is due; Openreach and EE, the companies involved, did what they needed to do. You would think that this was a good news story, Dame Maria, but it is not. SSE needs to connect the mast to the electrical grid for it to do its work. It has promised again and again that the work will be done—to absolutely no effect. We are now in 2024, almost five years since the mast was put up, and it is no good to man or beast, as we say in the highlands. On a slightly more humorous note, her neighbours in Borgie call the mast “Jean’s folly”. Alas, it is a folly indeed.

A lot of public money has been spent on the mast, so in this incredibly brief contribution I make an appeal to the Minister. Could she, in the goodness of her heart, representing the United Kingdom Government, have a quiet and meaningful word with the Scottish Government and tell them to get their act together with SSE to get that mast connected? In the meantime, we have no mobile connectivity whatsoever.

Finally, as others have said, we have power cuts all over the UK. My wife was cut off this very morning in the highlands; luckily, we got the electricity back on again. My final plea is therefore that the masts need to have some sort of solar power attached to them. I would be extraordinarily grateful to the Minister if she used her charms to sort out this extremely annoying problem, which is quite dangerous for a remote community in the highlands.

5.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this important debate.

There have been a lot of contributions, and I will zoom through most of them. We had contributions from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who raised concerns about signals within buildings, which is a different technical issue but one that still causes problems.

Mr Carmichael: There’s a problem in this building!

Carol Monaghan: There is a problem in this building as well, of course.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) told stories about his children; I think many of us can relate to those. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) is unfortunately still struggling with 3G, never mind 4G. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about Jean’s folly. Jean is the name of my dog—a different Jean. I gently point out to the hon. Member that this is a reserved issue, so it is incumbent on the UK Government, not the Scottish Government, to sort it out.

It was only last month that a number of us—the same characters—were here in Westminster Hall debating the difficulties arising from the switch from copper wire to internet fibre signals for phone lines. Today’s debate is important because, with the removal of the copper wire network, if an internet signal drops out, as has happened to many households this week with Storms Isha and

[Carol Monaghan]

Jocelyn, people rely on the 4G network, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire said. If the 4G network is not reliable, people are left without the resilience to deal with emergency situations, as we have heard. The hon. Member also raised concerns about the speed of the 4G roll-out. That is rather ironic: at the same time as the roll-out is happening too slowly, the switch from copper wire to fibre is happening too quickly. There seems to be a real—pardon the pun—disconnect between those two issues.

The shared rural network is a joint venture between the UK Government and the big four mobile providers. It should provide 4G coverage to 95% of the UK, and enable rural communities and businesses to gain greater connectivity. In Scotland, the roll-out must be done with an awareness of the importance of the natural environment. Although the issue is reserved, as I said, the Scottish Government have done some work in this area to bring together different groups and ensure that the roll-out is done in a sympathetic way. The Scottish Government have organised and participated in discussions with national parks and NatureScot to ensure that we get mutually acceptable outcomes.

We have heard about some difficulties regarding planning. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who is no longer in his place, raised concerns about ugly infrastructure. If we do the roll-out in conjunction with local communities, we can look at creativity of placement and the use of existing structures.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. EE has recently announced that it has met its coverage targets for the first phase of the rural network programme. We need to know whether that statement matches reality. How is EE checking that? Is it actually going round with a mobile phone and ensuring that there is coverage everywhere that there should be coverage, or is it saying that the mast should provide coverage in that area? Those are two very different things. How are the Government checking what the mobile providers are saying? What further incentives are the Government providing to ensure proper coverage?

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that the hon. Lady is coming to a close.

Carol Monaghan: I am just finishing. It would be useful to hear about specific interventions that the Government are taking in tricky rural areas.

5.10 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing the debate. It is vital not only for those in rural areas, but for constituencies like mine, which has many hard-to-reach villages.

I must take issue with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt). We have many rural areas in Islwyn. Indeed, the National Farmers Union hosted a farmers' breakfast in Crumlin last week. He is always able to visit if he wants to; he has an open invitation.

There was a vital contribution to the debate from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who highlighted the contrast between

the coverage in urban and rural areas. Those with young children will no doubt sympathise with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith); there are many times when I have been on long journeys with my children and tried to keep them entertained when we could not get an internet connection. There was also an interesting contribution from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke), who said that rural communities developing 4G will be left behind when there are further developments in 5G.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) told us a harrowing story about a constituent in the village of Borgie who had suffered a fall and could not speak to anybody because he did not have an internet connection. I genuinely hope that as a result of the hon. Member's campaigning, Jean's folly will be rectified and the good people of Borgie will finally have full internet connection. I wish him all the best with that campaign.

Many people regularly work in rural areas and remote locations that currently lack a good 4G connection. That work could be in tourism, construction or the provision of any number of at-home services in communities, particularly in health and social care. Having no 4G means that when someone is working on the go, there can be no online payments and no access to real-time data. As an example, builders have to take time out of their working day to drive to somewhere where they can get 4G to work and download the most up-to-date information they need, just to make sure that they can access the documents required for them to work safely and effectively.

