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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 6 February 2024

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Tax System: Fairness

1. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure fairness in the application of the tax system. [901356]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Regarding fairness, we have a progressive tax system where the top 5% of income tax payers pay nearly half of all income tax, while the top 1% pay more than 28%. In addition, the national insurance reforms announced at the autumn statement cut taxes for 29 million people. That package also strengthens the fiscal position by helping taxpayers to get their taxes right, while bearing down on the small minority who seek to avoid paying their fair share.

Mr Betts: The Minister talks about tax cuts, but in April most households in this country will receive a 5% increase in their council tax. That is not because local councils have mismanaged their finances, but because after 13 years of austerity, the local government finance system is essentially broken and relies on a regressive and unfair council tax. Why in the autumn statement did the Chancellor freeze the budgets of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for the whole of the next Parliament, leading the Office for Budget Responsibility to forecast a further £13 billion rise in council tax? Does that not show that the Chancellor has no regard at all for councils and the services they provide, or is he simply deferring a problem that his Government has created for the next Government to sort out?

Nigel Huddleston: I am afraid that is a ridiculous characterisation. We on this side of the House care, including about our vibrant, important local councils. That is precisely why they just received an additional £600 million, and future spending will be a matter for future fiscal events.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am a strong believer in fairness in taxation. Would my hon. Friend care to advise the House about who would bear the heaviest burden of taxation, should His Majesty's Government choose to adopt the £28 billion spending commitment that the Labour party announced on the radio this morning?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, we never know from day to day exactly what Labour's policy is, and I understand there are even differences among its Front Benchers at the moment, but we heard a firm commitment, without any promises at all about where the money would come from. We therefore know where it would come from: it would come out of taxpayers' pockets or further borrowing, which is deferred taxation. Everybody will pay for it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The Labour party has set out clear proposals to close tax loopholes on non-doms, private schools and private equity to give a much-needed boost to our public services. Will the Treasury Minister confirm whether the Government have assessed, or plan to assess, the merits of such a policy?

Nigel Huddleston: I am pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for closing down tax loopholes and going after the abusers. It begs the question why Labour did not vote in favour of the Finance Bill last night, which included measures along those lines.

Darren Jones: That is a short answer, but the answer to the wrong question—perhaps the Minister can have a second go. While he is thinking about the answer, I point out that the Comptroller and Auditor General has highlighted that the Government are wasting up to £28 billion a year on mismanaged procurement and governance of major projects. Does the Minister agree that the Conservative Chancellor and his predecessors have had to raise taxes so much partly because they are wasting so many billions of taxpayers' money each and every year?

Nigel Huddleston: The reason we have had to raise taxes is £350 billion of support during the pandemic, which I did not hear the Opposition oppose, and an additional £100 billion to help people during the cost of living crisis, which I did not hear the Opposition oppose. We therefore had to increase taxes out of necessity, but we reduce them out of choice, which is exactly what we are doing. Labour increases taxes out of necessity and then continues to increase them out of choice.

Economic Growth in Scotland: Tax Policies

2. **Michael Shanks** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the impact of his Department's tax policies on economic growth in Scotland during this Parliament. [901357]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): The Government remain committed to increasing economic growth in Scotland and right across the UK. As part of 110 growth measures in the autumn statement 2023, the Government introduced tax policies that are projected to stimulate economic growth in Scotland and across the country. That includes making full expensing permanent and the largest ever cut to employee and self-employed national insurance contributions, which means more people working.

Michael Shanks: The EY Independent Treasury Economic Model Club forecast published yesterday found that the UK's growth forecast of 0.8% this year is only slightly outperformed by the even more disappointing 0.7% growth in Scotland. Given this Parliament has hiked taxes 25 times, and the Scottish National party now think that those on modest incomes in Scotland should pay even more tax, does the Minister agree that the people of Scotland are simply paying the price for two Governments with no economic credibility?

