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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 25 January 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

SMEs: Access to Finance

1. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to help increase access to finance for small and medium-sized enterprises. [901135]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Please may I take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to pay tribute to Tony Lloyd? I worked with him very closely on the all-party groups on poverty and fair business banking. He was a thoroughly decent man. On behalf of myself and the Department, I pass on our deep condolences to his friends and family.

The Government work with the British Business Bank to improve access to finance for smaller businesses through targeted programmes, such as the £12.4 billion of finance that is backing more than 90,000 businesses across the UK and the £1 billion in start-up loans for 105,000 small businesses since 2012.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Many SMEs and new businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to open a bank account and to then obtain the support and services that used to be available in the rapidly diminishing branch network. What steps is he taking to address those challenges that SMEs are facing?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Leading banks and alternative lenders are committed to the SME finance charter to help small businesses and start-ups. We continue to work with the UK finance and banking industry to make sure that SMEs have the support from banking services that they require. Many leading challenger banks, such as Metro, Aldermore and Starling, provide additional application support. Banking hubs are also available for those without a bank on their high street to offer face-to-face support. Thirty have already opened, and 70 more are in the pipeline.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. There is a willingness to meet net zero commitments from businesses all over the United Kingdom

of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so would the Minister be prepared to introduce a scheme whereby small businesses can access funding to implement infrastructure changes in their businesses to help them achieve net zero, and will this be available to all parts of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Member raises a very important point. It is something that we look at all the time, and certainly we have had discussions on the matter. We already have programmes in place, including the £12.4 billion that we distribute through the British Business Bank that supports nations and regions funds. Some of that will certainly help businesses to access finance to decarbonise. We look at those measures all the time, and we are happy to work with him on future programmes that we might roll out.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): Small and medium-sized enterprises are a vital part of a thriving global economy, yet 49% of British SMEs say that they lack the time or resources to sell internationally. They are being hindered by complex regulation, insufficient access to funding and inadequate Government guidance. That is why Labour has launched the small business export taskforce with the Federation of Small Businesses to listen to business needs and address them head-on. What is the Minister doing to support hard-working SMEs in navigating the Government's complex web of regulatory requirements and help unleash this untapped entrepreneurial potential?

Kevin Hollinrake: We agree with the hon. Gentleman on the ambition, but he is probably behind the game a little in terms of what we are actually doing, not least in the 73 free trade agreements that we have agreed, including the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership that is coming down the track. I hope that he will be supportive of that agreement. He has probably also never heard of the export support service, the international trade advisers and the export champions, all of which help our SMEs export to other parts of the world.

Mr Speaker: I call George Freeman.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): May I take this opportunity to congratulate and thank the Secretary of State—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Question 2.

Science and Technology Sector: Inward Investment

2. **George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology to help increase inward investment into the science and technology sector. [901136]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Secretary of State was so savvy that she brought in a science Minister and now, under her stewardship, science and technology is booming in the Department for Business and Trade. The UK has the No. 1 tech ecosystem in Europe, raising more venture

capital than France and Germany combined. Science and tech is not just for fans; we have now mainstreamed it with the Office for Investment, which is reaching out to companies around the world to highlight the advantages of investing in the UK, bringing in over £5 billion of investment, as was announced at the global investment summit just last year.

George Freeman: Mr Speaker, you can see that I am using my freedom on the Back Benches to improve my fitness and to make myself as fit as the Department.

May I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate the Secretary of State and the team at the Department for Business and Trade on the work they are doing, particularly with the global investment summit? There is a wall of money out there globally to invest in UK science and tech—in life science, quantum, fusion and agritech—and we are beginning, finally, to attract that money. What plans does the Department have to make it easier for global investors to deploy money at scale in UK clusters?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend will know more than most, having had this brief previously. Of course, we are out there sourcing investment for the UK and, as I mentioned, we are already beating France and Germany. Further afield, the UK is the third country, behind the US and China, to reach the landmark of \$1 trillion in value. We have the concierge service with the Office for Investment. We have also recently secured £4.5 billion through the advanced manufacturing plan. That, coupled with the research and development budget of around £39.8 billion between 2022-25, shows that we are ready to enable investment in the UK and to manufacture products in this area.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State and her team pay much more attention to the science and innovation possibilities in the hydrogen sector—that is, hydrogen energy and power? This is something we are good at, and the research is there. We need to be there quickly before the Chinese dominate the market.

Ms Ghani: I gently say that the hon. Gentleman should pay attention to the hydrogen strategy, which shows we are leaning forward and ensuring that we can capture the investment, de-risk any of the testing and ensure that intellectual property can be commercialised here in the UK. We of course see hydrogen in the mix in our future energy spectrum.

SMEs: Operating Costs

3. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the implications for her policies of trends in the level of operating costs for small and medium-sized enterprises. [901137]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government have taken action to help SMEs deal with cost of living pressures, including freezing fuel duty, maintaining the 5p cut for a further year, introducing the energy bills discount scheme and reversing the national insurance rise. In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced

a substantial business rates package to support the UK's small businesses worth £4.3 billion over the next five years.

Christine Jardine: Notwithstanding what the Minister says, I am still frequently being approached by small and medium-sized enterprises in Edinburgh West that are struggling to meet soaring energy costs, stave off inflation and deal with Brexit red tape. The number of Scottish SMEs in financial distress is up 10%, according to research, and those were formerly strong, stable and well-managed businesses. They have a huge impact on employment in tourism, which is one of our main industries. Will the Minister tell me what more the Department will do to reassure businesses in my constituency and elsewhere, and whether he will ask the Chancellor to do more in the forthcoming Budget to help them?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises important points. Of course, the Chancellor can do nothing if the Scottish Government do not pass on our support to Scotland, which they have not done for business rates. I know that that is out of her hands, but it is a point she may want to raise with the Scottish Government. The average pub in Scotland is £15,000 worse off a year than its English counterpart because they have not passed through that rates support. The average restaurant or guest house is £30,000 worse off than its English counterpart, and closure rates in Scotland are 30% higher than in England.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Business closures now exceed new business openings, with 345,000 businesses across the UK closing in 2022—the highest since records began. This week, the *Financial Times* reported that more than 47,000 businesses are on the verge of collapse. Former Prime Minister Johnson used an expletive to describe his party's commitment to business. His successor well and truly delivered on that commitment by crashing the economy. Is it not time the Government put businesses out of their misery by calling a general election, so that the country can get back to business?

Kevin Hollinrake: On this side of the House, we are for business because we are from business, and we understand the needs of businesses.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): So are we!

Kevin Hollinrake: That is an interesting point that the hon. Gentleman makes from a sedentary position. The actual numbers of closures—although of course we are concerned about increases—are below pre-pandemic averages, but nevertheless we have stepped in to help by freezing fuel duty, maintaining the 5p cut and announcing £4.3 billion of business rates support, all to help our SMEs. Closure rates are lower in England than in Labour-run Wales.

Proposed Trade Deal with India: Human Rights

4. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If she will take steps to ensure that the proposed trade deal with India includes legal commitments on upholding human rights. [901138]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK is a leading advocate for human rights around the world. When we have concerns on human rights, they are raised directly with partner Governments, including at ministerial level, and that includes India. Trade negotiations with India are continuing, to build on our £38 billion trading relationship and get better access to 1.4 billion consumers.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for his answer, but an industry risk analysis dataset shows that India ranks among the worst performing countries for human rights abuses across a host of key industries. My question is a specific one and I would like an answer please: have the Government consulted human rights monitoring bodies and experts, and are the Government actively considering the impact of this deal on human rights abuses in India?

Greg Hands: I congratulate the hon. and learned Lady on her recent election as Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. The UK engages regularly with the Indian Government and other Governments around the world, bilaterally and multilaterally. Where we have concerns on human rights, we raise them directly with the partner Government, including at ministerial level.

I must say, though, that I am not entirely sure that whatever we do on human rights will make any difference to whether the SNP will support this trade deal. It is not only fans of free trade agreements who have noticed; we have all noticed that the SNP has never supported any trade deal negotiated by either the EU or the UK. It has abstained on Japan and Singapore and has been against Canada, Australia and South Korea—and even against Ukraine. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Do not tempt me—you are doing well! I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I would like to give the Minister another chance, because that was pretty dismal stuff even by his standards. India has one of the poorest human rights records in the world when it comes to child labour. To give the Minister an opportunity to get us to a position where we could potentially support a deal, will he explain how Ministers and the Government are engaging with negotiators in India to tackle child labour there and to ensure that the United Kingdom does not become complicit in that exploitation?

Greg Hands: Of course the UK has a very proud record on labour standards and on raising these issues with counterparts at all levels. Lord Ahmad was in India just a couple of weeks ago raising specific human rights issues, including a case that the SNP has raised frequently. The Government are proud of our record on labour protections and have been clear that an FTA with India does not come at the expense of labour standards. But may I refer the hon. Gentleman back to the rhetorical question: when will the SNP ever support a trade deal with anybody?

Mr Speaker: Minister, you know it is not your responsibility to ask the question. It is for others to ask you the questions. Come on—you know better than that as an ex-chair of the Conservative party.

Houthi Attacks: Supply Chains

5. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help protect supply chains in the context of the Houthi attacks in the Persian Gulf. [901140]

18. **Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help protect supply chains in the context of the disruption to trade in the Red sea. [901155]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): More than 15% of global shipping traffic passes through the Red sea, making it one of the most important strategic waterways in the world. Overall, a whopping 12% of global trade volumes use this trade route and my Department is monitoring the impact of events in the Red sea closely. I was previously the shipping Minister and now I am the Minister for advanced manufacturing, so I know that this is important to industry.

We are working to equip UK businesses with the tools they need to deal with global supply chain issues. Just last week, I published the world's first ever critical imports and supply chains strategy in collaboration with industry. The strategy includes making the UK Government the centre of excellence for supply chain analysis and risk assessment, supporting our status as the world's eighth largest manufacturer. This will help UK business to build secure and reliable supply chains, which are vital to the UK's economy, national security and the delivery of our essential services.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Gentleman does not need to ask a question now, with all you have read out. Come on, Sir Michael!

Michael Fabricant: I will think of one, Mr Speaker. As my hon. Friend has said, we are the eighth largest manufacturer in the world—and where is the centre of manufacturing? It is, of course, the west midlands. What advice is my hon. Friend giving to people such as Andy Street about what can be done to support businesses in the west midlands to overcome what I hope is a temporary difficulty?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has hit so many markers in that question. He is absolutely right that the west midlands, and Birmingham in particular, are the heart of advanced manufacturing. I suggest that the Mayor catches up on supply chain reporting. I am more than happy to sit down and talk to him about that. We have worked with industry, including in the automotive sector, to ensure that supply chains can be as flexible and resilient as possible. Of course there are concerns about extended routes from that part of the world into Europe, but, as I mentioned earlier, we are the first country in the world to produce a strategy, working with industry to ensure that the UK continues to provide the data that it needs—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on! I call Nicola Richards.

Nicola Richards: At a time when we are beginning to see inflation fall, recent developments in the Red sea are extremely concerning, not just in terms of security, but

because of the huge cost to shipping. My constituents do not want an increase in prices as a result of the terror attacks. Can the Minister build on the excellent answer she gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) by reassuring businesses in my constituency that we will do all we can to maintain the flow of goods to and from the UK?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The UK will always stand up for the freedom of navigation and the free flow of trade. We take threats to shipping vessels in the Red sea extremely seriously. My hon. Friend is right to note that, fundamentally, there has been an increase in cost potential, including a 124% increase in freight rates, which is why we have produced a strategy and why we have a council that will continue to work with industry to ensure that supply chains are resilient and the situation has the smallest possible impact on our economy.

Businesses in Rural Areas

6. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support businesses in rural areas. [901141]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The Government provide extensive business support for all businesses, including those in rural areas. As a Member of Parliament for a rural constituency, I am keenly aware of the difficulties that apply specifically to rural businesses because of their location. With other Departments, we focus on access to energy, and we work with the Department for Education on apprenticeships. We also have the British Business Bank's recovery loan scheme, and the Start Up Loans company, which improves access to finance to help businesses to invest and grow. I believe that that package helps rural businesses.

Jamie Stone: The Secretary of State will be aware that the Sutherland spaceport could be a fantastic boost for local businesses. Equally, floating offshore wind in the North sea presents opportunities for the Wick and Scrabster harbours. To underpin that, we need the transport infrastructure. The public service obligation for Wick airport runs out in March this year, with no word from the Scottish Government on whether it will be continued—it would be a fatal blow if not—and then there is the abject failure to invest in the A9. Promise after promise after promise has been broken. What advice does she have for me?

Kemi Badenoch: I would ask the hon. Gentleman to speak to the SNP-led Scottish Government, who are responsible for much of that investment. It is a real shame that the SNP Government do not care about rural businesses or small businesses in Scotland. Office for National Statistics figures show that Scotland lost more than 20,000 businesses last year, and they were mainly the smallest businesses employing up to 50 people. However, I take his point about infrastructure. We have to look at that on a UK-wide basis, and I am prepared to look in a little more detail at what my Department can do to support him.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I think that my right hon. Friend is doing a great job for rural businesses. However, the Met Office, which is under her

stewardship, is responsible for providing wind forecasts, which are particularly important given that the Orwell bridge was closed recently. I would like there to be more transparency and, specifically, for the Met Office to publish the wind speed on its app so that there is transparency for all businesses and the bridge is not closed unnecessarily.

Kemi Badenoch: That sounds like a significant issue. However, I am pleased to say that the Met Office is the responsibility not of my Department but of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. We can raise the matter with DSIT colleagues to ensure that they look at it as quickly possible.

Small Businesses: North Wales

7. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): Whether she has had recent discussions with the Welsh Government on the adequacy of Government support for small businesses in north Wales. [901142]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I regularly meet Ministers from the devolved Administrations through inter-ministerial fora to discuss a range of policy issues. SMEs across Wales have access to a range of UK Government services to help them to grow and thrive. The UK Government also recently announced that we will appoint new international trade advisers in Wales to provide tailored support for Welsh SME exporters to take advantage of new export opportunities.

Mr Roberts: The Labour Welsh Government are reducing rate relief for the hospitality sector from 75% to 40% in April. Following that announcement, Monmouthshire County Council, which is also Labour-run, called on its colleagues to maintain support at the same rate as in England. Business owners have criticised the Welsh Government, saying that it would be deeply unfair, but the outgoing First Minister has rejected their calls, and a number of hospitality businesses have already closed their doors this year. Will the Minister join me in urging the Welsh Government to maintain the 75% support that businesses need, instead of cutting their feet from under them just because Welsh Labour cannot manage a budget?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the Welsh Labour Government need to start supporting businesses and to maintain the 75% relief rate, as we are in England. The Welsh Government have also cut the budget of Business Wales from £26.6 million to £21 million. Figures from UK Hospitality show that the average pub in Wales will be £6,800 worse off as a result, compared with England; for the average restaurant, that figure will be £12,000; and for the average hotel, it will be £20,000. I do not know who will be in charge of Labour in Wales, but it is about time that it started to back Welsh business, as the UK Government do.

Foreign Direct Investment: North Northamptonshire

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to help increase foreign direct investment into north Northamptonshire. [901143]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The Department for Business and Trade has done a lot to bring foreign direct investment into the UK. Just last November, we raised £30 billion at our global investment summit. Specifically for north Northamptonshire, my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that his constituents can take advantage of the DBT national and regional investment teams, which work with local partners to provide support for foreign investors who wish to invest and set up in the region.

Mr Hollobone: Recent inward investment into the Kettering constituency includes the Ball Corporation from the US building Europe's largest and most modern aluminium drinks can manufacturing plant in Burton Latimer, creating 200 new jobs. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate and thank Ball for its confidence and investment in north Northamptonshire's manufacturing economy, and encourage others to see Kettering—with its superb connectivity and motivated workforce—as an ideal location for further investment?

Kemi Badenoch: I am extremely pleased to be able to do so. I congratulate and thank Ball Corporation for placing its investment in Kettering. That is exactly the sort of investment that we want to see all around the UK: it is the levelling-up agenda writ large. I also thank all the officials in my Department, but especially my Ministers, who travel all around the world—including to the US—to promote the UK. We never talk this country down; we let people know that this is a great place to do business, and we are seeing the benefits of that strategy.

Post Office Horizon System: Exoneration of Sub-postmasters

9. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): When she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to exonerate the remaining sub-postmasters with criminal convictions relating to the failure of the Post Office Horizon system. [901144]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): On 10 January, we announced the Government's intention to bring forward legislation within weeks to overturn the convictions of all those convicted in England or Wales on the basis of Post Office evidence during the Horizon scandal. I met the Justice Secretary only this week to make sure that those plans are on track, and we hope to bring forward that legislation as soon as possible.

Jeff Smith: Does the Minister have an estimate of how many convictions were made during the Horizon pilot? Will he confirm that those convictions will be included in the legislation, given that they were not made using Horizon data?

Kevin Hollinrake: We do not know that number yet, but we are very concerned about people who used the pilot version of Horizon and were potentially subject to similar abuses. We do believe they fall under similar compensation schemes, and there is no reason why they would not be covered by the legislation to overturn convictions.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): For the legislation to work, postmasters have to come forward. When I asked one of my constituents this weekend why they had not come to me sooner, they said it was because they had signed a non-disclosure agreement, but also because they had had to sign the Official Secrets Act. I thought that was so bonkers that I did not believe it, until I read page 26 of Nick Wallis's book, which says that postmasters do have to sign the Official Secrets Act. If that mad policy is still going on, will the Minister bring it to an end? Will he tell postmasters all over the country that they are completely at liberty to talk to their MPs about any aspect of the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he has done in this area. I understand that the requirement to sign the Official Secrets Act relates to the confidentiality of mail; it does not relate to the confidentiality of issues regarding mistreatment by Post Office Ltd. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point, and I will certainly raise it with Post Office Ltd, but I can confirm that that would not prevent somebody from speaking out, including to their Member of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that we are willing to work with the Government on a way to exonerate the sub-postmasters and get them compensation as quickly as possible. The proposals will have to be imperfect, but they represent a clear option for resolving this terrible issue. As a way to ensure safeguards against any potential future misuse of precedent, could cross-party agreement be established as an essential provision for the exercise of powers of this kind?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way he has engaged with us on this issue. I know that the Justice Secretary spoke to the Leader of the Opposition this week on this very matter, and we are very keen to engage with the hon. Gentleman too. He is right to say the solution is imperfect. We believe it is the least worst option, but of course we will engage with him and make sure that he feels the legislation is in the right place.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, and I hope that exchange gives some reassurance to all colleagues in the House. Will he confirm that all prosecutions that arise from the Horizon pilot scheme will now also be included in the exoneration, given that, although people were technically prosecuted without official Horizon data, it is very much the same issue?

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, similar to one made earlier. The circumstances were similar, so we feel there is no reason to exclude people who have been convicted in similar circumstances. Again, I am happy to work with him on that issue.

Trade Barriers

10. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the principal barriers to trade for importers. [901145]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government are committed to breaking down barriers to trade through our ambitious programme of free trade agreements. In August last year, the Government announced the border target operating model, which will simplify border processes for both imports and exports. These changes, based on smarter use of data and technology, will put in place new security and biosecurity controls while ensuring they are as simple as possible for businesses to comply with.

Daniel Zeichner: The five-times-delayed border checks will come into effect very soon, but those dealing with plant and animal health products are seriously worried about potential delays. Indeed, the chair of the Horticultural Trades Association has pointed out that the process of importing a petunia from the Netherlands has already increased from 19 to 59 steps, and he warns that the “new border is a disaster waiting to happen”.

What is the Minister doing to ensure that we will have a plentiful supply of imported red roses for Valentine’s day, especially for all those Conservatives on the other side who love each other so much?

Greg Hands: I am feeling the hon. Gentleman’s love this morning, Mr Speaker.

We have consulted very widely on the border target operating model. We have put in a lot of time and effort, we have done a lot of consultation, we have been running webinars and putting out leaflets to make sure that businesses are aware, and the introduction of the model will of course be staged.

The hon. Gentleman needs to be careful about what Labour’s plan will be. This week, the EU ambassador to London revealed the fact that Labour’s desire for a food and veterinary agreement is likely to lead to closer dynamic alignment between London and Brussels in the future, which is directly against his party leader’s stated policy of no dynamic alignment.

Post Office Horizon System: Compensation for Sub-postmasters

11. **Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage sub-postmasters who were affected by the failure of the Post Office Horizon system to claim compensation. [901146]

12. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage sub-postmasters who were affected by the failure of the Post Office Horizon system to claim compensation. [901147]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Over £153 million has been paid to 2,700 victims. We encourage anyone impacted to use the three compensation schemes available. We have already published the details of the up-front £75,000 fixed-sum offer for group litigation order postmasters on the gov.uk website, created a new claim form, and written to all eligible members of the GLO scheme to explain the offer further.

Jo Gideon: The Post Office Horizon scandal has shocked the nation. My constituent Kym Ledger received a settlement under the historical shortfall scheme, which

did not take into account the enormous stress, the extra work in trying to balance the books, the damage to her reputation and the price she and her family paid in lost income, having had to make up the shortfall herself. Does the Minister agree that we need to acknowledge the wider cost of the Post Office’s appalling behaviour? Will he meet me to discuss how those who accepted an offer under the historical shortfall scheme may now receive compensation that truly reflects the impact that the Post Office’s conduct over two decades has had on their lives?

Kevin Hollinrake: I apologise on behalf of the Government to Kym Ledger for what she has been through. It is absolutely our intention that everybody gets full and fair compensation, and that is not only for financial losses but for non-pecuniary losses. We have taken a number of steps to ensure that the compensation is fair and delivered swiftly, including by establishing the independent advisory board, on which the noble Lord Arbuthnot sits. We will continue to work with the board and consider what further action is required, but yes, I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these matters further.

Mary Robinson: The Post Office Horizon scandal has made clear to us all what happens when whistleblowers are ignored or silenced. Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as ensuring that victims are properly compensated, we need better legislation to protect whistleblowers? As the Government’s whistleblowing framework review draws to a close, will he meet me to discuss how the outcome of the review can be used to support the Whistleblowing Bill that I presented to the House yesterday?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work. At one point we were co-chairs of the all-party group for whistleblowing, and she does a tremendous job in raising this issue time and again in the House. We are currently reviewing the effectiveness of the whistleblowing framework in meeting its intended objectives. Every scandal that I have talked about in this House over the years, from the Back Benches and the Front Benches, has come to light because of whistleblowers, who are hugely important. We are reviewing that framework. The research for the review is near completion, the Government will set out the next steps in due course, and yes, of course I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, have a constituent who, although she was thankfully not prosecuted, was forced over a period of more than a decade to pay back thousands of pounds every year, and it amounts to a six-figure sum. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) said, this is not just about that pecuniary loss; this is about the impact on my constituent’s family—I will not go into her personal details, but they took a real hit and I wish she had come forward to me sooner. I met her a couple of weeks ago and it really has wrecked her life. She has not yet had any compensation through the shortfall scheme, so I urge the Minister to ensure that such people are properly compensated.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that point. Yes, the compensation scheme is there to compensate and provide redress for financial loss,

but also, quite rightly, for personal loss, loss of reputation, impact on health—those kinds of matters. There are two routes open to compensation: the £75,000 fixed-sum award, which is pretty much an immediate payment, or someone can go for a full assessment of losses, which takes into account all those matters. Interim payments are also available. We have paid out £153 million in total across the schemes. I am happy to help the hon. Lady with that specific case, and we are looking to try to expedite the payment of full and fair compensation to all individuals. I am working on a daily basis to try to do that.

SMEs: Late Payment

13. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle late payments to small and medium-sized businesses. [901148]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government are committed to tackling late payments. That is why we launched the prompt payment and cash flow review, which was published alongside the autumn statement. The review includes amending payment performance reporting requirements for large businesses, and providing the Small Business Commissioner with more powers to investigate late payments.

Debbie Abrahams: Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, but unfortunately late payments continue to blight the ability of small businesses to trade, with an average of £684 million a year being lost. Unfortunately, that is on the increase, with a 7% increase in 2023. I appreciate what the Minister said about another review—I think we had one a few years ago—but what specific actions are the Government taking to address this appalling abuse of power, which is contributing to 50,000 small businesses going under a year?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, and earlier I set out specific actions such as giving the Small Business Commissioner more powers, and producing league tables. We work closely with the Good Business Pays campaign, which produces league tables on this issue, and naming and shaming the people responsible is important. The Government are leading the way, and from April 2024 firms bidding for Government contracts worth more than £5 million will have to demonstrate that they pay their invoices within an average of 55 days, tightening to 45 days in April 2025 and to 30 days in the coming years.

Steel Industry

14. **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Whether she has had recent discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on taking fiscal steps to help support the steel industry. [901149]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Chancellor and I meet regularly, and obviously we know and recognise the importance of the steel sector in the UK economy. Our commitment to the sector is clear, and we will be investing more than £500 million in the Port Talbot site to ensure that

steelmaking continues in the UK. Without that investment, the 8,000 jobs at the port and the 12,500 jobs in the supply chain would have been at risk.

We are working with Tata, and we have set up a transition board—the hon. Gentleman knows about that because we both serve on it—and we have provided more than £100 million of support for affected employees and the local economy. Last Friday, Tata announced that it will provide an additional £130 million of support for employees facing redundancy. The option was steelmaking no longer continuing at Port Talbot, or the investment that we have provided.

Stephen Kinnock: Ministers keep spinning this line that Tata Steel was threatening to close down the Port Talbot works and walk away, but they know that was an empty bluff, because the costs of dismantling and remediating the Port Talbot steelworks were vast and utterly prohibitive. Against that backdrop, let us be clear: is it the case that no strings were attached to the £500 million of taxpayers' money that has been given to Tata Steel? Was that £500 million given by the Prime Minister to Tata Steel with a green light to make 2,800 steelworkers redundant?

Ms Ghani: I would not want steelworkers to think that we are not working together, and the hon. Member and I work together and will be working together to ensure that steelworkers are protected as much as possible. I think it is extraordinary that the position he is now putting forward is that it would have been better to risk the absolute loss of steelmaking in the UK and then allow the taxpayer to pick up the cost to manage the site.

Stephen Kinnock: It was a bluff.

Ms Ghani: I believe it far more preferential that we made the largest investment ever in steelmaking to protect more than 5,000 jobs at Port Talbot and the 12,500 jobs in the supply chain—[*Interruption.*] Fundamentally, we have steelmaking—

Mr Speaker: Order. It might be better that that conversation is carried on outside, rather than going on across the Benches while the Minister is replying.

Ms Ghani: At the heart of our decision was two things: continued steelmaking at Port Talbot and protecting steelworkers.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): We have recently heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence how the west is facing “a pre-war world”. Will the Minister ensure in her conversations with the Treasury that it understands the vital strategic importance of a virgin steelmaking capability here in the UK?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has a huge amount of knowledge of the steel sector and is a huge champion for Scunthorpe. She knows that we are working incredibly hard with the company in her constituency, and we are waiting for it to respond to the business plans going forward. We know how important virgin steelmaking is,

and we accept, because technology has moved on, that going forward 90% of all steel can be made in electric arc furnaces.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Mr Speaker:

“The UK steel industry, the trade unions, and Labour are...proposing an industrial policy worthy of a serious industrial country.”

Those are not my words but those of the world economic editor of *The Daily Telegraph* writing yesterday. He also said that

“the Government’s minimalist plan...does just half the job, leaving the UK with a stunted second-tier industrial base, the only G20 country lacking a sovereign capability in ‘weapons grade’ primary steel.”

He is right, isn’t he?

Ms Ghani: The £28 billion that Labour is proposing has no plan behind it, and we are not told what hard workers across the country would have to pay to fill that black hole. Labour has asked for a transition to green steel. It would want us to protect steelworkers and obviously would want to protect advanced manufacturing in the UK. Customers want cleaner steel. Port Talbot could no longer function with its ageing blast furnaces, and our package will save 5,000 jobs at Port Talbot.

Co-operatives and Social Enterprises

15. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help support the growth of co-operatives and social enterprises. [901151]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): This week, I spoke to a conference attended by building societies about how we can increase presence on the high street to help with access to cash and finance facilities. The Government provide extensive business support to all businesses, including social enterprises and co-operatives. The British Business Bank’s recovery loan scheme and start-up loans improve access to finance to help those kinds of businesses to invest and grow.

Rachael Maskell: Co-operatives and social enterprise businesses provide a fairer way of doing business, involve members in greater business decisions and provide economic growth for local areas. However, they are being held back by financial and regulatory constraints. Will the Government match the Labour party’s and the Co-operative party’s ambition of committing to address those challenges and doubling the size of the co-operatives sector?

Kevin Hollinrake: Personally, I am a big fan of co-operative movements and the regional mutual bank system in Germany, which I have spoken about many times in this place. Of course, the Government supported the Co-operatives, Mutuals and Friendly Societies Act 2023, which helps to maintain the status of co-operatives. Social enterprises and co-operatives can also access support via the business support helpline as well as help through our websites and our network of local growth hubs.

Economic Growth: Regulators

16. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that regulators support economic growth. [901152]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): At the autumn statement, we announced the decision to extend the growth duty to Ofgem, Ofwat and Ofcom, alongside a series of reforms to the duty to hold regulators to account for delivering growth in the sectors they regulate. We are also currently consulting on proposals to strengthen the economic regulation of the energy, water and telecoms sectors.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer, but on retained EU law reform, in the June to December 2023 reporting period there were only two regulatory reforms of note, which were on wine marketing and working time calculations; the rest were technical corrections. What steps is she taking to speed up reform of retained EU law to ensure that regulation works for business and enables growth?

Kemi Badenoch: I am glad that my hon. Friend read the report that I sent out this week on what we have been doing. However, I disagree that only two reforms of note have been delivered. We have repealed or reformed more than 2,000 measures. The Port Services Regulations 2019, which were not designed with UK ports in mind, are an example. We have also passed the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 and the Procurement Act 2023. I remind him that that list is what we are using the schedule for, and there are many other mechanisms in the retained EU law programme to deliver on that road map so that we improve our economy and make it more competitive by making sure that our laws are tailored to our economy.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In support of economic growth, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) cut £235 million from Environment Agency budgets when she was at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Rather than bringing economic growth, that served to bring sewage growth: sewage discharge doubled between 2016 and 2021. I was delighted to hear yesterday that the Government will adopt my Water Quality Monitoring Bill, but will they also restore some of the cut Environment Agency funding to bring back powers as well as duties?

Kemi Badenoch: A spending review, where we can look at these things, will be coming up shortly, but I really have to challenge much of what the hon. Gentleman said. It is a misrepresentation to say that the issues going on with sewage are to do with the actions of my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). This Government have been taking reforms through the Environment Act 2021 to improve the situation throughout multiple Governments, including the one in which his party, the Liberal Democrats, participated during the coalition. So it is very wrong to make that case.

Topical Questions

T1. [901158] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): As Secretary of State for Business and Trade, I am committed to ensuring the resilience of the UK's critical supply chains. Last week, the Government published the "Critical Imports and Supply Chains Strategy" to help UK businesses build secure and reliable supply chains. Our 18-point action plan will help businesses to deal better with global supply chain issues from overcoming bureaucratic barriers to dealing with severe shocks caused by events such as the pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine and the attacks on the Red sea that have threatened a key route for global trade. DBT led the development of the strategy, which was shaped by the experiences of UK businesses. I was delighted that representatives of industry as well as key international partners joined us at the strategy's launch at Heathrow airport, which is, of course, the UK's largest import hub by value.

Mr Carmichael: Mr Speaker, I wish you and the rest of the House a happy Burns night for this evening. Is it not a scandal that the only way to get the great chieftain o' the puddin'-race exported to the United States is by sending the vegetarian version? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Could not the Secretary of State put that into her 18-point action plan and get on and do something, or does she want to risk forever being known as a cowran, tim'rous beastie? [Laughter.]

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his esoteric question. We are continually removing barriers to US-UK trade, and we are trading with the US more than ever before. If he has a specific example that I can help with so that he can enjoy his Burns night, I would appreciate it if he wrote to me, and we will look at the matter in detail.

T2. [901159] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): With many banks closing on high streets, the post office is picking up so much slack, but in rural areas the limits placed on the amount of cash that can be paid in at the post office is having a real impact on businesses. For instance, pubs have a lot of cash but cannot pay it in because of the limits. Can the Minister review that and ensure that the post office can take far greater volumes of cash from rural businesses?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work on this matter, which he and I have discussed on many occasions. The limits are there to try to prevent money laundering, but it is important that the checks are proportionate. I have raised their impact on a number of occasions with the Financial Conduct Authority and UK Finance. There is more transparency now and they are working more effectively. I know that the wonderful Ingham's fish and chip shop in Filey now experiences fewer problems when it pays in money at its local post office. There is a great opportunity not just for Inghams fish and chip shop but for the post office banking framework to make that relationship more lucrative.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Postal workers are the bedrock of our communities, but they are being forced to work at unsustainable levels—something that, sadly, has not been recognised in Ofcom's

report on the future of universal service obligations. The input of postal workers is critical to a successful Royal Mail, so please can we have confirmation that their views will be considered in any future decisions?