According to DEFRA, half of all rural businesses report that notspots have a negative impact on their profits, turnover and productivity. Many attribute hundreds of pounds of losses a month to poor connectivity. The issue is also important for lone workers—for example, in the agricultural sector—who need to know that they can stay in touch with colleagues or at least contact someone if things go wrong, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross described for his constituent.

People's lives can be transformed by a reliable connection to 4G. It is important to recognise that online spaces can mitigate loneliness, which is crucial for people who do not have regular opportunities for physical interaction. Staying connected with friends and family, regardless of one's location, is a brilliant benefit from being online and is key to maintaining good mental health. An internet connection can facilitate access and inclusion for disabled people—whether through apps that meet communication needs or through online information about available services. Now that many people do not have a local branch of their chosen bank, particularly outside cities, online banking from home is essential and is often used as an excuse for why a bank has closed. It is often those who live in an area without 4G who are most in need of it, because the bricks-and-mortar versions of services no longer exist.

Time is of the essence in securing access for those who have so far been left behind, so progress is to be welcomed. However, the Government once stated their aim to ensure that 95% of the UK had partial coverage by 2022, meaning 4G from at least one provider. Unfortunately, like a lot of the Government's goals, this goal was pushed back to 2025. I am afraid that that is

not good enough for so many rural communities. The programme has required commitments from the four mobile operators in the UK to invest in areas with partial coverage, in conjunction with public investment that will provide for hard-to-reach areas, like my own. One of the four operators has already succeeded in meeting its interim target for June 2024, but the remaining three reportedly wrote to the Government last October, asking for more time. I hope that the Minister will elaborate on that when she responds, and that it will not result in another postponement.

I do not want anybody thinking that I want the Government to fail. Being connected is extremely important—a lifeline for rural and hard-to-reach communities and people who are alone. It is vital and, as we have heard, often lifesaving.

As we have heard today, internet access is a necessity nowadays for so many people to access services, work, school and leisure. As we have seen during lockdown, it really was a lifeline to keep people connected and to form some sort of online community. I am hopeful that we will continue to see the expansion of 4G coverage and eventually 5G coverage in rural communities so that everyone can reap the benefits of access to the internet.

5.15 pm

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing this very important debate on the implementation of a shared rural network. I am glad to have her support for the SRN, and I thank her for showcasing the Government's commitment to this extremely important programme. I am grateful to the hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, which speaks to the importance of connectivity in everybody's constituencies. I will say a little more about that later.

I need to set out some of the challenges that we have when it comes to telecoms. There are balances to be made in terms of investment and infrastructure versus competition and low prices for consumers and making sure that MNOs implement their security commitments. Some of these things are difficult for us, but we are making good progress in getting people the connectivity that they need.

The shared rural network is a deal between the UK Government and the four mobile network operators—EE, Three, Virgin Media, O2 and Vodafone—signed in March 2020 to share an investment of £1 billion. It is delivering 4G coverage to about 95% of the UK land mass by the end of 2025. That is a commitment whereby we put up half the money and they put up half the money. We think that this shows great value for the taxpayer in getting the connectivity that we want.

The SRN is there to tackle the digital divide issues that hon. Members have highlighted with respect to connectivity in urban and rural areas. It supports economic growth and contributes substantially to public safety; an element of it involves building on the emergency services network. It means much greater life chances for people in those connected communities. We all understand from the pandemic what having poor connectivity meant for education, healthcare and so much more, so I understand hon. Members' desire to get connectivity as quickly as possible.

This is just one of the interventions that the Government are making when it comes to connectivity. I am sure that hon. Members will be familiar with Project Gigabit, with which we are trying to drive gigabit connectivity in people's constituencies. It is incredibly well supported by hon. Members. I am always grateful for that engagement—particularly, if I may say so, from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who is single-handedly driving roll-out in Scotland.

David Duguid: In Banff and Buchan.

Julia Lopez: In Banff and Buchan particularly. I should like to say to my hon. Friend that there has been some progress. I know that he shares my frustration at the slowness of the Scottish roll-out, which is a unique situation whereby the Scottish Government are driving it, as opposed to the rest of the UK, where the UK Government are taking the lead.

David Duguid: Can the shared rural network programme be used to help to fill the notspots not just for mobile signal but for fixed signal? As the Minister has alluded to, the Scottish Government's R100 programme has absolutely failed to deliver on their promises for fixed broadband.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend highlights a challenge whereby some communities have not only bad broadband connection, but bad telephone connection. Sometimes one can substitute for the other: people can tether off their phone signal. He has a constituency that has poor coverage for both, and I am very sympathetic. As he is aware, I am trying to do what I can as a UK Government Minister to substitute for some of the challenges that we have had with the Scottish roll-out.

We are looking at pilots on satellite connectivity in the very hardest areas to reach; we are also looking at some of the wireless solutions that my hon. Friend alluded to. Is the technology there? Some of these are probably not technologies that will substitute for gigabit roll-out, but we are seeing where they can. I can only assure him, as I do on a regular basis, that I am pushing and looking at every lever I have to get him the connectivity he desires. I should also say that we have had some progress in our discussions with the Scottish Government recently. We are having a regional procurement, and they are finally getting their act together on some of the more local procurement. I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will start to see the benefit.