Nigel Huddleston: No, I do not agree. The hon. Member should be aware that the OECD suggests that in the coming years we will be growing faster than France, Italy and Germany. Of course, the Government have a strong track record against our OECD friends over the last 14 years, and Scotland benefits from this economic growth.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): As in Scotland, business rates are devolved in Wales. With business rates relief set to fall from 75% to 40%, businesses in Wales will pay almost twice as much as in England. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Labour Government should be supporting local businesses such as the Kimmel Arms in Moelfre and not increasing the number of Senedd Members by a staggering 60%?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend puts it well. Of course, we have seen the considerable protections and support given in retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief in England. That has not been extended to the same extent in Wales, and Scotland failed to extend it as well. She makes an important point.

Mr Speaker: We go back to Scotland: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Contrary to what the Minister said, OECD forecasts show that the UK will have the lowest growth in the G20 and the highest inflation in the G7. Ministers like to pretend that there is no real cost of living crisis, but there is one, and it is biting hard. How long will Ministers—and their Labour counterparts—continue to peddle the fantasy that Brexit is somehow good for the Scottish people?

Nigel Huddleston: I am afraid that the thing that would most impoverish the people of Scotland is separation from the UK. After 16 years of SNP rule—longer than the Conservatives' in England—GDP per head in Scotland is lower, productivity is falling, employment is lower and inactivity is higher. That is not exactly a proud record.

Drew Hendry: The Minister talks about GDP. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that GDP in the UK will be 4% lower in the long term due to Brexit. Meanwhile, independent Ireland in the EU is booming with a giant fiscal surplus. Given that the Tories, Labour and the Lib Dems are all now champions of Brexit, is it not the case that the only way for Scotland to rejoin the EU is through becoming an independent country?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman knows that the IMF has forecast us greater growth than France, Italy and Germany over the next few years. If he is so enthusiastic about supporting growth, including helping

businesses across the United Kingdom, perhaps Scottish National party Members could have joined us in the voting Lobby last night instead of voting against, for example, full expensing and investment in research and development. They voted against that—how on earth is that in the interests of their constituents?

Business Investment: Fiscal Measures

3. Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to help increase the level of business investment. [901358]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Mr Speaker, may I add my comments to yours yesterday about His Majesty the King? I wish him and his family well, as well as saluting his courage in being so open about his condition.

At the autumn statement last year, I announced an ambitious growth package, which will boost business investment by about £20 billion a year. We are making full expensing permanent, which the CBI welcomed as a game changer that will fire up the British economy.

Mrs Drummond: I also welcome those measures. Business rates are among the biggest issues for small businesses in Meon Valley, so I welcome the Chancellor's £4.6 billion package of support in the autumn statement. However, following covid, there are a number of empty offices where landlords are still having to pay business rates. Does the Chancellor have any measures to support those who are struggling with a lack of income to pay business rates?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the pressures caused by business rates. That was why in the autumn statement we introduced the 75% discount for retail, hospitality and leisure. All I would say is that the reason we were able to introduce those large cuts in business rates was that we did not embark on a spending spree of £28 billion a year, which is Labour's policy on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but not apparently on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I will try to be nice to the Chancellor, but he seems to be living in a parallel universe. If he came to Huddersfield and talked to my businesses and manufacturers, he would find them at the lowest ebb that I can ever remember. It is time that the stimulus was there to make people invest and create jobs. Get on with it, Chancellor!

Jeremy Hunt: If that was being nice, I am relieved that I have not seen the other type of questions that the hon. Member asks. I agree that manufacturing is central to our economic fortunes, which is why it was good news that last year we overtook France to become the eighth-largest manufacturer in the world. But we have gone even further: in the autumn statement, we announced a £4.5 billion manufacturing strategy to give further support to make our manufacturers the best in the world.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Yesterday, we had the pleasure of discussing the very many benefits from the autumn statement, including research and development grants and simplification of the tax code. However,

I wonder whether the Chancellor might go a little further and see whether cutting VAT for the tourism and hospitality sector, perhaps by 10% over five years, would be advisable to help the economy across the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is an assiduous supporter of the many pubs, restaurants and shops in Devon, and I commend him for that support. We will, of course, keep all those measures under review ahead of the Budget.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Hair salons are a vital mainstay of our high streets, but many employers are worried about the sustainability of their businesses; a huge issue is their tax bills, with VAT a significant concern, making further business investment very difficult. Cutting VAT to 10% would make an important difference to local businesses, high streets and apprentice training. Will the Chancellor look at doing that to support all our local economies?