Kevin Hollinrake: That would make perfect sense. We read the Ofcom report into the review of universal service obligations with interest. Our clear position is that we will retain a six-day service for our citizens and businesses, but those views will be taken into account.

T8. [901166] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Secretary of State has often stated her support for post-Brexit regulatory reform and divergence, and did so again in answer to an earlier question. Is she in a position to deny reports in *The Daily Telegraph* today that the Government have pledged to introduce a requirement that all future regulatory change will be screened to ensure that extra barriers in the Irish sea are not created? That could be a significant impediment to divergence from EU laws.

Kemi Badenoch: I cannot comment on the ongoing Northern Ireland political process, to which I am not a participant. However, it is clear that we retain the ability to diverge. I agree with my right hon. Friend that if we are to seize the benefits of Brexit, we need to find that comparative advantage over the EU in our regulations, otherwise there would be no point. I remind her that I was the Business Secretary who made sure that there was transparency, rather than an invisible bonfire, in what we were doing on EU regulations. I ended the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice on 1 January. We have a comprehensive deregulation programme, which I am pushing. I understand her concerns, and I will speak to colleagues across Departments to ensure that they are raised at the highest level.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State please confirm that this Government have no plans to alter the legislation on the marketing of infant formula and other breastmilk substitutes?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I am very happy to write to him about it.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Royal Mail customers will have welcomed the Minister's reassurance this week about ruling out a reduction to the current six day a week service. However, many customers already feel short changed by what is often an inadequate service in their area. Does the Minister agree that any proposed changes must protect the small businesses whose business models rely on the six-day service, and customers' rights?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. The service has not been satisfactory, and Royal Mail has been fined £5.6 million by Ofcom as a result. It has employed 3,000 more postal workers to address those problems, and we are seeing some improvement, but he is right to raise the point about our six-day service being vital to businesses, particularly those in the magazine and greeting card industries.

T3. [901160] **Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the results of private sector trials in relation to the introduction of a four-day week? Will he meet me in due course to discuss the results of those trials?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. It is clearly up to businesses to decide if they want to trial a four-day week. We have made no assessment of any results. It is our belief that we should not run a Stalinist economy, where we tell private sector businesses how to operate their workforce and on what days of the week—he may differ on that particular perspective—but we have introduced important reforms that help businesses work more flexibly, including the flexible working changes that were introduced recently.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Gosport branch of Asda is the first in the UK to ballot for strike action. Employees cite issues including low staffing levels, health and safety, and delayed equal pay claims. Considering Asda's importance to the UK food chain and employment across the country, what powers does the Minister have to ensure that both workers and consumers are protected?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend raises an very interesting point. We have looked at this particular situation with interest and will continue to monitor it. Clearly, Asda is a private company and it is up to it to decide how best to deploy its workforce, but I am very happy to continue our conversation and I appreciate her engagement on this issue.

T4. [901161] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): A lot of concern has already been expressed in the House this week about the steel industry. With the expansion of renewables across Scotland and the rest of the UK, there will be demand for the vital materials required to build more wind turbines, which may now need to be sourced from abroad. Will the Secretary of State tell us what steps will be taken to try to provide the vital materials for an important industry?

Kemi Badenoch: It is really important for us to not misrepresent what is happening on steel. Our steel industry is not disappearing; our steel industry is evolving. We will continue to have significant steelmaking capability in the UK, including producing materials for the industries the hon. Lady talks about. But we should also remember that the changes to Port Talbot are part of the decarbonisation that all Opposition Members have been asking for. This is the biggest single emitter of carbon in the UK and this House voted to reach net zero by 2050. Everything we are doing is to ensure that we do that in a sustainable and sensible way.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Following on from the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), for the sake of clarity, can the Secretary of State confirm that it remains the Government's position to ensure that the UK has the capacity to produce virgin steel here in the UK?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government maintain that we want to ensure that we keep steelmaking capability in the UK. At the moment, we import ore to make steel.

When we talk about virgin steel many people assume there are no imports in the supply chain, but there still are, even now, and whatever changes we make will require some imports. However, we are making sure that our steel industry is more resilient than ever before, at a time when it faces oversupply from China and India. That is the real problem faced by the steel industry in all of western Europe. We do a lot with tariff measures, such as steel safeguards—

Mr Speaker: I call Debbie Abrahams.

Kemi Badenoch: So there is a lot we are doing.

Mr Speaker: Please, do not do that. I called the next Member, so I expect you to sit down. It is topical questions, not free statements.

T5. [901162] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Post Office Minister meet me and my constituent, who was a postmistress? She lost £250,000 in 2000. It is an unusual case, otherwise I would write to him, but it does need him to meet her, so I would be grateful if he would do that.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, I would be very happy to meet. There are three compensation schemes and it depends on which one she falls into. If it is the group litigation order, an immediate award of £75,000 can be made; if it is an overturned conviction, the amount is £600,000. I am sure there will be one scheme that the hon. Lady's constituent will fit into. I am very happy to meet her to help ensure she finds the right one.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Mining is coming back to Cornwall. This week, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for critical minerals, I met industry leaders from around the country at a roundtable here in this place to talk about the challenges the critical minerals industry is facing. Will the Minister agree to come to a meeting to discuss the challenges facing the industry? Demand is going up exponentially, but it is a high risk industry and it needs her help.

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Obviously it is important to secure investment in mining in Cornwall, particularly the mining of lithium, which will be critical for our car batteries. I certainly agree to be interrogated by the APPG, of which my hon. Friend is a powerful leader, and I congratulate her on securing that investment in Cornwall.

T6. [901163] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Could Ministers fix the illogical loophole faced by Pixipixel, a lighting and camera hire firm in Acton? It supplied the equipment for the first two series of a popular ITV drama called "Grace", which is set in Brighton, but because of Ofcom rules about the imposing of regional spending on public service broadcasters, it has now been banned and gazumped by a company in Manchester. Can this be sorted out, because—

Mr Speaker: I call the Secretary of State.

Dr Huq: It is having a punitive effect on businesses within the M25.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State took advantage; I do not want the hon. Lady to do exactly the same.

Kemi Badenoch: I believe that this might be an issue for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, but if the hon. Lady will write to me, we can look at that specific case.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for working with me on the issue of button battery safety, and grateful for the ongoing commitment of the five working groups that were set up in 2022 following the tragic death of one of my constituents, Harper-Lee Fanthorpe, and the campaign for Harper-Lee's law. Will the Minister meet me to discuss progress, and, in particular, how the guidelines drawn up by the Office for Product Safety and Standards can be made compulsory so that more deaths and injuries from button battery ingestion can be prevented?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend has done a fantastic job with the campaign, and has made huge progress towards ensuring that best practice is followed by suppliers. Of course I shall be happy to meet her to see what more can be done.

T7. [901164] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): Ferguson Marine, the last remaining shipyard on the lower Clyde, is threatened by the way in which its current work is configured. It badly requires an order from CalMac for seven small island ferries. The issue of procurement is one for the Scottish Government and their agencies, but will the Minister ensure that no impediment, no obstacle and no rules that are under her control will prevent the order from being given directly by the Scottish Government to Ferguson Marine if they so wish?

Ms Ghani: I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Member to discuss furthering his case, but the overriding fact, which he mentioned, is that the decision sits with the Scottish Government. In the UK we have the National Shipbuilding Office, which provides a wraparound service not only to secure contracts but to ensure that ships are built in UK shipyards.

T9. [901167] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Importers of short-life items in my constituency, such as seed potatoes and chilled equine semen, are worried

about impending import controls. Will the Minister meet me, and business leaders in North Shropshire, to discuss how they can continue their businesses in the face of these imminent problematic controls?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Of course I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady, but let me remind her of what I said earlier. The border operating model was introduced after extensive consultation with businesses, led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with the agrifood sector. There has been plenty of opportunity for feedback from businesses, but I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss specific cases.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State shares my desire to revitalise our fantastic local high streets. Flitwick Town Council plans to do exactly that, but it needs support from the community ownership fund. May I urge the Secretary of State to look favourably on its forthcoming application?

Kemi Badenoch: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman working so hard for his community. The community ownership fund sits with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I am sure that if he makes representations to those in the Department, they will be able to give him a more substantive answer.

Mr Speaker: And the final—short!—question comes from Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State look at the impact assessments of universities? The traditional universities are failing to meet the standards of sustainable development research, and Manchester, Huddersfield and Newcastle Universities are doing much better. Will the Secretary of State look into that, and push the other universities to do better?

Kemi Badenoch: This is a matter that sits with the Department for Education, but of course my Department takes an interest in all the innovation research that is going on, because it will help to boost the UK economy. I am sure that officials in my Department have been looking at those assessments, and will be able to provide details if the hon. Gentleman has a more specific question.

Business of the House

10.33 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 29 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 30 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Media Bill.

WEDNESDAY 31 JANUARY—Motion to approve the draft Electoral Commission strategy and policy statement, followed by a motion to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2024, followed by a motion to approve the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2024.

THURSDAY 1 FEBRUARY—General debate on miners and mining communities, followed by debate on a motion on freedom and democracy in Iran. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 February includes:

MONDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Leader of the House for the business.

I begin by paying tribute on the sad loss of Lord John Tomlinson, who served as an MP, MEP and peer for over six decades. He was a formidable force and an effective campaigner. Our thoughts are with his family.

With Holocaust Memorial Day this weekend, and ahead of this afternoon's debate, more than ever we must never forget the horror of the holocaust and other genocides.

It has now been over a month since the publication of the House of Commons Commission's proposals on the risk-based exclusion of Members of Parliament. I thank you, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House, the Commission, staff and unions for all their work thus far. When will the Leader of the House table a motion on this important issue? It was first promised before last summer, and then before the end of 2023. The Commission is in agreement, the proposal has wide support across the House, and others are looking to us to take action on the culture in this place.

While we are on the topic of culture in Parliament, I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in welcoming the recommendations of the Jo Cox Foundation's report on civility in politics. I know that some recent exchanges in this place have caused offence to others, as we did not model the good behaviour that we should. Will she join me in reminding Members of this, and that Parliament should be the exemplar of respectful and cordial debate?

We saw the House and politics at their best this week with the moving, heartfelt, cross-party tributes to Sir Tony Lloyd. He reminds us that we can have strongly held, differing views while remaining dignified and respectful.

The Procedure Committee has now published its report on Commons scrutiny of Secretaries of State in the House of Lords, which I welcome. I commend the Committee for its work, and we will shortly be hearing from its Chair, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley). The Leader of the House has reassured us many times since Lord Cameron's appointment that he will be "forward-leaning", and she promised:

"When the Procedure Committee brings forward measures...those measures will be put in place."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 1061.]

Can she confirm that she will table a motion forthwith to ensure that Lord Cameron comes to the Bar of the House to answer questions and statements, as the Committee recommends? The next Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions are on Wednesday, so the motion should be tabled before then.

Despite war in the middle east, conflict in the Red sea, Russia's ongoing illegal war in Ukraine and the Venezuelan threat to Guyana, the Foreign Office has failed to meaningfully update Parliament on these international flashpoints. It has offered only two statements since November, with Mr Speaker having to grant 10 urgent questions on these matters instead. It is just not good enough.

We have had three weeks of ad hoc business statements to bring in emergency and urgent legislation. The King's Speech legislative programme, announced just two months ago, has almost run out. With all the unused parliamentary time, there is no excuse for Ministers not coming to Parliament or getting on with their day job. We have had another week of ministerial failure, with Secretaries of State failing to show up. There was no Secretary of State to speak about steel, either today or during the week, which is insulting to the steelworkers who face redundancy.

The Secretary of State for Education did not show up either. She has had no legislation for months, yet the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in schools shambles drags on, and now we understand that the much-needed flagship childcare policy is in chaos. Can the Leader of the House shed more light on this? How many parents of two-year-olds who qualify and want to take up the offer of free childcare in April will not be able to access it? And will the roll-out to nine-month-old babies go ahead in September, as promised? Ministers seem unable to give those assurances, and providers are clear that the Government's flagship roll-out is a sham.

Another week goes by with a failing Government who have run out of road, are out of ideas and are failing to deliver on their basic promises. That is now the verdict of Conservatives as well, with the Prime Minister's own pollster having concluded that they are not

"providing the bold, decisive action required"

and that

"the Conservatives are heading for the most almighty of defeats."

Those are his words, not mine, and many agree. So can they just put everyone out of their misery, and get on and call a general election?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank all colleagues who will be marking Holocaust Memorial Day this week and, in particular, those taking part in the debate later. Clearly, it has additional significance this year.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to Lord John Tomlinson, and I thank her for her tribute. I also send my deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Sir Graham Bright, the former Member for Luton East and for Luton South. He served this House and his constituents for 18 years, and this included being John Major's Parliamentary Private Secretary. He is perhaps best known for his private Member's Bill that became the Video Recordings Act 1984, which required all commercial video recordings offered for sale or hire within the UK to carry a classification. Legend has it that during the passage of the Bill he had to explain to the Prime Minister of the day what particular acts performed on camera warranted particular ratings. Given that that Prime Minister was Margaret Thatcher, that alone would have warranted his knighthood. Many colleagues have spoken very fondly of him over the past few days, and he will be much missed.

Let me also thank two delegations to Parliament this week: the families of Liri Elbag, Eliya Cohen, Idan Shtivi, and Ziv and Gali Berman, who are five of the many hostages still held in Gaza—we must not rest until they are all home—and the Ukrainian delegation, to whom I conveyed our deepest respect and solidarity for all they are doing to protect our freedom. I wish President Zelensky, “Z dnem narodzhennya” and all in the House a happy Burns night.

Let me turn to the hon. Lady's points. She spoke about the work the House of Commons Commission, on which we both serve, has been doing on the exclusion of Members of Parliament who are considered to be a risk to others on the estate. She will know, because she is on the Commission, that we agree with the proposal that has been brought forward. We were waiting for a motion to be brought to us by the House. That happened late last week, and we will shortly table that motion for Members to see and then bring it forward.

The hon. Lady mentioned the work that the Procedure Committee has done on Lord Cameron, the Foreign Secretary. I thank its members for their work and the hon. Lady for the evidence she gave to that inquiry. We have received that report this week and will shortly be responding to it. I hear her plea to act before next Wednesday, but she should have said next Tuesday, because that is when the next FCDO questions are.

I join in what the hon. Lady says about the work that the Jo Cox Foundation has done through the Commission. It is very important that we protect democracy. We all know that democracy is under attack, and civility in politics is incredibly important, as was demonstrated, as she said, in the form of the late Sir Tony Lloyd.

In that spirit of the Commission's recommendations, let me deal with the charges that the hon. Lady has made against our record and that Labour has levelled against our Prime Minister. Our Prime Minister is a man whose migrant parents made sacrifices to ensure that he could have a good start in life. He worked hard to make the best use of every opportunity he was afforded—he studied hard, he pushed himself. He had many career options, but he chose a life in public service representing God's own country. He protected this nation and livelihoods from the greatest financial and health crisis since the second world war. He has risen through hard work, courage and determination to be this country's first British-Asian Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister has shown global leadership on many challenges facing this country. He is a wonderful dad. He gives quietly to charities. He runs for his local hospice. He is a cricket fanatic. He still attends home games at the football club he supports, despite being Prime Minister and despite it being Southampton. He is a shareholder in three community pubs and patron of the Leyburn brass band. He does not just get Britain; he represents the best of Great Britain—the greatest things we have to offer the world, including our values of hard work, enterprise, taking personal responsibility and helping others.

He is in no way confused about where his duty lies. People will not find him taxing education or denying others the opportunities he has had; voting against strengthening our borders; siding with militant trade unions against the public; compromising our energy security or nuclear deterrent; opposing the deportation of foreign criminals; scratching his head about the monarchy; ducking difficult issues; or supporting the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). If the Leader of the Opposition is a weathervane, our Prime Minister is a signpost. He knows what he stands for, he knows where the country needs to go, he has a plan to get us there and that plan is working.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: That brings me to a slightly difficult problem. Bob Blackman is meant to be representing the Backbench Business Committee, to tell us about its business, but unfortunately he is not here, so I now call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I associate myself with the remarks about Holocaust Memorial Day. I ask the House to note that tonight is Burns night, when we celebrate the work of Scotland's great national bard.

A new year, a new Tory civil war—just what the UK needs—with talk of doom loops, massacres and extinctions. If only Members of the Leader of the House's party had listened to her the last time she wooed them for leadership. She warned them that if they voted for the former Chancellor as leader it would “murder the party”. I know that the Leader of the House is furiously busy with all her “Minister for clickbait” responsibilities—those anti-Scottish articles and sneering videos do not write themselves—but as her Government grind, punch-drunk and exhausted, to an election, should we not debate some of the key legacies of the last 14 years of Tory rule?

Where should we start? There are still the scandalously unresolved scandals, such as infected blood, the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—and Post Office Horizon, to name a very few, but has the Leader of the House had time to reflect on recent comments from Sir Michael Marmot, professor of public health at University College London? He said that Britain in 2024 is starting to suffer from Victorian diseases again, and that

“Britain has become a poor country with a few rich people...it's worse to be poor in Britain than in most other European countries.... Poor people in Britain have a lower income than Slovenia.”

Perhaps the Leader of the House will cast her eye over the latest Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, which says that more than one in five people were in

[Deidre Brock]

poverty in 2021-22, with about 6 million in “very deep poverty” that same year. Has she not managed to look at that yet? That is unsurprising, as the Tories seem genuinely untroubled by poverty in the UK. My colleagues and I have asked them about it many times, but their eyes just glaze over—comfortable, I guess, with the choices they have made, as the PM has said.

Perhaps we should start our Tory legacy debates with an emerging threat. The Electoral Commission chair warned recently that the Government’s strict new rules on voter ID risk excluding certain voter groups and leave the Conservative party open to the charge of bias. I and many others have thought for some time that this was simply an attempt at voter suppression from the Government, so does the Leader of the House agree with an erstwhile Cabinet colleague that the new Tory rules are simply, as he put it, an attempt at “gerrymandering”? Will she bring a debate on this important issue to the House before the next general election?

Penny Mordaunt: What a bunch of rotters we are, with our anti-Scottish articles. It appears that the hon. Lady is planning to follow in the footsteps of many a great antipodean election guru by using a brilliant new strategy of equating criticism of the SNP’s performance with criticism of Scotland itself. The latter is a landmass of approximately 30,000 square miles, populated by brilliant, creative, stoic people; the former is a ramshackle separatist movement, full of people who have turned maladministration into an art form.

There is one tiny flaw in this new political tactic from the SNP: if we Conservatives dislike Scotland so much, for some reason the hon. Lady never gets round to explaining, why on earth would we strive so hard to keep it part of the Union of the United Kingdom? Why would this Conservative Government give Scotland the largest funding settlement it has ever had? Why would we have offered its citizens who were waiting for NHS treatment additional help and options, which the Scottish Government turned down?

If I wanted to do Scotland down, I would join, donate and campaign for the SNP, to whose members I would point out that the trailblazer for bringing back Victorian diseases to Britain is Glasgow. Watching the hon. Lady’s inaction, and that of her party, is like watching your much-loved neighbourhood being clobbered by a bunch of gangsters—let us call them the “hole in the budget” gang—hitting businesses, taking your cash, making your life a misery and keeping the local police force very busy. This new political strategy from the SNP, like everything else that it does, will fail.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make a statement next week on the instructions to the advocate for his Department at the Holocaust Memorial Bill Select Committee? Yesterday, on a number of occasions, the lead advocate said that the design had not been awarded to Sir David Adjaye, or that he was not the architect.

I refer the Leader of the House to the press notice on 24 October 2017, in which the Department and the Cabinet Office said that Sir David and his team would

design the memorial; the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid), and the Mayor of London congratulated Sir David; and Sir David was quoted as saying that it was “architecture as emotion”.

I believe that the advocate may have inadvertently told the Committee things that are clearly contradicted by the facts six years ago, and by every other quotation until Sir David Adjaye became a name that could not be mentioned.

Will the Leader of the House please ask the Secretary of State to consider making a statement to correct what was said to the Committee yesterday, and perhaps acknowledge the four holocaust survivors who gave evidence, and look at what they said?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for again diligently raising this important issue; I understand that the forums in which he can do so are limited, which is why he brings it to the Floor of the House each week. He has put those points on the record, as well as his thanks to those survivors for their important intervention. As the Secretary of State will not take questions until 4 March, I will again ensure that he has heard what my hon. Friend has said.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Stratford market village in my constituency has provided space for more than 60 much-loved independent local businesses to ply their trade since about 1974. They are the kinds of businesses that reflect the entrepreneurship, drive and diversity in Newham, but on 10 January, with no warning at all, the traders received an email telling them that the market village was closed with immediate effect. The company that owns it is going into administration, leaving viable, much-loved businesses in limbo, out of pocket and without a home. I thank our Assembly Member Unmesh Desai and Newham Council for their work on the matter so far, and I hope that it bears fruit, but I know that many similar communities have faced similar problems. May we have a debate in Government time on whether our councils have the resources and powers they need to effectively step in and save much-loved local spaces and businesses when this kind of thing happens?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful suggestion of a debate. I am sorry to hear about the situation in her constituency. Such markets are often a stepping stone for many businesses to getting additional premises of their own. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and its high streets team have been collecting good practice about where other people have faced such situations. There are some good examples of what local authorities and other groups can do to ensure that continuity. As the next question time is a little way off, I will ask officials in the Department to contact the hon. Lady to see what more can be done to assist.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on the Government’s massive expansion of free childcare so that we can really scrutinise progress on delivering it, in order to ensure that people can access it, that we tackle workforce shortages, and that the initial stages of implementation go as smoothly as possible in April and September?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and remind the House that we had an urgent question on that matter on Monday. We are rolling out the single largest expansion in childcare in England's history, ensuring that working parents receive 30 hours of free childcare a week, starting at nine months and going all the way up to their child starting school. She will know that we have increased hourly funding rates with a £204 million cash boost this year and more than £400 million next year to support the childcare sector to deliver this, but I know that hon. Members will want to follow that progress very carefully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On 5 January, Bath received a red flood alert warning, the highest alert warning, which means risk to life. Fortunately, thanks to good management by local agencies and the council, no life was lost, but the damage was still substantial. Yet my council was told that it was not eligible for funding through the flood recovery framework, because not enough properties were flooded internally. That is no comfort to flood victims or to the council, because the clean-up operation and the repair to external damage are still very substantial. My council has still not received any information from the Government. May we have a statement on why certain council areas are excluded from the funding through the framework, what the thinking is behind that, how they can be supported, and what else the Government can do to help councils that have been substantially damaged by flooding?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady's question affords me the opportunity, on behalf of us all, to thank all those emergency services and others who have been working to protect our communities through snow, floods and high winds in the past few weeks. I am sorry to hear that she has not had information through from the relevant Department. I did write last week on a similar matter about eligibility criteria, and I will make sure that she gets a copy of that answer from the Department. As departmental questions are a couple of months away, I will raise the issue with the Secretary of State.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Could we want for any better evidence that the mandate for the covid inquiry is already out of date than hearing that the evidence of serving and former Cabinet Ministers, and of the former Prime Minister, about the origin of the covid virus has been ruled out of order? Let us have a statement from the Government about updating the mandate for the covid inquiry two years on from when it was set up, so that it can properly deal with the origins of the disease, the efficacy of both the vaccines and the lockdowns, and the huge number of NHS excess deaths. This is an inquiry that must serve the people of this country and the victims of this terrible disease, and it is already out of date.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend raises an extremely important matter. Some of the issues that he raises were not in the original terms of the inquiry. Even if they sit outside the work of that inquiry, the questions that he raises are legitimate, particularly for our national security. Although it may not be possible to change the terms of the current inquiry, which is looking particularly at the Government's response to that situation, I will certainly alert the Cabinet to the issues that he raises, which are related to national security.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is Thursday, so we have another question on contaminated blood. As the Government had Sir Brian's recommendations on what compensation should be paid in April 2023, and we were repeatedly told that the Government were working at pace to be ready for the original November announcement of the final report, can we now please have a statement from the Minister about what progress has been made since last April to update the House, so that we can see that the work at pace is actually happening?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for again diligently raising this matter. I met the Paymaster General yesterday to get an update on progress. Progress is being made, and I know that the Paymaster General will want to come to the House to make a statement on that. I know that he will do so as soon as he has something substantial to say, but I can assure the House, which I hope knows my interest in this area, that he is working to ensure that justice is served as swiftly as possible.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Some time ago, the Scottish Government refused an instruction from the Information Commissioner to publish written evidence from the Hamilton inquiry into the conduct of the former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. Last month, I attended the Court of Session hearing at which the Scottish Government were humiliated, at great public expense, in their attempt to reject the request. Despite a unanimous ruling against them by the highest civil court in Scotland, the Scottish Government still refuse to release that information. That extraordinary behaviour would appear to be in breach of the ministerial code, the civil service code and, indeed, the rule of law. May I ask the Leader of the House whether the rule of law in Scotland is at risk and whether we can have a debate and a statement on this matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this matter and the disturbing issues surrounding it. Although there is a debate about whether the court decision is binding or is binding in a particular way, we consider it to be a matter of accountability to the Scottish Parliament. I am sure that the Scottish Parliament will be asking questions of their Government in relation to those very serious matters, which my right hon. Friend has raised today.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I inform the Leader of the House that we already have a holocaust memorial centre at the University of Huddersfield at the heart of Huddersfield? All Members hope that the new holocaust memorial centre at the heart of Westminster will happen soon. Am I right in believing that an illustrious ancestor of hers—Raymond Postgate—wrote a book called, "The Common People"? Is she aware that common people in my constituency and up and down the country are being dreadfully exploited via Rachmanite landlords? They are being given a miserable life, with rack-renting or letting every room in the house as a bedroom. What is going on in the rented sector is a scandal. May we have a debate on that?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I learn something new every session. I shall have to investigate the first half of his question, but he is absolutely right

[Penny Mordaunt]

to raise the plight of tenants who either are in unsuitable accommodation or are being exploited by their landlords. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has done an enormous amount of work on that issue, both on building quality and ensuring that tenants are protected, and I shall ensure that he has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Energy national policy statements have a significant impact on my constituents. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend's officials and her Parliamentary Private Secretary for finding some information in advance; I know that the statements were laid before Parliament on 22 November, and it was then declared in a written ministerial statement that they had been approved by Parliament. Although I have returned to the Back Benches after many years, I remember that the Government in the past laid a resolution before the House, and I participated in that debate on 18 July 2011. I do not believe we have had a debate on these particular statements, so I would be grateful, even if we have gone past the legal deadline, if my right hon. Friend found time for one.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that question. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero made a written ministerial statement on 22 November presenting the five revised energy national policy statements for parliamentary approval. She deposited copies of all those documents in the Libraries of both Houses, and they were available on gov.uk. She also sent a letter to all hon. Members on 9 January highlighting the scrutiny period of the NPS. Following the expiry period of 21 days, no objections were received, and the Secretary of State designated them on 17 January. I fully appreciate that while all the i's have been dotted and the t's crossed, my right hon. Friend and other Members may feel they have not had the chance to discuss or offer their opinions on them. She knows how to apply for a debate, but I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I was pleased to hear this week that the UK Government have recognised the funding pressure on local councils in England and confirmed that there will be Barnett consequentials. However, we in Scotland can only hope—and as a keen follower of the problems that we have with the Scottish Government, the Leader of the House will be aware that it is probably a forlorn hope—that the Scottish Government will use the consequentials to cover funding gaps in our local councils and speed up repairs to mould and damp in social housing, which is becoming a critical problem. In Edinburgh we have a housing crisis, and even as we speak my council and others across Scotland are trying to figure out how to fill the gaps that the Scottish Government have left. I was, however, disappointed that there was no clear mention in the statement about how the UK Government would enforce measures in Awaab's law to improve social housing. May we have a statement on the steps the Government are taking to enforce those new rules, if only to provide a template for the Scottish Government on how one can support local councils?

Penny Mordaunt: I think the hon. Lady for her question. At the last oral questions, the Levelling Up Secretary highlighted that local authorities have been given the chance to take 100% of the receipts from right to buy and invest them in social housing. We have provided a very good funding settlement to the Scottish Government—at least 20% more funding per head than the UK Government spend on the same things in other parts of the UK—but more often than not the Scottish Government do not pass that funding either to local authorities or, in the case of support for businesses, to those businesses. That is a very sorry state of affairs; if it could be rectified, we would have a much better chance of dealing with the issues she raises.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As T. S. Eliot opined, time present and time past are inseparable, for we are what we remember—who we have known, where we have been, what we have done. When dementia robs people of those precious memories, as it does for 850,000 people, their lives are diminished. That often happens with age, and with age come other conditions such as arthritis, which affects one in six people, or diabetes. Can we have a statement on the Government's major conditions strategy to ensure that that strategy is holistic and takes account of the fact that many people suffer from multiple conditions?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this very important matter. The Health Secretary will not be answering questions until 5 March, so I shall relay to her his interest in this area. We can combat those particular major conditions partly through research. As he will know, several research missions in dementia care since 2010 have arrived not just at fantastic new drugs but made connections between dementia and those other conditions that he outlines.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was recently contacted by a constituent who had been unfortunately caught out by an online scam involving Google gift cards. Fortunately, they got their money back, but Action Fraud decided not to investigate. On further investigation, it turns out that, at a time when online fraud is rapidly increasing, the number of fraud cases being investigated has gone down by a third. May we have a debate on what more we can do to make sure that the online world is safe from these scamsters and fraudsters?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear what the hon. Gentleman's constituent went through, but very pleased that they managed to get their money back. This morning we had the latest figures from the crime survey of England and Wales, and I am pleased to report to the House that fraud has decreased by 13% with notable reductions of 33% in advance fee fraud and 40% in other fraud. The actions that the police and the other agencies that support them on this matter are taking are having an effect. We have a plan and it is working.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): May I, too, send my condolences to the family of Sir Graham Bright, who was incredibly kind to me when I was a candidate and gave great support and advice over many years?

I have been robustly raising the concerns of residents of Kytes Drive in Watford regarding a planning application, including bringing a petition to Parliament about the

long-term use of the site, to ensure that it would be suitable and used only for people who were veterans, those with disabilities and older people. I am pleased to say that, by ensuring that the chief executive of Anchor heard residents' concerns, I have had a small long-term win: Anchor has agreed to pursue a local authority lettings agreement prioritising the housing needs of people with disabilities, veterans and other vulnerable people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Ahem.

Dean Russell: Although I appreciate that my right hon. Friend may not be able to comment on planning specifically, can she advise me on how I can best encourage the council to take up that offer?

Penny Mordaunt: That was a lengthy question, Madam Deputy Speaker—I could hear you coughing—but the answer will be short. My hon. Friend has provided his own answer and got it on the record. We all encourage the council to act as he wishes.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Government's flagship policy for a generational ban on tobacco sales has many health benefits, of which the Leader of the House will no doubt be aware, but is she alarmed that it will not apply in Northern Ireland, where it will be frustrated by the EU tobacco products directive? Even if a Northern Ireland Assembly were in place, it could not trump that directive. Will she ask for a statement to be made on what is more important: the health of all the people of the United Kingdom or tobacco policy outlined by the EU?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that one reason we want to get the Executive re-established is to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are able to make decisions relating to themselves, and that principle also applies to the point that he raises. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard his concerns. The UK Government have previously stepped in and made interventions in the health space. Although I note that there would be difficulties with regard to that particular EU directive, I think this is something that the UK Government should think long and hard about.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that we had a debate on steel this week in which Members on both sides of the House raised concerns and questions, particularly in relation to the UK's ongoing ability to make its own virgin steel. That is an incredibly important issue on which there is much more to say. Will she support a debate in Government time so that we can discuss it further?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend again for her diligent work in speaking up not just for steel producers but for the users of those products. It is incredibly important that we retain those sovereign capabilities. I know that she takes every opportunity in this Chamber to champion those issues. I am sure that she will apply for another debate on the matter, and my office stands ready to assist her.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I draw the House's attention to early-day motion 204 and my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The industrial dispute in the Pensions Regulator has now reached its 50th day because the regulator is offering a pay rise lower than the UK Government's pay guidance. May we have a statement or a debate on the Government's pay review guidance and what actions can be taken against agencies that do not comply with it?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that the next chance to question the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on this issue will be on 5 February. I encourage him to attend those questions.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I bring good news from Kettering, where 16 mature street trees have been saved from the chop. Gipsy Lane is one of the older and most attractive roads in Kettering, but there is going to be a 340-house development at the end of it, and under the original planning application, 21 very mature trees were to be chopped down to facilitate access. However, thanks to the proactive engagement of Councillor Jason Smithers, the leader of North Northamptonshire Council, and of the developer Places for People, the good news is that 16 of those trees will be saved. May we have a Government statement on the importance of keeping mature street trees wherever possible—they are attractive and good for the environment—and will my right hon. Friend praise the leader of the council and Places for People for the decision that they have taken?