Carol Monaghan: Once again, I point out that broadband roll-out, as well as 4G roll-out, remains reserved to Westminster. The Scottish Government are of course helping to support the roll-out, but it is a reserved issue.

Julia Lopez: Perhaps at some point the hon. Lady might like to update us on the progress and success of the R100 programme and its impact on constituents.

I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for highlighting some of the issues in Borgie in particular. I will happily take up the issue of Jean's folly and see whether we can make any progress on it. I thank the hon. Member for highlighting cases showing the real-life impact that poor connectivity can have.

[Julia Lopez]

Before I respond to points raised by other hon. Members, it might be helpful if I explain how the SRN will be implemented across the UK and what has been achieved for some time when it comes to boosting mobile coverage. To deliver the programme, the operators are investing about half a billion pounds to eliminate the majority of partial notspots, which are the areas that receive coverage from at least one but not all four operators. The Government will then go even further and tackle the total number of notspots with our contribution of half a billion pounds. Those are the hardest-to-reach rural areas that currently have no 4G coverage at all.

By upgrading existing networks and working together on shared infrastructure in new sites, we will transform mobile coverage in rural areas and—this is key—maximising the use of existing infrastructure. I was particularly glad to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan about how we are seeing that sharing of infrastructure in his constituency. We want to minimise environmental impacts, but also ensure best value for the taxpayer.

One of the ways we are trying to speed up roll-out is by easing the planning process. Several hon. Members raised the need to make more straightforward the erection of new infrastructure, as we did in the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022. It can be a difficult balance, because a number of hon. Members are unhappy about the siting of masts, and we are encouraging operators to put in mast applications in sensible places. To have engagement with local authorities, I wrote to all councils to set out where they have powers in that regard. I also raised the matter with Ofcom, because I know that there are some issues in particular parts of the country. We want to make sure that we can ease people's concerns about the impact of mast infrastructure on communities, because pausing roll-out on that basis is in nobody's interest.

Greg Smith: I have multiple examples, particularly of 5G masts. One was quite literally put in somebody's back garden, right on the fence line; another, in Monks Risborough, was right on the edge of a shopping parade. Are the networks actually being receptive to my hon. Friend's demands? Are we seeing a real change in where they are putting in applications to put up the new infrastructure?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. One of the challenges is trying to get that transparency and get data and information that goes beyond the anecdotal, to give us a proper picture of what is happening on the ground. It seems to me that this is happening in particular areas with particular companies, so I am trying to get that information. In the meantime, I am talking to Ofcom and local authorities and trying to understand where there are problems. There are also working groups between altnets so that there can be better sharing of mast infrastructure, which I think will ease some of the challenges.

Mr Carmichael: My own experience, and I have the scars to prove it, goes all the way back to the mobile infrastructure project. My experience has always been

that the mobile operators will only come to the table when they are put under serious pressure. My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) pointed out that three of the mobile operators will be wanting extensions to the time they have to meet their targets. I encourage the Minister to harden her heart when the pleas come in. If we do not hold the mobile operators' feet to the fire, we will never get anywhere.

Julia Lopez: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have robust conversations with the mobile network operators. He should also bear in mind that we are asking quite a lot of them, and there are a number of commitments. We want them to speed up roll-out and to make sure that their network infrastructure is secure, so there is a little bit of give and take on some of these issues. I always bear in mind the importance of not soft-soaping these things, and of having honest and robust conversations when they are needed. I am fully aware of the impact on communities that are poorly connected. I can only assure hon. Members of the Government's desire to make sure that people get connectivity as quickly as possible. However, there are difficult balancing questions with some of these issues.

On the shared rural network, each operator will reach 90% geographic coverage. That will result in 84% of the UK having 4G coverage from all four operators, and 95% from at least one. That will increase choice, boost productivity and provide increased public safety in rural areas. The programme is already well under way, and coverage from all four operators has been increasing in every nation. Coverage from at least one operator has also improved. We are now approaching 93% geographic coverage for overall 4G. That is up from 91%, so we are on track to hit the 95% target. Those improvements have all come since the SRN deal was first agreed.

The first part of the programme, which is funded by industry, is tackling those partial notspots. The four MNOs have deployed over 190 new sites since 2020 to meet their SRN targets, and 35 new sites have been added this year. That is leading to improvements across the country. We are also progressing well in our part of the deal. The majority of our investment, as hon. Members opposite will be aware, is in Scotland, which currently has the lowest 4G coverage of any of the four nations, perhaps for obvious geographical reasons.

Operators and their suppliers have been establishing where masts should go to deliver the best coverage by carrying out a number of site suitability surveys. That has led to a number of letters to me about protecting the beauty of the highlands and so on. I would like to take this opportunity to assure hon. Members that we are trying to make sure we have the right balance, getting the infrastructure in place but not being ridiculous about where that infrastructure is sited. Obviously there are concerns, and some new masts will be needed, but probably not as many as people fear.