Jeremy Hunt: I will always look at anything that helps businesses to grow and expand. I set up and ran my own business for 14 years. Can I gently say to the hon. Lady that it is slightly incongruous to argue for lower taxes when the SNP has given Scotland the highest taxes in the United Kingdom?

Loan Charge: Bankruptcy

4. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential impact of the loan charge on levels of bankruptcy. [901359]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): I have heard the concerns expressed by hon. Members on the impact of the loan charge, and I have pushed His Majesty's Revenue and Customs for firm assurances on the safeguards that it has in place. No one will be forced by HMRC to sell their main home or access their pension funds early to pay their loan charge debts, nor has HMRC petitioned for bankruptcy, which would be only a last resort and is in nobody's interest. There is substantial support in place to help people in debt, including agreeing time-to-pay arrangements with them.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer and his engagement with the loan charge and taxpayer fairness all-party parliamentary group, including a meeting this evening with its officers. In an internal document that surfaced as part of the 2019 Morse review, HMRC admitted to around 100 bankruptcies from the loan charge. Can the Minister tell the House why that figure has never been given publicly by HMRC, and what the figure is today?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for championing this area and his great concern for the human stories behind the difficult circumstances resulting from some of these schemes. As I have said, I am constantly seeking reassurance from HMRC on this matter, and my understanding is that where bankruptcies have occurred, it has often been because of requirements outside of the loan charge, not from HMRC; indeed, some people have declared bankruptcy of their own volition. However, if my hon. Friend has evidence to the contrary, I would like to know about it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The original Treasury impact statement for the loan charge stated that it would have no material impact on "family formation, stability or breakdown",

yet there have been countless divorces, family break-ups, mental health breakdowns and bankruptcies, and at least 10 suicides. That impact statement was grossly wrong, but also surely negligent. We now need a full investigation, including how and why Parliament was so misled over the dangerous and unfair loan charge.

Nigel Huddleston: I hear the House's concern about this issue, on which we had a debate not so long ago. Of course, the suicides the hon. Gentleman mentions concern us, and independent reviews have taken place. However, I want to provide the House and anybody listening with reassurance that the best thing to do if people have concerns is to engage with HMRC, because very generous and long-term plans can be put in place to help people to repay. As I said, there are fears out there—there is a bit of scaremongering—that homes are being taken over or people are having to give up pensions. That is not the case. Engagement with HMRC to establish reasonable time to pay would therefore be reassuring for many of the people who fear much worse consequences. My appeal is to engage with HMRC.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government's approach to the loan charge has become a nightmare for ordinary people across the country who are the victims of mis-selling and facing financial ruin. The torment and devastating reality is the clearest possible proof that the Government need to think again. Those facing the loan charge ordeal cannot bear to hear yet again that the Morse review is the final word on this matter. Will the Minister finally agree today to commission a new, truly independent review?

Nigel Huddleston: We had an independent review in 2019 under Lord Morse. The Government accepted 19 of its 20 recommendations. The review has taken place, but as I have said repeatedly, I am challenging HMRC and listening to colleagues. If action needs to be taken, I will take it, but I do not believe that there is a case for another review, because we have already had one, and the Government have already taken action.

Homeowners with Mortgages: Support

5. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to help support homeowners with mortgages. [901361]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): As the House knows, the path to lower interest rates is through lower inflation, which is why the Government are fully committed to supporting the Bank of England to get inflation back down to its 2% target. If mortgage borrowers fall into financial difficulty, our mortgage charter, which covers about 90% of the market, includes new flexibilities to help customers manage their repayments, on top of the Financial Conduct Authority's rules on how lenders must treat borrowers.

Mr Robertson: Given that a lot of mortgage payers are suffering because of the rapid hike in interest rates, will the Government continue to talk to the Bank of

England and mortgage lenders to see what can be done to bring interest rates down? That would help most people.

Bim Afolami: I completely agree on the absolute need to drive mortgage rates down, which is why we are supporting the Bank of England's independent remit to bring interest rates down. We are also ensuring that we do not do things to make inflation worse, such as adding £28 billion to Government borrowing, which would increase inflation.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The rate for a two-year fixed mortgage remains more than double the level of December 2021. More than 900,000 borrowers are set to see their monthly payments rise by £500 or even £1,000 a month. Government Ministers are having to resign because of increasing mortgage payments. How does the Chancellor expect people in Scotland to cope with increased mortgage rates if his Ministers cannot?