Penny Mordaunt: Good on my hon. Friend, good on Jason, and good on all the residents who supported their campaign. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard that my hon. Friend's work has been triumphant and encourage him to make a statement, as my hon. Friend suggests.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The permanent secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions claims that his Department is "making good progress" in dealing with its staffing crisis. However, the PCS union has obtained figures for the year up to last November showing that while the Department recruited 8,495 new staff, there were also 8,031 leavers in that year—far short of the aspiration to recruit 5,000 staff per quarter. Will the Leader of the House seek clarification as to the true state of the staffing crisis at the Department and what action is being taken to accelerate the recruitment drive?

Penny Mordaunt: I am always here to assist the House and hon. Members, but the hon. Lady can raise that matter directly with the Secretary of State on 5 February.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): At my most recent constituency surgery, I had the pleasure of meeting Southend's outgoing Member of the Youth Parliament, the amazing Madi Faulkner-Hatt. Madi raised with me the alarming statistic that the number of eligible pupils claiming free school meals drops by 26 percentage points when those pupils leave primary school, from 77% down to 51%. Given that figures from the House of Commons Library confirm that the number of eligible pupils, of course, remains the same, may we please have a debate

[Anna Firth]

in Government time on what more can be done to make sure that every eligible pupil is encouraged to take up their free school meal at all stages of their education?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for taking the time to meet Madi, and I thank the Youth Parliament, which has made that issue its campaign focus for this year. My hon. Friend will know that around 2 million pupils currently have free school meals, but we are also doing much more outside of term time through our holiday activities and food programme—about £200 million is invested in that every year. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. She will know that the next Education questions are on the 29th.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): At the beginning of the month, I had a meeting with a veteran who came to my advice surgery, who was gay. In what was a genuinely upsetting and moving meeting, he described the profound impact on his life of having lived in fear of being convicted and of the genuinely horrifying, homophobic environment at his work. We have had a statement and an apology in the House, which is welcome, but we have not had a debate in which the voices of LGBT veterans can be heard and their compensation scrutinised, so please may we have that debate in Government time? This is a very important issue.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter. I am sure that many Members would want to attend such a debate—she will know how to secure one. Last week, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) raised the issue of those serving in particular parts of our armed forces or our intelligence agencies who were unable to give evidence to that investigation because of the nature of the work they were doing, so there are still some unresolved matters that need an airing, and I encourage the hon. Lady to apply for that debate.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Government have rightly given local authorities additional money this year to fix potholes, which are dangerous to cyclists, can cause really expensive bills for motorists and make neighbourhoods look unsightly. Will the Government consider requiring councils to publish information each month about what repairs they have done and on which roads, in an easily accessible format, to aid scrutiny and accountability so that residents can see what is being done with their money?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a very important point and makes a very good suggestion. The waters are often further muddied by the local authority working with contractors: it passes the money to those contractors, and it is then hard to keep tabs on how it is being spent. We know that in certain parts of the country, potholes are not being filled in, despite the local authorities being given money to do so. By 15 March this year, the Government will require local authorities to publish a plan of how that extra money is being spent and, thereafter, quarterly reports summarising which roads have been resurfaced. My hon. Friend reminds us that that plan needs to be in an accessible form, because hon. Members need to be able to see it, and our residents need to see it too.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Residents in the new town of Wixams have been waiting nearly 15 years for a GP surgery. Despite 3,000 families having moved into the town, there is still no sign of one, with many having to drive over 14 miles for routine or emergency appointments. Sadly, they are far from alone across the country in facing this challenge. Will a Health Minister make a statement on how we can do more to get much needed primary care provision into areas of high housing growth and how we can reform the system to make sure that these types of challenges cannot happen again?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter, and I would encourage him to raise it with his local commissioners as well, if he has not already done so. They will be responsible for those capital plans. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard what he has said, given that her next questions are not until 5 March.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): This week, the Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in my constituency opened its new accident and emergency facilities, which will enable patients to get to expert clinicians sooner than they have been able to do until recently. The building was backed by £4.4 million of Government funding. Would the Leader of the House agree to our having a debate on the amount of infrastructure that the NHS has built since the last election to recognise the scale of the investment and the beneficial effect it is having on patients?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate her on what she has helped to secure for her constituents. The Government are investing record sums to upgrade and modernise NHS buildings so that staff have the facilities needed to provide world-class care for patients, including over £9 billion in this financial year, and totalling over £25 billion over the spending review period. These are incredibly important investments that often not only increase the capacity in places such as her A&E department, but are designed with the staff who will be working in them so that they are set out in the best way for them to deliver good care. I have to say that—in some cases for the first time—this includes facilities for members of staff to enjoy a break and a sleep when they need it.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In response to my question on 11 January, the Leader of the House told the House about

“people in England paying lower tax than people in Scotland”.—*[Official Report, 11 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 455.]*

She also said that her Government had delivered a “balanced budget”. Last week, I asked the Leader of the House to correct the record since both those things are untrue, which she refused to do.

The House of Commons Library has now confirmed that no UK Government have delivered a balanced budget since 2000-01 and that this Government do indeed pay the equivalent of £318 million every day in debt interest, while the Scottish Government must by law deliver a balanced budget every year. It has also confirmed that the majority of people in Scotland—the majority—pay less tax, including council tax, than they

would if they lived in England. I can share this information with the Leader of the House if she wishes to see it. So I ask again: will the Leader of the House make a statement correcting the hugely inaccurate information that she gave to this House on 11 January?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I was very careful in the figures that I gave the hon. Lady, and I stand by them. They are completely true and factual. In addition to having the Office for Budget Responsibility, we are very open and do not mark our own homework on this front. Perhaps before next week, the hon. Lady might like to read what Audit Scotland has said about her own Government's performance.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As many as 2 million grandparents do not have contact with their grandchildren. Conversely, the number of children who do not have contact with their grandparents is even higher. Given those large figures, it is likely that the constituency of every single Member in this House has someone suffering from this condition. Next week, there is an exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall with a quilt of love and hope made by grandparents who are estranged from their grandchildren. Can we have a statement from a Minister on whether the Government will consider amending the Children Act 1989 to give grandchildren the right to a relationship with their grandparents when they are blocked from contact, which mainly happens as a result of breakdowns in parental relationships?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. Not being able to see a grandchild can often be heartbreaking for grandparents and it is also an experience that the child misses out on, as we know the incredible value that grandparents can bring to their lives and upbringing. Although grandparents do not have an automatic legal right to see their grandchildren, they can try to secure access through an informal arrangement or via a court order. My hon. Friend might consider raising his questions and helpful suggestion with the Secretary of State for Justice on 20 February.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Last Friday marked a full year since the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill published its report, setting out a series of important recommendations to improve the rights of people with mental health problems detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. In that time, there have been 51,312 detentions under the Act, according to NHS statistics published this morning. Despite repeated promises, we have still not had a response from the Government, who will say only that we will get an opportunity to debate any Bill when parliamentary time allows. Will the Leader of the House please allow parliamentary time for that vital legislation as an urgent priority, to protect some of our most vulnerable constituents?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising another important matter. She will know that we have a draft Bill, and although it was not in the King's Speech, when parliamentary time and the legislative programme allow, we will consider bringing that forward to the House. I shall ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what she has said, and she may be interested to

know that I have also been speaking to the legislative team at No.10, and with officials at the Department of Health and Social Care, about measures that the Bill would have helped.

We still have a number of people in inappropriate care settings, and subsequent reviews have been initiated by this Government—starting with Sir Stephen Bubb's Winterbourne report, to mention just one—about people with mental, learning or behavioural disabilities. Everyone ought to be in the right setting and be looked after, and if we are not able to bring forward legislation, I know that the Secretary of State will be looking at practical ways that we can make that happen.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): This Government have done more than any in history to bring jobs and opportunities, especially manufacturing opportunities, to areas such as mine, so much so that unemployment in Rother Valley is now only 2.8%. The Leader of the House will know that South Yorkshire now has the UK's first investment zone, which will bring 8,000 new jobs—many of them high quality manufacturing jobs—and leverage £1.2 billion of investment to Rother Valley's doorstep. To celebrate the opportunities and wealth this brings for everyone in the country, and the increase in manufacturing jobs in Rother Valley, may we have a debate in Government time on that massive uptick for local economies?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work and success that he has been having in his constituency—it is very good news indeed—as well as all the employers, the business community and everyone else who has helped to deliver that incredible progress. I am sure he knows how to apply for a debate, and I hope that many other Members across the House would have similar good news stories to tell if such a debate were to take place. g

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In the market town of Honiton that I represent, youth sports groups have been struggling because of inadequate sports facilities. That is true of at least three clubs—football, gymnastics and rugby clubs—that I have visited. Ensuring that we have healthy, active children is not just the responsibility of schools, so may we please have a debate to discuss how local authorities can be encouraged to identify space for young people's sport?

Penny Mordaunt: This is a very important matter—it is important for health, for mental health, and often for the economic regeneration of particular areas. The hon. Gentleman will know that the next opportunity to ask questions to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will be on 22 February. I shall ensure that she has heard his concerns, and ask her to get her officials to contact him to offer some advice.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that despite being bailed out with more than £6 billion by the Government, the Mayor of London has continued to plead poverty at every opportunity and seeks to deflect blame to the Government for his many appalling failures to keep Londoners safe and to keep London moving over the past eight years. Given that the Labour Mayor of London has now suddenly found more than £500 million behind

[Mr Louie French]

his sofa for pre-election giveaways, will the Leader of the House please confirm how Members can have a debate on the powers of the Mayor of London and how we can seek an audit of his financial mismanagement of Government and taxpayers' money?

Penny Mordaunt: I understand my hon. Friend's concern and why he raises it. I notice from the BBC London news this morning that the Mayor of London is now going back to the Government to ask them to bail out the black hole that was discovered last week in the Met's budget. That is despite a £6 billion bail-out being given to the Mayor, plus his increasing the Mayor's part of council tax by 71% since he came to office.

In that debate, we might like to consider the Mayor's spending plans, which have seen £30 million given to unions to avoid the 140th strike on the transport network on his watch. A similar amount was spent on increasing staffing costs. There has been a 57% rise in mayoral office costs and a 33% increase in press spending. There was £10 million for the Metropolitan police to determine their personality type, £1 million-worth of free advertising for lingerie and vaginal moisturiser—believe it or not—and £5,000 of taxpayers' cash for Transport for London's staff's junk food, despite the banning of junk food adverts on the tube. That is what Labour do in power, and we all know what we need to do if we do not want it to continue.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I learned to swim at Withington baths—

Lucy Powell: So did I.

Jeff Smith: Indeed, the shadow Leader of the House also learned to swim there. It is a lovely Edwardian building in the heart of Withington. When the coalition cuts hit Manchester so hard around 10 years ago, the council was forced to transfer ownership to a community group. Under its leadership, the leisure centre has gone from strength to strength, and last week it celebrated the completion of a highly successful heritage refurbish project. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the board and volunteers at Withington leisure centre? Perhaps we could have a debate in the House to recognise the work of volunteers and community groups in running local facilities.

Penny Mordaunt: What a fabulous good news story. I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating them all. Members will know that this is a subject close to my heart. I have gone above and beyond to save my local lido, which will this year undergo a huge heritage refurbishment, thanks to the levelling-up fund. These things would not be possible without an army of volunteers, first standing to ensure that the community asset transfer occurs, and then also helping to run the facilities and to engage the community. What a wonderful story. If the hon. Gentleman manages to secure a debate, I will come and listen.

Mr Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It will shortly be 25 years since the establishment of the Welsh Assembly, so we have had 25 years of 60 Senedd Members stealing a living from the taxpayer while delivering zero identifiable benefits for the people of Wales to explain their existence.

At the Welsh Affairs Committee recently, the Secretary of State for Wales was unable to name even three benefits of devolution when I questioned him. In 1997, the Labour Secretary of State for Wales in this place said that devolution was “a process”, “not an event” and should be continuously reviewed—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think the hon. Gentleman needs to be careful with his language when he uses the word “stealing”. He might want to reconsider that.

Mr Roberts: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Members of the Senedd may be questionably obtaining a salary for not doing a great deal of work—that may be a better way of putting it.

Will the Leader of the House confirm which Department should be reviewing devolution and when the last review was? Can we have a debate on whether the people of Wales are happy with having devolution at all?

Penny Mordaunt: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that it is the Minister with responsibility for the constitution whose remit will cover such matters. The problems he raises relate to the performance of the Welsh Labour Government. I think it is the longest period of time that Labour has been in power, and we can really see, given the state of the NHS and the other things that it looks after, what a blueprint for a Labour Government looks like.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to bring issues to the attention of the Leader of the House, and the House. This time, it is a good news story. In the light of recent progress in Pakistan on religious education, our heartfelt thanks should be given to the Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training for developing the inclusive religious education curriculum for grades 1 to 12 for minority religions in Pakistan. Will the Leader of the House enable the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to monitor the situation as it unfolds?

Unfortunately, not all is good news. I bring the spotlight back to the situation in Tibet, where Chinese repression continues to be applied, with human rights violations committed especially against Buddhists in Tibet. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning China's repression of Buddhists in Tibet, who have a right to hold their religious views?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again bringing to the House's attention these important matters, which would not otherwise get much airtime. It is nice to have some good news, and it shows the difference that particular Ministers can make under difficult circumstances. I am sure the whole House will join him in congratulating that particular gentleman.

I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning China's repression of Buddhists in Tibet. The Foreign Office will monitor both those situations closely. I thank him again for raising them.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): It is sadly impossible for new patients to find an NHS dentist in Blackpool. It is estimated that 40% of my constituents—

some 35,000 people—cannot currently access NHS treatment. Every single week, I have constituents attending my surgeries pleading with me to get them the treatment they so badly need. Only last week, a mother attended my surgery who had had to remove the teeth of her six-year-old daughter with pliers because she was in so much pain and could not access the treatment her family needed. As the NHS dentistry recovery plan is long overdue, would it be in order for the House to receive a ministerial statement on when we may finally see some progress on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I happen to know from recent meetings with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is responsible for this policy area, that she is doing a lot of work, which she will be keen to bring to the House's attention in short order.

The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have given a considerable uplift to local commissioners to ensure that providers are in place. From memory, I think £50 million was given at the start of last year. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister is interested in what commissioners have done with that money as it was flexibly given—it was not ringfenced—although it was specifically given for dentist treatment. She is looking into that matter, and I will be interested to see what the answer is in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Secretaries of State in the House of Lords: Commons Scrutiny

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Procedure Committee. Dame Karen Bradley will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. May I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Government Minister? Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

11.38 am

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Procedure Committee report "Commons scrutiny of Secretaries of State in the House of Lords", which was published yesterday. I thank both the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for the statement and the Clerks of the Committee, who put the report together in very short order to ensure that we could report as soon as possible in the new year on this important matter.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Mr Speaker asked the Committee to examine this issue after the appointment of Lord Cameron as Foreign Secretary. He asked us whether any historical precedent could be adapted to allow non-Members to participate in Commons proceedings, and whether options for scrutiny should extend beyond departmental questions to statements, urgent questions and debates.

I would like to thank the 131 colleagues who responded to our survey, and those who submitted evidence to our inquiry. Almost nine in 10 of those who responded to our survey wanted to see more direct accountability of Lords Secretaries of State in the Commons. Around 85% thought it should include departmental question times, urgent questions and statements. Almost two thirds thought it should take place in the Chamber.

Some colleagues raised concerns that changing our procedure to facilitate scrutiny would legitimise the appointment of more senior Ministers in the Lords. The constitutional question of the House in which senior Ministers sit is not in the Procedure Committee's remit, but our clear preference as MPs—the elected representatives of our constituents—is that Secretaries of State should sit in the Commons. That is why our recommendations are limited to this Parliament, to deal with the issues that the House faces now. They should not set a precedent for the future.

We have great respect for the work of the House of Lords in its scrutiny of the Government. The other place has great expertise and experience of foreign policy and international affairs among its Members. The Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees do excellent work holding the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to account, and I support their calls for Lord Cameron to appear

[*Dame Karen Bradley*]

regularly before them, as Secretaries of State in the Commons appear regularly before their departmental Committees. But their work complements scrutiny in this Chamber—it does not replace it.

As the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), told us, Select Committees and the Chamber have unique mandates, functions and purposes. They are not synonymous. Scrutiny by elected MPs on behalf of their constituents is a fundamental part of our democratic system, as is debate across the Dispatch Boxes between Ministers and the Opposition. Therefore, every MP should have the ability to directly question the Foreign Secretary.

The Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), and his ministerial colleagues do an excellent job, but the Foreign Secretary is ultimately accountable for the FCDO. As the Leader of the House acknowledged in her evidence to us, there will always be some issues that the House and our constituents would expect the Foreign Secretary to answer for.

We considered proposals for using Westminster Hall or Committee Room 14 instead of the Chamber, but they would restrict participation to a fraction of the House. We do not believe that is acceptable or practical. That is why we have recommended that, for the rest of this Parliament, Secretaries of State who sit in the Lords should appear at departmental question times, make ministerial statements and answer urgent questions that a Secretary of State in the Commons would normally do. They should speak from the Bar of the House, not the Dispatch Box, which should continue to be reserved for Members of this House.

Such an arrangement will rightly require the agreement of the House of Lords. We are confident that the Lords will agree that in the modern age, and at a time of growing global tensions, it is not tenable for the Foreign Secretary not to be scrutinised by elected MPs on behalf of our constituents. I therefore urge the Government to bring forward the necessary motion as quickly as possible.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Following yesterday's debate on the situation in the Red sea, there was no retrospective vote on UK military action. The debate was responded to by the Minister of State from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is a brilliant Minister and answered expertly. In the light of the work of the right hon. Lady's Select Committee on accountability for Secretaries of State in the House of Lords, does she think that another precedent is Lord Carrington? He resigned during the Falklands war for not having anticipated the Argentinian invasion, despite warnings from Members of this House.

Dame Karen Bradley: The question of whether a vote is required for military action is not a matter that the Procedure Committee deals with, but I am sure colleagues on the Front Bench heard that point.

On the matter of Lord Carrington, the hon. Gentleman will recall that at that time the Prime Minister appointed a deputy Foreign Secretary to sit in this House, so there

was somebody with the ability to answer for the whole Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as it then was, in this Chamber. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for ably chairing the Procedure Committee in its deliberations and for compiling this topical and timely report. Will she assure Members such as myself, who can perhaps be regarded as sceptical of innovations in this House, that the proposals contained within this excellent report are deeply wedded in tradition? Indeed, it was the case that, in 1814, the Duke of Wellington came to the Bar of the House to answer questions from MPs. Now, while the Duke of Wellington and Lord Cameron may have enjoyed rather different campaigns in Europe, it is none the less deeply wedded in tradition.

Dame Karen Bradley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I know he is very, very concerned with matters of the constitution, and with ensuring that we look at precedents. I can assure him that, as Mr Speaker asked us to, we started from historic precedent. He rightly cites the example of the Duke of Wellington in 1814, who I believe received the plaudits of Members while at the Bar of the House. I think a painting of such can be seen in the National Portrait Gallery.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her Committee on an excellent report. I very much agree with its recommendations. The Leader of the House said that the Government would respond shortly. Has she had any indication from the Government that they will accept the Committee's recommendations? She said that it needs the agreement of the Lords. What sort of timescale is there for how quickly that process can be agreed?

Dame Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his comments about the report. The report was published only yesterday, so I would not expect to have heard any response from the Government yet. I am sure that the Leader of the House will ensure that a response is forthcoming shortly. He is absolutely right. We have to bear in mind that the other place is an independent body and its Members are governed by its rules, which say that Members should not appear before this House without explicit permission from the other place. That includes appearances in front of Select Committees, Bill Committees and so on. We will wait to see how long such matters might take, but I hope that the other place will recognise and acknowledge the real concerns in this place that we should be able to properly scrutinise. We have to remember that in this House we represent the people who sent us here. The other place has great expertise and contains some great minds, but it does not speak on behalf of constituents in the way that we have to as elected Members. That is an important distinction.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Procedure Committee for her statement, and for her very succinct and helpful answers. We all know Lord Cameron and recognise his ability and qualities to do the job that we need. I am very conscious that we live in a very dangerous world, where there are wars and

rumours of wars, to cite the Bible. With the Foreign Secretary in the other place, that leaves a gap in accountability. Today, I believe that that accountability gap has been addressed. Does the Committee believe that accountability in this House is the priority and that our constituents deserve that as well?

Dame Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and hon. Friend, for his comments. I would have been disappointed if he had not contributed, so I am very grateful he stayed to take part. He is absolutely right. This is the concern that the Committee has had throughout: that there is a democratic deficit if we cannot raise concerns on behalf of our constituents. We are in our constituencies hearing what our constituents are concerned about, so we know what people on the ground are feeling. That is no criticism of any Member in the other place, but they simply do not have that day-to-day contact with constituents. That is why we felt that it was so important, particularly in the world that we see today, that we were able to scrutinise properly the work of the FCDO and the Secretary of State. We are not suggesting that the Secretary of State should take part in debates—we accept that debates are a different matter—but there will always be statements, and some urgent questions, to which it is appropriate for a Secretary of State rather than a Minister to respond. Again, this is no criticism whatsoever of the excellent Ministers in the FCDO, but at times a Secretary of State has to be the one who responds, and that is what we have put in our report.

Backbench Business

Holocaust Memorial Day

11.50 am

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

I thank the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—who is not in the Chamber—the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for co-sponsoring the debate. Let me also pay tribute to two organisations, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust, both of which devote much energy and time to organising the events that help us to commemorate the holocaust. Without their excellent work, we would not keep alive the memory of those who lost their lives in the Nazi death camps, or indeed those who were killed in other genocides from Rwanda to Cambodia and from Bosnia to Darfur. Without them, our efforts to learn the lessons of history would weaken and fade away.

This is the last time I shall have the privilege of participating in this important debate, but it could not be a more difficult and depressing time to do so. I have just returned from a short visit to Israel. We went to support the people who lived on Kfar Azar, a kibbutz that we had visited in February last year. Many of those living on the kibbutz were people committed to peaceful co-existence with their neighbours in Gaza, but tragically many were killed on 7 October, many who survived are distraught because their loved ones were captured as hostages, and many, especially the women, were treated with the utmost abominable, sadistic cruelty, sexually assaulted in utterly inhumane ways, and then murdered. Israel and its people are experiencing a national trauma and a real, existential fear for their survival, with memories of the holocaust at the heart of their minds; and the same is true in Gaza, with innocent civilians experiencing a similar national trauma, an identical existential fear and a comparable terror of genocide as they live with bombardment, death, injury, displacement, and a lack of humanitarian aid.

So we meet at a deeply depressing time to reflect on the holocaust, with many asking themselves, “When will the world ever, ever, really learn from our past?” But the truth is that we must keep trying. This year’s focus for Holocaust Memorial Day is the fragility of freedom. That theme allows us to reflect on how, by better understanding the past and better understanding how easily freedom can be eroded, we can act today to make the world a better place for those fleeing persecution today.

I want to raise these matters in the context of my own family’s experience. Like others, I lost close relatives in the holocaust: my grandmother, whose last written words to her son, my uncle, were “Don’t forget me completely”, and my uncle, whose wife wrote in a letter pleading for his release, “He’s only a number to you. He’s everything to me.” But I had other relatives who escaped days before the start of the war, and were dispersed across the diaspora as they sought safety. They too were victims of the assault on Jews, they too suffered hugely, and they too should be the focus of our concerns as we commit ourselves to its never happening again.

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

My grandfather came to England on 29 March 1939. He was 66 and had just recovered from a prostate operation and an embolism in his leg. We have a powerful account of his experiences and emotions in the diary that he kept. He described his last visit to his parents' graves in Vienna, in tears because he would never visit those graves again. He recalled how his parents, my great-grandparents, visited the graves of their own parents, my great-great-grandparents, in Poland, in tears because they were driven out of their homes by pogroms—a never-ending cycle of violence.

My grandfather described his feelings a few days after arriving in England:

“Because of the lack of language skills very lonely, depressed, cannot memorise, miserable pronunciation. Living like a recluse.” Even six months later, he said that those who stayed in Vienna

“may have saved themselves from all the horrors and all the difficulties of emigrating.”

He talked about antisemitism in Britain and how it reached up into the Government, when the only Jew in the Cabinet was sacked by Neville Chamberlain. On his arrival in Britain, my Jewish refugee grandfather was classified as an “enemy alien.” That was later changed to “friendly,” but he was still an alien.

At 8.30 am on 27 June 1940, in the middle of a war that led to the death of 6 million Jews, my grandfather was in his bath and there was a knock on the door. He was arrested, removed from his home and interned. He tried to ring his doctor to certify his illnesses but then, as today, no doctor picked up the phone. He was taken to Huyton, in Liverpool, and given a number: “Group number 28/2, number 1428.” He was housed in overcrowded conditions with a rubber sheet, straw and blankets. In the early days, he was not allowed to write or receive letters. The sanitary conditions were dreadful, and the German Jews found themselves housed with German Nazis. His freedom was indeed fragile. Our treatment of Jewish refugees was unconscionable.

Fast forward to my own experience. I came to the UK from Egypt, stateless, in 1949. After the creation of Israel, Egypt became an increasingly hostile environment for Jews. My father had a stone thrown through the window of his office and, with the memory of the holocaust still raw in his mind, he decided to get the family out of Egypt. We were rejected by three English-speaking countries, and the UK finally, to my father's eternal gratitude, gave our family of six entry visas to this country. My father's freedom was indeed fragile.

Five years later, we were still stateless and my father applied for British nationality. At that time, my mother was dying in hospital and my older sister and brother were away at school and university, so I was at home with my younger sister. She was six and I was nine. A Home Office inspector came to tea. I remember that occasion vividly as, instead of our usual boiled eggs and toast, we had to eat cucumber sandwiches and fruit cake, which I absolutely hated, having grown up on succulent fresh fruit in the middle east. Worst of all, we were interrogated—two young girls on their own—for a full hour on who our friends were, what books we read and what games we played. My freedom was indeed fragile, dealing with a hostile, not friendly, environment that remains forever locked in my memory.

What do all these stories tell us? My family know, and indeed the families of millions of refugees know, that freedom is never guaranteed. We should understand that how we treat those who escape persecution and genocide is central to our reputation as a country that boasts a humanitarian approach to genocide and the holocaust.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for securing this debate and for the tone of her speech. Most of us are proud friends of Israel. I think of what the nation of Israel was put through because so many people would not speak out, and we saw the result in the horrific atrocity that is remembered today. Does she agree that we remember not out of a sense of morbidity, but out of the absolute necessity to ensure that the lessons taught by the slaughter of the Jewish people are learned by people of all faiths, so that it is never permitted to happen again?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely share that sentiment expressed by the hon. Gentleman.

As I was saying, we are not as good as we proclaim to be. My grandfather did not feel welcome and I did not feel wanted as a nine-year-old girl. The asylum seekers who try to come here today face a similar hostile environment. They are told by leading Government politicians that they pose an “existential threat” to the west's way of life, that they are part of a “hurricane” of mass migration, that MPs feel “besieged by asylum seekers” and that asylum seekers are “invading” Britain. We should reflect on what we say and what we do today before we exercise any moral entitlement to condemn the atrocities of the past.

The language we use today matters; the laws and practices of today designed to exclude many of those seeking freedom from persecution, which make a mockery of our commitment to the victims of genocide, matter; the fees we charge for visas today matter; and our refusal today to allow those seeking asylum to work matters. The hostility my grandfather faced in 1938 and the trepidation I felt when subjected to questioning in 1954 echo through the generations. All of this contributes to our credibility in the debate on the holocaust and subsequent genocides.

So before we applaud ourselves for keeping alive the memory of the holocaust, we should think about how fragile freedom was then for those who sought to escape death and how fragile it remains today. We must take responsibility and stand up to genocide wherever it rears its ugly head, and we must protect those who seek refuge in Britain. If we stand by while genocides unfold, or fail to protect those who need it the most, the horrors the likes of which my grandfather, father and even myself experienced will have all been for nothing. Freedom is one of our basic values, so surely we owe it to our children and our children's children to be able to stand up and really mean it when we say, “Never again.”

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

12.2 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for missing

the first minute of her speech. I was trying to get a transcript of the hearing yesterday at the Select Committee on the Holocaust Memorial Bill, when four of the witnesses were Joanna Millan, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Dr Martin Stern and Dr Lydia Tischler, each of whom is a holocaust survivor.

Some in the House will also have been present at the holocaust memorial commemoration when the holocaust candles were lit—five of them were lit; I was asked to stand in for someone who had had a transport difficulty; I did the one for those who had suffered at Darfur.

We have been given a good introduction to this debate with the moving speech we have just heard. I hope it will be possible to put on wider record the experience of the four people I have cited, who came as witnesses to the Committee having been produced by Baroness Ruth Deech, who herself talked about how her family had been destroyed in the Nazi holocaust.

We have rightly been reminded that our hands are not clean. It would have been possible for the state of Israel to have been created in the 1930s, and possibly 6 million people would have thus survived. Three quarters of the Jews in Europe died.

I have said in the past how much I welcomed the emphasis that the Holocaust Commission has put on education, which has been followed up by words from the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation. I have said that I had had a vague idea that perhaps 10 of my grandfather's extended family had died, but we now know that the real figure is more than 110 and possibly more than 120. That kind of education matters. I do not claim to have had the family experience that the right hon. Member for Barking has had, but I think that more of us will know and understand more if we have a personal connection of some kind.

I have spoken in the past about my first cousin once removed, George Woodwork, who was one of the Westminster medical students who thought they were going to help people suffering from malnutrition in the Netherlands, but were diverted to Bergen-Belsen, where they helped to save the lives of two thirds of those who were still breathing at the time of liberation.

On another occasion, we should have a further debate about the controversial proposals for a memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens, but I do not want to disturb this debate by going into too much detail about that now. What I will say is that if people get the chance, they should go to the Holocaust Galleries at the Imperial War Museum and, if possible, read a copy of the book "The Holocaust" produced two years ago by James Bulgin, which describes how things grew.

I will quote a paragraph from the book about Adolf Hitler:

"Hitler's early years of adulthood were spent pursuing an unsuccessful career as an artist in Vienna. Service in the First World War changed his life, however, giving his aimless existence a new sense of purpose and direction. Radicalised by the shock of defeat, he became convinced that Jews had conspired to ensure Germany's downfall. These ideas were first introduced to him by soldiers he was convalescing with after being injured during the war. After the war, he was sent to spy on a Nazi meeting, but became enraptured by the message of the movement—by 1921, he had become the leader of the Nazi Party. In 1923 Hitler led an ill-fated attempt to overthrow the government which became known as the Munich Putsch. He planned to take control of the Bavarian state government and then march on Berlin. The uprising

was quickly suppressed and Hitler was arrested. He was sentenced to five years in prison for treason, but was released after just eight months."

That was a decade before Hitler took his National Socialist party—the Nazi party—from doing pretty badly in the last elections in the 1920s to doing reasonably well in the proportional representation elections in 1933. The people who thought they had control of Germany thought they would make him Chancellor as a way of controlling him; they were wrong.

In any education associated with the holocaust—or whatever name people choose to call it, because "the holocaust" is a relatively recent name for the horrors, the terrors and the intended annihilation of a whole people—we need to understand that people can come up in the way that Adolf Hitler did. They may have gone to a meeting, found a small group, turned it into a more powerful one, recruited a private army and started marching around with the aim of taking control. If that sounds familiar from recent events in other countries, so be it.

We have to beware of private militias. We have to give the state a monopoly on resisting the potential of violence, so that it can resist by force those who are behaving dangerously badly. We have to ensure that message is not known just in this country, but in other countries as well.

When I first stood for election, there were about 40 countries around the world that had reasonably democratic political systems, in which people who lost elections accepted the fact they had lost. That number increased to about 80 or 90, while the number of countries in the world rose from about 190 to 210. We are now, I think, going backwards. More people may have a better standard of life, but I do not think they have a better standard of democracy.

The flexibility of people who are willing to use elections as a way of accepting defeat, not a way of guaranteeing victory, matters. We have to have a way of controlling, and if necessary confronting with force, those who would use force to subvert our country or any country, or would try to launch a genocidal attack on a whole group of people defined by their race or religion—or, for those who are Jewish, the overlap of the two.

When there was the attack on 7 October in Israel, on Israelis, someone wrote to me saying, "Why do they keep picking on us?" There are 16 million Jews around the world, but the number would probably be three times higher if it had not been for the holocaust. We have a responsibility to get better education about the holocaust going. We ought to ensure that people do not just get the chance to see an exhibition, but that in virtually all parts of their life, whether geography, history, current affairs or international relations, they understand how people rose to take control of their countries. People should be able to take part in something that is different and an alternative.

I understand that I will not always get my way—within my own party, within Parliament, and within the country. I might not always be re-elected. It is important that we learn the lesson that democracy is about trying to achieve a good purpose but being willing to be defeated and to try again, without taking to the streets with guns or going into exile. Even more importantly, we have to ensure that people do not find themselves dead because of other people's prejudices and very cruel behaviours.

12.9 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for the debate. I am grateful for the way in which the application was dealt with. When we went to the Committee, I felt that we were pushing at an open door. Its willingness to find time in the Chamber was exceptionally welcome, because this year of all years it is important that the debate take place right at the heart of Parliament. It would have been no less powerful in Westminster Hall, but it really matters that it is here. I pay tribute to my co-sponsor, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). Her speech was one of the finest I have heard in my 22 years in Parliament. It would have been powerful just for her to share her family experience, but for her then to take that experience and draw parallels and lessons for the world today made it a wholly exceptional contribution. She will be remembered and missed in future Holocaust Memorial Day debates.