The issue of roaming has been raised. My understanding from discussions in the Department is that rural roaming was looked at previously, and it was decided that it could dissuade operators from going into rural areas because they would lose the competitive benefit of getting there first. It is a difficult balance. I appreciate the arguments put forward by the hon. Member for North Shropshire and am interested to test them.

I am aware that I am running out of time—there is so much to cover. Hon. Members raised the issue of the PSTN role. Again, I believe assurances have been offered on that front. There was a summit raised on the copper switch-off, but we are also looking at energy resilience.

We are very alive to the Ofcom data issue. We asked Ofcom to improve its reporting last year, and work is under way. We are alive to the concerns. I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire and will happily engage with her on all these issues and more, whenever she wishes.

5.28 pm

Helen Morgan: I thank the shadow Minister, the Minister, the SNP spokesperson and all right hon. and hon. Members for contributing to our debate on this important issue. I also thank the Library for producing an excellent briefing, and all the people in the industry—the

mobile network operators, the industry organisations, the Country Land and Business Association and the Rural Services Network—for helping me to pull together the necessary information. I am extremely grateful to them all.

I will pick up with the Minister the issues of data, equipment sharing and rural roaming, because they are extremely important. Indeed, my private Member's Bill on the subject is due to be debated on Friday, and I am sure we will pick things up again then.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the implementation of the Shared Rural Network.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 January 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Smarter Regulation: Improving Price Transparency and Product Information for Consumers

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Today, my Department has published the Government's response to the consultation on "smarter regulation: improving price transparency and product information for consumers". The consultation sought views and evidence on steps the Government could take to improve price and information transparency for consumers.

The response sets out our intent to reform the Price Marking Order 2004, and to legislate on hidden fees—"drip pricing", fake reviews, online interface orders and interim online interface orders.

The Government plan to:

- Reform the Price Marking Order 2004 (Retained EU Law), simplifying the requirements making it easier for businesses to comply with and for consumers to compare prices of products;

- facilitate the DEFRA, Scottish, and Welsh Government plans to create deposit return schemes;

- introduce new rules on hidden fees—"drip pricing", by requiring that unavoidable and mandatory fees be included in the headline price or indicated at the start of the purchasing process;

- prohibit commercial practices related to fake reviews; and

- extend the power to apply for online interface orders and interim online interface orders to additional public enforcers.

I am placing a copy of the consultation response in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS203]

Product Safety and Metrology: (Amendment) Regulations 2024

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Today, I am updating Parliament on developments to the Government's approach to the UK Conformity Assessment (UKCA) product marking and plans to continue recognition of 'conformité européenne' (CE) beyond 31 December 2024. The Government intend to lay legislation in spring to provide businesses with the flexibility to place goods that fall under 21 product regulations and meet current EU requirements on the market in Great Britain. Later in the year, the Government also intend to introduce greater labelling flexibility, including the option for manufacturers to use digital labelling. This forms part of the Government's smarter regulation programme of regulatory reform, designed to improve regulation across the board, ensuring it is effective and used only where necessary and proportionate.

I announced in August 2023 that the Government plan to extend CE recognition indefinitely for the product regulations managed by the Department for Business and Trade. Since then, we have continued to engage with industry. We have listened to businesses—both in the UK and those who supply the UK from abroad, and we are taking further action. I am today announcing that the Government intend to lay legislation, this spring, using powers under the Retained EU Law Act 2023. This legislation will support economic growth and provide businesses with greater flexibility to continue to place products on the market in Great Britain using either CE or UKCA marking after 31 December 2024. In Northern Ireland, the CE mark is and will remain recognised, pursuant to the Windsor Framework.

The continued recognition of current EU requirements, including the CE and reversed epsilon markings, will apply to 21 product regulations, including the 18 product regulations owned by the Department of Business and Trade, previously announced on 1 August 2023. Following feedback from industry, we are also continuing CE recognition for a further three regulation, which will now include: the Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products 2010 Regulations—Department for Energy Security and Net Zero; the Explosives Regulations 2014—Department for Work and Pensions, Health and Safety Executive; and the Restriction of the Use of Certain Hazardous Substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2012—Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.

The Restriction of the Use of Certain Hazardous Substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2012 is included within this announcement. However, we are taking a two-part approach given the role of exemptions in these regulations. Where products meet the maximum concentration values set out in Annex II to the EU RoHS Directive (2011/65/EU), we will continue to recognise current EU regulations and CE marking. Where a product relies on an exemption, we will also continue to recognise current EU regulations and CE marking provided there is an equivalent exemption under the Restriction of the Use of Certain Hazardous Substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2012.

The UK Government will also introduce new measures to introduce a 'Fast track UKCA' process, allowing manufacturers to use the UKCA marking to demonstrate compliance in Great Britain with either UKCA product requirements or EU product requirements where they are recognised. Where products are covered by multiple regulations, a mixture of both UKCA and CE conformity assessment procedures can be used. This is designed to provide longer term certainty and flexibility for businesses if the UK mandates UKCA marking for certain regulations in the future.