Bim Afolami: I would say two things in response to the hon. Lady. First, the best thing we can do is to help people with the cost of living, not increase their taxes, as the SNP in Scotland proposes, and to maintain—*[Interruption.]* I will not get bored of saying this. Secondly, we maintain our support for the Bank of England driving inflation down. We have more than halved it. We will continue to do that, and interest rates will come right down.

Economic Growth Forecasts: 2024 and 2025

6. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of economic growth forecasts for 2024 and 2025. [901362]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): We announced 110 growth measures in the autumn statement. Taken together with the measures in the spring Budget, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility says that they will have the biggest impact on output that it has ever measured in a fiscal event, increasing GDP by 0.5% by 2028-29.

Christine Jardine: The UK economy is set for slower growth than previously thought. The International Monetary Fund predicts that next year we will have the second worst growth in the G7. In Scotland, the SNP has increased taxes, which we have heard about already, and Scots now face six bands. Stagnation there is even worse, and businesses and households in my constituency need reassurance. Will the Chancellor tell us what he will do to give confidence to people up and down the country that we will soon see economic growth?

Jeremy Hunt: May I gently correct the hon. Lady on the IMF? It said that over the next four years, UK growth will be higher than in Germany, France, Italy and Japan. I agree about SNP tax rises, but I point out that the Liberal Democrats have some tax rises of their own. They want to increase capital gains tax, which would be incredibly damaging for Scotland's financial services industry, which employs thousands of people.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Has the Chancellor had the opportunity to look at the New Conservatives' budget proposal, a budget for families?

It has a six-point plan, with two points to help unlock growth, particularly for the many small, family-run businesses in places such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Those plans to increase the VAT registration threshold to £250,000 and to abolish the IR35 reforms would surely help us unlock the growth of our great nation.

Jeremy Hunt: I have been talking with my hon. Friend about these issues recently. In fact, we were discussing increasing the VAT threshold only last night—such are the interesting evenings I have in this job! We will look seriously and carefully at any measures that help small businesses. They are the lifeblood of the country.

Cost of Living

7. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of increases in the cost of living on living standards. [901363]

18. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to support households with the cost of living. [901380]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): The Government stand by households, with one of Europe's largest support packages, worth on average £3,700 per UK household, but we all know that the key to reducing cost of living pressures is to bring down inflation, which we have more than halved, delivering on the Prime Minister's promise.

Rachel Hopkins: Families in Luton and Bedfordshire, and indeed the rest of the country, are worse off because of 14 years of economic chaos and incompetence under the Conservatives. Does the Minister concede that, even if the Government's inflation target is met, families will still be paying £300 a month more for their household bills than they were just 18 months ago?

Laura Trott: Fourteen years of the Conservatives has halved unemployment and increased employment by 4 million. Crucially, poverty is down: we have 1.7 million fewer people in poverty now than in 2010, including 400,000 children and 200,000 pensioners. That is a legacy to be proud of.

Patricia Gibson: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report on poverty in the UK in 2024 reiterates that, consistently, the demographic with the highest poverty rates is children. Although 29% of the children in my constituency live in poverty, the Scottish Government are doing what they can with their limited powers via the Scottish child payment. Will the Chancellor and his team use their powers to make a concerted and determined effort to tackle the scourge of poverty, which is so damaging to our children?

Laura Trott: I reiterate: we have 400,000 fewer children in poverty now than in 2010. In addition, the national insurance contributions cut that we have introduced has been shown to cut child poverty dramatically. Crucially, the leading indicator of whether a child is in poverty is whether their parents are in work, and that is what we have delivered over this Parliament—*[Interruption.]* Yes it is—it absolutely is. Getting more people into work will help to solve child poverty.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The British public are still struggling with the Conservative cost of living crisis, and the Government are now forcing up council tax. Last week, for the first time in my life, a Conservative MP spoke for me when he said:

“There’s almost no point chopping £100 off tax bills nationally if you’re adding on to it with council tax.”

Labour Members agree with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley). Does the Chief Secretary agree with her hon. Friend and colleague?