Next year, it will be 80 years since the end of the second world war. With every year that passes, the act of memorial becomes more and more important. Members can do the maths for themselves: I was born in 1965, 20 years after the end of the second world war. I was born into a world where many of the older people in my community had lived experience of it. They had fought in different parts of the world, or made a contribution on the home front. I grew up reading comics that were rooted in the second world war—*The Victor*, *The Hotspur* and *Warlord*—so even in that way there was a context that I understood, which was unavailable to my children, who grew up with comics full of Japanese anime or whatever. If they have children, they will doubtless look at me blankly and say, “Comics? What are you talking about?”

As we get further from the lived experience, and those who survived the holocaust or served in the second world war become rarer, moments such as this become more important. As the right hon. Lady said, the work of organisations such as the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust—I pay particular tribute to the work of Karen Pollock—becomes more important too.

In the community that I represent in Shetland, we have our own story to tell on Holocaust Memorial Day. The Shetland bus was a fleet, or progression, of small fishing boats that went from Lunna and Scalloway in Shetland to bring those who were fleeing persecution and whose lives were at risk in Nazi-occupied Norway to safety—in Shetland, and then in the United Kingdom mainland. When we talk about the Shetland bus, we talk mostly about the work that it did in bringing downed airmen and others to safety, but it should be remembered that no fewer than 350 refugees came to Britain through that route. They were fugitives of the Gestapo. They were not all Jews, but many were. Indeed, I came across an article in *The Jewish Chronicle* from 2018 that highlighted an episode that I had never heard of. I share it with the House because it is remarkably potent to think of the contribution that my small community, right at the very north of this country, closer to Norway than to London, was able to make in that struggle. It records:

“Individual stories from individual sailings bring a human face to a brave, secret expedition. Just one example is the Bus’ first loss, Nils Johansen Nesse.

After dropping an agent in Bømlø, Norway, Nesse’s fishing boat Siglaos started the return journey to Shetland in dreadful conditions. Aboard were seven passengers rescued from Norway, including three children.

After several hours at sea battling the weather, the Siglaos was attacked by enemy aircraft. Nesse, who held his position at the steering wheel, sustained injuries to the leg and the head.

The boat returned safely to Shetland, but Nesse lost the fight for life, aged 23. Today, on a calm day in this picturesque, close-knit harbour town, it’s hard to imagine such heroic endeavours taking place.”

Imagine them we must, because it is part of history, and part of what brings us here today.

We have to recognise the context of today’s debate: what is happening in the world, and what is happening in Israel and Gaza as we speak. Apart from anything else, we know that the Jewish communities in this country feel so much more at risk and vulnerable than ever, as a consequence of what happened on 7 October. There is a balance to be struck. The focus has to be on what happened—otherwise, we risk disrespecting those who perished and those who survived it, and the families for whom it is a lived experience—but surely the whole point, as others have said, must be to ensure that it does not happen again. That is why when I read stories about a restaurant opening in Jordan called “October 7”, frankly I despair. It is something that has to be called out and dealt with wherever it happens.

As somebody who has massive reservations about what Netanyahu is doing in Gaza—and we can debate that another day—I look with horror at the incipient antisemitism that is creeping up in so many different ways. Let us not forget that antisemitism—something that is wholly irrational but that we never seem to eradicate—was at the root of what happened in the holocaust. The price of it not happening again is that those of us who care about what happened in the past have to be honest, open and courageous in calling it out when we see it starting again. If we wait until it has taken hold, it will be too late.

12.18 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind): I am going to talk to the House about my own personal experience of genocide: Bosnia in 1992-93. I was in Germany commanding an infantry battalion in 1992 when I rang my mother. I said, “Mum, my camp is beside this ghastly place called Bergen-Belsen. Do you know, Mum, it has rectangular mounds with signs that say, ‘Here lie 3,000 bodies.’ It’s heathland. It’s a foul place.” She said, “I know, Robert.” I said, “How would you know, Mum? You’ve never been here with me.” She said, “I went there in 1945.”

In 1945 my mother was a member of the Special Operations Executive, in something called the FANY—the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. It was the uniform they put spies into. She had gone there to try to find women who had been caught by the Germans and put into concentration camps. Seventeen SOE women had been killed—they were murdered, not executed. I asked my mother, “Why the heck haven’t you told me this before?” She had only told me that she was SOE a couple of years before that. She said, “Because I was ashamed.” I asked, “What do you mean you were ashamed? As soon as you could, you joined up, you learned to parachute

and you learned to fight the Germans. You did your bit." And she said, "You don't understand; I was ashamed because genocide had occurred in my generation and we are all responsible." That is what this is all about. We are all responsible for what happens in this world, and genocide happens so easily.

I did not understand what my mother was talking about until a few months later, when I went to Bosnia as the British United Nations commander. There was one hell of a lot of killing around us. I was appalled. To be honest, I went into a bit of a funk about it. I could not believe what I was seeing. I will not repeat some of the stuff that I saw, but how about crucifixions on barn doors; people scalped; people's eyes pulled out with implements that are designed just to do that; and women in trees, because they had been raped and had then hanged themselves—they were mainly Bosnian Muslims. I was horrified, and then I felt what my mother had told me about: shame. Why had I not been able to stop this? I had soldiers and arms, and I was representing the great, mighty world forum of opinion, the United Nations. Yet near me, women, children and men were being murdered, stupidly. They were all South Slavs; they just had different religions.

Things got worse. Let me give the example of Ahmići. On 22 April 1993, the European Commission ambassador asked me to try to stop the battles, and I asked how. He said, "I'll deal with the politics; you deal with the front-lines." I thought, "You've got the good deal, mate." Anyway, I went to the frontlines. As I went to the Bosnian Muslim frontline up on the hills, above the Lašva valley, a commander said to me, "We are not stopping this battle." I was trying to stop the battles and bring about a ceasefire. "We are not stopping this", the commander said, "because at Ahmići village, women, children and men are being massacred." And I said, "No, that cannot be happening". I did not think that could actually happen in this day and age. So I said, "Look, if I go there with my men and I discover you are wrong and I come back, will you stop fighting?" He said yes. I came off the hills and went down into the valley. I was with my platoon—about 30 men—and had four armoured vehicles. We were attacked as we drove along the valley by the jokers—Bosnian Croat special forces—but we just ignored them as their attacks bounced off.

As I went into Ahmići, the first thing I saw was the minaret, crippled and broken. It had been brought down. Then I went all the way through the village—it was a linear village about a mile long. When I took my men all the way to the top, I said to Alex Watts, my platoon commander, "Put a section on either side of the road in a sweep position. Let's go down and find out what's happened." I walked down the road with my platoon commander in front of me. We started finding houses that had been destroyed. And then, at one house, the soldiers called me over and asked me to take a look. In the doorway was a man and a teenage boy. They were dead; they had been burned.

Around the back of that house, the men found a cellar. When I went in, I was hit first by the smell. Then my eyes focused and I saw what was in there—it looked like bodies. There were bones and heads—there was a head bent back, and I saw the eyes. I rushed outside and was sick. I thought, "God, how can this happen?" And I was there, with this great UN, the people who are meant to police the world, and I had failed.

I then had to make a decision. My instructions from the British Government—the Ministry of Defence; the politicians—were that I was neutral and was not to get involved; this was not my war. I was there purely to deliver aid. I thought that was appalling. The whole point of the United Nations, I thought, was to stop people dying. So I extended that role a bit. I escorted aid, but if people attacked me, I responded pretty robustly—not me, but my men. My men were great.

Do you know how we had to clear up that village? Do you know what genocide means? It means some poor devils with shovels having to clean it up—in this case they were my bandsmen, who were actually medics. Why did I choose the band to do that? It was because they were slightly older than most of my men. For some reason—I am sure that people will understand this—I felt that 18-year-olds should not be involved in clearing up bodies. I thought that a chap in his mid-20s, perhaps married, with some sort of sanity, should do it, rather than an 18-year-old lunatic—I don't mean lunatic; I mean a boy, with all the testosterone in him. I also had girls—sorry, that is the wrong term; it's women these days. You cannot be a girl if you are over 14, as I was told on the course I went on.

I remember this corporal in the band shovelling up the remains of a body, and saying, "Sir, this is Europe in 1993, not Europe in 1943. This is appalling." I said, "Gosh, yes. Yes." The next day I found a whole family—father, mother, boy and girl. The little girl, who was about seven, was holding a puppy. They were all dead. They were all in a line, where they had been shot. I said, "Oh, gosh. Pick them up. Take them to the morgue." We did that. We took them to a morgue. It was horrific. Can you imagine what it is like for our soldiers to see that? All they see is their own family—their sisters. We took this family to the morgue, and I thought, "Well, that's it. Done." The next day, I went down that road again. Guess what? The family were back in front of their house. Guess what else? Wrong morgue. They were Muslims; I had taken them to the Croat morgue. I just could not believe it.

We then had the problem of what to do with the bodies. No one was going to deal with them. It was nothing to do with me—I was not meant to get involved in the war—but I had to deal with them, because of the disease, the smell. I got my Royal Engineers—lovely blokes—to dig a big pit, and we made a mass grave. We put about 100 bodies into that pit. Even then, we got it wrong—no one had taught me how to make mass graves—because we put them into the pit in plastic bags, until the International Committee of the Red Cross delegate, who happens now to be my wife, came along and said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I said, "I'm burying people." She said, "You're not burying them in plastic bags. That's not how you do it," so she led and my men emptied the bodies out—horrendous.

That happened in Europe and, as the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) said, watch out because it happens elsewhere. This happened in Europe, and we could not understand it. When we talk about the holocaust memorial theme being fragility, I call it the fragility of decency. People's decency can rapidly be shattered. After all, all those people I saw were normal human beings. I thought—I don't know why—"To hell with this!", picked up my satellite phone

[Bob Stewart]

and rang the Security Council of the United Nations from Bosnia. I got through to the operations room and said, "The Security Council is visiting Bosnia next week. Come and see what is happening out in my area." I didn't think anything of it, but next week I was told, "The Security Council of the United Nations is coming to visit you." I thought, "My God, I must be important"—of course I wasn't. They came, and I remember saying to the Argentinian Security Council member, "Look, sir, we have to do something about this. This is genocide." They refused to accept it as genocide for several years. I always called it genocide; it was called crimes against humanity. The definition of genocide is simple, fundamentally: trying to eliminate a group of people for being a group of people that is separate. He said, "I totally agree."

The Security Council of the United Nations set up the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia within a month. I have given evidence in four trials at the ICTY, and I have given evidence that was difficult. My men found it difficult—your soldiers find it difficult.

If there is a theme this year, it is one that has run along the same lines forever. Genocide occurred not just in the second world war by the way; it extended back well into the '20s and has occurred repeatedly since. Our job is to highlight the fact that it has occurred. Our job is to make sure that we shout loudly that genocide has occurred in the past, and we like to think that it will not occur in the future, but it damn well will. Let us try to lessen incidents of genocide by shouting as loudly as we can, "Never again".

12.34 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): What an honour and privilege it is to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I know he takes this opportunity every year to remind us that the kind of barbarity he saw is ever present in our world and that the only thing to do is to try to bring attention to it and to stop it from happening again. I am truly grateful to him for his personal testimony. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). What a privilege it was to listen to her speech, too. I am so grateful to her for talking to us about her experiences and the lessons that she and we must draw from them. There was so much she said that was absolutely spot on, and she is absolutely spot on that the language we use today truly matters.

I join colleagues in expressing my gratitude to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for the amazing, extraordinary and dedicated work they do. At a time when hatred and mistrust are surging, this work is more important than ever. When I reflect on the holocaust, I simply marvel with horror at how ordinary people could herd children, toddlers, babes in arms, women, elderly people and the infirm into a gas chamber to kill them: the industrial slaughter of human beings. They were vulnerable human beings, including tots, who, in the normal course of the world, we would do our utmost to protect, whether they were ours or not. I just fail to comprehend what made ordinary people act in that way, and I fail to comprehend the scale and depravity of the holocaust.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, so if hon. Members will allow, I shall give a voice to the testimony of Daphrosa, one of the survivors of that atrocity, and put it on the parliamentary record. Before the genocide, Daphrosa lived with her husband and five children. Her husband had a good job as a customs officer, and she had opened her own business, running a bar from the side of their home. They were happy. Her husband would always come home with presents for the children, and they would go out together to the lake—they had fun. They weren't rich, but they were happy.

For years before the genocide, though, hatred and suspicion—words—had been growing, fuelled by divisive politicians and media incitement. Daphrosa heard the rumours being spread and rumours that her husband was a supporter of the rebels. Discrimination and segregation started to take hold, with shops refusing to serve Tutsis and even some churches refusing to offer the Eucharist to Tutsis. Her husband was scared, but even when trouble was being stirred up in the years before 1994, Daphrosa felt protected. Her Hutu neighbours sometimes drank at her bar, ate her praised chicken and called her grandma. Daphrosa's Hutu housekeeper promised to protect her. But prejudice against Tutsi people was strong, and the dehumanising bile spread over the radio was powerful enough to turn those same neighbours into killers, rapists and torturers.

When the genocide began, Daphrosa tried to continue with her normal life. On the third day of the genocide, she and her children fled, but her husband was captured and beaten, and she was forced to return home. Her injured husband was sat in a chair in the living room. Daphrosa and her daughters were forced to take off their clothes. The housekeeper who had promised to protect them was the first to take part in their rape.

Daphrosa's eldest son was called Allan. She remembers him as the model child, clever, with a great future in front of him. Allan tried to stop the rape, but the men beat and slashed him until he died and then threw him behind the chair. They raped Daphrosa and then her daughters. They slashed her breast and they mutilated her. Her husband was forced to watch the nightmare, terribly injured from blows with hammers and nailed clubs. He did not die until the next day.

On the third day of their torment, the militia brought a community officer with them. She took away the children, supposedly for protection, but Daphrosa heard the men joking that the girls would soon become their wives. Daphrosa was left in a home that had become a living hell, with the corpses of her husband and her son. Neighbours coming to the house to loot it simply ignored her plight, stepping over her and even stepping on her.

Miraculously, Daphrosa's four younger children survived. The two youngest, Innocente and Eric, were taken in and hidden by a neighbour after being removed from the house. The older girls, Aline and Tina, were found alive in the capital Kigali after the war. However, as we know, survival does not mean an end to suffering. Daphrosa, Aline and Tina all fell pregnant as a result of the rape they were subjected to, and they were infected with HIV at a time when medicine was extremely scarce.

Aline's own testimony tells how she was raped countless times after being taken away from her mother and their home. Not only that, but, after their return, as the only

surviving Tutsis from their village, Aline endured further torment from the taunts of neighbours, who spread rumours about how she had been infected. At the time of the genocide, Aline was 14 years old. When she told her story years later, at the age of 25, she was living in despair while her rapists now lived happily with families and children. In her words:

“I have no future. I have no life...”

To be honest, I struggle to imagine how anybody could endure such trauma, and cope with the mental and physical scars of that ordeal. As we know, so many others endured these same terrible experiences, and as many as 1 million Rwandans were murdered in less than 100 days. The scale is truly shocking.

There are many appalling echoes of the holocaust in what was done to Daphrosa, her family and the hundreds of thousands of others. Of course there are differences, but, like the holocaust, the Rwandan genocide was built on decades of institutionalised racism. Like the holocaust, it was fuelled by dehumanising propaganda. Like the holocaust, it was organised and systematic in its brutality and, like the holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda was perpetrated, collaborated with—and resisted by—ordinary people: ordinary people such as Daphrosa’s neighbours who saw what was happening and made horrifying choices about how to respond.

Unlike the holocaust, the Rwandan genocide happened in most of our lifetimes, just 30 years ago. “Never again” rang hollow in 1994. In truth, I fear it rings hollow again today.

12.45 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who reminds us of the importance of the experiences in Rwanda. Just as there were echoes of the holocaust in Rwanda, as she shared with us the testimony of that particular family in Rwanda there were echoes of what happened to some of the people in the 7 October attacks: breasts slashed, people raped and brutality taking place in front of families. I thank her for sharing that.

When I used to deliver holocaust education as a secondary school history teacher, I used to put up pictures for my students of the holocaust and those appalling scenes that we all know too well. We used to show the video footage and the pictures of the gas chambers and of the bodies of murdered Jews piled high. Never did I think that I would have the experience in my lifetime of visiting the site of a pogrom and smelling the rotting flesh of Jewish people who had been murdered. That happened for me three and a half weeks after 7 October, when I visited Israel with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). That is a memory and a trip that will live with us all.

Although in my 14 years in Parliament I have taken a number of parliamentary trips, I have never undertaken a visit that has been more important to me—and important to me in my lifetime, not just as a Member of Parliament. We visited Kfar Aza, the kibbutz that the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) spoke about. It was founded by peaceniks and led by a peace-loving leader, who was also the chair of the regional council and who was picked out and shot by Hamas fighters on his own doorstep specifically because of his leadership of that peaceful group.

At the time of our visit we could still smell the blood and the flesh that was still rotting in that community. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon will attest, we also visited the base where the bodies—or should I say the body parts—were being identified. I do not think either of us will forget the emotions we felt when the doors were opened to where the bodies were being kept in the refrigerators. The wave of smell coming towards us was truly shocking. Having delivered education on the holocaust, I never thought that in my time I would bear testimony and see the bodies and smell murdered Jews. It was a truly horrendous visit, but one I am very proud to have made, and I am pleased to come back here and at least share that experience.

When I delivered that education on the holocaust to year 9 students, what did I teach? I taught them about boycotts and how people were told not to buy Jewish goods and products. I taught them about Jewish community facilities and synagogues being attacked. I taught them about how Jews used to huddle in dark spaces, about how they were held in captivity against their will and about the people shouting on the streets for the death of Jews. I taught them about how children were indoctrinated with hate against the children of Israel.

I am afraid all that is what we are seeing today across large parts of our own country and, indeed, across the west. We now see Jewish products in shops attacked. We have seen Jewish schools in Canada shot at, not on one occasion but on two occasions. We have seen Jewish businesses torched in other parts of the west and, of course, we have had marches on our own streets where people have called for the death of Jews.

It is the same message but in a different era. It is not the brownshirts of the Nazis on our streets or the streets of Europe, parading through screaming and shouting that society needs to be cleansed of Jews. They have been replaced, I am afraid to say, by hard-left activists and associated useful idiots—“useful idiots” is a polite way of describing them—calling for a socialist intifada. They are joined by progressives, LGBT groups and feminists, who would not last a second in Hamas-controlled Gaza.

The cries of, “The Jews are our misfortune” have been replaced on our streets by calls for jihad, calls for an intifada and demands for Muslim armies to rise up and fight Israel. It is no longer Nazis crossing international borders to murder and round up Jews; it is Islamist extremists in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and, of course, in Hezbollah if it had its way. Those groups are as clear in their intentions to commit a genocide against the Jewish people as Adolf Hitler was in his ramblings. That is not to say that we do not still have a problem with far-right antisemitism and racism—of course we do—but it has now been joined by those sinister groups and alliances of Islamist extremists and hard-left activists.

What was the response to the atrocities on 7 October by some of those people? It was not to come out in sympathy after the events of that pogrom; it was to stand outside the Israeli embassy within hours demanding boycotts of the state of Israel. As I have called out before, I am afraid that even in this place some people have spent a lot of time on their feet criticising the response to the atrocities of 7 October and not a lot of time condemning those actions. We have seen that in the media and civil society. Football pundits and actors

[Andrew Percy]

who have never uttered a word about Yemen or the 85,000 children killed there, or about Sudan and the millions of people displaced, find time to add their voices and offer us commentary on Israel, sometimes promoting ancient blood libels.

We have even had Members of this place tweeting about an attack on a hospital that never took place. A blood libel; Jewish bloodlust—that is what that feeds into. Some of them never apologised for that, of course. Yesterday, we even had somebody accusing the Prime Minister of having blood on his hands. Who has blood on their hands for 7 October? It is Hamas, and the thousands of civilians who followed those fighters into Kibbutz Kfar Aza, Kibbutz Be’eri and other communities and stepped over the bodies of murdered Jews to loot and pillage their homes. That is who has blood on their hands. Some people in this place would do well to remember that.

I have been attacked for daring to call people out for giving a free pass. I will continue to do that—the bile and hate for me that came up as a result does not bother me, including from people targeting my post on Holocaust Memorial Day with words such as “Zionist scum”. I am a proud Zionist. I have never been prouder to be a Jew or a Zionist. People attack my Facebook page and tell me about the “Zionist rat hostages” and that “Nobody cares about the Jews”—all because I dared to say freely, as I thought I had a right to do in this Chamber, that I thought some people were not contextualising the response of Israel with the events of 7 October and were giving a free pass to terrorists. I will go on doing that, because I will not be silenced by those who seek to bully me.

And from members of the community who would otherwise be screaming and shouting about the gender-based violence that took place on 7 October? Not a peep. Not a word. Why not? Is it just the pressure of people’s inboxes? Is it something deeper and more sinister? I do not know, but I find it hard to understand how that is not called out. Why is that gender-based violence not acknowledged? Why do we not have young people on the streets of this country marching against what happened to those young Jewish women on 7 October? The most brutal rapes, breasts sliced off, people shot and then raped—necrophilia—and under-age girls subjected to the most appalling abuse.

Look at our streets. What do we have? Nazi and Soviet-era propaganda marching down our streets, and it is not being tackled. The police stand by as people call for jihad. They say that it is about context. The anti-Zionist stuff on our streets is directly out of the Soviet propaganda playbook, which itself drew heavily from Nazi propaganda.

Look at what is happening in our schools. Just a couple of weeks ago, I mentioned at Prime Minister’s questions the letters being produced by pupils in our schools that included such phrases as, “I do not believe all Jews are bad”, and a phrase challenging a Member of Parliament on why they believed the western media narrative that Hamas were a terrorist organisation. Where is that coming from? It is coming not from the school but from within communities in this country.

In Jewish areas in this country, we have flags put up illegally that will not be brought down. I, like many hon. Members, have watched the 47-minute video of the slaughter of people on 7 October, and the same flag

was proudly displayed on the breasts and lapels of Hamas fighters. That flag is not being removed in Jewish areas because people are scared. Councils are scared to remove them and cannot guarantee the safety of people who take them down. Imagine if we had swastikas up. How long would they last? I am not comparing the two flags—of course not—but in a Jewish area where concerns have been raised about these triggering incidents, something that would be so triggering in a different way would be dealt with very quickly. We have seen that across the west.

What do I want from my Government? What do I want from this country? I want it to stand up for the values that I thought it stood for. I want the right to have a different view without being subjected to threats of violence. I know that many Members of Parliament who have a different view on this have had their offices and inboxes targeted, and have been threatened. Those are not the values of Britain. The values of Britain are that we allow and respect people’s right to have a different view. That is what I want my Government to protect.

I want to feel safe on the streets. I want Jewish people in this country to feel safe coming into central London on a weekend, which they do not at the present time. I want our democratic values to be defended. I want to live in a country in which children are not brainwashed with hate—be it hate against Jews, hate against members of the Muslim community, or any other hate. I want a Government and institutions that stand up and say, “That is not acceptable and we will do something about it”—not just standing up and saying, “We all condemn it,” but actually doing something about it.

I leave Parliament this year. I have never felt more ashamed or sadder about the state of some of our institutions, about our democracy and about people’s right to express their views freely without fear of being subject to violence or threats of violence. That is what is currently happening on our streets—it has happened on other issues as well—and it is dangerous.

In the time that I have, I want to refer to two Holocaust survivors I met this week. One is Eve Kugler, who spoke at the Foreign Office event this week. She gave us examples, which are all too familiar today, of growing up in Germany and of experiencing Kristallnacht. Her father was taken off to Buchenwald but, fortunately, the whole family were eventually able to escape. So much of her story and testimony rings true today with regard to boycotts, the smashing of Jewish businesses and all the rest.

I also want to mention briefly John Hajdu, another survivor I met this week. He was born into a Jewish family in Budapest, Hungary, in 1937. He shared with me his experience of being hidden in a cupboard by a non-Jewish neighbour. Again, that rings true with 7 October, when Jewish children on those kibbutzim were hidden in cupboards—it did not save some of them, of course. After hiding, John was eventually forced to live in the ghetto. Those who were not taken to concentration camps were forced into about 290 buildings, where at least 20 people lived in each overcrowded flat. He described the situation there as pretty grim, as Members would imagine; his experience was horrific, but fortunately during the liberation of Budapest, he was freed, minutes before the ghetto was about to be blown up.

As I recounted those two stories, they made me think that John and Eve at least have one fortunate thing that some of the people who were affected by 7 October do not have: they lived to tell their story. Right now in Gaza, there are Jewish people who do not have a voice—who cannot tell their story. Those are the 136 hostages who remain, and in the brief time I have, I would like to name just a few of them. I would like to name all of them, but I appreciate that that is not going to be possible today.

I think particularly of Liri Albag, Karina Arieiv and Noa Argamani—who, as Members will remember, was the young girl on the motorbike, seen pleading to her boyfriend as she was whisked away into Gaza. Her mother is dying and wants her daughter home, but Hamas refuse to release her. I think of Romi Gonen, Carmel Gat, Inbar Haiman, Judi Weinstein, Arbel Yehud, Maya Goren and Doron Steinbrecher. I think of Daniela Gilboa, 19 years old, Naama Levy, 19 years old, and Agam Berger, 19 years old—all women held currently by Hamas. I think of the Bibas family, the ginger-haired family; Members might remember the little baby who turned a year old in captivity, his parents, and of course his brother Ariel.

I think of Omer Shem Tov, the 21-year-old Israeli at the Nova music festival. I met his mother in early November: she was desperate for news about her son and utterly distraught. Of course, he has no voice today in this place, and neither do so many others. I think of Amiram Cooper, 85 years old; Oded Lifshitz, 83; Gadi Moses, 79; and Shlomo Mantzur, 85—people who are not too different from my parents' ages. They should be at home with their families, enjoying the peaceful life of their retirement and their dotage. Of course, it is not just Israelis who are held: Bipin Joshi is a Nepalese citizen, and Avera Mangisto is a Tanzanian. There are so many other names I wish I could mention—Shlomi Ziv, Tsachi Idan, Matan Zangauker, Andrey Kozlov, Ohad Ben Ami, Sahar Baruch, Uriel Baruch, Ziv Berman, Gali Berman, Rom Braslavski—but of course, I cannot name them all today.

As I end my contribution, those are the people I will be thinking about: the Jews who do not have a voice, who again are being held as Jews were held 80 or 90 years ago, in dark tunnels, in cupboards and in cages, as we have heard. How is this happening again? It is now 2024, and here we are again: Jew hate, which never really went away, is manifesting itself for all to see in all of its gory, disgusting detail.

1.2 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). I thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing today's debate and allowing us to talk about something that has always been important in this House—Holocaust Memorial Day has always been the day on which we remember and recommit ourselves to ensuring that the holocaust does not happen again—but this year, it is particularly important that we are aware of it.

Two things have happened to me personally since the last time I spoke in one of these debates. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland, I am

of that generation for whom the holocaust was always history. We were told about it by our parents who had been children during the war and had heard about it. We had no personal experience of it, but information and knowledge about it was everywhere. It was in comics, in the films that we saw and the books that we read, everything from "The Diary of a Young Girl" by Anne Frank to "Schindler's List". We were aware of it, but we did not actually believe that it would or could ever happen again, because we would not let it happen again—it would never have happened in this country anyway, because we would not let it happen. However, since 7 October, I have become increasingly worried that we in this country are just a fraction complacent about the danger that anything like the holocaust, Darfur or Cambodia could happen here.

Just over a year ago, I went to see "Good" with David Tennant in the west end. It is an absolutely wonderful play: it is about a good, liberally minded academic whose best friend is Jewish and who lives in pre-war Germany. He becomes complacent about the Nazis and what they are doing, he gradually becomes seduced and involved, and it has a cataclysmic ending. The other thing that happened was hearing the first reports of what was happening in Israel on 7 October. I was in a taxi on my way to the airport to fly out to a friend's wedding in Spain, and I remember thinking, "Oh my God, what's happening? This is horrific." I had no idea of what was to follow.

A few weeks ago, I was speaking to a handful of students at the University of Glasgow, and we were talking about various issues on campus. They told me that they had been to a debate about an international chain of coffee shops that happened to have an outlet just off campus. It was all very civilised—a chat and a strong debate—and then one of the students, who was Jewish, told me that one of the other students had said, "But it's only Jews that go there anyway." I was utterly horrified that a comment like that could be made in a meeting of young people in this country.

That is not the only example. I visited the synagogue in Edinburgh recently, where I heard the concern of ordinary people about what they are experiencing every day. The Jewish students' association at Edinburgh University is one of the largest and fastest growing in the country, but its members feel completely isolated. Jewish students have written to associations across the country—to every university—asking for support against the antisemitism that they see creeping into their daily lives, and only a handful replied.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the answer is for people to engage with the lived experience of Jewish people and to understand the profound effect that it has on their lives? My constituent Natalie Cumming has written about the experience of her family fleeing persecution, both in Russia and the horrifying experience of her sister, who survived Auschwitz and whose story she retells in her book. That book was one of the most difficult reads of my life and I think that people need to engage with those stories and understand, so that they do not repeat that kind of prejudice going forward.

Christine Jardine: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is about listening to, hearing and engaging with the experiences of holocaust survivors. It is about hearing

[Christine Jardine]

the direct relating of tales, as we did at Mr Speaker's ceremony earlier this week, because surveys in America have discovered that 20% of young Americans do not believe that the holocaust actually happened, and something like another 30% believe that the holocaust is exaggerated—that it was a minor event. We are in a very dangerous position at the moment. Antisemitism is creeping in everywhere: we hear of it every day, from people who are finding that it is becoming part of their daily experience, and we are not aware of it. We are all good, liberally minded, intelligent people; how easy it would be for us to get drawn in and not realise what is happening around us—to let it happen. By the time we notice, it would be too late.

A few years ago, I visited Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial in Israel, and one of the things that struck me is that it is built on a hillside. It is dark, scary and depressing. We hear the tales, we see the remnants of people's lives that were destroyed by the holocaust and it has an oppressive feel to it. However, as we move towards the end, we see the light at the end of the tunnel, and we come out to a breathtaking view of Israel. At the moment, I feel that we are truly in such a dark spot, and we have to make sure that we do not get trapped and pulled further into antisemitism becoming accepted in this country. We have to remember the light is at the end of the tunnel, and strive for that.

1.10 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I absolutely and totally agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), and I am a bit shocked by this, because it has come up on me. As a teenager, I lived in a little village in a prosperous agricultural area in the north of the South Island in New Zealand. It was a mecca for European immigrants, who flooded into the area, and the schools were co-educational and multiracial. There were plenty of schoolboy spats, especially on the rugby field, as Members can imagine, but I do not remember any racial aggravation at all.

Most of the men of my parents' generation were involved in the second world war. Almost all of them served overseas from New Zealand, and when they came back they told stories, including some of the horrific ones we have heard today. Like a typical teenage boy, I got fascinated, and I haunted the village library for appropriate books. Inevitably, in reading them, I read the books on the Nuremberg trials and associated books, and to say I was morbidly horrified would be one of the biggest understatements ever. That was probably capped in 1982 when I saw, at a full-screen cinema, the film "Sophie's Choice". As a father, that scene of the Gestapo officer walking the wee girl away was the stuff of nightmares, and it would have scarred any parent.

The United Kingdom medical and dental profession is very multiracial. There are a lot of people from the middle east, but also many Jewish people, some of whom I rank not just as colleagues, but as friends. Many are among the best of the profession, with lists of achievements to their name that go across the whole page. Most of them live in north London, and periodically they have made me aware of the progressive rise of what I saw as irrational antisemitic abuse, sometimes associated with violent activity. This activity and violence increased in the run-up to the last election, and then seemed to

dull down a bit. To me, however, the Hamas outrage on 7 October—12,000 women, men and children raped, tortured, murdered and beheaded, and some 240 hostages—lit the fire again, as I have seen.

For many of us, this is the stuff of horror, but it has been submerged in the rise of these attacks on Jewish people, including the professional Jewish people in our community. These people have nothing to do with what Israel does to Hamas and no say in that, and what is happening to them is a complete disgrace, with hints of the early days of the Nazis in Germany. The attacks are frightening, and the most vicious, as I had explained to me by a very senior, top-notch dental practitioner, who is an expert on a number of key things and who is treating children—she had tears in her eyes as she was telling me this on Tuesday night—are the attacks on social media. Those attacks are coming on special social media for the profession, so we would assume that every single person writing on it was intelligent and educated, yet the vile abuse on it is ghastly. We are being asked to reflect—and I hope that we do—on whether, as many have said, this could be the thin edge of the wedge. It must not happen again.