The Government also recognise the important role that UK conformity assessment bodies play in ensuring the compliance of goods to UKCA requirements and their role in supporting innovation. We will continue to work with the UK Accreditation Service and industry to monitor capacity of the conformity assessment market.

In response to feedback from businesses through engagement and the Product Safety Review consultation, the Government also intend to provide for permanent labelling flexibility to enable importers of goods from the EU and the rest of the world to supply their details indelibly, on an accompanying document, the packaging

or on an adhesive label. The Government will also introduce the option for manufacturers to use digital labelling. Businesses will be able to include the UKCA marking, manufacturer details, importer details and the declaration of conformity via, for example, a QR code attached to the product via a label. In scanning the code, the information can be accessed by a website or app. We will set out further details in due course.

The Government are taking a tailored approach to support the interests of British businesses and ensure consumers are protected, taking account of the specialist nature of each regulation. This means that not all product regulations covered by the CE or UKCA regime will be included in this legislation. Separate approaches apply to products covered by: the Medical Devices Regulations, the Construction Products Regulations, the Cableway Installations Regulations, the Carriage of Dangerous Goods and Use of Transportable Pressure Equipment (Amendment) Regulations, the Railways (Interoperability) Regulations, Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Regulations, and the Merchant Shipping (Marine Equipment) Regulations.

The UK Government will continue to monitor any regulatory changes the EU may make in future, and we will continue to work with industry to ensure UK regulatory policy reflects the interests of British businesses and consumers. We recognise the importance of being able to mandate UKCA marking, and we may choose to do this in the future for certain regulations where this is in the interests of British businesses, consumer safety, or environmental protection.

This announcement is in line with the REUL Act Report published Monday 22 January 2024, which outlines the progress the Government have made in reforming and revoking retained EU over the last six months.

[HCWS202]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telegraph Media Group: Public Interest Intervention Notice

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): My Department has today written to solicitors acting for the Barclay family and RedBird IMI, the current and proposed new owners of Telegraph Media Group, to inform them that I am “minded to” issue a new public interest intervention notice.

This week, RedBird IMI has made changes to the corporate structure of the potential acquiring entities of Telegraph Media Group and this creates a new relevant merger situation. RedBird IMI asserts that no changes have been made to the identity, nature or economic interests of the ultimate shareholders.

I have noted the very late stage in the process at which information about this new corporate structure has been shared and implemented. I do not consider that this is conducive to the full and proper functioning of the process. I expect the parties to ensure that all the relevant authorities have timely access to all relevant information, and in sufficient detail, in order that they, and subsequently I as Secretary of State, can make our determinations.

The new public interest intervention notice that I am minded to issue relates to concerns that I continue to have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the planned acquisition of Telegraph Media Group by RedBird IMI, and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

A “minded to” letter has therefore been issued to the parties on the following public interest ground specified in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002:

(2A) The need for—

(a) accurate presentation of news; and

(b) free expression of opinion;

in newspapers is specified in this section.

These letters, and other relevant updates, will be published on gov.uk.

The “minded to” letter invites further representations in writing from the parties and gives them until 9 am on Thursday 25 January to respond. My Department will publish versions of these “minded to” letters on gov.uk in due course.

If I decide to issue a new intervention notice, the next stage would be for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest concerns and for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to assess and report to me on whether a relevant merger situation has been created and any impact this may have on competition. Following these reports, I would need to decide whether to refer the matter for a more detailed investigation by the CMA under section 45 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

The public interest intervention notice issued on 30 November 2023 and the pre-emptive action order made on 1 December 2023 remain in force.

DCMS will keep Parliament updated on progress with this media merger case.

[HCWS207]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner: Annual Report 2022-23

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the annual report of the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner.

The Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner, who is appointed by the Home Secretary under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, covers independent statutory roles.

The report covers the exercise of the statutory functions over the reporting year.

This was the final report by Professor Sampson before leaving his post on 31 October 2023. I am grateful for his contribution to this important area of work.

The report has been laid before the House and it will be available from the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS204]

Licensing Act: Age Verification: Digital Identity, Technology and Remote Sales

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government are today launching a consultation on whether to allow digital identities and technology to play a role in age verification for alcohol sales, as well as whether to amend legislation in order to specify that for sales of alcohol that do not take place face to face, age verification should take place at the point of delivery as well as sale.

The Licensing Act 2003 covers the retail sale and supply of alcohol. One of the licensing objectives that the Act seeks to uphold is the protection of children from harm, meaning that alcohol must not be sold to someone under 18. Secondary legislation made under the Act specifies that if anyone appears to be under 18, they need to produce identification which bears their photograph, date of birth and either a holographic mark or ultraviolet feature. In practice this means that currently only physical identity documents are permitted.

The Government are keen to enable the secure and appropriate use of new technologies that can improve the experience of consumers and retailers. However, the current wording of the Act does not allow technology to play a part in the age-verification process for alcohol sales. A person must make the decision on whether an individual is old enough to purchase alcohol.