Laura Trott: Council tax is a matter for councils, but we put in place a limit, which I do not believe existed under the previous Labour Government. More than that, the most difficult thing for councils and consumers more broadly is the £28 billion-worth of tax rises that Labour is planning in government.

Bankers’ Bonuses: Removal of Cap

8. **Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the potential impact of removing the cap on bankers’ bonuses on the financial sector. [901364]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Removing the bankers’ bonus cap was a decision made by the independent Prudential Regulation Authority, which has long said that the cap was completely ineffective; it did not limit pay or make banks safer.

Sam Tarry: The cap on bankers’ bonuses might have been a great newspaper headline, but it did little to tackle the City’s excesses. Financial institutions quickly changed remuneration packages and structures so that risk takers still receive substantial pay-offs, sometimes even taking them through offshore mechanisms. Does the Chancellor agree that what we need is enhanced regulation to mitigate excessive risk taking in the square mile? That could require, beyond merely capping bonuses, a move toward an alignment of interests focused on the form of bonus payments, share allocations and deferred amounts, and robust clawback mechanisms for those who have behaved maliciously, in order to deter misconduct in the square mile more effectively?

Jeremy Hunt: I suspect that when the hon. Gentleman tabled his question, he was not expecting that the biggest supporter of abolishing the bankers’ bonus cap was not the Chancellor but the shadow Chancellor. I hear what he says, and indeed those are some of the reasons we abolished it, because it was not working. If Labour is going to change its mind on that policy, may I ask—just to take a totally random example—when will it change its mind about the planned £28 billion of additional borrowing?

Non-dom Status: Abolition

9. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Whether he has made a recent assessment of the potential merits of abolishing non-domiciled tax status. [901365]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): The Government want the UK to have a fair but internationally competitive tax system, designed to bring in talented individuals and investment that contributes to the growth of the economy. Non-doms

play an important role in funding our public services through their tax contributions. They pay tax on their UK source income and gains in the same way as everyone else.

Alan Brown: The Minister talks of fairness, but the fact is that during the cost of living crisis nearly a million more struggling pensioners will start paying income tax, because of the freeze in personal allowance rates, while the Government protect some of the richest members of society through non-domicile status. Scrapping that status could bring the Treasury an extra £3 billion a year. Why do the Government not do the right thing and bring in that extra money to protect pensioners and the lowest paid?

Nigel Huddleston: Non-doms contributed about £8.5 billion in taxes in 2022, and have contributed to investment to the tune of £7 billion since 2012. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that scrapping their status would not be risk-free in a world in which people can be quite mobile, and could damage the UK’s competitiveness. As for the need for other support, that is exactly why we have been reducing national insurance rates, for example.

Mortgage Interest Rates: Impact on Disposable Income

10. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes in mortgage interest rates during this Parliament on household disposable income. [901366]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): Mortgage interest rates have fallen by more than 100 basis points from their peak in the summer. None the less, the Government have prioritised support for households that are vulnerable to cost of living pressures. We have introduced one of Europe’s largest support packages, and it is partly thanks to those measures that real incomes have proved more resilient than was anticipated. In the third quarter of 2023, real household disposable income per person was just 0.5% lower than in Q4 2019, versus the Office for Budget Responsibility’s autumn statement 2023 forecast that it would be almost 3% lower.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for his answer, but since his party’s disastrous mini-Budget fiasco under the previous Prime Minister, food prices have soared, extreme damage has been done to the economy and mortgages have skyrocketed. Every month 200,000 people are having to remortgage, the average monthly rate has risen by £240, and 1.6 million people will have to remortgage this year. Overall, after 14 years of a Conservative Government, people are more than £10,000 less well off than they were on pre-2010 trends. Is it not time that the Chancellor and his ministerial team looked again at the possibility of additional support for those who are facing mortgage and other financial distress? The Chancellor is frowning, but it is time that he took further action to support people in distress.

Bim Afolami: This Government have introduced one of Europe’s largest support packages, worth more than £100 billion during 2022 to 2025. That is an average of £3,700 per household. The point about mortgage rates is that they went up everywhere across the world, to a

higher level than ours in many jurisdictions such as the United States. I have already mentioned the work that we have done on the mortgage charter, helping hundreds of thousands of people to manage their mortgages, but the critical thing that we need to do is bring inflation down. She needs to talk to her shadow Chancellor and the shadow Treasury team about their plans, which would make inflation higher.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that “she” is a good word to use to other Members.