1.14 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I grew up in a household where it was common to hear family members discuss world war two. I knew about Hitler, the Sudetenland, Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill, and I had heard about Barnes Wallis and the Dambusters. To my shame, however, I have to say that I was an adult in full-time employment before I began to understand the meaning of the holocaust. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing today's debate and for her personal testimony. I also want to commend the other speeches we have heard, particularly the contribution of the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

My education has been assisted by a few very specific things. One is the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. I will never forget going with a group of sixth-formers from a local school to Auschwitz one bitter cold February morning. I do not know who was more distraught by what we encountered, these young sixth-formers or me, but it was a total education and it left an impression on me that I will never forget. I am also extremely grateful to Scott Saunders, the chairman and founder of March of the Living, who has done so much to help inform and educate people, particularly about the events in Poland, but also about what happened in the concentration camps. I am indebted to him for helping me to learn that, before the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, there were 3.3 million Jews living in Poland, but by the end of the war, less than 400,000 of them had survived.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, including in highlighting the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust.

Mine was one of those families in Poland. There are now very few survivors left, and I think it is important that we recognise the experience of my father's generation, or the baby-boomer generation—I went with him and my own children to Auschwitz last year—but also the work of independent researchers and organisations such as the Wiener Holocaust Library in bringing home to us what happened. We have the very last of that living

testimony, so we need to encourage all those in the second generation and those research bodies to keep holocaust education alive.

Steve McCabe: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is something of a theme today that we must do everything to remember and to preserve that memory so that people do not forget.

As I have said, Scott Saunders was one of those who assisted me. I also read fairly recently a book about Witold Pilecki. There have been lots of excellent books about the holocaust and about certain aspects of it, but he was the Polish resistance fighter who actually volunteered to go into Auschwitz to gather information about what was happening. That was then given to the allies, and we chose not to act on it. We heard earlier in the debate how we maybe should not always feel so proud of our own record, and I think that is another example of where—with hindsight, admittedly—we should have done better.

Going back to my hon. Friend's point, the other thing that has really helped me has of course been listening to the testimonies of holocaust survivors. They are all amazing people, but two in particular have had an impact on me: Mindu Hornick MBE, who lives near Birmingham, who was sent to Auschwitz when she was 12 years of age and never saw her mother or her brothers again; and Harry Olmer MBE, who is just an incredible man and an inspiration to anyone who meets him.

When I hear protests about current events in Gaza, I wonder what we have learned. I deplore the killing and the suffering we are seeing there. I want a ceasefire and an end to the killing, an enduring peace and a two-state solution, with Palestinians and Israelis living side by side in recognised and secure independent states. I want that as much as anyone else. But I struggle when I hear marchers, demonstrators and protesters chant "Ceasefire now" in one breath, and "From the river to the sea" in the next. What are they saying? What have they learned, and what are they advocating? Some know well what they are doing, but others need to stop and spend a little more time learning the lessons of the past. They need to reflect on how little their behaviour shows a desire for peace, and how much it is encouraging division and hatred.

I also wonder at the genuinely concerned people who contact me about the deaths and suffering in Gaza but skip over the 7 October attack, and who use with ease terms such as "war crimes" and "genocide" to condemn Israel and the Israelis, but seem to have overlooked an

attack on Israeli civilians that was based on torture, mutilation, rape, murder and hostage taking. Some even tell me that the Hamas attack needs to be understood because of Israel's previous behaviour. They usually show little knowledge that Israel pulled out of Gaza and removed all its settlements there in 2005, in accordance with the peace accords, and was promised in return a demilitarised Gaza that could become something like a Singapore of the middle east. Two years later, Hamas took over Gaza, and it has been a launch pad for attacks on Israel ever since.

The Nazis took people in. They used excuses and demands. They talked about the suffering of the German people. They blamed the Jews. They offered seemingly plausible explanations for their actions, and they lied about their intentions, while laying plans to exterminate 6 million people.

I am, and I always will be, a friend of Israel and the Israeli people. I am not a fan of the current Prime Minister, and I totally disagree with him and others who oppose a two-state solution. I believe such views are an obstacle to peace, and that such attitudes and behaviour risk giving succour to those who oppose the very existence of the Jewish state. But I will not accept the blaming of the entirety of the Jewish people for things I dislike, and I will not demand higher standards of the world's only Jewish state than we do of any other nation. We need to remember the holocaust, and the way that seemingly decent people resorted to cowardly, wicked and savage behaviour, designed to wipe out the Jewish people. Those who shout for peace and ceasefires but not for peace and reconciliation have not learned those lessons. Their shrill cries and disruption of meetings and events organised by those who will not support them are dishonest and irrational, and show how much more we need to strive to learn the lessons of history, and why we cannot ever afford to ignore real genocide and the events of the holocaust.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Act 2024

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2024

Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2024

Church of England Pensions (Application of Capital Funds) Measure 2024.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Debate resumed.

1.25 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), and I thank him for his commitment to the Jewish community in Birmingham and to Israel. It is deeply appreciated.

I have sometimes thought that I struggled to grasp the scale of the holocaust, because every time we hear someone's testimony, we think we understand what the holocaust was, yet it is always only a tiny fraction of it. Every story in the holocaust is completely unique. Differing factors and testimonies include the country someone was born in, where they were made to move when tensions started to rise in Europe, where or how they managed to hide, how they were rounded up, and what happened to their friends and family. Then stories differ in how people watched their parents being murdered, how they cared for younger loved ones, how they got by, and how snap decisions they made saved their lives or those of others.

The holocaust was the murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children, but it was so much more than that. The number 6 million is huge, but on its own it does not encompass the true scale of suffering. It is millions of people who did not get the opportunity to wake up in the morning in their homes and feel safe; millions of people who did not have the privilege of making normal, everyday decisions to get married, start a family, go to school, or have a career. It tore humanity apart, and stole the future from 6 million Jews and their future families.

The seventh of October was not on the same scale. It was not over the same long period of time, and it was not carried out by the same perpetrators. It was not even on the same continent. But 7 October was the biggest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the holocaust. On Tuesday I met a delegation of family members of hostages with the Leader of the House. A brave 23-year-old told us that she lost 60 friends on 7 October. Can anyone imagine losing 60 friends in one day? Sadly, many Jewish families know what that feels like.

I have really struggled with this, Mr Deputy Speaker. Accusations of genocide are thrown around too frequently, and I am the last person who would ever wish to draw comparisons with the holocaust. As Lord Pickles said earlier this week, there can be no comparison with the holocaust. We now have the Jewish state, and that was designed to ensure that history does not repeat itself. It was born out of the need to do just that. However, it is true that 7 October was the largest murder of Jewish people since the holocaust, and sadly the comparisons do not end there.

I visited Israel at the beginning of the year. I had the chance to visit the exhibition that survivors of the Nova festival have created. It was heartbreaking. On tables lay shoes, clothing and other items of ordinary festival goers who just went to dance. I could not help but see the table of shoes and be reminded of the pile of shoes in Auschwitz. Lying next to this table of clothes and shoes was make-up—the kind of make-up I use. In Auschwitz you see personal items that make you wonder what that person might have looked like or how they

might have lived. When I saw brands such as L'Oréal, I did not have to think about that. I know exactly how they looked and how they might have lived. I know exactly what they were doing on that fateful day when their life ended. I know that they were not any different from me: young women in their 20s or 30s. They were doing what normal young people around the world should do—they were dancing.

I had hoped my visit would help me to understand how the attack happened, and perhaps the true motives. I think it is probably part of the natural human mind and reaction to try to make something so huge and terrifying make more sense. I heard stories about families murdered in a kibbutz. We visited Kfar Aza. We heard about a mayor who will never stand for re-election, because he bravely tried to defend his community, and about the young couple who were going to get engaged and how they texted their parents in the last moments of their lives before being slaughtered. I heard about a teacher set on fire in her house.

I watched 47 minutes of this footage. Until then, some of the most disturbing images I had ever seen were of the holocaust and images of bodies strewn across Bergen-Belsen upon the liberation, but I had never known what a body looks like after being tortured, shot in the head, or burned until the only thing left is their teeth. I have seen footage of two young boys witnessing the brutal death of their father. I wondered how they survived. Why did the terrorists so calmly help themselves to a drink from their fridge while they screamed? Why were they not taken as hostages? Why were other children taken hostage? Why were other children and babies murdered without a chance?

The events on 7 October started with rockets, followed by a massacre at a music festival. They slaughtered people one by one, setting cars alight, raping women and girls and throwing grenades into bomb shelters. It did not end there. They went hunting for soldiers in military bases, raped more women, murdered more people and took more hostages. They went house to house, having already identified who lived where. Hamas enjoyed every second of it, even boasting in calls to parents that they had killed at least 10 Jews.

No two stories from 7 October are the same. I felt completely overwhelmed trying to grasp the scale of it, and the scale of the fear. If I am confused now, how must they have felt on that day and every day since? I never believed I would use today as an opportunity to talk about something other than the holocaust. I firmly believe that is what today is for; there are 364 other days in the year to talk about everything else, but I also know what holocaust survivors today are thinking, and I can only begin to imagine how they are feeling. They have dedicated their lives to telling their stories, much like the survivors of 7 October are now doing. They are furious that 7 October happened. It was never meant to happen again. Every year we stand here and say "Never again."

We rightly label those who seek to distort or deny the holocaust ever happened as antisemites. They have the evidence, and plenty of it, but to them facts do not matter, because they believe they have a deeper understanding, borne of their hatred for Jews. Holocaust denial is antisemitic, so what about those thousands who do not believe that 7 October happened? They do not believe women were raped. They argue about how many babies' heads were cut off, or if they were at all. Some, who

have kindly written to me, tell me that 7 October, if it happened at all, was actually carried out by Israel. Recounting how I have witnessed 47 minutes of death and destruction makes no difference to their view.

One theory within holocaust denial is that the holocaust was carried out by European Jews. Some believe that Nazis and Zionists worked together in partnership and that, as a result of having scammed the world, the state of Israel was born. That theory features in a book called “The Other Side: The Secret Relationship Between Nazism and Zionism”, written by President Mahmoud Abbas in 1984. The same theory, but set in 2023, is now gaining traction on social media, particularly among young people. They believe that 7 October was carried out by Israel to legitimise military action against Hamas, or that Israel has been funding Hamas, or that Israel is exaggerating claims of the death and destruction at the hands of Hamas. What is this theory at its core? You tell me.

I will not even ask that we say “never again” one final time in this place before we make it a reality. Instead, people should understand what has happened to the Jewish people in October last year and since. We have the largest increase in antisemitic incidents on record, in response to the largest murder of Jewish people since the holocaust. The Chief Rabbi, Sir Ephraim Mirvis, last week made an important intervention. He said that claiming Israel is carrying out a genocide

“is a moral inversion, which undermines the memory of the worst crimes in human history.”

He said:

“It is a term deployed not only to eradicate any notion that Israel has a responsibility to protect its citizens, but also to tear open the still gaping wound of the Holocaust, knowing that it will inflict more pain than any other accusation”.

I will finish by quoting holocaust survivor Manfred Goldberg, who selflessly has spent so many years educating young people here in the UK with his testimony. He said:

“The majority of people in this country are not Jew haters, but they are often our silent supporters. And all that it takes for evil to flourish is for good men to stay silent.”

On this Holocaust Memorial Day—the day we remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered by Nazis—let us also think carefully about the current rise in antisemitism and what we, as individuals, are going to do about it. If 7 October was a fresh warning to the world about where antisemitism can lead, let us remember that it is against that backdrop that we are seeing record increases in antisemitism. None of us can afford to stay silent.

1.35 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), who gave such testimony of what has happened. I thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for opening the debate in her customary fashion, telling us the story of her relatives and what they suffered, and reminding us that we should not be comfortable about what happened in the United Kingdom when Jewish survivors arrived. Indeed, it is even more important today that we recognise the atrocities that were directed towards the Jewish community before the second world war, and that continue today.

I declare my interest as co-chairman of the all-party Britain-Israel parliamentary group and the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial, which we hope will be erected alongside this place. Some 79 years on from the end of the holocaust, we still have people persecuting and attacking people based solely on their religion. It is unacceptable, and I am proud that the Government are committed and steadfast in their support for Israel and the wider Jewish diaspora.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “fragility of freedom.” That is particularly fitting, given the unstable position we find ourselves in today all over the globe. Although there will always be mild tensions between communities, we have to remember that there is a war raging in Europe, a terror war raging in Israel and Gaza, attacks in the Red sea, the Sudan war and growing concerns on the Asian continent. I have never felt more grateful to live in this country and to work in the heart of a thriving, free and fair democracy.

We often take for granted the privileged position of being able to get up in the morning, work in a career of our choosing, and be confident that we are being represented by elected individuals looking to represent our views. We do not fear for our lives every moment of the day, and we are not on constant alert for potential rockets. Sadly, that cannot be said for the rest of the world’s population, or even the Jewish population in this country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) referred to.

Each year the remarkable survivors of the holocaust grow older, and sadly year by year their numbers decrease. It is therefore vital that we make a continued, conscious effort to learn their stories and the true history of the holocaust, so that we not only let them live on, but educate each other to ensure that we never allow the same atrocities to occur. I have had the privilege of visiting many of the holocaust sites across Europe and in Israel over my years in Parliament. Each time, I find the most remarkably striking thing to be that despite the abominable and unimaginable conditions that Jewish prisoners had to live through, somehow they maintained hope that liberation would occur.

Hope is one of the strongest, most determined and powerful attributes a person can possess. Many interviews with liberated prisoners from the Nazi concentration camps describe their fellow inmates losing hope and thus sadly passing quickly thereafter. Without hope, they lost purpose and died. I remember from a book I read that there was a rumour around one of the camps that they would be released on a specific date in 1942. The prisoners held on to that bit of hope for several years, until, several days before the alleged release date, they realised it was a malicious lie from the Nazis. A prisoner recounts how, almost instantaneously, many of those disheartened people died. For them, their hope was over and they could no longer hang on.

Last week, the temperatures around London plummeted. When I left home, my car thermometer was regularly reading minus 1° or even lower. I was lucky to be wrapped up in my hat, scarf and coat, but I could still feel the bitter cold. That puts into perspective how harsh the conditions were for the people in the camps, where temperatures frequently reached minus 10° and below, and blankets of snow covered the camps. Imagine that with minimal clothing, bare feet and bodies of skin and bone—it must have been unbearable. With people

[Bob Blackman]

then physically and psychologically tortured on a daily basis, it astounds me how they never gave up and remained hopeful that one day they would be free.

I have an overwhelming amount of respect for the survivors of the holocaust, who so importantly and bravely share and recount their stories over and over for the benefit of others. To live through those circumstances and then be brave enough to share them continuously with others is a phenomenal feat, but it is crucial.

Antisemitism is not new, and it did not originate with Hitler. Throughout Europe, Jewish people have been subjected to antisemitism since the middle ages. The hatred escalated significantly after the great war, when the reparations placed on Germany and its allies were extreme. We had the Wall Street crash, followed by the depression, leading in turn to rampant inflation in Germany and the collapse of the Weimar republic.

Last year, I related some of the challenges faced between the wars in this country, particularly on the growth of antisemitism, but we should remember that the same thing happened in the United States, growing from the traditional hostilities of Christianity towards Judaism. Jews have been targeted since the middle ages. America was rife with antisemitism from the early colonial days. However, as Jews represented only a small part of American society, it remained dormant. Antisemitism flourished in the 1880s with the arrival of 2 million Jewish immigrants fleeing eastern Europe, particularly from parts of the Russian empire, where persecution was frequent.

Towards the end of the 19th century, conditions for Jews worsened with the passage of ever more restrictive legislation and recurring Government-initiated violent attacks against Jewish communities, commonly known as pogroms. Consequently, Jews began fleeing in great numbers to the United States. Many Americans, who originated traditionally from north-west Europe or Scandinavia, grew increasingly anxious about the arrival of mass immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, whom they considered to belong to inferior races, and they frequently questioned their religious beliefs.

We rarely talk about the antisemitic movement in America—more often than not, we concentrate wholly on Nazi Germany—but it was a grave situation across Europe, and also specifically in the States. Antisemitism became ever more common in almost every aspect of American culture.

Bob Stewart: What I struggle with is this: what is it that people hate about Jews? Is it about religion? What is it that has come across the ages? I just do not get it.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for that intervention. It is hard to understand blind prejudice, but that is what it is. People are possibly fearful of the success of those who strive to do better for themselves, their children and their children's children. That is the only reason I can think of: that people are jealous of what Jewish people have been able to do, solely through their own efforts.

I turn back to what happened in the United States. Newspapers and magazines were commonly printing antisemitic attacks. There were racist cartoons. Antisemites

represented high positions in the federal Government. There was Jewish exclusion from social clubs and discrimination in employment opportunities. Many towns adopted zoning regulations to prevent the sale of land and houses to Jews. From 1922, following the example set by the leading University of Harvard, many prominent educational institutions imposed strict quotas on the number of Jews they allowed to study.

Throughout the 1920s, renowned car producer Henry Ford published a weekly newspaper called *The Dearborn Independent*, which attracted an audience of over 700,000 people. He launched a vicious and persistent campaign against "The International Jew". He blamed the Jewish community for all that was wrong with society, from threatening the capitalist system to undermining the moral values of the nation. Notably, he even blamed them for the great war.

Many miles across the globe, that narrative was gaining traction in Germany with the rapid rise of the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler. Hitler, of course, was a prominent member of the German Workers' party following the establishment of the Weimar republic, and often a firm favourite in the party for his engaging and passionate speeches. Throughout the 1920s, Hitler would ferociously campaign across Germany, promoting his party's values of anti-communism, antisemitism and ultra-nationalism, appealing to both the left and right of the political spectrum and gaining considerable momentum as a result.

The political landscape in Germany took a sharp turn following the Wall Street crash in 1929. The economy slammed to a halt, and the USA loans that were helping repay the great war reparations soon dried up. The Nazis used that polarising landscape to exploit the crisis and loudly condemn the ruling Government. Slowly but surely, the Nazi party was gaining more and more support.

In 1932, Hitler ran for the presidency but faced defeat to the incumbent Paul von Hindenburg. The Nazi party became the largest party in the Reichstag, but it was still short of an absolute majority. Despite initial hesitations from Hindenburg, Hitler was appointed Chancellor in 1933. Although not yet a dictator, that was a pivotal moment for Hitler and his party. Soon after, the Reichstag was set on fire. Hitler was quick to hold the communists accountable for such actions and persuaded Hindenburg to pass the Reichstag Fire Decree, which severely curtailed all liberties and rights of German citizens. Hitler began to use that to eliminate political opponents and then all those who opposed him. With the groundwork for a dictatorship firmly in place, in 1934, following the death of President von Hindenburg, Hitler merged the chancellery with the presidency and became Führer, the sole leader of Germany.

The Nazi persecution of the Jewish community continued: subtly at first, then more and more discriminative, until in 1938 it took an exponential and unignorable turn. The night of Kristallnacht was a significant moment in the persecution of Jews in Germany. Until that point, although still despicable, the repressive policies had been largely non-violent. However, on the night of Kristallnacht, the Nazis torched synagogues, vandalised Jewish homes, schools and businesses, and murdered over 100 Jews. In the aftermath, some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to the concentration camps. After Kristallnacht, the conditions for German Jews grew increasingly and drastically worse. As we know, by the end of the holocaust, some 6 million Jews had lost their lives—a truly shocking figure.

It saddens me that, almost 80 years later, the Jewish community is again being unjustly marginalised. The conflict in Gaza following the horrific terror attacks on Israel by the Hamas terror group on 7 October is a terrifying example of religion-based hatred still occurring today. The repercussions include a huge surge in antisemitic hate in the United Kingdom. It is truly appalling that in this country today schoolchildren have to hide their uniforms on the bus to protect themselves just because they show them to be Jewish.

My constituency of Harrow East boasts a large number of Jewish communities. The cultural, economic and diverse contributions that they bring are invaluable, and we should celebrate, not condemn, what they have brought to our society. It is at times like this in this country that we need to come together as one to fight hatred, not ignite further cultural wars. Israel is a small country, and it is highly likely that Jewish people in the UK will have family, friends or connections who are suffering from the deadly attacks that Hamas are inflicting on the state of Israel every single day. I urge hon. Members to reach out to friends or local people and offer their thoughts, prayers and support at this undoubtedly difficult time.

We must always remember the great struggle of the Jewish community, and learn from the holocaust to ensure that never again will such grave actions take place. We must do so for the sake of not just our generation but future ones to come, and out of respect for all those who sadly lost their lives during the holocaust. I will end with an important point from Zigi Shipper: “do not hate”.

1.50 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I feel humbled and privileged to take part in this solemn debate. This year, as in past years, it is an opportunity to show the House of Commons at its best. It is an honour to follow the powerful interventions by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and others.

Every year in preparing for Holocaust Memorial Day, I struggle all over again to comprehend how a well-educated, highly cultured and seemingly civilised society in Germany could turn on its Jewish citizens with such cold-hearted barbarism. Those Jewish communities had been part of central and eastern Europe for centuries, and were so dehumanised by hate-filled Nazi propaganda that most people just stood by when their Jewish neighbours were herded in ghettos and then on to trucks and trains bound for the death camps.

Holocaust Memorial Day is an opportunity to remember a series of genocidal crimes, including the holodomor perpetrated on the Ukrainian people, about which I have spoken in past debates. But it is hard to think of anything that can match the sheer scale of the evil perpetrated by the Nazis in carrying out murder on an industrial scale, brutally cutting short the lives of six million Jewish men, women and children, and millions of others just because they were gay, Roma, Sinti, disabled or because they were brave enough to resist the Nazis. We need to remember the heroes who stepped up and saved people, sometimes putting their own lives at risk. There were heroes here who organised the Kindertransport and saved many lives.

We also need to reflect on this country’s approach to its mandate in Palestine and its decision to seek to reduce Jewish migration there in the 1930s, just when so many were trying to flee attacks in Europe. It is possible that many more could have escaped the Nazis if the British mandate authorities had taken a different approach. Even after the savagery of the holocaust was fully revealed, British resistance to Jewish migration to the Holy Land continued. Those Jewish people trying to make a new life for themselves in the Jewish state that had been promised were turned away and left in displaced persons camps. Some were even sent back to Germany, from where they had come.

As everyone has said, it is crucial that we remember the victims of the holocaust at a time when antisemitism is rising again in a way that is utterly unacceptable in any civilised society. The coming days are an opportunity once again to warn younger generations of the appalling consequences of antisemitism and where it can lead. I would recommend that anyone wishing to understand what happened visit Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. It is the only museum that has reduced me to tears. One of the most powerful exhibits is the display of shoes taken from holocaust victims at the concentration camps. These personal possessions—suitcases, glasses and shoes—provide one of the defining images of holocaust remembrance.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), I felt a palpable sense of shock a few weeks ago when I saw another collection of shoes and belongings forever lost to the Jewish people who owned them. I saw that in an exhibition in Tel Aviv on the Hamas terror attack on the Nova music festival. The items had been retrieved from the Nova site and provided a truly chilling and harrowing reminder of the Yad Vashem display. I saw the Nova exhibition as a part of a trip to Israel declared in my Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

During that visit, I, too, saw the chilling 47-minute film of footage from the 7 October attacks. I did not want to see the film, but I felt I ought to. The horror of that footage stays with me in my nightmares, and I mean that literally—it haunts my sleeping hours. Once you see it, you cannot ever unsee it. I do not want to dwell on the horrors that the film contained, but I was struck by the brief clip shown of young people hiding in portaloos or seemingly in a rubbish skip at the festival. Those scenes are painfully reminiscent of the holocaust and of scenes portrayed in films such as “Schindler’s List” of children desperately trying to find any hiding place to escape the liquidation of the ghetto and deportation. It was a horror to see those scenes replayed just over 100 days ago. We should be in no doubt in this House of the genocidal intentions of Hamas towards Israel and all Jewish people—intentions in their founding charter, and which they have reiterated many times since the 7 October atrocity.

I want to conclude with a reflection on the recent brave article by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, responding to those who accuse Israel of genocide. We should heed his words that misappropriation of the word “genocide” is an affront to the victims of the unspeakable crimes that we remember today. As he said, its use in this context is the ultimate demonisation of the Jewish state. It is a moral inversion that undermines the memory of the worst crimes in human history. As we say, “Never

[Theresa Villiers]

again”, on Holocaust Memorial Day, and we renew our commitment to combating antisemitism and racism, let us remember the November march in London, where hundreds of thousands turned out to support Israel and the Jewish community, many with placards telling us, “Never again is now”. Our vigilance against anti-Jewish hatred must never cease, wherever and however it manifests itself.

1.58 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is 22 years since I attended my first Holocaust Memorial Day event in Hendon. I would have thought that after all these years there was nothing left to say, but today’s contributions show that there is ever more to say, which in many ways is a great disappointment.

The first event was held in a marquee in Hendon park. I welcomed the idea of Holocaust Memorial Day, but I did question the sustainability of such an event and whether it would continue in the longer term. In 2002, antisemitism was not the issue that it is today, and certainly not as it was leading up to and including the holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis. The first event was well attended by many people. Many were Jewish, which is not surprising, because many of my constituents are of the Jewish faith. Holocaust survivors also attended, such as my good friend Renee Salt, and I was as pleased to see her then as I am each year.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, over the years I have welcomed attending the event—I never say that I am pleased to attend, because that is not appropriate. I value attending it. Over the years, Barnet Council has acknowledged more than the shoah—the name that Jewish people use to describe the holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis. Past speakers have included not just survivors of the Nazis and their relatives—some of them even elected councillors in Barnet—but people who survived the Bosnian massacres, the Rwandan genocide and the purge in Cambodia.

For many years, I have been interested in the holocaust. I was interested in how it happened, how it came about, why no one spoke out against it, why ordinary decent middle class Germans either did not know about it or refused to accept that it happened, and what consequences remain today. I remember reading Art Spiegelman’s “Maus” books when I was a teenager. He brought the horrors of the holocaust to me, from the third generation since the war, in the late 1980s. It should be remembered, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) reminded us, that it was just 40 years since the end of the second world war at that time. For people who had experienced the 1939-1945 war, such perceptions of events would be the same as the ones I have of the Falklands conflict in 1982.

Spiegelman’s book ends with his father’s emigration to America, so it has been left to other authors, such as Leon Uris in his book “Exodus”, to describe what really happened to most displaced Jewish people after the war. It has been acknowledged and is not disputed that the UK refused to take refugees from Jewish communities after the second world war. Many other countries in Europe also refused. Some populations took part in the murder of Jews alongside the Nazis. Others had simply

misappropriated Jewish lands and property, and were not giving it back. Jewish people had nowhere to go and it was vital that a homeland was provided for the survivors. Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and it was the right course of action to re-establish the country on 14 May 1948. Almost half of all Jewish survivors of the holocaust, 49%, today live in Israel. About 18% live in north America and about 18% in western Europe. Approximately 1,200 survivors live in Britain, many of them in the Hendon constituency.

As Lord Blencathra told the Holocaust Memorial Bill Committee this week, the way different generations discover our history has changed. Many now read information from the internet. We all know that not everything that appears online is entirely accurate. But this has an impact on what people learn and their perceptions of past and current conflicts. For many people around the country, the holocaust is something they know happened but it does not impact them. But that is not the experience of many people in my constituency.

Yesterday, I spoke to a neighbour of mine, who told me about her daughter’s university experience at University College London. As she said, they are a liberal Jewish family who have a Jewish faith but are not orthodox. You would not know by looking at them that they are Jewish. Unless my constituent’s daughter told you she was Jewish, it would not be apparent. But what her daughter has heard in lectures and in the university itself are things she refuses to leave unchallenged. I have known her for many years and she is not a belligerent person, but students have told her that there are no Arabs in Israel, all Jews are wealthy and Jews control the world—all the usual tropes that we are now hearing more and more. She has pushed back but has been shunned by the other pupils, who refuse to sit next to her in lectures. Another student complained that there is an antisemitism tsar at UCL. My constituent’s daughter said that it was not a competition or even a privilege to have such a tsar, but that explanation was rejected and a demand was subsequently made for an anti-Islamophobia tsar, for no other reason than there is an antisemitism tsar. Young people in my constituency are now fearful of attending university and it is obvious why. Jewish students are held responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government, and the same is now steadily creeping into our schools.

There is a clear link between these attitudes and the terrorist attacks in Israel on 7 October. Those attacks were no different from what the Nazis were doing. Their intention was to kill as many Jews as possible and it remains a real concern to many of my constituents. Just like the holocaust deniers, there are deniers of what happened in Israel on 7 October. I will struggle a bit at this point, Mr Deputy Speaker. I cannot turn around and look at my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). We did visit Israel a few weeks after the attacks and we did see things that I certainly never expected to see. And I did warn my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet not to watch the 47-minute video. We saw not only that video, but another video.

When we were at the Shura base, the colonel, I believe it was, in charge opened the mortuary. Just like my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), what I remember is the smell. It was the smell not only of blood and death, which I have smelt before, but formaldehyde, some kind of chemical used to preserve the bodies. Many of the bodies, approximately 200,

were left there because they could not be identified. The reason they could not be identified is that some were headless, some were just a head, some were limbs and some were bodies fused together by fire. What really upset me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole was when the colonel whipped his phone from his pocket and showed us a video. I will not even mention what was on it. I do not talk to my staff or my family about what was there, but it was something that is not in the 47-minute video and it is not something that can be forgotten.

The events of 7 October are also quite personal due to the fact that Nathanel Young was one of the first to be killed. He was a student in my area at Beit Shvidler School. I recently visited the school and was upset when I saw his photo on the wall. The photo showed him with me and Lord Cameron at the 2013 Chanukah event at No. 10—he was part of the choir. I remember him distinctly because of his exuberance and vitality.

In the weeks since 7 October, I have received several emails from constituents. This has been touched on by hon. Members today and it is important to outline some of what people have said to me. One email said:

“I am writing to you today as a concerned member of your constituency and, more importantly, as a British Jew who is increasingly fearful for the safety of my family, friends, and community. Recent events have compelled me to express my deep concerns about the rise of antisemitic incidents and the apparent inadequacy of the response from law enforcement. Following the advice from the police on October 7th, instructing our sons to conceal their Jewish symbols while traveling to school, my family and I were already grappling with a heightened sense of vulnerability. As a community, we have observed instances where the police seemed to turn a blind eye to chants and unpleasant behaviour during weekly marches, fostering an environment where antisemitic sentiments are allowed to flourish unchecked. Recent events have left me questioning the assurances we once held that if these protests were to turn violent, the police would intervene decisively.”

She goes on to mention the alleged assault on a group of Israelis in Leicester Square on 20 January. She concludes by saying that she feels that she cannot allow her son

“to use any Hebrew or Jewish-sounding words when traveling, out of fear that he may become a target for senseless violence. It is deeply disheartening to realize that, in London 2024, Jewish people feel compelled to hide their identity and censor their innocent language for their own safety.”

Antisemitism is not restricted to my constituents. I have been subjected to two incidents in recent weeks, the second of which remains under consideration for prosecution, so I cannot say any more.

In conclusion, I will be attending Holocaust Memorial Day this year in Hendon. I will value it as much as ever. There will be a day when the Shoah will be an ancient historical tragedy, but unfortunately that will not be for many more years yet.

2.8 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time for this debate. I was very happy to be a co-sponsor of it. I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for the way in which she opened the debate. It is very important that we have this debate every year in the Chamber and this year it is all the more pressing. Like others, I would like to put on record my thanks to the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for their year-round work, as well as their support at this time of year.

It is Burns Night tonight and his famous line:

“Man’s inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!”

well stands the test of time when we look at the world today, and when we look to the holocaust and the continued impact down the generations. Like the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), I am often frustrated by the increasing polarisation of politics and views. There are far more shades than black and white, and public discourse is always the better for appreciating that, and trying to at least understand the spectrum of views that are different from one’s own.

On this particular issue—perhaps it is the exception that proves the rule—the importance of holocaust remembrance and understanding why it matters is something black and white: there is one clear way in which to look at these issues. In an age of increased tension, global flux and the growing influence of those whose very purpose is to foster hatred for others, we need to be ever more clear about the need for “never again” to mean exactly that; but it will not happen without specific and concerted effort.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “fragility of freedom”. To me things seem that bit more fragile and that bit more strained, and I was struck by hearing the same point made earlier this week by Rabbi Rubin, the Senior Rabbi of Scotland. I often speak in this place about the importance of freedom to follow the religion of one’s choice or to follow no religion, and across the globe that freedom is increasingly under threat. We are witnessing eye-watering spikes in antisemitism and Islamophobia. We need to mean what we say and stand up against that hatred—against the misinformation and disinformation, the tropes and the trolls, and the plain holocaust deniers. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made a good point about the significant challenges in the online space.

We also need to be vigilant, and face hard truths. Intolerance and hatred are increasing, and those who peddle hatred, here and throughout the world, do feel empowered. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) spoke powerfully about the huge dangers posed by people spreading conspiracies, and the efforts to erode and deny democracy. We need to remember that genocides do not just suddenly happen in faraway places. They are always the product of the gradual and deliberate “othering”, demeaning, dehumanising and diminishing of people simply because of their identity. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), they are fuelled by ordinary people acting in extraordinarily awful ways, empowered by the encouraging and normalising of hatred. That leads to the industrial-scale evil described by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers).