We are therefore consulting on whether to amend the Act so as to allow digital identities and technology to play a role in age verification. The need for robust national standards for digital identities and technology remains paramount in order to provide confidence to retailers and consumers alike that they are fit for purpose. Any change would reflect the wider cross-Government position on the use of digital identities and technology for the sale of age-restricted products and will take effect only once there are Government-approved national standards in place.

We are also considering whether the Act adequately covers transactions that do not take place face to face. Currently, the Act only sets out a requirement to verify age at the point of sale or appropriation to a contract, not at the point of delivery. We are reviewing whether this is still right and whether there should additionally be checks at the point of delivery and/or service. We are consulting on whether to amend the Act so that it is explicit about when age verification must take place.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and the Government will publish their response in due course. A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS205]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Finance

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today, the Government have announced additional measures for local authorities, worth £600 million. This includes £500 million of new funding for councils with responsibility for adult and

children's social care, distributed through the social care grant. Further details on the exceptional provision of this funding will be set out at the upcoming Budget.

Taking into account this new funding, local government in England will see an increase in core spending power of up to £4.5 billion next year, or 7.5% in cash terms—an above-inflation increase—rising from £60.2 billion in 2023-24 to up to £64.7 billion in 2024-25.

By making progress on the Government's plan to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt, we now can provide this extra funding to councils to continue to provide vital services for their communities.

Introduction

On 18 December, I published a consultation on the provisional 2024-25 local government finance settlement. This consultation's proposals made available over £64 billion to local authorities, an increase in core spending power of almost £4 billion, or 6.5% in cash terms on 2023-24.

The consultation ran until 15 January 2024 and we received 267 responses. Alongside this, the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), engaged extensively with colleagues across the House, meeting over 90 MPs and local government leaders to understand their views. I am grateful to all who responded.

We know that councils have faced cost pressures as a result of high inflation. That is why the Prime Minister has prioritised halving it—it is important that we stick to the plan. The Government have also listened to the sector and to the issues raised by Members of the House. For this reason, I am today announcing a wide-ranging package of support for local government.

First and foremost, I am pleased to announce an additional £500 million of funding for local government to deliver social care. This is further to the £1 billion in additional funding announced at the autumn statement 2022 and in July 2023. It will enable councils to continue to provide crucial social care services for their local communities, particularly for children.

Moreover, at the final settlement, I will set out plans to:

- increase the funding guarantee to 4%, ensuring that all authorities see a minimum increase in core spending power of 4%, before local decisions on council tax—a key ask of district councils. Local authorities should of course be mindful of cost of living pressures when taking any decisions relating to council tax;

- support rural councils by increasing the rural service delivery grant;

- provide support to authorities experiencing significant difficulties because of internal

- drainage board levies; and

- provide additional funding for the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly, in recognition of their unique circumstances.

These measures mean the local government finance settlement for 2024-25 will make available over £64.7 billion, an increase of 7.5% in cash terms on 2023-24. Representatives of all tiers for local government have expressed support for these measures, which will provide critical support across the sector to deliver services.

Social care

The Government recognise that pressures on social care, including for children, have increased significantly. In February 2023 the Government published their strategy for children's social care reform. After listening to the sector's consultation responses, and to make sure that councils can continue to deliver these services while we build the evidence for reform, I have today announced an additional £500 million of funding for local government. This will be allocated through the social care grant, which is ringfenced for adult and children's social care. Where possible, councils should invest in areas that help place children's social care services on a sustainable financial footing, while being mindful of the level of adult social care provision. This includes investment in expanding family help and targeted early intervention, expanding kinship care, and boosting the number of foster carers. This increase in funding will be reflected in the local authority allocations published at the final local government finance settlement.

This funding, in turn, will reduce pressures on other areas of children's services, such as home to school transport, where we recognise there has been a significant increase in pressures for special educational needs and disability services.

Funding guarantee

We know that the whole sector is facing pressures, and we need to support all tiers of government to provide the services on which our communities rely. We have listened to the asks of the sector during the consultation period and, as part of this commitment, we are increasing the funding guarantee. This means councils will see their core spending power increase by a minimum of 4% before they have taken any local decisions on council tax. This is an increase from the 3% funding guarantee that we had proposed in the provisional settlement.

Rural services delivery grant

The Government have listened to the sector's consultation responses and recognise the specific challenges and difficulties that local councils can face in serving dispersed populations in rural areas. I am therefore announcing my intention to provide a significant increase in funding delivered through the rural services delivery grant. I am announcing a £15 million increase to the grant in 2024-25. This is an increase of over 15%, making available a total of £110 million next year. This is the largest cash increase in the rural services delivery grant since 2018-19, and the second successive year of above-inflation increases.

Internal drainage boards

Last year we provided one-off funding to local authorities struggling with internal drainage board levies. We have listened to authorities that continue to face sustained increases in these levies. We will again provide £3 million outside of the settlement to support those experiencing the biggest pressures. We will work with the sector and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to implement a long-term solution.

Islands

In recognition of the unique circumstances facing our island authorities, and their physical separation from the mainland, we will be increasing funding to the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly.

We will set out full details at the final settlement.