Infected Blood Compensation: Funding

11. **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on funding for a UK-wide infected blood compensation scheme. [901369]

13. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential cost to the Exchequer of compensation for people infected and affected by contaminated blood and blood products. [901372]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): This is an appalling tragedy, and my thoughts remain with all those affected. We understand the strength of feeling, and the need for action. The Government have accepted the moral case for compensation, and have acknowledged that justice needs to be delivered for victims. As such, the Government intend to respond in full to Sir Brian Langstaff’s recommendations for wider compensation following the publication of the inquiry’s final report in May this year.

Paul Girvan: The Minister’s answering that question has brought forth another question. The Chancellor was previously Secretary of State in the Department of Health, and three of his former colleagues all gave a commitment to address the issue. Now that the Chancellor is in a position to do something about that, how long is it going to take? As this Government’s days are numbered, the difficulty I have is whether this will be in place before we have an election. Will they ensure that the commitment is there?

Laura Trott: I know that the hon. Gentleman has a lifelong friend who has suffered from this terrible tragedy, and I can reassure him that we are determined to do right by the victims and those who have tragically lost their loved ones. The victims of the infected blood scandal deserve justice and recognition. On his question on timing, Governments of all colours have failed to sort this out, but I am pleased that the interim payments at least have been paid. As I have said, the Government are committed to the moral case for compensation and we are expecting the final report very soon. We will move as quickly as possible afterwards.

Clive Efford: We have had Sir Brian Langstaff’s recommendations since April 2023. Mrs Dorricott, the wife of the Chancellor’s constituent Mike, told the inquiry that the Chancellor, when he was Health Secretary, told Mr Dorricott:

“Don’t worry about this, we’ll sort it.”

He is now the Chancellor, with his hands on the purse strings, so will he now—through his colleague the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—confirm that the Government have identified the contingencies to pay the compensation to the people hit by the infected blood scandal?

Laura Trott: I can confirm that we are working with the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we can respond as quickly as possible once the inquiry reports.

Small Businesses: Support

12. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [901370]

15. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [901375]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Small businesses are the engines that drive our economy and we support them to thrive using levers right across Government. Our small business rates relief means that one third of business properties in England already pay no business rates. We provide tax reliefs benefiting small and medium-sized enterprises, such as the annual investment allowance and employment allowance, and we support investment in SMEs through British Business Bank programmes and a variety of other support measures.

Selaine Saxby: What consideration has been given to reducing employer national insurance contributions to help small businesses to sustain employment following the record increase in the national living wage from April, particularly in the tourism and hospitality industries?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about these policy areas on a number of occasions. In terms of supporting small businesses, the employment allowance enables businesses with employer national insurance contributions bills of £100,000 or less to claim up to £5,000 off those bills. That was increased in April 2022 from £4,000 to £5,000, so the smallest 40% of businesses have already been taken out of paying employer national insurance contributions, and many of those are in the hospitality and leisure sector. We always keep policies under review, and I know that my hon. Friend will always be lobbying on this issue.

Sir Edward Leigh: Becoming an entrepreneur in this country has become increasingly purgatorial over the past 25 years. Does the Minister agree that what small businessmen want is not more handouts and allowances from the Government but lower, simpler and flatter taxes, and less regulation not more? They want the Government to get off their backs and shove off.

Nigel Huddleston: That was very interestingly put by my right hon. Friend. I completely agree with his instincts, though, and those instincts are completely shared on the Conservative Benches. When we are able to reduce tax and release the entrepreneurial spirit, independence and innovation that exist right across the UK, the country thrives and all of us thrive.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): In 2020, the former Chancellor set a public sector net investment target of 3% of GDP, but that was abandoned after the 2022 debacle and today we have the second lowest business investment among advanced economies, partly because of that failure on public sector net investment. Can the Minister offer us any reassurance on the future trajectory of public sector net investment?