I was fortunate to attend my local holocaust memorial event at the start of the week, as I do every year. These events have been, without exception, profoundly moving, and this year’s was no different. I am grateful to East Renfrewshire Council and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, especially Kirsty Robson, for putting it together so effectively. Our young people were at the heart of that event, and I applaud them all for their efforts. Students from all our local schools were there, notably Christopher James and Sarah Bone from St Ninian’s High School, who spoke about their involvement as Holocaust Educational Trust ambassadors, and Lexie

[Kirsten Oswald]

Davidson from Mearns Castle High School, who has been working with the Anne Frank Trust. Kaela-Kaliza Molina, a young woman whose mother was caught up in the Rwanda genocide, read us a poem that she had written about the experience of her mother and so many others. It was entitled “We all bleed the same”, and you could have heard a pin drop.

The point that that young woman made—that point about the fragility of freedom—is illustrated very effectively by individual histories. The right hon. Member for Barking talked about her own family’s journey, much of which seemed to have been highly dependent on chance: it struck me that it could have been a very different story. We need to remember that we are talking about people and families, not just about the unfathomable number that we think about so often when reflecting on the holocaust while neglecting the individuals who perished.

At the event we also heard from Geraldine Shenkin, who spoke powerfully about her lovely mum, Marianne Grant, whose story has been captured in materials used in Scottish schools thanks to the work of Vision Schools Scotland, as well as in a beautiful book of her mum’s art which is now on permanent display in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Geraldine was exceptionally brave in telling that story, and I know that in doing so she spared us some detail because she was aware of the number of schoolchildren who were in the audience. Suffice it to say that her mum endured the most terrifying, inhumane and shocking treatment as she survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz before her liberation from Bergen-Belsen.

Marianne Grant was an artist, and while in Auschwitz she was forced to draw for Dr Mengele, known as the Angel of Death, whom she recalled walking back and forth in front of her nose in his black uniform as she drew, “like a clock pendulum”. The horrors that she experienced are beyond our imaginings, but of course they would have been unimaginable to her too until her life was turned upside down in that most horrific way.

The same can be said of the lives of Henry and the late Ingrid Wuga, Kindertransport children who escaped and later met, married and made their home in my constituency. They have changed countless lives with their work telling our young people about the reality of the Holocaust, and we owe them both a huge debt of gratitude for that. Henry Wuga is about to turn 100, and I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending him our very best wishes.

The importance of that kind of work, sharing the truth about the Holocaust, is ever greater. I met Gathering the Voices again this week, and heard more about Martin Anson, whose story is so important. He talked about the growing anti-Jewish sentiment in his Bavarian home town in the early 1920s, his activities in the anti-Nazi movement, stormtroopers assaulting his family on Kristallnacht, and his imprisonment in Dachau before he managed to emigrate to Scotland just before the outbreak of the war. His son Steven told me about a trip that he made last year to his father’s former home, where a stone called a stolperstein had been laid down in the ground—unusually, to record that someone who had lived there had survived; usually the stones record those who have been lost. On that visit, Steven was struck by the warm welcome that he received from the family who were currently living in the house. It was an

incredible story to hear, and the generosity of spirit of the current occupants is, I think, a ray of hope in a very harrowing history.

It would not be a Holocaust Memorial Day debate for me without my touching on another ray of hope, offered in the person of Jane Haining, the Scottish matron in a Budapest school who refused to leave her young Jewish charges despite knowing what the dangers were, and who paid for that decision with her life. She said:

“If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?”

That sentiment is one worth holding to at a time when everything seems a bit more fragile and less certain than the circumstances that we have, perhaps, become comfortably used to. Jane Haining is the only Scot to be named as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem.

It will take all of us—all of here, but all of us in our communities too—to say that we will not tolerate anti-semitism, we will not accept hatred, and we will not accept people’s being othered and demeaned because of their identity. Freedom really is fragile, and all of us together are the key to sustaining and strengthening it. Let us try to heed the terrible lessons of the past. Let us try to work hard together to keep alive the voices of those who survived, so that those who come after us can hear their testimony too, and can protect that fragile freedom.

2.18 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a great honour to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for introducing it, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time.

My right hon. Friend told us about her family’s personal experiences during the war and immediately after it. She spoke about the fact that freedom is fragile, and that has certainly been apparent in the debate. She also asked, “When will we ever learn?”, a question that has been repeated by many Members on both sides of the House.

As we have heard, this Saturday, 27 January, is Holocaust Memorial Day and the 79th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is an opportunity for us to come together to remember the 6 million Jewish victims murdered by the Nazi regime, as well as the millions of lives lost to genocidal violence in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) mentioned the testimony of Daphrosa on the horrors of the Rwandan genocide. This year’s Holocaust Memorial Day marks the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and the murder of up to 1 million Tutsis in just 100 days by violent Hutu extremists.

We remember the families, communities, cultures and traditions lost forever to hatred and persecution, and we pay tribute to the survivors. Their lives irrevocably altered by devastating violence, we owe them great gratitude for sharing their testimonies and exposing the true horrors they experienced, in order that we can all bear witness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said that, as a child, he heard about some of the events of world war two, but that he was an adult when he learned about the atrocities that were committed. He stressed the need for us to continue to educate people.

Recalling his return to the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said:

“It has swallowed an entire people...a people with hopes and memories.”

This week we honour those hopes and memories and the rich individual lives that lie behind the dreadful statistics that have been referenced across the House throughout this debate.

We also remember the many others killed by the Nazi regime, including more than a quarter of a million disabled people, up to half a million Roma and Sinti people, and thousands of LGBT people, many of whom have had to fight to be recognised as victims. These crimes were the most terrifying consequences of identity-based persecution.

Today, people around the world, and here in the UK, continue to face deep hostility because of who they are. Over the past decade, we have seen rises in hate crime of every category. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face persistent discrimination. Many LGBT+ people continue to face hostile environments. And in the months since 7 October, as we have heard today, we have seen an unprecedented rise in incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia. This Holocaust Memorial Day, we must all remember our common humanity. We must remember, too, that the prevention of atrocities begins at home, and we must seek to unite our communities, to prevent hatred and polarisation, and to warn against the dangers posed by insidious hatred.

This year’s “fragility of freedom” theme is a call for us to reject complacency and to pay attention to the processes that restrict and remove the freedoms of those targeted for persecution. As soon as the Nazis took power in 1933, they weaponised every lever of the state to erode the freedoms of German Jews, by passing decrees and regulations to limit the participation of Jewish people in public life. The 1935 Nuremberg laws proscribed marriage between Jews and non-Jews and, in so doing, robbed Jewish people of their freedom of religion and self-identification.

As Nazi horrors spread across Europe, Jews in occupied countries were forced into ghettos and deported to concentration or extermination camps. This was the ultimate manifestation of violence, which took away their freedom to live, but it did not come from nowhere. That is why this year’s theme asks us to remember how climates for genocide are created. It is a reminder that freedom can be vulnerable, and that we should not take it for granted.

By providing a focal point, Holocaust Memorial Day ensures that we come together to remember and to mourn victims of genocide each and every year. Local activities will be taking place all over the UK this week, and I pay tribute to the many organisers who are ensuring that generations of young people continue to hear these vital messages. It is estimated that more than 10,000 such local activities take place across the UK around 27 January each year, which is a magnificent achievement.

I also pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, which have worked hard to embed understanding of the holocaust in our education system. It is thanks to the Holocaust Educational Trust that learning about the holocaust has been a compulsory part of the national curriculum for

more than 30 years. Since 2006, its “Lessons from Auschwitz” project has allowed post-16 students in schools and colleges to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the face of dangerous holocaust denial and distortion, these lessons are of paramount importance.

Recognising the essentialness of holocaust education, we have supported the Holocaust Memorial Bill from its outset. Just like Holocaust Memorial Day, the holocaust memorial and learning centre will provide yet another essential focal point for genocide education and commemoration in the UK. It will preserve the memory of the holocaust, convey the truths about its nature and, crucially, serve as a fitting tribute to the 6 million Jewish people murdered by the Nazis.

I am pleased that today’s debate has given us the opportunity to come together to reject hatred and to strive for a better future, never forgetting the lives, families and communities lost to the most horrifying violence.

2.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): This is the first time I have attended a Holocaust Memorial Day debate, and I have to say that I am rather glad it is. I must be honest with the House that, if I had had any idea of the raw emotion, I might have dodged it, but I am so glad that I did not. It has been sad and it has been frightening, but every word has been worth hearing. I thank the House and all those who have contributed to today’s debate. It has been a true privilege to be here to hear it.

As many right hon. and hon. Members have noted, the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is the “fragility of freedom”. It is not just about the fragility of freedom in emerging democracies or elsewhere in the world; it is about the threat and the challenge to all mature western democracies. Frankly, we have grown complacent about our rights and privileges, and about our freedom to think, speak, write, congregate, worship and pray. Too much of it is under attack, whether by social media, the ease of populism or the search for the simple in a complex world. So much that we hold dear is under pressure, so let us come together, as this debate has shown the House can do at its best, to champion and defend all that we cherish and hold dear to our hearts.

But let us do more. Let us not just be armchair or, indeed, green Bench democrats. Let us be, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) suggested, muscular and robust in our stance and in our defence, because in collaborative defence there is courage, there is hope and there is opportunity.

The big numbers of the holocaust make it hard to envisage, as all big numbers and statistics do, so let us pause for a moment not to think of 6 million as just another statistic. I follow the Auschwitz Memorial Twitter feed, or X feed as we now have to call it, and, virtually every day, it presents a picture or pictures of men, women and children. These ordinary folk were starved, taken from their homes, persecuted and incinerated—the true meaning of the word “holocaust”—for their faith. Let us recommit to always seeing these people for what they are, people, fellow human beings, and never as just a statistic, whether they be Jewish, Bosnian, Rwandan or Cambodian.

[Simon Hoare]

What we must always remember, as many contributors have reminded us so powerfully today, is that down the centuries the Jewish people have always been forced to look over their shoulders, with pogroms, the holocaust, displacement, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and the Dreyfus case. They are a people always worried that they are only temporarily tolerated, rather than permanently welcomed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge)—I am going to call her my right hon. Friend—added a poignancy to her characteristically brave and bold remarks and thinking by reminding the House that, sadly, this is the last of these debates that she will take part in as a Member of Parliament. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, she will be missed but not forgotten. Hers have been important words on this issue, particularly during difficult years for her and Jewish colleagues in her party—thank God that is changing—where she stood bravely on difficult and hostile Benches and made her case, as she did today.

My job is to reply to the debate and respond to speeches, so with the leave of the House I will try to reference a nugget or two from each contribution, because they merit it, as does the seriousness of the issues at hand. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for her words, in speaking for the Opposition, as I am to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who spoke for the Scottish National party. I know that the hon. Member for Blaydon has given me a little more time than the usual channels may have agreed to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the Father of the House, spoke powerfully about the fragility of democracy. As many Members soon went on to do, he pointed to the importance of education. We do not repeat when we know, and we know only when we are educated. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland spoke about his constituency and the story of rescuing those fleeing persecution in Norway. That historical fact was new to me, and the House will be grateful for it.

My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke, in his characteristically frank but moving way, about his experience in Yugoslavia, and I wish to make two points to him. First, he is right to remind the House, and we are right to remind ourselves, that those events took place not in a faraway land of which we knew nothing, but on our doorstep, and just in 1993. Secondly, for what it is worth, I wish to say personally to him, because he spoke of his shame and the shame of his mother, that he has nothing to be ashamed about. He and his men did their best, and that is all we as a democracy can ever ask.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) is currently in Westminster Hall for a debate about religious freedom, so there is a link even today. She is not in her place for that reason, but she gave us a powerful speech on Rwanda, reminding us of the horror of rape and sexual violence, as my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Brigg and Goole and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) did in relation to the horrific events of 7 October. I sat and listened as a husband and a father

of three daughters, and who would not be moved to think that those horrible events took place just a few short weeks ago.

A common theme has been smell, a sense that is often not spoken about enough. We talk about our memories of what we have seen or heard, but smell can be hugely evocative, be it of a time or place in our childhood, a holiday or whatever. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon is a doctor and he will have been used to the smell of medical things. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole also spoke about the recent smell of death and rotting flesh. The father of a great friend of mine had been part of the medical team that went into Belsen, and until his death he always spoke about the smell that was still on his skin. We should remember that always.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) spoke of the complacency of the view that, “It’s all history.” It is not history; it is happening now. When we think it is history—that either it is not happening or it cannot happen again—we have lost the battle, have we not? What was the holocaust and why should we remember it? We can remember it for the horror, the statistics, the figures and the scale, but the eternal shame, to use the phrase of my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham, is that it was man’s inhumanity to man. We should all be ashamed and embarrassed by it, because it shows, at the darkest and basest moments of humankind, precisely what we can do to each other, in the name of doctrine, theology, ideology. It is a terrible thing that we have somewhere deep within our DNA. Let us resolve to keep it buried.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) spoke powerfully about hatred and prejudice, and he, too, spoke of the importance of education. I want especially to mark the speech made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I hope he will not take it the wrong way when I say that I thought that the frank assessment of current events that he gave us was, for a Birmingham Member, a brave speech. I was pleased to hear it, the House will be grateful to have heard it, and he should be commended for delivering it in the heartfelt and sincere way that he did.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), in that simple memory of a shoe and a piece of make-up, so reminiscent of the museum where the shoes of those who died were gathered up as a reminder, reminds us of the simplicity and therefore the futility; this was ordinary people going about their lives in an ordinary way, on an ordinary day, and suddenly, as a result of somebody’s bigotry and hatred, it was all taken away. The lipstick, powder, mascara, the pair of dancing shoes, whatever it might happen to be, will stand as a longer lasting memorial than any statue or plaque that could be erected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) again picked up on this theme of education, and I pay tribute to all of those—the Holocaust Educational Trust and others—who day in, day out ensure that we never forget. We are right to remind ourselves of the importance of that. People have spoken of the important role that our universities and schools play in ensuring free and fair speech, and ensuring that all voices can be heard, and that tolerance and toleration are the hallmarks

of a civilised democracy. They need to step up to the plate and play their part, as does this place, in ensuring that those are preserved and protected.

The hon. Member for Blaydon, who spoke for the Opposition, gave a heartfelt speech, as did the SNP spokesman, and we commend her for that. How right my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East were to remind us of the uncomfortable truth, as the right hon. Member for Barking did, of our slightly uncomfortable position with regard to the welcoming of Jewish children through the Kindertransport but not their parents, and the controls that we placed on Jewish migration and the problems that caused for too many people. I could go on, because this has been a moving debate on a mammoth issue. It has been about history—80 years ago and more recent—but the issue is so fresh and contemporary today that it chills us to the bone.

Before I conclude, I should apologise to the *Hansard* scribes. My officials will have given them a typed speech but, as usual, I have ignored it, because the speeches I heard from colleagues this afternoon were from the heart, and I wanted to respond, on behalf of the Government, in kind.

However, wherever, whoever and whenever, how they died, where they died, and who they were, let us unite today and always to mark and reflect on all of those who have lost their lives, to both the holocaust and all holocausts. May all of their sacrifices not have been in vain. May all of their memories be a blessing.

2.40 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge: I will not detain the House, but I echo the words of the Minister and the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) in saying that the House is at its best when we can all speak across the Chamber in unity on issues that are a million times more important than anything else we debate in the

House through the year. I thank every Member of the House who has participated in the debate for their warm and important speeches.

I want to reflect on what the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) said. Like her, I went to the exhibition about the Nova festival, which the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet mentioned. The picture of the shoe lying on the ground, as people were slaughtered at the festival, reminds us of the Holocaust and what we see in Auschwitz, which I do not think any of us can forget. I never smelled the smell in Kfar Aza—I probably went a few weeks after the hon. Members for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and for Hendon (Dr Offord)—but I felt the misery and horror that people experienced there. I agree with all hon. Members that the growth of antisemitism on our streets today, as with the growth of Islamophobia, should chill us all and make us think about how we do things.

My final words relate to what was said by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Jews have maintained hope through the generations—that is probably why we have survived in the way we have. I hope we can leave today's debate with a feeling of hope and determination that we will build a society of tolerance, both here and across the world. We should learn that hate will not bring us the peaceful co-existence we all want. Freedom is fragile, and we all have to put every effort into securing freedom for everybody, wherever they live, whoever they are and whatever their background or religion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank all hon. Members who have participated today for the manner in which they have conducted themselves. I am sure that will have been appreciated outside the House, as well as within it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

Milton Keynes Women's and Children's Hospital: New Hospital Programme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Fletcher.)

2.42 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am hugely grateful to have been granted this Adjournment debate, on a matter that means so much to me, my constituents in Milton Keynes North and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart).

My constituency and the whole of Milton Keynes is growing all the time—it is one of the fastest growing cities in the UK. More and more folk with families, as well as young couples looking to start a family, are moving to Milton Keynes. Our freshly minted city, which is 57 years old this week, is a wonderful place to build and grow a family. People want to build their families in Milton Keynes because there is opportunity there, including highly skilled jobs, good schools and green neighbourhoods for children to grow up in. Milton Keynes is the place to be.

However, a growing city brings challenges, particularly for our healthcare infrastructure. More people means a need for more healthcare capacity, in both the short and the long term. I thank the Government for their efforts so far to meet that challenge head-on.

For those reasons, I am delighted about the investment we have seen since I became an MP in 2019. For example, the community diagnostic centres, backed by £2.3 billion of Government funding, are making a significant impact in reducing the covid-19 backlogs and delivering an extra 6 million vital tests, checks and scans to date. There are two such diagnostic centres in Milton Keynes, with one up and running at the Whitehouse Health Centre and one coming soon in Lloyds Court in central Milton Keynes.

The Maple Centre is another important step in the right direction, helping to provide same day emergency care, meaning patients can get the treatment they need without being admitted to hospital. That has reduced pressure on the main emergency department at Milton Keynes University Hospital, ensuring that patients are treated in the environment that best meets their healthcare needs. In its first year, the centre treated over 20,000 patients, so I offer my thanks to staff at the centre who work really hard to provide the best quality care for their patients.

I also welcome the Government's urgent and emergency care plan, alongside an investment of over £1 billion to deliver 5,000 more hospital beds. That will free up beds for patients needing urgent and emergency care, and, ultimately, reduce pressures on hospitals. This includes a £3 million investment in Milton Keynes University Hospital, where we have a new 22 bed ward with extra clinical space. I am also delighted that the Government are funding a new breast cancer screening unit at Milton Keynes University Hospital.

Milton Keynes University Hospital serves not just the people of Milton Keynes, but communities in the surrounding areas, acting as a cornerstone in the region. Work must continue to safeguard the healthcare needs of future generations.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point that the hospital is there for Milton Keynes, but it is also there for the surrounding areas, including towns such as Buckingham and Winslow and the villages around them. Does he agree that the important partnership between the medical centre at the University of Buckingham and the hospital has driven up clinical standards? When I was first elected in 2010, standards at Milton Keynes University Hospital were not good. They are now among the best in the country. That should be cherished and it bodes well for future investment.

Ben Everitt: I agree wholeheartedly; in fact, I remember campaigning with my hon. Friend to get that partnership up and running back in 2015. It really is a virtuous circle: because it is now a teaching hospital, people want to go there to learn, and standards go up. It is one of the best places to work in the region, with fantastic staff and fantastic management.

One of the best measures we have for a healthcare system is its capacity to provide everyone with the specialist care they need. That is why I was very pleased when the construction of a women and children's hospital, which is the subject of the debate, was agreed in principle. It is part of the new hospital programme, and getting it on to the list of 40 new hospitals and keeping it there has been quite a journey. With covid, build cost inflation, and concrete rot being found in other hospitals, which bumped them up the priority list, it has been hard work to keep our hospital on the list. I sincerely thank my hon. Friend for his hard work, and Professor Joe Harrison at Milton Keynes University Hospital.

On the list we are! The Treasury has confirmed the funding and we are a go. Our new hospital will act as the home for paediatric and maternity care in Milton Keynes, while increasing surgical capacity. Through the new hospital programme, the new hospital and the existing hospital will be able to utilise the latest technological developments to create smarter hospital facilities. That means more up-to-date systems and devices, leading to greater efficiency and better care across the whole hospital estate. Another point, which might be overlooked, is that moving maternity and paediatric care to the new hospital will free up capacity in the existing hospital for other clinical requirements. Often, building new hospitals is not just about new facilities, which are of course important; it is also about improving existing facilities and care. MK University Hospital will be able to move forward with its own expansion plans. In that sense, we can begin to unlock the full potential of our healthcare infrastructure in Milton Keynes.

Having seen the architect's impressions of the new hospital, I can only be excited. With it, we have a brilliant future ahead of us. It is clear that the hospital will act as a symbol of how far our city has come, but I also feel that it will act as a symbol of the new hospital programme overall, and of the benefits of the Government's ambitious levelling-up agenda. Of course, having a new hospital focused on women and children is not just about the additional treatment; it is about creating the right environment for that care to take place—an environment in which women feel comfortable talking about their health without distress or worry, and children feel that they are cared for in their own setting.

The integration of maternity and paediatric care is key. Having those services all under one roof will make life easier for nurses and doctors, as well as for families. The health of our women and children is fundamental. We must therefore keep pushing for the new hospital to be built as soon as possible, to ensure that Milton Keynes can provide the best care for our young families and is the best place possible to respond to the challenges of population growth. With funding having been announced last May, I hope that the funds can be released soon, so that we can get the plans finalised and get on with the construction work. I know that many back in MK are itching to get the green light and get on with the project, so I would welcome any updates on the hospital, and where we are on the timeline.

Delivering the 40 new hospitals by 2030 is key to meeting our manifesto commitments from 2019. Getting this hospital up and running as soon as possible will demonstrate in no uncertain terms that the Government are more committed than ever to that target.

2.51 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) on securing a debate on this important issue. He is a tireless campaigner for better healthcare in Milton Keynes, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). Before I talk about the new hospital, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North for mentioning the new community diagnostic centres. I am delighted that the Whitehouse health centre is already carrying out tests, checks and scans for his constituents, with another CDC in Lloyds Court shopping centre coming very soon. As he laid out, Milton Keynes University Hospital has already seen improvements to emergency and cancer care facilities. The addition of a dedicated new women and children's centre through the new hospital programme builds on that record of investment.

Both my hon. Friends, along with the Conservative candidate for Milton Keynes South, Johnny Luk, have spoken to me in detail about the huge difference that the investment will make for local people. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North hit the nail on the head in pointing out the smarter hospital design that we have developed as part of the programme, and how it will benefit patients. He is entirely right that it will improve patient care, with features such as more single rooms to give new mums the privacy that they deserve, or for families comforting sick children. The design is a major plus for staff working in our NHS too, providing better lines of sight to monitor patients from nurses' stations, better IT and equipment so that less time is wasted on non-clinical tasks, and a lighter, brighter environment to work in.

The hospital will also boost the emphasis of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on women's health and maternity care, and I know that she will follow the hospital's progress with keen interest. As my hon. Friend said, Milton Keynes is rapidly expanding, as the penny drops and people realise what a fantastic place it is to live, work, and raise children, thanks in no small part, I am sure, to his zealous and spirited pursuit of Milton Keynes' interests in this House. The Government are bearing that important fact in mind, as we work very

closely with Milton Keynes University Hospital Foundation Trust on its plans for a new women and children's hospital, surgical ward block and imaging centre.

In May last year the Government announced a further five hospitals as part of our commitment to build 40 new hospitals by 2030. Structures that were mostly built using reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—commonly known as RAAC—will be rebuilt by 2030 as part of the new hospital programme, along with two hospitals that were already included on the list. We will not cut any corners when it comes to protecting the safety of patients and staff. We remain committed to every scheme announced as part of the new hospital programme.

I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that Milton Keynes Community NHS Trust submitted its refreshed strategic outline business case to the programme last week, on 19 January. This will now progress through the appropriate assurance processes, as set out in the Treasury Green Book, to ensure that the trust's plans are aligned with the national programme approach, are deliverable and provide value for taxpayers' money. But the intention is very much that these plans will be delivered at pace and with rigour.

I am pleased to inform the House that, up to the end of the 2022-23 financial year, the scheme received more than £11 million for scheme development funding. In the current financial year, we have released more than £600,000 extra, to help the trust develop the business case for the new patient imaging centre. A further £120,000 will be made available for the development of business cases for a multi-storey car park and high voltage supply upgrade. I look forward to receiving further business cases from the trust. I commit to updating my hon. Friend as funding is released for that important scheme. All the money that we have released to date has helped reach key milestones in delivering the plan for the people of Milton Keynes and the surrounding areas, enabling construction teams to crack on early with preparing the site ahead of the main construction commencing in the second half of the decade. The funds also demonstrate our commitment to delivering a new Milton Keynes hospital by 2030 as part of the new hospital programme.

I would like to end by providing a more general update on the ambitious and vital work that we are undertaking as part of the new hospitals programme. I am very pleased that four hospitals are now open to patients: the Northern Centre for Cancer Care; the Royal Liverpool Hospital; stage 1 of the Louisa Martindale, also known as the 3Ts hospital—trauma, tertiary and training—in Brighton; and the Northgate and Ferndene hospitals in Northumberland. A further hospital, the Salford Royal major trauma centre, is complete and due to open shortly. Another 17 hospitals are either in construction or in early construction with activity well under way to prepare their sites. This includes surveys and crucial work on non-clinical infrastructure, such as energy centres, demolitions or car parking.

My ministerial colleague with responsibility for the new hospital programme, Lord Markham, has been visiting these sites up and down the country to see at first hand how some of the schemes are progressing. I can assure my hon. Friend that his lordship's enthusiasm for the programme matches his own.

[Andrew Stephenson]

I thank my hon. Friend for continuing to champion this investment in his constituency and for his continued engagement in the new hospital scheme. He is right to hold our feet to the fire; let the record show that we are committed to every scheme announced as part of the new hospital programme and delivering the new hospital

in Milton Keynes by 2030, because I know that he will be holding Ministers to account, as he does so diligently on this and so many other issues.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 January 2024

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

Religious Persecution and the World Watch List

1.30 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for this debate on religious persecution and the 2024 Open Doors world watch list. Several hon. Members have spoken to me and said they would have liked to have attended and spoken in the debate, but that it directly clashes with the debate in the main Chamber on Holocaust Memorial Day. We fully understand, because as hard as MPs might try, we still have not worked out how to be in two places at one time.

That allows me to speak more at length than I might otherwise have the luxury of doing, so I take this opportunity to thank Open Doors for its 2024 world watch list and for all the organisation does to ensure that the issue of persecution of Christians and, generously and rightly, of those of other faiths and none is highlighted globally and in particular in this Parliament. Open Doors does a tremendous job of ensuring that its supporters, whom I thank, ask our Members of Parliament to attend the annual launch of the world watch list. This year's event took place last week here in Parliament, with just under 100 Members of Parliament attending. That is a huge number for a gathering of that kind.

I also thank other organisations, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Aid to the Church in Need and those that represent people of other faiths such as the Baha'i, the Ahmadiyya Muslims or the Jehovah's Witnesses, with which I work as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I thank them for what they do, working as part of a global network of organisations, individuals, NGOs, academics and Government representatives, and collaborating now more than ever to promote and protect FORB worldwide and to challenge its abuses.

Before I proceed, I will also say that while I have had the privilege of being the Prime Minister's special envoy for more than three years and I have learned a great deal through that role, I speak this afternoon as a Member of Parliament. I will be interested to hear the responses from the Minister, who I am delighted to see in his place. I know he has taken an enormous personal interest in this issue over many years.

As chair for the past two years of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, consisting of Government representatives from 42 countries, I know that we as representatives cannot do our job without the grassroots accounts and information brought to us by those working on the ground in countries and often at great risk and cost to themselves. With that information about the persecution of individuals, we can then advocate, and it is wonderful to be able to advocate confidently on

the facts when an organisation such as Open Doors and others I have mentioned bring to us those facts and cases of individuals being so maltreated.

For more than 30 years, Open Doors has produced its annual world watch list, most recently last week for the current year's edition. It is the product of intensive, year-round research, data collection, interviews and action, all independently analysed and verified to produce a ranking system to portray Christian persecution globally. Details are collected on five areas of non-violent pressure on the freedom of religion for Christians: private life, family, community, the church and business life. Separately, details are collected on violence against Christians, which includes reports of attacks on churches, homes and businesses, detention without trial, jailing, abduction, sexual harassment, forced marriage, and Christians being exiled or displaced, tortured and even killed.

It is a gruesome schedule. It is even more distressing when we realise that when the Open Doors world watch list started just over 30 years ago in 1993, Christians faced high, very high or extreme levels of persecution in around 40 countries and 30 years on that number has just about doubled. Year on year the world watch list now reports increasing numbers of Christians persecuted. According to the report, this year more than 365 million Christians around the world faced high levels of persecution or discrimination for their faith in Jesus Christ. That is one in every seven Christians worldwide. In the top 50 countries covered by the report, 317 million Christians face high, very high or extreme levels of persecution.

Why should that be in the 21st century? As I say, this is happening not only to Christians but to those of many other faiths, and indeed those of no faith at all—humanists, atheists. The watch list highlights a number of reasons. First, there is a shrinking space for civil society. That means a shrinking space for people to speak publicly about their religious beliefs. There is an increase in autocratic regimes across the globe. Religious faith and allegiance is anathema to an autocratic regime, which demands undiluted loyalty.

That goes not just for North Korea, where we hear of a two-year-old child having been sentenced to life imprisonment simply because his parents owned a Bible. It does not just go for China, where we know there are severe restrictions on practising the Christian faith, with children under 18 now banned from church, along with many other groups in society. It is happening in Asia and Africa too, in countries such as Eritrea, where there is appalling cruelty. Tens of thousands are imprisoned there simply because of what they believe.

Prisons in Eritrea are not like prisons here. People are placed in shipping containers where they nearly burn to death in the heat of the noon sun at over 40° with little if any ventilation, or they are virtually frozen at night. Many go mad. Many die. Others are imprisoned in what are literally holes in the ground dug into the earth—maybe no bigger than 4 metres by 6 metres, if that, and often shared. They have little chance of escape, and are often kept for years with little chance of release.

Open Doors talks about one such prisoner in its report. It is only when reading about the experiences of individuals that we can appreciate that the numbers we talk about relate to people like us. Abdullah—not his real name—had a Government job, like many people in this room, in Eritrea. A co-worker baited him into making

[Fiona Bruce]

comments while secretly recording him. The next day, he was arrested, charged and sent to prison. He grew up in a traditional Muslim family, but became a Christian and married a Christian woman; they had seven children. He was recorded after he spoke about his faith to his colleagues, and spent two years in prison. His wife shared that she was not allowed to bring him extra clothes, and he only received food three times a week. His health deteriorated and he needed medical attention; he died in 2022. There are many like Abdullah in Eritrea, imprisoned simply on account of what they believe. It is no wonder that Eritrea is No. 4 on the world watch list.

Persecution is also increasing due to the rise in the use of technology by regimes. It enables persecution on an industrial scale unimaginable even a few years ago, and that technology is being exported all over the world. A human rights lawyer and Uyghur activist, Nury Turkel, has written a wonderful book called “No Escape”. It is a powerful and authoritative memoir about the detention of the Uyghurs in China; he himself was detained. He writes that in East Germany, once the Stasis targeted a dissident, it took an entire team of covert agents to tail them—not any more. All-pervasive surveillance cameras can use artificial intelligence to scan vast numbers of people using facial recognition software, or even a person’s particular gait or walk, to pick them out of the crowd. A handful of people can now keep tabs on millions, and then arrest and incarcerate at scale. The problem, of course, is that AI has no moral sense of right and wrong.

There has also been an increase in gender-based violence: violence against women and girls, who suffer doubly if they are a member of a religious minority. This discrimination, often justified on religious grounds, exacerbates lawless mob violence—with no legal action taken. Time permitting, I hope to speak more on this regarding the abduction of young girls in Pakistan for so-called forced conversion and forced marriage. I wish we could think of another phrase, because that is a heinous way to put it. There are potentially hundreds of Hindus, Sikhs and Christians being mistreated in this way, including girls as young as 12, often with no recourse to justice, cast out of their communities even if they escape.

Another reason for the increase in persecution worldwide is what Open Doors describes as the collapse of Government institutions—the collapse of the rule of law in the face of widespread lawlessness. Open Doors quite rightly highlights Nigeria, where there are major problems, as we have said many times in this place. It is no surprise that Nigeria is No. 6 on the world watch list.

It is important to describe personal experiences. At the launch last week, Henrietta Blyth, the CEO of Open Doors UK, relayed the experience of one man. She said that while we were all enjoying Christmas eve, and while Christmas day found us all with our families once again, at exactly the same time in Nigeria, in the middle of the night, gangs of Fulani militants launched a devastating attack on Christian families in the central Plateau state. Twenty-five villages were attacked; 160 people burned to death in their homes; 15,000 people fled; and eight churches were burned down. She said that the violence continued from Christmas eve until the morning of Boxing day.

The militants discovered older people, women and young children who were hiding by the riverside. They shot some of them, and hacked others to death with machetes. One man tells how his wife “was not fast enough” and the attackers caught up with her:

“They grabbed her and my two children. They shot my wife and my children before my eyes. There were so many things we wanted to do. All our plans are shattered. Now I don’t know where to start from.”