Working with the sector on efficiency

I would like to emphasise that this money, alongside all funding announced at the provisional settlement, should be used by local authorities to deliver the frontline services on which our communities rely, rather than put aside for later use. We will therefore continue to monitor the level of local authority reserves.

Looking ahead, we know that there is work to be done between national and local government to improve productivity in local government, as part of our efforts to return the sector to sustainability in the future. While the new funding announced today is an important part of these efforts, alongside ongoing work in adult and children's social care, we can go further. That is why today we are asking local authorities to produce productivity plans setting out how they will improve service performance and reduce wasteful expenditure to ensure every area is making best use of taxpayers' money. I encourage local authorities to consider whether expenditure on discredited equality, diversity and inclusion programmes meets this objective.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be establishing an expert panel to advise the Government on financial sustainability in the sector, which will include the Office for Local Government and the Local Government Association. The panel will review local authority productivity plans and advise the Government on best practice in this area. The Government will monitor these plans and use them to inform funding settlements in future years. Our aim is for local authorities to produce these plans by the summer recess, and we will design a process for local authorities that will enable them to do so. We will provide more information on these requirements for local authorities at the final settlement.

With regard to part-time work for full-time pay arrangements—the so called four-day working week—the Government continue to believe that this reduces the potential capacity to deliver services by up to 20% and, as a result, does not deliver value. The Government have already taken steps to deter the sector from operating these practices, consulted on the use of financial levers at future settlements, and will legislate if necessary.

Conclusion

These proposals will provide councils with the support they need, ensuring stability and delivering additional resources for the most acute pressures. We will also hold the sector to account and help maximise local authorities' efficiency and value for money.

Alongside the measures announced today, the Government continue to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases through the proposed package of referendum principles, including the 3% core council tax principle and the 2% adult social care precept. It is for individual local authorities to determine whether to use the flexibilities detailed above, taking into consideration the pressures many households are facing.

We are committed to improving the local government finance system beyond this settlement in the next Parliament, and the Minister for Local Government will be engaging with the sector on this over the coming months.

The final local government finance settlement will be published in full early next month, and the statutory reports that comprise the settlement will be subject to debate in the House of Commons shortly after.

This written ministerial statement covers England only. The Barnett formula will apply to this funding in the usual way.

[HCWS206]

Petitions

Wednesday 24 January 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

On-call doctor provision at Westmorland General Hospital

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares opposition against the decision from Cumbria Health on Call to reduce the on-call doctor provision from Kendal overnight three times a week; further declares the essential service which overnight doctors at Westmorland General Hospital provide to the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to urge Cumbria Health on Call to restore the on-call doctor provision from Kendal.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, *Official Report*, 5 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 316.]

[P002883]

Observations from the Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately):

The Government are aware that following a period of analysis Cumbria Health on Call, or CHoC, has introduced a change in staffing model, reducing the presence of a site-based clinician at the Westmorland General Hospital between the hours of 2 am and 8 am on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday—Wednesday and Thursday only post bank holiday. This reduction will allow CHoC to reallocate the resource to peak periods of service demand, which will improve access times for patients.

Patients in the Westmorland area can still access the service via NHS 111 or a direct line number that is provided to certain patient groups—for example, palliative care patients. For patients who require a face-to-face consultation or home visit due to clinical need, this service will be available, where clinical resource will be shared from other sites.

CHoC has provided the NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board with detailed activity data covering a 12-month period, and the ICB has undertaken a clinical review of the data and considers that the analysis supports the proposed staffing model, including the use of virtual consultations and ability to deploy a doctor from other areas within Cumbria. CHoC is due to repeat the clinical audit in January 2024, three months post implementation.

Local health and care organisations are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders and local populations to meet people's needs.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Ceasefire in Palestine

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the only and quickest route to lasting peace in Palestine is for all sides to support and adhere to full ceasefire; condemns violence against people for simply being Israeli, equally condemns violence against people simply for being Palestinian; mourns the growing death toll of women, men and children and grieves for the thousands more traumatised by what they have witnessed and experienced.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to add its voice to international calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire so that aid can continue to reach Palestinians; bombed out homes, universities and hospitals in Palestine can be rebuilt and the process to finding last peace with a two state solution can begin.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Anne McLaughlin, *Official Report*, 29 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 1020.]

[P002882]

Observations from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:

The UK supports a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, with an end to the destruction, the release of hostages and no return to hostilities, creating a deliverable political horizon to a two-state solution.

No one wants to see this conflict go on a moment longer than necessary, and an immediate pause is now necessary to get aid in and hostages out. The situation is desperate.

Israel has the right to defend itself against Hamas, in accordance with international humanitarian law and its obligations in Gaza and across the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The best outcome will be moving from that pause to a sustainable ceasefire without a return to hostilities. Of course, a sustainable, permanent ceasefire—with an end to the destruction, fighting and loss of life, the release of hostages and no resumption of hostilities—would be the best way forward. To achieve that, a number of things would need to happen:

Hamas would have to agree to the release of all hostages

Hamas would no longer be in charge of Gaza—and the threat from Hamas terror and rocket attacks would have to end.

Agreement in place for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza in order to provide governance and services and, increasingly, security.