Nigel Huddleston: Of course, Labour left us in pretty terrible financial circumstances back in 2010. Instead its figure is up £28 billion in real terms at the start of the next Parliament, an increase of 40% in real terms or 7% annually—the biggest ever published.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, but they have a constant problem with late payments, which increased by 7% last year, and that is driving many of them into insolvency. Given that the Government are a major contractor, what are they doing through project bank accounts to reduce the impact of late payments?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I know there is agreement on this issue across the Chamber. We made statements last year along those lines, putting particular pressure on the public sector. I am sure there will be continuing pressure on the private sector, too.

Financial Services: Growth Support

14. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support growth in the financial services sector. [901373]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The Government are taking ambitious steps to grow the UK's world-leading financial services sector, with widespread industry support. To take one example, reforms to Solvency II will help to spur a vibrant, innovative and internationally competitive insurance sector. The reforms will unlock £100 billion-worth of productive investment to grow the economy in every constituency over the next 10 years.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer but, clearly, to grow the financial services industry, investors must have confidence that their money is safe. I have written to him about the Woodford equity scandal, of which there are many thousands of victims across the country. The Financial Conduct Authority refused to intervene, so will he now intervene and take action to ensure that the investors get at least a large part of their money back?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, for writing to me and for standing up for the rights of his constituents. It is important the House knows that over 90% of investors voted to accept the scheme of arrangement. It is now up to the court to decide whether to approve it, and I therefore will not comment on it any further. I am happy to be in constant dialogue with him on this matter, as on many others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the Minister knows, the Northern Ireland Assembly sits for the first time today to make a change for Northern Ireland. We

would very much like to be part of the financial services sector, so what can he and the Government do to support the Northern Ireland Assembly in relation to the financial services sector, and to ensure that we in Northern Ireland can be part of this great country of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Always better together.

Bim Afolami: I strongly echo the hon. Gentleman's sentiments. I am very happy to engage with him and his colleagues from Northern Ireland to see what more I can do in the Treasury to work with him and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Executive, particularly to encourage our financial services institutions to invest more in Northern Ireland. I am very happy to discuss ways in which we can do that.

Regional Economic Inequalities: Fiscal Steps

16. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent fiscal steps he has taken to help tackle regional economic inequalities. [901377]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): This Government are committed to supporting all parts of the United Kingdom. In October we announced the £1.1 billion long-term plan for towns, which gives 55 towns up to £20 million of endowment-style funding. We are delivering an ambitious programme of investment zones and devolution deals, we are continuing to support local growth through the UK shared prosperity fund and we are investing billions to improve local transport connections in our regions outside London.

Daniel Zeichner: By their own measures, the Government are failing on almost half of their levelling-up missions in the east of England. Meanwhile, the Cambridge sub-region, which is a net contributor to the Exchequer, has vital transport projects on hold or awaiting finance. When will the Treasury stop stalling growth and give power back to the regions, which know best what needs to be done in their area?

Gareth Davies: This Government are committed to levelling up by boosting growth, raising living standards and spreading opportunity throughout the country in several different ways. The hon. Gentleman talks about giving more power to local areas, and he will know that the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is getting a £97 million devolution deal. He will also know that Cambridge received some £14 million as part of the shared prosperity fund to spend on local projects. I reject his assertion; the people of Cambridge are benefiting from this Government.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): The way to reduce regional inequality is to ensure that growth happens everywhere across the country. One way to do that is to support small and medium-sized enterprises and community enterprises, which are particularly located in under-served regions. I commend the Government for the recovery loan scheme, which has been a lifeline to many small businesses and community enterprises. Can the Minister tell us whether that scheme is likely to be renewed? Hundreds of millions of pounds of private investment is waiting on the Government to make a decision.

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend has a long history as a great champion for community organisations. I will write to him on his specific question.

National Living Wage

17. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What recent progress he has made on raising the level of the national living wage. [901378]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): The Government are committed to ending low pay. From 1 April 2024, the national living wage will increase by 9.8%, to £11.44. That represents an increase of more than £1,800 to the annual earnings of a full-time national living wage worker and it is expected to benefit about 2.7 million workers.

Dr Luke Evans: I congratulate the Government on increasing the national living wage, because that will make a huge difference. However, after speaking to not only those in the public sector, at the likes of my local Leicestershire County Council and Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, but small businesses in the private sector, I know that there is a trade-off, because they have to foot that wage bill. What steps can the Government take to make sure that those businesses and the public sector have the money to pass on to those who are earning so well?