That is happening on a regular basis in Nigeria. People go to bed at night fearing attacks from militant Islamic extremists, and not enough is being done by the Government there to address it. We need to call it out and help those people. They are asking for help when they suffer in that way and lose their homes and livelihoods.

The UK in 2022 spent £110 million on UK bilateral aid. Surely some of it could be spent on helping victims of massacres such as the Owo massacre, which I spoke about recently at Prime Minister’s Question Time, and in which more than 40 people were killed in their church. I brought here one of the survivors, Margaret Attah, and her husband. She lost both her legs and an eye. She spoke in the Jubilee Room next door. I was amazed at the grace of her husband, Dominic, when he said, “I forgive them all.” That takes some doing. It was moving; Margaret was sitting quietly in her wheelchair, and one of the people there asked, “How can we help you?”. Dominic and Margaret said, “We really could do with a computer”, and within three days, money had been gathered by volunteers and a computer was delivered to them. Margaret also needs prosthetic limbs. Wonderfully, again as a result of that meeting, a colleague in this place has offered to try to help with that. That is wonderful, but survivors of massacres ought not to have to rely on almost individual charity. There should be a way in which UK aid can quickly help them.

Another cause of the rise in persecution is religious nationalism. It is often accompanied by hate speech, which drives persecution of religious minorities and often incites mob violence. Criminality is overlooked. I ask colleagues and those listening to have a look at the concerns relayed in the report about the collapse in stability in Manipur in India. Since May last year, I have worked with Open Doors on looking into what has happened there. It has ensured that we have interviewed individuals affected, and that people on the ground have gathered accurate information. What is happening in Manipur is horrific and widespread, yet the world knows very little about it, partly because the internet has been disconnected there for much of the time since what happened. Let me read hon. Members a little about it:

“attacks have not been limited to one tribal group. More than half of the 400 churches attacked were those of Meitei Christians—249 of these within the first 36 hours of rioting.”

How could so many churches be attacked in the riots without some premeditation? We have even heard that houses that were attacked had been marked; the doors of Christians had been marked. According to Open Doors’ sources, around 70,000 Christians

“have been forcibly displaced... Particularly horrific has been the situation for Christian women in Manipur.”

I have mentioned the plight of women already. In one incident,

“women were dragged from a police van by a mob...before being stripped, paraded and sexually assaulted. The younger woman’s brother and father were killed trying to protect them.”

Sadly,

“Open Doors researchers have verified five case studies of women being targeted for sexual violence, with the police failing to intervene or protect the women.”

As I say, the increase in persecution is happening all over the world, much of it due to autocratic regimes. The world watch list 2024 highlights that in South America there are concerns about Nicaragua and Cuba. In Nicaragua over the last year, the Catholic Church has been severely attacked by the Government. Radio stations run by Catholics have been shut down, as have schools, medical centres and even a university. Even Mother Theresa’s nuns, who have been there for 30 years, were expelled without notice.

It is heartening that in such cases the international community comes together. Non-governmental organisations and Government representatives from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, of which I am a member, have championed the situation of Bishop Álvarez of Nicaragua, who was imprisoned for 26 years for speaking out about human rights violations last year. I am very pleased to say that two weeks ago, he was released as a result of that campaigning, so it does work, although sadly he has been expelled from the country.

I encourage people to campaign for and support Pastor Lorenzo of Cuba, who has been imprisoned in Cuba for a seven-year term for raising the issue of human rights violations. There is information about his plight on the CSW website. We want him released, so please support that campaign.

Other cases include that of 27-year-old Hoodo Abdi Abdillahi, from Somaliland—I apologise; I know that I have not pronounced her name correctly. She was arbitrarily arrested and sentenced in October 2022 to seven years in prison, simply for becoming a Christian. She was reported to the authorities, in violation of her right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and her right as a member of a religious minority in Somalia. Of course, Somalia too is high on the world watch list; in fact, it is No. 2. We have learned that during her trial, which was allegedly very swift, she did not even have defence counsel, and she has not had an opportunity to appeal her sentence. Her appeal case is being brought to the Somaliland court of appeal, but the hearing date has been repeatedly delayed by the court. International organisations have taken up her case. I do hope that she will be released, and I urge others to support her.

Ordinarily in such debates, I would not have this much time. I am very pleased that I have been informed that today I do have the luxury of time, so I now turn to the recommendations in the Open Doors report. I apologise, because some of the comments that I will make will perhaps appear just a little bit dry after the human stories of the last few minutes, but it is important that we look at the recommendations.

One of the recommendations says that the UK Government should

“Promote and protect FoRB as a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement”.

The UK Government frequently pronounce that promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief is a priority in their international human rights work. It is true that it is much more of a priority than it was just a few years ago. Defending FORB has risen up the political agenda.

I am interested in comments made by Sir Malcolm Evans, the principal of Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, and a member of the Foreign Secretary’s advisory group on human rights. Sir Malcolm has said that in the mid-1990s—that would be about the time that the Open Doors watch list began—the growth of international human rights law concerning freedom of religion or belief had barely begun. It is testament to many, including Open Doors, that in the 30 years since, it has indeed risen up our Government’s agenda.

I pay tribute to all individuals and organisations, such as Open Doors, CSW and Aid to the Church in Need, that have worked to ensure that parliamentarians here continue to press our Ministers. I pay enormous tribute to my colleague the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for his sustained work on this issue, because it is in large part as a result of that that our Ministers and officials have taken hold of this issue in a way that they did not just a few years ago.

I have worked internationally, and I think we can be very proud of our Parliament. There is no other Parliament in the world where, across the parties, this work and advocacy happen on this scale. Having 170 Members of Parliament and peers as members of the all-party group—it is the biggest all-party group out of, I think, over 700 now—is testament to the commitment of our colleagues to this issue.

I also thank Ministers. I thank the then Foreign Secretary, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for initiating the Bishop of Truro’s independent review for the Foreign Secretary of Foreign Office support for persecuted Christians. The review was published in 2019 and made 22 recommendations. It has been part of my mandate as envoy to try to get those recommendations implemented. I also thank the Prime Minister and the current Foreign Secretary for their support for my role, which I know is strong. I thank, too, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is responsible for development and Africa, and of course the Minister present today.

We have come a long way in the last few years, and there has been improvement in addressing FORB, but there is much more to be done. Three years after the Truro review’s work, experts carried out an independent review of it. Rather politely—they are academics, so this may be the language they use—the review concluded that

“there remains scope for further developments in order to ensure that the protection of FoRB for all becomes firmly embedded in the operational approach of the FCDO as a whole.”

That is right. A number of Truro recommendations still need to be implemented fully or effectively if, in line with the review’s core principle, FORB is to become truly mainstream in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement, as the Open Doors report recommends.

I will mention a few areas in which we—I use the word collaboratively, because I recognise that I, too, have responsibilities in this regard—need to step up. For example, a lot of work has been done on producing religious literacy materials, including a FORB toolkit, to help our officials and diplomats in embassies across

[Fiona Bruce]

the world to understand what FORB is and the importance of protecting it, promoting it and understanding the principal areas of different faiths and beliefs. However, it is really important that the material is read and used. The problem is that, although its roll-out should be mandatory, as Truro recommended, it is not—it is just recommended. We need a review of how often and to what degree the materials are being taken up, because we need to ensure that every diplomat working in the world watch list's top 50 countries has been through them, and others too.

Engagement by the diplomats who work in our embassies and diplomatic posts around the world needs to be ramped up, acknowledging that in the context of peacebuilding, supporting democratisation and the development of inclusivity, FORB needs to be included with other human rights. It is more necessary now than ever. As international commentators now frequently remark, the rules-based international order has not been so imperilled for decades. The international scene is darkening. There can be no assumption of peace and security; we have to work for it.

Although religion can be a cause of conflict, it can also be a force for good. Is peace not a core value of most religions? In the context of our trying to prevent conflict and deter wars, the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief is vital. Indeed, it has much to contribute upstream to preventing conflict in the first place. I commend the education materials that have been developed in four primary schools across the country, one in my constituency, that help children as young as four to understand this. It is one of the activities that our international alliance has inspired. What has come out of it is that children as young as four grasp very quickly how important it is not to be unkind to people simply because of their beliefs.

Similarly, we have worked with older young people. In October, we had a 24-hour global conference—a virtual conference—which young people across the world could join using open space technology. They came from countries where there was persecution and where they wanted to work on the issue. More than 500 young people from more than 70 countries across six continents joined the conference. If we could inspire young people to be global ambassadors for FORB in the same way as they have been global ambassadors for climate change, we could really see change in the next generation. That is what I call the ultimate upstream prevention work, but most of that work is being done by the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Let us look at how we can ensure there is some real support from the FCDO for that work with young people.

We should be bolder when we work with countries where persecution is high or where there is risk of persecution. We should not underestimate the UK's influence. I see that happening around the world: we underestimate our influence on this and other issues, but Ministers in post need to be equipped and to know about what resources are available to them from across the FCDO. It would be interesting to ask the Minister how many briefings on freedom of religion or belief he has received when travelling to countries where he is responsible for representing the UK. I believe those countries include Nicaragua and Cuba in the Americas,

which rank as 30 and 22 respectively on the world watch list and where FORB concerns have seriously increased in the past year. That should be happening as Ministers travel, whether to countries such as those or to like-minded countries where we can discuss how to work more closely with those countries to promote FORB.

I am not saying that good work has not been done, but I think we could work more strategically. We need to have specific action plans for certain at-risk countries. Just as His Majesty's Government has focused so well on women and girls, we need to strengthen collaborative working with those in the FCDO and elsewhere who are working on this issue.

I went to the conference on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative around a year ago. I was surprised that there was such limited—if any—reference to freedom of religion or belief, despite the double jeopardy of women who are in a religious or belief minority. I spoke about those in Pakistan, but we also see women in Iran and Afghanistan, from religious groups such as the Hazara Shi'a community, being excluded from society. They are women and they are members of a religious minority. We need to look at how we can integrate work on freedom of religion or belief in the FCDO, along with other human rights issues. We need to ensure that the Foreign Secretary's advisory group on human rights meets regularly to ensure that FORB issues are incorporated into wider human rights discussions.

You will be pleased to hear that I do not have too much longer to go in my speech, Ms Vaz, but there are some important points that I want to make to the Minister. It is good that we have been imposing sanctions following the Magnitsky laws, but we need to be more prepared to impose sanctions, specifically against perpetrators of FORB abuses, through the human rights global sanctions regime in order to send a powerful message to those who target people on the basis of their beliefs.

It is welcome that there is a mass atrocity prevention hub at the FCDO, but, as Open Doors rightly says, that needs to recognise the connection between the persecution of Christians or other religious minorities and the risk of mass atrocities. A plan for the work of the hub is needed, but there is no plan. That is one of the Select Committee recommendations that we have to take forward.

It is good, too, that FORB is more on the FCDO's radar, but we have not yet fully worked out how to establish cross-departmental work in the Government, as the Truro review recommended. Nor have we convened "a working group for government departments and civil society actors to engage on the issue."

We need to do that. I know that needs to happen because, over the past year, I have held several roundtables in my office in the Foreign Office, bringing together officials and civil society—15 or 20 of us sat round the table. Time and again, officials have said that they did not know what civil society was bringing to them. We need to narrow that gap. One of my aspirations is to narrow the gap between Whitehall and Westminster; there is only a road between them, but it is a big gap.

We are doing great work with like-minded countries as members of the international alliance of 42 countries, but we need to work harder to engage with countries that do not qualify to join the IRFBA. Several countries have approached me because they are interested in joining—countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and

Indonesia. I have met their representatives, and we need more dialogue with them in order to move the dial on freedom of religion or belief. All those countries appear in the world watch list top 50, but there is a door and an opportunity for dialogue.

It is excellent that, with the United Arab Emirates, we delivered a landmark security decision on tolerance and international peace and security last year, but we need to look at how to take that work forward. I look forward to meeting the UK mission at the UN next week when I am in New York to discuss that issue.

I am grateful that Open Doors referred to the need to address human rights concerns around emerging technology. It is excellent that our Prime Minister has taken a lead on AI, and we need to include in that discussion its challenges for FORB.

I thank the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, for listening to my team's concerns and including the plight of religious minorities in the recent White Paper. When people are discriminated against because of their beliefs—perhaps they cannot get a job, education or healthcare—they will be poorer. That needs to be recognised and addressed, but it has not been to date. It is excellent that religious minorities are mentioned in no fewer than six places in the “International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change” White Paper. We need to make that a reality to help the millions across the world who are affected by integrating FORB into UK aid thinking; the Department for International Development did not do that in the past.

We have a real opportunity to be a global leader if we lead the dialogue on the review of the sustainable development goals up to 2030 and provide evidence that they will succeed only if this issue is addressed and included. Marginalising and disadvantaging religious groups drives poverty, and the SDGs will continue to be compromised if those groups are left behind. Our ability to achieve them will be enhanced if there is a better understanding of the value of religious freedom and pluralism in societies. I commend the work of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development in that regard. I look forward to working further with it and with Ministers to take this issue forward and build on the excellent White Paper.

I thank Open Doors for highlighting the importance of recommendation 6 of the Truro review, on establishing the role of the Prime Minister's special envoy permanently. I thank Foreign Office Ministers for their support for my private Member's Bill, which has its Second Reading tomorrow. It is vital that the envoy role is not dependent on the discretion of any individual Prime Minister. It has been my privilege to serve under three Prime Ministers who have all been very supportive, but the role cannot be dependent on the good will of the Prime Minister in place at the time. If the work done by me and my predecessor envoys, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) and Lord Ahmad, is to continue and be strengthened, the role must continue.

I conclude with the words of Sir Malcom Evans:

“the establishment of the Office of the Special Envoy has been a real driver of, and catalyst for, change. What is needed is for that Office to have legislative grounding to ensure that this continues, that it has a more clearly defined position and that its impact

continues to grow... Making it so will help support the development of detailed, focussed and clearly articulated policies and strategies which will complement take up and lend further substance to what is already now in place. We have come a long way—but there is a long way further to go and it is all too easy to go backwards. Can a bulwark also be a springboard? Hopefully, a legal duty to promote freedom of religion or belief will be both.”

2.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). I congratulate her on leading the debate so well. I can assure you, Ms Vaz, that I will not take as long. That does not take away from the importance of the debate, but I do not want to repeat what has been said. Although we could speak about many countries, I want to focus on two—India and Pakistan.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I am very pleased to be chair of the APPG; it is a privilege and an honour. The importance of freedom of religion or belief is indicated by the fact that some 174 Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords wish to be part of the APPG. That shows the interest and the strength of support in Parliament.

Through the APPG I am fully aware of the relevant issues, and it is crucial that we speak about them and give them the time they deserve. With the launch of this year's world watch list, it is important to bring attention to two specific countries where there is religious persecution—India and Pakistan. As religious nationalism escalates in both countries, the impact of persecution for one's faith or belief is suffered not only by Christians, but by other religious minorities. Pakistani religious minorities face serious persecution, including forced conversions, child marriage, the abuse of blasphemy laws, exclusion from education, limited employment, hate speech and incitement to violence. All these things happen against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in both India and Pakistan. In Punjab alone, 3,914 cases of rape or sexual abuse of ladies and young girls, 664 cases of domestic violence, 174 honour killings and 44 acid attacks were recorded in one year, such is the violence and hatred towards others. I can never understand how anyone could hate anybody with such venom and violence.

Open Doors has ranked Pakistan as No. 7 on its world watch list for the persecution of Christians. Last year, more than 20 churches and 100 homes were attacked in response to believers' being accused of desecrating the Koran, often on trumped-up charges. Blasphemy laws in Pakistan pose a grave and serious threat to Christians and many other religious minorities, because it seems that people do not need to have an evidential base; they just have to make an accusation and the authorities will take action, without any basis of fact at all. All minority religious groups in Pakistan suffer persecution, with no end in sight.

The Sita Ram temple in Ahmadpur Sial served the Hindu community in the region for more than a century, with the architecture revealing a rich cultural heritage and religious beliefs. That beautiful representation of Hinduism in Pakistan has now been converted into a chicken shop. Where is the thought for Hindus and people of other religions? The views of the Hindus who live there have been disregarded entirely. Multiple Hindu sites were demolished or encroached upon in 2023.

[*Jim Shannon*]

In December, CCTV footage from a Hindu temple in the Sindh region showed a radical extremist mob with sticks and batons attacking the temple and beating Hindu worshippers. Such persecution must be addressed and stopped.

The Ahmadis—we in the APPG met some of them at about this time last year—are a major target for prosecutions under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, with specific anti-Ahmadi laws enabling such persecution. This Muslim group is explicitly targeted by the federal laws of Pakistan. What have we done to address such targeting? I am not asking the Minister to do it all himself—that is not right—but what course of action have the UK Government taken? Ahmadi Muslims are denied the right to call themselves Muslims and have been openly declared as “*wajibul qatl*”, or “deserving to be killed”, in the Pakistan media and by religious clerics.

Am I less of a Christian because I am a Baptist? The Minister is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is a member of the Church of Scotland and others in this Chamber are members of the Church of England. Am I less of a Christian than they are? No, I am not—not a bit of it. Why should they be less of a Muslim just because they happen to have slightly different beliefs? They are just as much a Muslim. I find it incredibly hard to try to understand. No state action with Pakistan has been taken to protect the Ahmadiyya. In the past year alone, over 42 Ahmadiyya mosques have been attacked and more than 400 Ahmadiyya graves have been desecrated and destroyed.

Sikhs also suffer grievous religious persecution in Pakistan. With rising violence, many Sikhs have fled Pakistan’s north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to deadly militant attacks and severe religious intolerance. As Members of Parliament, what should we do? What should our Government do? I am always very pleased to see the Minister in his place. I mean it sincerely, and he knows that. I believe that he understands the points I am trying to put forward and agrees with our comments. I know he will be anxious to make clear in his reply what we have in place.

I am also very pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), in her place, fresh from the Holocaust Memorial Day debate in the Chamber. A Member can almost be in two places at once. I commend the shadow Minister sincerely. In her comments in the Chamber she mentioned the Tutsis and what happened in Africa. That was a genocide without a doubt, and she said that. I believe that in some parts of the world we are seeing the same genocide being carried out. The hon. Member for Congleton also mentioned genocide. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is a good and dear friend. She knows that. While we do not always agree on everything we speak on, these issues draw us together. With one voice, we speak on behalf of those who wish for someone to be their voice.

One oppressed Sikh has said:

“We do not want money or jobs from the Government. We just want an immediate end to the targeted killings of our community members and want the Government to compensate us for the demolition of our houses. Pakistani leaders have promised to protect members of religious minorities from militants and Muslim

mobs, which have carried out lynchings and destroyed places of worship. But minority communities say the authorities have not done enough. There is no security for religious minorities in Pakistan.”

Where is our aid money going in Pakistan? I am not saying we should not give any, but let us make it a condition that we see an improvement in human rights and the opportunity for people to worship their God as they wish. What records are being kept to ensure that the money is spent equally on all areas of need in Pakistan? Religious persecution in Pakistan is a necessary area to which aid money should be directed. We should also help to increase access to education, healthcare and opportunities for work.

I want to speak about access to decent job opportunities. On both occasions when we were in Pakistan, I was really aggrieved to see the young Christians; they have the ability, and with a bit of education they could be nurses and doctors, but only certain jobs are allocated for them. Those jobs are usually for menial positions, such as janitors, sweepers and sanitary workers. The job adverts specifically state that the jobs are only available to Christian minorities. Members of the Christian minorities could be nurses, teachers or doctors or do so many other jobs with the right skills, ability and qualifications. They just need opportunity, which they are not seeing yet. That creates an impression among the wider society that Christians are only able to do such work as the three jobs that I mentioned. We met some very influential people in Pakistan and felt that we were making some headway on this issue, but my question to the Minister is: is our aid money going into job development or trade education?

While the situation in Pakistan continues to give rise to extreme concern and we must constantly monitor it, we must also address the growing religious persecution of Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities in India. India is a country of particular concern to Open Doors and the State Department of the United States of America. In the first eight months of 2023 there were more than 525 attacks against Christians in India. Vigilante violence against Muslims and Dalits has been accompanied by a sharp rise in attacks against Christians in India in recent years. It can manage to escape the headlines, because often much happens there and little is said.

The numbers this year are likely to be particularly high given the violence in Manipur state, where hundreds of churches have been destroyed in the last four months. A petition to the Supreme Court puts the figure of places of worship destroyed at 642. That is 642 churches destroyed. Yes, they can destroy the buildings, but they cannot destroy the spirit or the beliefs of the people, who should have the right to go to those places of worship and the necessary protection should be given. Unfortunately, on many occasions it is not, and sometimes the army, the police and others stand by and let it happen. The Supreme Court has ordered restitution for the victims of the violence in Manipur, but what policies and requirements have been put in place to ensure equal funding to the religious minorities that were impacted by the violence? I apologise to the Minister for asking all these questions in such a hurried state, but I am conscious of the time.

In addition, Muslims are being challenged on their ability to prove their Indian citizenship by the National Register of Citizens. A report published in 2018 indicates

that over 15% of the adult population in India are left out or excluded from voting lists, and the percentage is considered to be higher among Muslims. Fifteen per cent of 1.3 billion is 195 million people excluded from voting in India in 2018. If anyone did not have an idea of the vast impact of this issue, those are the figures and the stats, and we can never ignore them. That is a significant number of people to consider as being unable to vote, especially when one realises that currently 15% of the total population of India identify as Muslim. Looking at those numbers, we see that an even greater number of people are excluded because they are Muslims, and that is the case for Christians as well.

We are aware that elections are coming in both Pakistan and India, and we hope and pray that they will be a time of not only safety but opportunity for people to express their mind and vote for whoever they wish, and that the elections will be free from corruption and so on. I believe that the UK has a role to play and must take action to ensure that both countries rightfully include religious minority citizens and their right to vote in any discussions. If the Minister could give us some indication of that, I would be really pleased.

In conclusion, as Members of Parliament it is our duty to ensure freedom of religion or belief for everyone. The APPG, which I am privileged and honoured to chair, speaks up for those with Christian beliefs, other beliefs and no beliefs. We sincerely believe that our God is a God of love. As such, I wish to see everyone have the opportunity to express themselves and their religious views in the way that they wish, and I believe that others in this House do as well. Such violations in India and Pakistan must be brought to the forefront and efficiently addressed.

As I have done on many occasions, I call upon the Minister, who is a dear friend to us all, to ensure that persecution and abuses are addressed. We in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland must play our role in ensuring that we support other nations across the globe. That is how we can influence and assist those in Government and positions of authority—the police, army and so on—to do better. Here in this place we have again been given the opportunity to be a voice for the voiceless—people in this world whom we may never meet. We today have been their voice and it is wonderful to have that opportunity, privilege and honour. They are people we may never meet, but we will undoubtedly meet them in the next world.

2.28 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this annual debate on the world watch list that ranks the persecution of Christians around the world, and to have attended the launch of the 2024 report last week. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this debate and for all the work that she and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have done in this area for such a long time.

Persecuting people for their faith is completely unacceptable. As we have heard, nations that persecute people for their faith also have very poor human rights records across the board. This year, North Korea retains its No. 1 position in that grotesque league table as the worst country in the world for the persecution of its Christians, of which there are around 400,000. Those

who are discovered to be Christian under that barbaric regime effectively face a death sentence: either they are deported to labour camps to be worked to death or they are shot on the spot, a fate shared by their whole family.

Violence against Christians has intensified in sub-Saharan Africa as the region faces increasing instability. During the 2024 reporting period, across 18 of the countries in that region, 4,606 Christians were killed because of their faith. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimate that 16.2 million Christians became forcibly displaced persons at the end of 2022.

Article 18 of the UN declaration of human rights states:

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

That article is almost identical to article 9 of the European convention on human rights. It will be no surprise to the Minister that we in the SNP are very keen for the UK Government to reaffirm their commitment to human rights, and to remain part of the European Court of Human Rights as part of that commitment. It is important that we do not politicise human rights in any part of the world, including the UK. Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the wonderful work of Open Doors, which does so much to support Christians who are persecuted for their faith around the world.

After North Korea, the worst offenders for the persecution of Christians are Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Syria and Saudi Arabia—nations that do not believe that their populations should be able to worship their god, however they perceive their god, or to practise their Christian faith. As we have heard, that means that Christians in those nations face violence, “elimination”—not my word—arrest, harassment, attacks on and the destruction of their places of worship, as the hon. Member for Strangford outlined, and ultimately death.

The UK and all democratic nations must be unequivocal. The freedom to worship is a fundamental human right. We cannot tiptoe around so-called cultural, religious or other sensitivities. All nations that believe in and value freedom must stand up for it. That is our duty.

The UK has close relationships with some of the nations that I have mentioned as the worst offenders and those that are the most repressive in their persecution of Christians. Those close relationships must be re-examined in light of that persecution. If any nation turns a blind eye, it becomes complicit by default.

Every year I attend the Open Doors event in Parliament, and every year I am both moved and horrified by the first-hand accounts of those who come to Westminster to share with us the level of persecution that they, their families and their communities have suffered. Those accounts are worth hearing, and they are very disturbing. They demand not just that we listen, but that we act.

The action we take should have an impact on our dealings with the worst-offending states. One of the worst offenders is India, yet the UK Government are writing a blank cheque to that nation when they should be holding it to account for its appalling human rights record. For Christians in the countries named on the world watch list, there is an environment of intolerance, hatred, fear, intimidation, discrimination and violence.

[Patricia Gibson]

The worst part is that the persecution of Christians is not diminishing. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that it is growing: 365 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution. That is one in every seven Christians worldwide. In the top 50 countries on the Open Doors world watch list, 317 million Christians face high, very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination.

For peace-loving and rights-respecting democracies, that demands a response—a practical response. Whatever form it takes—a refusal to trade with states that are guilty of such crimes, a united diplomatic response across the west to elicit change, or diplomatic isolation for the offending nations—more pressure has to be applied. Whatever approaches western democracies have already taken to address the matter have not brought about the necessary change. The problem is getting worse, the repression is getting worse and the violence is getting worse. Other approaches should be considered. We cannot pass by on the other side.

Like everyone else here, I am keen to hear what new approaches the Minister believes the UK and other western democracies could take to make it clear, or clearer, to these barbaric and repressive regimes that human rights must be respected for all peoples. To quote one of the people who attended the world watch list event in Parliament:

“Why should practising one’s faith come at such a high and unjust cost?”

2.36 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I believe that this is the very first time I have served under your chairship, Ms Vaz; I am delighted to do so, and I am sure it will not be the last.

My thanks, as ever, go to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing the debate. She is a redoubtable, articulate and knowledgeable advocate for those who experience religious persecution, as is the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am always delighted to be asked to be on the Labour party Front Bench for one of the hon. Members’ debates.

I am also delighted to have the opportunity to address the important issue of religious persecution around the world. I know that each of us wants to see our foreign policy working hard to strengthen protections for freedom of belief. Given my role, I hope that I will be forgiven for focusing on Africa, although nearer to the end of my remarks I will mention a number of other areas of the world.

I want to talk about Nigeria, where, as we know, there is significant continuing violence across the country. Some of that violence, sadly, is religiously motivated, and none of us could possibly forget the utterly horrific attack on St Francis Xavier Catholic church in June 2022. As we know, both Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province continue to kill innocent people. In October last year, suspected jihadists killed 37 villagers in the Geidam area of Yobe state. Days later, on 5 November, an armed group attacked a Muslim celebration in the Musawa area of Katsina state, killing at least 20 people and abducting others. The following day, in Borno, Boko Haram combatants killed at least 15 farmers in the Mafa area.

We have to recognise that much of the violence in Nigeria is not religiously motivated and that all communities are affected. Even so, the impact of all the violence clearly worsens religious and ethnic tensions. For example, in Plateau state, intercommunal violence between farmers and herders continues and attacks on Christmas eve by suspected armed herders killed almost 200 people. While herders are mostly Fulani Muslims and farming communities are often non-Fulani Christians, I believe it is vital that we look at the root causes of the violence.

Climate change is eating away at arable land, making conflict over resources near-inevitable. To reduce religious tensions, which is something we all want, we need a holistic approach. We need to work to mitigate the economic and climate-linked harms that can so easily deepen divisions and spark conflagrations of intercommunal violence. There are actions that we can take within our partnership with the Government of Nigeria to support that holistic approach. While I am talking about Nigeria, we are all aware that Mubarak Bala, the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, is still in prison. It has been almost two years since he was sentenced to 24 years’ imprisonment for allegedly blasphemous Facebook posts. That is something that we should continually raise with our Nigerian partners.

However, there are also positive stories that I think we can learn from. Ahead of the 2023 general elections, Muslim leaders and traditional rulers in Nigeria’s Kaduna state joined worshippers at an evangelical church to show solidarity and commitment to co-existence and harmony. I know that all friends on both sides of the Chamber will agree that we do not hear enough about the steps that religious community leaders take to build peaceful co-existence. We need to look how we can help to support that work, because it is a way we can move forward together. Can the Minister tell me what steps are being taken to work with civil society organisations on this interfaith and intercommunal work that reduces tension and provides narratives against hate?

Another way we can support communities at risk of persecution is by pushing for accountability. With that in mind, I would like to talk about Sudan. As we know, appalling, widespread and apparently systematic atrocities have been taking place in Sudan. As I noted in a debate yesterday, the recent report of the UN panel of experts estimates that as many as 15,000 people were killed in the city of El Geneina alone. Specific evidence continues to emerge of targeted massacres and sexual violence against the Masalit people in El Geneina and elsewhere in Darfur on the basis of their ethnicity. The conflict in Sudan is extremely complex. It is not primarily about religion, but all Sudanese communities have been affected. There can be little doubt that the rapid escalation in violence and the proliferation of weapons to militias have created significant additional risks to religious minority communities.

Sadly, there has been relatively little coverage of the plight of Christians and other minority communities in Sudan during the present horrifying conflict. Just two weeks ago, on 12 January, yet another church was burned in Sudan, continuing the pattern that we discussed last February. Following the capture of Wad Madani by the Rapid Support Forces faction, the Gezira state evangelical church was set on fire. I understand that it was the largest church in the state and one of the oldest in Sudan as a whole. Thankfully, the building has been

only partially destroyed. However, we have to recognise the pattern of abuses of Sudanese religious minorities by those with power who can act with impunity. It is clear that the pattern will continue unless we see peace, justice and accountable civilian government in Sudan.

Is the Minister confident that the Government have the capacity to identify and map those responsible for these targeted attacks? I genuinely believe that there is more that we can do to work towards justice and accountability. To give just one example, surely far more work is needed to stop the funnelling of gold out of Sudan. That gold fuels the atrocities. As I have mentioned the issue many times over recent months, I will leave it there for now, but I think it is something we have to look at. How is this conflict being funded?

Today's debate is about persecution globally, so I am sorry not to be able to address as much of the world as I would like in my 10 minutes. Hon. Members have raised heartbreaking cases from many areas of the world where we know that diverse religious groups are targeted for persecution, including in China, as the hon. Member for Congleton mentioned, in North Korea, in Iran, in Pakistan, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, in Afghanistan and in Syria. However, I want to mention the plight of many minority communities, including Christians and Muslims, in India.

India is a country with a rich, diverse history, of which every Indian should rightly be proud. But last summer during a Hindu procession in the Nuh district of Haryana state, communal violence broke out. Authorities in India then retaliated against Muslim communities. Hundreds of properties owned by Muslims were demolished and scores of Muslim boys and men were detained. It is reported that Sarfu, a 65-year-old mechanic who had been running his small business from a tin shed for 30 years, came home to find his shed and all his tools reduced to scrap: imagine—struggling to make a living and working hard all your life, to have your work destroyed in a few minutes all because of your faith.

The targeting of minority groups can form part of a very disturbing pattern, which we know can only lead to spiralling misery and escalating violence. As we know, state action against identifiable groups often results in communities believing they can act with impunity and take whatever action against others that they individually see fit.

I want to end my contribution by speaking about the widespread and continuing persecution in Eritrea. The Eritrean Government continue to detain those who practise faiths not recognised by the state. One Pentecostal church leader died in detention last April following a year of imprisonment; I will not name him because of concerns about the risk of reprisals against his family, but I understand he was denied the burial chosen by his relatives. I cannot begin to imagine the pain that his family experienced as a result of that final insult.

Many others continue to languish in prison, and it is a source of deep frustration to many of us that there is so little that we can do to support them. Let's face it: there are clear links between closed societies, poor governance and insecurity, and many forms of religious persecution. A key goal of our foreign and development policies must be to promote good governance, a free press and a strong civil society, but we have to recognise that, in reality, much of our development co-operation and wider partnerships also have a role to play.

We can support peace-building efforts more consistently if we partner with Governments and civil society organisations in a smart, joined-up and strategic way. The issue is far wider than sanctions and support for democracy. In supporting Governments to provide even the most basic services to their most marginalised communities, we can reduce the risk of religious persecution and extremism.