There is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support to Gaza; the current levels are woefully inadequate and are deepening the humanitarian crisis. Israel must take steps, working with other partners including the UN and Egypt, to significantly increase the flow of aid into Gaza, including allowing prolonged humanitarian pauses, opening more routes into Gaza, and restoring and sustaining water, fuel and electricity supplies.

Israel must also take the following steps:

Ensure effective systems to guarantee the safety of aid convoys, humanitarian operations and IDP returns, and facilitate access.

Ensure the UN has the people, vehicles and equipment to distribute aid safely across Gaza. This includes issuing visas.

Extend the opening hours and capacity of the Nitzana screening facility and the Kerem Shalom checkpoint so more trucks, aid and fuel can enter Gaza.

Open the Kerem Shalom crossing seven days a week.

Remove restrictions to ensure greater consistency on the goods allowed in.

Allow unencumbered access to aid coming from Jordan.

Open Ashdod port as a route for aid to reach Gaza.

Open the Erez crossing to allow direct access to the north of Gaza.

Restore water, fuel and electricity connections.

We have trebled our aid commitment this financial year to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the UK is doing everything it can to get more aid in and open more crossings. We played a leading role in securing the passage of Security Council resolution 2720, which set out the urgent demand for expanded humanitarian access in Gaza. We have also supported the United Nations World Food Programme to deliver a new humanitarian land corridor from Jordan into Gaza. Seven hundred and fifty metric tonnes of lifesaving food aid arrived in the first delivery in December and a second delivery of 315 tonnes was made in January 2024. The first UK maritime shipment of aid for Gaza arrived into Egypt on 3 January, carrying 87 tonnes of lifesaving UK and Cypriot aid for the people of Gaza, delivered by Royal Fleet Auxiliary Ship Lyme Bay, in addition to 74 tonnes of aid previously delivered.

The Foreign Secretary and I continue to discuss and press for the action that needs to be taken to increase aid to Gaza in regular calls with our Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese, US and Palestinian Authority counterparts, recently with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza and Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz to raise the urgent need for increased aid to Gaza. The Foreign Secretary has also appointed his representative for humanitarian affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Mark Bryson-Richardson. He is based in the region and is working intensively to address the blockages preventing more aid reaching Gaza.

We remain deeply concerned about the impact of the conflict on the civilian population in Gaza. There must be a reduction in civilian casualties. Israel must act within international humanitarian law and protect civilians.

We are clear that for a peaceful solution, four things must happen—there must be a Palestinian-led Government in Gaza and the West Bank, a concrete plan to help reform and support the Palestinian Authority, a massive reconstruction plan for Gaza and a political horizon towards delivering a two-state solution. This will provide a safe and secure Israel living alongside a sovereign and viable Palestinian state across the Occupied Palestinian Territories—the west bank and Gaza—based on 1967 borders and agreed land swaps. The Foreign Secretary and I are fully engaged and committed to working with allies and regional partners in pursuit of this vital objective.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 24 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	288	SCOTLAND—continued	
Engagements	288	Levelling Up	281
SCOTLAND	279	Nursing Bursaries	282
Ambulance Waiting Times	286	Oil and Gas Industry	280
Co-operation with Northern Ireland Businesses	285	Promoting Scotland Overseas	286
Horizon: Prosecution of Postmasters	279	Scottish Economy	283
Leaving the EU: Import and Export		Scottish Economy: Autumn Statement 2023	287
Requirements	283		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 24 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	7WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	10WS
Product Safety and Metrology: (Amendment)		Biometrics and Surveillance Camera	
Regulations 2024	7WS	Commissioner: Annual Report 2022-23	10WS
Smarter Regulation: Improving Price		Licensing Act: Age Verification: Digital Identity,	
Transparency and Product Information for		Technology and Remote Sales	11WS
Consumers	7WS		
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	9WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND	
Telegraph Media Group: Public Interest		COMMUNITIES	11WS
Intervention Notice	9WS	Local Government Finance	11WS

PETITIONS

Wednesday 24 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	3P
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	4P	On-call doctor provision at Westmorland	
Ceasefire in Palestine	4P	General Hospital	3P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 31 January 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 24 January 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 279] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Extreme Weather Events: Resilience [Col. 301]

Answer to urgent question—(Alex Burghart)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) [Col. 311]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Whistleblowing [Col. 311]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Road Traffic and Street Works [Col. 312]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Kit Malthouse)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill (Business of the House) [Col. 315]

Business of the House—(Chris Heaton-Harris)—agreed to
Motion for Second Reading—(Chris Heaton-Harris)—agreed to
Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Situation in the Red Sea [Col. 349]

General debate

Petition [Col. 404]

Nuclear Defence Infrastructure: Parliamentary Scrutiny [Col. 406]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Hedgerows: Legal Protection [Col. 109WH]
Books in Primary Schools [Col. 130WH]
International Human Rights Abuses: UK Response [Col. 138WH]
Mentoring [Col. 162WH]
Shared Rural Network Implementation [Col. 169WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 7WS]

Petitions [Col. 3P]

Observations