I welcome the fact that freedom of religion or belief was mentioned several times in the international development White Paper, but does the Minister think that enough is being done, as part of the UK's atrocity prevention strategy, to address the root causes of religious tensions? Although our influence is limited, we have the power to support strong protections for freedom of religion or belief in partnership with our friends around the world. I know we all agree that it would be a terrible waste if we squandered that opportunity.

2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I normally have the joy of being on the receiving end of your powerful speeches, so it is good that you are here to keep order—although you have not had to work particularly hard in this debate, because we have been probably the most unanimously agreed body I have ever heard in Parliament. We had a pretty good debate yesterday on human rights, too, but it is important to highlight that this one has really brought all sides of the House, and each of the nations, together.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—my well-respected neighbour and dear friend—on securing the debate. I pay huge tribute to her, to echo comments from across the Chamber, for the work that she has undertaken as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, which she has been doing for over three years now—thank you. I am also grateful to her for her moving speech.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his work as the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which takes him to many parts of the world—he is a strong voice. I know that it is not always customary to pay tribute to people who have not even made a contribution to the debate, but I also recognise the presence of the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms)—we have the Members for both East Ham and West Ham in the Chamber today—for his interest in the subject over many years. It is important that he is here, along with everyone else, to highlight the importance of this area. It is obvious from the debate that, through the work of the APPG and Members present, there is a lasting and mutual commitment across the House to protect freedom of religion or belief. The Government, and my noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who has responsibility for freedom of religion or belief and human rights in the FCDO, share that commitment.

Today, the importance of championing freedom of religion or belief is laid bare in the alarming facts and figures regarding Christian persecution described in the Open Doors world watch list for 2024, which was launched last week. I was able to attend part of that reception. The presentations were incredibly clear, worrying and often harrowing. We are clear that no one should

[David Rutley]

be persecuted, abused or intimidated because of their religion or belief. The Government have long been committed to promoting and protecting freedom of religion for all, but sadly, as the world watch list sets out, many Christians are targeted daily purely for their faith, despite the protections of international law. History has shown us that where freedom of religion or belief is under threat, other human rights are also at risk. We must continue to call out human rights violations and abuses.

Sadly, many of the concerning trends and statistics set out in the world watch list are familiar. The report identifies that one in seven Christians are persecuted worldwide. It is in the most oppressive societies that Christians face the harshest persecution. This year, Open Doors again ranked the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as the place where Christians face the most persecution for their faith. As we have heard today, it is not just the facts and figures that are shocking; it is the personal stories of those who are suffering at the hands of oppressive regimes. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton highlighted concerns about that country, as did the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) in her moving speech.

According to that report, attacks on places of worship around the world were up sixfold in 2023 and nearly 5,000 Christians were murdered that year. The need for collective action and unwavering commitment from the international community to protect freedom of religion or belief for all remains imperative. That is why FORB remains a human rights priority for the United Kingdom.

The UK is deeply concerned about the scale and severity of the violations of FORB, whatever the faith or belief. Religious intolerance and persecution, whether targeted at Christians, Muslims, Jews or Buddhists, as the hon. Member for Strangford highlighted, are often at the heart of foreign and development policy challenges. No one should be excluded because of their religion, belief or conscience. Discrimination not only damages societies, but holds back economies by reducing opportunities for all.

Countries cannot fully develop while they oppress members of religious or belief minorities. Communities are stronger when they are fully inclusive—a point that is particularly poignant as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day. My mother was raised in occupied Denmark, and she taught me at a very early age the importance of never forgetting the horrors of the holocaust and the bravery of those who fought against it.

We demonstrated the depth of our commitment to FORB in July 2022 by hosting the international ministerial conference in London, bringing together 800 faith and belief leaders, human rights activists and 100 Government delegations to agree action to promote and protect those fundamental rights. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad, who as I said is Minister for human rights, announced new UK funding to support FORB defenders, including those persecuted because of their activism, as well as funding and developing expertise for countries prepared to make legislative changes to protect FORB.

As a result of the conference, 47 Governments, international organisations and other entities made pledges to take action in support of FORB. I was able to attend one of the regional meetings linked to the conference,

hosted in Manchester by my faith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton spoke. It was great to see people coming together in common cause, not just here in this House, but across the country, speaking to each other and learning from each other, as we should.

Since the conference, we have built on that momentum in a number of ways. First, we have been working through international bodies to strengthen coalitions of support and to protect freedom of religion or belief for all within the multilateral framework. Secondly, we have been using the strength of our global diplomatic network to encourage states to uphold their human rights and FORB obligations. Thirdly, we have been working to embed FORB considerations across the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

My hon. Friend, who I have to say was quite forceful in some of her asks—that is a common theme in the way she works, and quite rightly too—asked important questions around sanctions. I want to respond to her and to the House to say that we use our global human rights sanctions regime as a lever to hold to account those involved in serious human rights violations or abuses around the world, including those carried out against individuals on the basis of their religion or belief. That includes the sanctioning in December 2022—in the wave of sanctions that we put in place, which we talked about in yesterday's debate—of Mian Abdul Haq, a cleric responsible for the forced conversions of girls and women in Pakistan.

My hon. Friend also talked about SDGs. The UK is firmly committed to achieving those SDGs, as affirmed in the international development strategy. It is vital that the SDGs get back on track, and to achieve that the world must work in partnership to recommit to reform, and to accelerate our work. We are pleased that our commitment to FORB was included in our international development White Paper, published in November, which has been noticed and noted in this debate already. She also asked about mandatory training on FORB for diplomats; they are well briefed on the matter, but I will take that point away and determine how we can do more on it.

It is also right, in the time available, to highlight the multilateral action we are taking through the UN, the G7 and other multilateral fora. We regularly raise situations of concern at the UN Human Rights Council and we hold states accountable—that is another important word that has come out of this debate—on their FORB commitments and obligations through our engagement with the UN's universal periodic review. For example, the UK was active in its participation in Nigeria's UPR, published yesterday, and we raised a number of human rights issues, including FORB. At the UN Security Council in June 2023, we led a resolution with the UAE on tolerance, peace and security. That resolution directly addresses for the first time the persecution of religious minorities and other minority groups in conflict settings, which again has been noted in the debate.

Our collective action does bear fruit. Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton concluded her second consecutive term as the chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. That network of 42 countries, committed to protecting and promoting FORB for all, has published statements on the FORB situation in numerous countries, including Nigeria and

Myanmar. As well as statements on specified persecuted religious minorities, with one on Christians published in May 2023, the IRFBA has also conducted advocacy campaigns on individual prisoners of conscience. We have seen several released from prison, no doubt due in part to the work of the alliance. We achieve that success by working together, and I am grateful for the convening role played by my hon. Friend—the role that she enjoys and amplifies so well. She regularly meets with civil society groups and faith leaders, and has been chairing a series of roundtables to bring civil society representatives together with FCDO officials to discuss the FORB situation in individual countries.

Indeed, at the bilateral level, the Minister for human rights, as well as myself, other ministerial colleagues and FCDO officials, do not shy away from challenging those who we believe are not meeting their obligations, both publicly and in private. The UK continues to raise FORB and ongoing insecurity on a regular basis with the Nigerian Government, a point well made by the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown)—she knows more about the situation in Africa than I do, and I am grateful for the comments she made. For example, the high commissioner recently raised reports of serious violence in Plateau state with the Nigerian national security adviser.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised concerns about the situation in Nicaragua. We welcome the release of Bishop Álvarez and 18 other clergy from unjust detention in Nicaragua, but we absolutely condemn their expulsion from the country, which is something I tweeted about. We know that human rights need to be respected fully, in the round. In my role as Minister for the Americas and the Caribbean, I have been briefed on the situations in Cuba and Nicaragua, and I can assure my hon. Friend that I am committed to making FORB an even greater priority in my work over the months ahead.

The British commission in Islamabad continues to engage with senior Government officials and civil society in Pakistan on the need to ensure the safety of the Christian community at this troubling time, a point that was well made by my friend the hon. Member for Strangford. Representatives from the British high commission in Islamabad visited the Christian community in Jaranwala in December to discuss ongoing support for that community. The hon. Member raised an important point about education; in Pakistan's universal periodic review in January, the UK formally recommended that Pakistan ensure that school textbooks are inclusive of all religions, and that religious minorities can access suitable alternatives to compulsory Koranic studies.

The hon. Member for Strangford also raised points about India. The British high commission in New Delhi and our deputy high commissions across India regularly meet with religious representatives and official figures. The high commissioner has visited a number of diverse places of worship in India, meeting faith leaders there—including Christian communities, which is important. The Government also show our support to diverse faith communities through hosting iftars to celebrate the important contribution that Indian Muslims and other communities have made in Indian society.

Sudan was also raised by the hon. Member for West Ham. The UK continues to fund and support the office of high commissioner for human rights in Sudan, the UN body

that provides a crucial role in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. Since 2022, we have provided around £1 million in funding for that office.

We continue to ensure that the changes we made following the Bishop of Truro's review of the work the Department has done on FORB are embedded, and we look for opportunities to ensure that FORB is central to our wider human rights work. In that regard, I am pleased to say that our work on FORB is included in the international development White Paper, as I said. As in past years, we marked Red Wednesday by lighting up the UK-based FCDO buildings in red on 22 November 2023 to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians.

I note the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton on international freedom of religion or belief, which seeks to make the role of special envoy for FORB statutory. I know that is something she feels strongly about, and I also know the Minister for Development and Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), looks forward to joining the debate on the Bill tomorrow. The Government's position will be confirmed on Second Reading, as is the usual procedure.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank all those who work tirelessly defending freedom of religion or belief. We have talked about the special envoy and the chair of the APPG, and we all talked about the important work of Open Doors. I would also like to pay tribute to those who work at the local level in all our constituencies to encourage greater interfaith understanding and activity.

In my constituency, I have to shout out the important work of Hope in North East Cheshire and legends, such as Pip Mosscrop, who spend their lives bringing people together from all faiths. They put into practice what we all know: that we should celebrate different beliefs, learn from each other and work in common cause to tackle the challenges of this world. Even if we have different perspectives, that is the antidote to the intolerance and persecution that concern all of us. I speak in tribute to not just that particular organisation, but the many across the country. We stand in awe of that work.

Let me end by saying that the issues outlined in the Open Doors world watch list are of the highest importance to the Government. We continue to work through all available methods to call out persecution and defend the right of freedom of religion for all, just as hon. Members across this Chamber have said today.

3.7 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his response and, indeed, all colleagues who have contributed to the debate. We are all very much of one heart and mind that this important issue is one that needs to continue to be moved forward. It is in that vein that I say to the Minister that, yes, I am forceful in my role, but I make no apology for it—millions are suffering across the world.

There was almost complete unanimity but not quite. I want to come back on the position of the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) for the Opposition. I very much appreciate her presence in these debates and she contributes thoughtfully, but I want to quote some of the report from Open Doors on Nigeria and

[*Fiona Bruce*]

west Africa, because we have a difference on the level to which religious differences are a motivating factor in some of the violence there.

The report says,

“ISWAP (Islamic State West African Province)”

—the clue is in the title to an extent—

“continues to menace Nigeria’s north-east and many other parts of the country.”

According to Open Doors research:

“A decentralized armed group with ethnic ties to the pastoralist Fulani people, the Fulani Ethnic Militia”—

a separate group—

“attack predominantly Christian villages, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands.”

The report quotes the July 2023 all-party parliamentary group on FORB report, “Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? Three years On”. Based on evidence from a wide range of organisations, it concluded that FORB violations had “worsened” in the intervening years, with religious identity remaining “the key motivator” in the violence and Christian groups suffering “disproportionately”. It pointed to the fact that while a range of other factors are contributing to violence in Nigeria, from poverty to existing ethnic tensions, the flow of weapons and insecure

borders, contributors to the report highlighted how the religious dimension was often obscured or played down by appeal to those other factors. I want to put that on the record.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Could I just say to the hon. Lady that wind-ups are two minutes?

Fiona Bruce: I will conclude.

I therefore believe that with regard to the recent universal periodic review on Nigeria, while it was good that the UK’s recommendations highlighted blasphemy and the need for accountability for mob killings in Nigeria, it is regrettable that the UK did not mention increasing attacks on religious minorities, or freedom of religion or belief.

I close with a quote from Henrietta Blyth at the Open Doors launch of this year’s world watch list. She said:

“Never has it been more important for those of us who are free to worship as we wish to wake up to what is happening to our Christian family and those of other faiths around the world”

and to speak out.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024.

3.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 25 January 2024

TREASURY

HM Treasury and Bank of England Consultation Response

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami):

The Government have today laid the response to the Bank of England and HM Treasury's consultation paper, "The digital pound: a new form of money for households and businesses?"—(CP 970).

The Bank of England and HM Treasury have been exploring the concept of a UK retail central bank digital currency (CBDC), or "digital pound", issued by the Bank of England. A digital pound would be a new form of digital money for use by households and businesses for their everyday payment needs, and a complement to physical cash and other means of payment. However, it is important to stress that no decision has yet been made to build or issue a digital pound, either for corporates or for the public.

Alongside cash, a digital pound would help to ensure that central bank money remains widely available and useful in an ever more digital economy, continuing to support UK monetary and financial stability. It would also provide a public platform for private sector innovation, promoting further competition, efficiency and choice in payments. Many other countries are also exploring the issuance of CBDCs.

No decision has yet been made to build or issue a digital pound, but given changes in money and payments, as well as developments in other countries, we believe there is merit in further preparatory work. This work will allow us to build the necessary skills and put in place the technical capability to introduce a digital pound in a timely manner, were the decision made to do so in the future.

The consultation paper sought feedback from the public on a set of design proposals for the digital pound. The Government and the Bank of England are grateful to everyone who provided their feedback, which will be carefully considered during the ongoing design phase. Respondents from a range of industries and organisations were supportive of the design proposition set out in the consultation paper, while many other respondents raised concerns about the implications of a digital pound for access to cash, users' privacy, and control of their money. The Government and the Bank of England recognise the critical importance of building the public's trust in a digital pound.

The consultation response sets out commitments that the Government and the Bank of England are making in response to the feedback received in the consultation, including that primary legislation would be introduced before any launch of a digital pound. Today, the Government and the Bank of England are committing that this legislation would include measures to guarantee users' privacy and control over how to spend their money. The response also reiterates the Government and the Bank of England's commitment to protect access to cash. The digital pound, issued by the Bank of England, would be a complement to cash and not a replacement for it.

This consultation response sets out the steps we are taking to reinforce public trust in the design of a digital pound before any decision is made:

Before any launch of a digital pound, the Government have committed to introducing primary legislation. This means that the digital pound would only be introduced once Parliament had passed the relevant legislation. A further consultation exercise would be held prior to the introduction of legislation.

Privacy, and preventing Government programmability, would be a core design feature of the digital pound issued by the Bank of England.

The Government and the Bank of England would not access users' personal data, and legislation introduced by the Government for a digital pound would guarantee users' privacy. Today, the Bank of England is committing to exploring technological options that would prevent the Bank from accessing any personal data through the Bank's core infrastructure.

The Government and the Bank of England would not program a digital pound, and legislation introduced by the Government for a digital pound would guarantee this.

The Government have already legislated to safeguard access to cash, ensuring that it would remain available even if a digital pound was introduced.

The feedback to date will help to inform our work on the design of the digital pound. We will continue to engage with parliamentarians, the private sector, civil society, academia and the public to develop our proposals for a digital pound, so that we are prepared, should a decision to build a digital pound be taken in the future.

The document is published online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-digital-pound-a-new-form-of-money-for-households-and-businesses>.

Copies of the document are also available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS210]

Public Service Pension Scheme Indexation and Revaluation 2024

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott):

Public service pensions continue to be among the very best available.

Legislation governing public service pensions in payment requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 08 April 2024 by 6.7%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2023, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro-rata increase.

Separately, in the career average revalued earnings public service pension schemes introduced in 2014 and 2015, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires HMT to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2023. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 6.7% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy year-on-year change in average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2023. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 7.7% for the earnings element of revaluation.

The effective date of revaluation listed in the order is 1 April 2024, but some schemes have chosen to move their effective revaluation date to 6 April 2024 in order to manage interactions with the annual tax allowance.

<i>Scheme</i>	<i>Police</i>	<i>Fire-fighters</i>	<i>Civil Service</i>	<i>NHS</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>LGPS</i>	<i>Armed Forces</i>	<i>Judicial</i>
Revaluation for active member	7.95%	7.7%	6.7%	8.2%	8.3%	6.7%	7.7%	6.7%

[HCWS211]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Student Support

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): I am announcing details of student fees and support arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2024-25 academic year starting on 1 August 2024, together with further help to address cost of living pressures in 2023-24. Also, I am confirming that eligibility for student finance is being extended to children granted indefinite leave to remain where their parent has been granted ILR as a victim of domestic abuse or as a bereaved partner.

The Government recognise the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year and that are impacting students. We have already made £276 million of student premium and mental health funding available for the 2023-24 academic year to support successful outcomes for students, including disadvantaged students.

We are now making a further £10 million of one-off support available to support student mental health and hardship funding. This funding will complement the help that universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

In addition, we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds of additional funding over the three-year period from 2022-23 to 2024-25 to support high-quality teaching and facilities, including in science and engineering, subjects that support the NHS, and degree apprenticeships. This includes the largest increase in Government funding for the HE sector to support students and teaching in more than a decade.

I can confirm today that maximum tuition fees for undergraduate students for the 2024-25 academic year in England will be maintained at the levels that apply in the 2023-24 academic year. This is the seventh year in succession that fees have been frozen. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees for a standard full-time course will remain at £9,250 for the 2024-25 academic year, to deliver better value for students and to keep the cost of higher education down.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:

Thanks to the progress we have made on the Prime Minister's five priorities, inflation has more than halved. Maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by forecast inflation, 2.5%, in 2024-25. The same increase will apply to the maximum disabled students' allowance for students with disabilities undertaking full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in 2024-25. Maximum grants for students with child or adult dependants who are attending full-time undergraduate courses will also increase by 2.5% in 2024-25.

We are also increasing support for students undertaking postgraduate courses in 2024-25. Maximum loans for students starting master's degree and doctoral degree courses from 1 August 2024 onwards will be increased by 2.5% in 2024-25. The same increase will apply to the maximum disabled students' allowance for postgraduate students with disabilities in 2024-25.

The 2.5% increase follows standard procedure to base annual increases in support on forecasted inflation. We have continued to increase maximum loans and grants for living costs each year, with the most support for students from the lowest income families. Decisions on student finance have had to be taken to ensure that the system remains financially sustainable and the costs of higher education are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.

I am also announcing today a number of other changes to eligibility rules for student support and home fee status that will benefit certain vulnerable groups of students.

Students who have been granted indefinite leave to enter as a victim of domestic abuse, and their children who are granted ILE, will also qualify for student support and home fee status.

I am also confirming today that home fee status and tuition fee support is being extended to British citizens born in the Chagos islands, and their direct descendants who are also British citizens.

In addition, students who gain settled status part way through their course will qualify for student support and home fee status for the remainder of their course.

Looking forward to the 2025-26 academic year, the new lifelong learning entitlement will create a single funding system to help students to pay for college or university courses, and train, retrain and upskill flexibly over their working lives. In tandem, the Government

will continue to recognise the importance of loans for living costs and targeted grants to support access and participation in higher education.

That is why, under the LLE, the Government will extend the scope of loans for living costs, and grants for students with adult and child dependants, making this support available for all designated full-time and part-time courses and modules that require in-person attendance. This will ensure that people will be able to develop new skills and gain new qualifications at a time that is right for them.

Further details of the student support package for 2024-25 are set out in the document available as an online attachment: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-01-25/HCWS209>.

I am today laying regulations implementing changes to student finance support for undergraduates and post-graduates for 2024-25. These regulations will be subject to parliamentary procedure.

[HCWS209]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Correction to Written Parliamentary Question 182223

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): On 2 May 2023, the FCDO responded to WPQ 182223 in relation to how much the FCDO spent on staff training related to diversity and inclusion in 2022.

The figure provided—£25,412.96—was inaccurate and an error. The figure was incorrectly provided as that amount had been charged to the account code relating to training in the team that was responsible for the diversity and inclusion work in 2022. Recent work has identified that none of the transactions put to this account code during this time period were actually diversity and inclusion training, and instead related to the running costs of that team, such as conference attendance.

The FCDO does not have a centrally organised diversity and inclusion training offer; instead, we use courses provided via Civil Service Learning.

Directorates and posts have devolved training budgets, which could have been used on training needs, but information is not collected centrally on whether this spend relates to equality and diversity training.

The FCDO has contributed to the Cabinet Office-led civil service equality, diversity and inclusion expenditure review, which is assessing current spending on EDI activity across the civil service to ensure that spend is providing a return on investment and that activity is being carried out in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

I am apologising for this error and clarifying the position in relation to diversity and inclusion training spend in 2022. We have learned from this situation. There has been a change in budget managers in that team and new financial procedures have been put in place to ensure greater accuracy. The Department continues to take its responsibility for parliamentary accountability very seriously.

[HCWS208]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Improving Police Standards and Culture

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

Last year, on 1 March, I issued a written ministerial statement (HCWS590) setting out actions being undertaken by the Home Office and partners to improve police standards and culture. This statement provides an update on that work.

The vast majority of police officers and staff perform their vital duties with professionalism, skill and courage. We are fortunate to have so many brave people dedicated to protecting us. However, we must not be complacent, we know that confidence and trust in the police must never be taken for granted.

That is why the Government asked the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) to undertake a “datawashing” exercise to ensure that all officers and staff employed within policing across the country were checked against the police national database (PND) for any new intelligence which forces were previously unaware of.

This week—22 January—the NPCC published the outcomes of this work, which represented the largest single integrity screening project undertaken in any national workforce. It is a key step to identify information and intelligence around our workforce and take appropriate action to remove those not fit to work in policing.

Checks were made against 307,452 officers and staff in total. In well over 99% of cases, no new adverse information was identified. Of the 461 cases that were referred to a decision-making process, 97 required no further action. Criminal investigations were triggered in nine cases, 88 cases led to disciplinary investigations, 139 others led to a vetting review while 128 cases led to management advice.

The Government have committed to provide further funding to the NPCC to develop an automated and continuous vetting system, enabling the identification of new information on officers and staff to be sent directly, at pace, to the force concerned. The NPCC will continue to work closely with the Home Office to achieve this.

This month will also see the closure of the National Police Chiefs’ Council’s programme to co-ordinate and monitor the police service’s progress against recommendations made by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in their November 2022 report into vetting, misconduct and misogyny. This follows evidence being submitted to HMICFRS on successful delivery of almost all of the 28 recommendations and five areas for improvement.

This work has driven significant improvements in force vetting processes and is underpinned by the new statutory code of practice for vetting, strengthened by the College of Policing at the Home Office’s request and published in July last year. The revised code makes clear the expectation on chief officers to ensure vetting standards are maintained within their force.

The vetting code of practice is supported by the college’s authorised professional practice guidance, or APP. The APP is regularly updated, and the college has now published a revised vetting APP, currently out for consultation, which will further promote national consistency and the highest standards in police vetting.

To further support the vetting code of practice, the Government are legislating to introduce a statutory requirement for officers to hold and maintain vetting clearance. Individuals who are unable to hold vetting clearance should face dismissal proceedings. Our new regulations will provide a stronger, clearer and more defined process to assist forces.

This is included, and will be delivered, as part of a wider package of reforms, announced as part of the Government's review of the police dismissals process, to strengthen the systems that deal with police misconduct and performance. These include:

Enabling senior officers to chair misconduct hearings, giving them a greater role in decisions relating to the integrity of their workforce

Creating a presumption of dismissal where gross misconduct is proven; and

Prescribing that conviction of certain criminal offences automatically amounting to gross misconduct.

This package of measures is designed to improve not only standards, but efficiency and timeliness as well. The first tranche of these reforms is to be in place this spring.

It is imperative for public confidence in the police that we have assurance that professional standards departments are tackling misconduct and implementing these reforms. To ensure more rigorous scrutiny, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services has been developing a new inspection methodology looking at force professional standards departments. This will join the existing vetting and counter-corruption inspection arrangements to form a new integrity programme, which is due to commence in the new financial year.

Adhering to professional standards is just part of ensuring that those who work in policing deliver a service that is fair, ethical and can be trusted to make decisions in the interest of keeping people safe. Yesterday, the College of Policing launched the new code of ethics. This provides everyone in policing with clear principles and practical guidance for officers on making ethical decisions as they undertake their daily duties. This will complement provisions in the Criminal Justice Bill that require the college to set out a duty of candour in statutory guidance for chief constables, ensuring a culture of transparency and accountability.

The Government and our policing partners have made significant progress in delivering on our commitments to help rebuild confidence and trust in policing, and will continue to drive this work forward. This is what the public expect and the decent, hardworking majority of officers deserve. I will provide the House with further updates in due course.

[HCWS212]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Levelling Up

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): In 2019, we set out the Government's commitment to level up and unite the country, making it our guiding mission to spread opportunity around the United Kingdom. The Levelling Up White Paper set out a broad prospectus on the long-term steps we would take to deliver on this ambition. On 26 October 2023, the Levelling-up and

Regeneration Act 2023 received Royal Assent. To cement the Government's commitment to levelling up, and meet the requirements of the Act, I am laying before each House a statement of levelling-up missions, setting out the Government's levelling-up missions and the metrics against which we will measure them.

As has always been our intention, this first statement reaffirms the 12 long-term and ambitious missions set out in the Levelling Up White Paper. In the statement, we detail the definitions and metrics we will use to assess the two missions that were exploratory in the White Paper: wellbeing and pride in place. As this is the first time we have set out this detail, we have also published an accompanying narrative, setting out how we developed the definitions and metrics for the missions and the rationale behind some of the decisions we have taken during the exploratory phase.

In making our commitment to level up and unite the country across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we set ourselves deliberately stretching missions designed to drive all levels of government, the private sector and civil society to think innovatively about how to address these challenges. Since then we have continued to push new and innovative ways to transform communities and respond to the issues that people care most about—whether that is by transferring powers away from Whitehall and investing in local growth and pride through the levelling-up fund and the community ownership fund, or through our investment in cities through investment zones and innovation accelerators that are driving nationwide economic growth.

Our progress

Cross-Government efforts to deliver levelling up mean that we have made significant progress—but there is more to do. Starting with transport, more than £36 billion previously earmarked for extending High Speed 2 will now be reinvested in transport improvements that will benefit far more people, in far more places, far more quickly. This will benefit towns, cities and rural areas through improvements to roads, rail, trams and buses. Every penny committed to the northern leg will go to the north and every penny committed to the midlands leg to the midlands. That means £19.8 billion and £9.6 billion is reserved for transport investments in the north of England and midlands respectively. This adds to the work already done by the Department for Transport to make sure that every local authority has a plan for improved bus services and the extension of the £2 bus fare cap until December 2024.

Digital connectivity is as important as transport. The 5G element of the mission, which commits to basic 5G coverage for the majority of the population, has been met. The wireless infrastructure strategy, published in April 2023, commits to an ambition of spreading advanced 5G coverage to all populated areas. On research and development, the £100 million innovation accelerator programme is empowering local areas by bringing together national and local government, industry and R&D institutions in a long-term partnership. The programme is investing in 26 transformative R&D projects to harness innovation in support of regional economic growth. The UK continues to lead the way in attracting significant foreign investment into the UK, with the latest data showing that we delivered the highest jobs total in Europe, with more jobs per project than our European partners and the most “new” projects.

On education, we have put in place targeted support in our 55 education investment areas across England to improve outcomes in the areas where attainment is weakest, including through the levelling-up premium, giving teachers up to £3,000 annually, aimed at helping schools to retain the best teachers in high-priority subjects. The Government are also offering additional intensive investment in 24 priority education investment areas in England, including through the local needs fund, providing up to £42 million to support schools to boost pupils' literacy, numeracy and attendance.

In October, we launched the long-term plan for towns, a £1.1 billion lifeline to drive ambitious plans to regenerate local towns across the UK over the next decade, recognising that it is both our towns and our cities that are the engines of delivering change. Through the antisocial behaviour action plan, we are giving communities, police and local authorities the tools they need to protect the spaces and places they most care about. Our levelling-up partnerships have shown that central Government, working alongside local leaders, MPs and the communities they represent, can support bringing about real long-lasting change in the places that need it most.

Our levelling-up funds have continued to provide much-needed capital to bring back into use or transform cultural and town centre assets. Towns, cities and communities across the UK have benefited from significant funding through the levelling-up fund, the future high streets fund and the towns fund. Across the three rounds of the levelling-up fund, £4.8 billion has been awarded to 271 projects across the UK, driving prosperity and boosting pride in place in communities. Investment zones are exemplifying our commitment to unlocking growth potential, and driving innovation in city regions across the UK. All eight freeports in England—East Midlands, Freeport East (Felixstowe and Harwich), Humber, Liverpool, Plymouth and South Devon, Solent, Teesside, and Thames—are now open for businesses, offering attractive tax incentives to companies looking to invest and create jobs. These incentives have recently been extended to 2031, giving businesses the long-term certainty to invest. In 2023, we also announced two new green freeports in Scotland—Inverness and Cromarty Firth green freeport and Firth of Forth green freeport—as well as two new freeports in Wales—Celtic freeport and Anglesey freeport—which are currently working through Government approvals and will be open for business later in 2024.

Finally, we have made significant progress against our local leadership mission. Today's devolution deal signing with Devon and Torbay means that Government have agreed 10 devolution deals with 26 different local authorities since the Levelling Up White Paper was published in February 2022. Taken together, these deals take the proportion of the English population living in a place with a devolution deal up from 41% when the White Paper was published to 60% today—an increase of over 10 million people. More than 90% of the north of England, and 55% of the midlands, now stands to benefit from devolution, with over £5 billion of new long-term funding committed as part of devolution agreements in the last 18 months. In total, these deals will see the election of seven new mayors or directly elected leaders in the next two years, with voters having their say on a new mayor in York and North Yorkshire, the east midlands, and an expanded north-east, for the

first time this May. As well as extending devolution, we have also deepened arrangements, with two trailblazer deals in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands announced last year, and the offer of a deeper “level 4” to all eligible institutions. We continue to extend and deepen devolution in England with further live negotiations, including new trailblazing provisions for the north-east.

We also committed to publishing a current analysis of geographical disparities in the UK and a document showing how we have had regard to the considerations of the devolved Administrations in relation to the missions. These accompanying documents will be published on gov.uk in due course. We will also deposit all relevant documents in the Libraries of the House.

This is just the start, and there is more to do, but we will continue to drive change across the United Kingdom.

[HCWS214]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit: Managed Migration from April 2024

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): The Government are working to deliver a brighter future for Britain, with long-term economic security and opportunity, where hard work is always rewarded; where ambition and aspiration are celebrated; where people get the skills they need to succeed in life; where families are supported; where those who have worked hard all their lives have the retirement they deserve.

Universal credit plays a vital role in providing financial support to households. For more than 10 years, universal credit has successfully delivered a tailored service to millions of people, adjusting each month to an individuals' needs and helping people progress in work.

The “move to universal credit” activity will bring those who remain on the older, legacy benefits on to universal credit, completing the implementation of this major welfare reform.

Throughout 2023-24 our activity has focused on notifying households that receive tax credits only. This activity is progressing well, and we remain on track to notify over 500,000 tax credit-only households of the need to claim universal credit by the end of March 2024. Furthermore, by February 2024, a month earlier than originally anticipated, “move to universal credit” will be under way across all jobcentre districts within Great Britain. The Department continues to listen to all feedback to continuously improve the service, but to date there have been very few complaints, and any issues have been swiftly resolved.

Looking ahead to 2024-25, we will be migrating the remaining groups of households receiving legacy benefits to universal credit, excluding employment and support allowance only and employment and support allowance with housing benefit.

Our plans for 2024-25 are to undertake the issuing of migration notices to in-scope working age benefit households sequentially, starting with income support claimants and those claiming tax credits with housing benefit from April, housing benefit-only claimants from June, claimants of employment and support allowance

with child tax credits from July, and jobseekers allowance claimants in September. Households may be in receipt of a combination of benefits, for example an income support recipient could also be claiming housing benefit and/or child tax credits.

From August, we will contact those claiming tax credits who are over state pension age, with households being asked to apply for either universal credit or pension credit, depending on their circumstances.

The Government recognise that some individuals may need additional support to move to universal credit. The Department is committed to providing such support through a range of channels for anyone who needs it. We will continue to review and revise this approach to ensure the success of “move to universal credit” for our customers.

[HCWS213]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 25 January 2024

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Smokefree Future

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on a Smokefree Future on 11 January 2024.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): First, let us be crystal clear: the tobacco and vapes Bill will save many lives. Unlike other consumer products, there is no

safe level of nicotine consumption; it is a product that kills up to two thirds of its long-term users and causes 70% of lung cancer deaths.

[Official Report, 11 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 178WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire:

An error has been identified in my response to the Westminster Hall debate on a Smokefree Future. The correct information is as follows:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): First, let us be crystal clear: the tobacco and vapes Bill will save many lives. Unlike other consumer products, there is no safe level of **tobacco** consumption; it is a product that kills up to two thirds of its long-term users and causes 70% of lung cancer **cases**.

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