Laura Trott: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I will take the two parts of it in turn. The Government continue to support businesses with the higher costs through a generous package of support. At the autumn statement, we showed our commitment to supporting small businesses by extending the 75% retail, hospitality and leisure relief, and by freezing the small business multiplier, which will protect more than 1 million properties from the multiplier increase. Yesterday, we announced a wide-ranging package of support worth £600 million for local councils, including £500 million of new funding for social care.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I understand that concerns were expressed some years ago about how a significant increase in the minimum wage may well have a knock-on effect, particularly on the hospitality sector. Given that that did not come about with previous living wage increases, will the Chief Secretary commit her Government to ensuring that future increases will be monitored closely to enable and assist small businesses to increase wage levels systematically and sustainably over the longer term?

Laura Trott: I can commit to the hon. Gentleman that we are absolutely monitoring the effects, but, as I said, a good package of support is in place for businesses.

Topical Questions

T1. [901382] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): I would like to update the House on a couple of data releases published since our last oral questions. Total greenfield foreign direct investment since 2010 has not just been higher than that of France, Germany and Italy, but in

the past two years has overtaken that of China to be the second highest in the world. Yesterday's labour force survey said that unemployment fell to a quarterly average of 3.9%, meaning that unemployment has halved and Conservative Governments have overseen the creation of more than 800 jobs every day since 2010.

Theresa Villiers: Can the Treasury find funds for an increased pay offer for junior doctors? I completely agree that we must safeguard the public finances and have regard to affordability, but if ever a group deserved a pay rise, it is junior doctors, and we need to get the dispute settled.

Jeremy Hunt: As my right hon. Friend knows, as Health Secretary I campaigned for extra money for the NHS to make sure that we could pay NHS staff fairly, but I do believe that junior doctors have had a very fair offer—one that is higher than was recommended by the independent pay review body and is about double the rate of this year's predicted inflation. I know that the Health Secretary is willing to talk about anything else that could help make their working conditions better.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Last week, at Prime Minister's questions, when asked about the Tory mortgage penalty, the Prime Minister boasted that someone coming off a fixed-rate mortgage

"will be able to save hundreds of pounds."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 857.]

But the small print was that they had to add many years to their mortgage. Three million people have been coming off fixed-rate mortgage deals this year and last, so does the Chancellor agree with the Prime Minister that British homeowners have never had it so good?

Jeremy Hunt: The way we are helping families with mortgages is not just through the mortgage charter, which is a lifeline to many families, but by bringing down inflation. We have been having a few pops about Labour's confusion about its £28 billion policy, but the real reason we are against it is that going on a borrowing splurge pushes up inflation, pushes up interest rates and makes mortgages more expensive.

Rachel Reeves: It is under a Conservative Government that interest rates, inflation and mortgage costs have gone up. The Government need to take responsibility because, after 14 years, this out-of-touch Government are making it harder for ordinary people to get on. If the Chancellor decides to campaign in next week's by-elections, what will he say to the 3,100 people in Wellingborough who are remortgaging and paying £210 more on their mortgages every month, and to the 2,800 people in Kingswood paying £270 more a month because of the Conservative mortgage penalty?

Jeremy Hunt: What I will say to them is that responsible, difficult decisions, the vast majority of which the shadow Chancellor opposed, have seen the inflation rate more than halve and interest rates likely to have peaked. Last year, we built more houses in one year than in any single year under the previous Labour Government. We are

doing everything we can to help bring down mortgage rates, but a £28 billion borrowing spree will make them worse not better.

T4. [901385] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): In 2011, the Government quite rightly set up the fund to compensate victims of the Equitable Life scandal. Notwithstanding the fact that the Government did not give them enough money, we know that the fund will not be fully spent on the people being compensated. Will my right hon. Friend ensure the fund is used for the benefit of the people who suffered in the scandal, rather than being returned to the Treasury?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): I thank my hon. Friend for his question and I will write to him with the specifics of the answer.

T2. [901383] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Many of my constituents whose lives have been destroyed by the loan charge scandal feel the central injustice is that the Government are focused on pursuing the victims rather than the companies responsible. They were dismayed to read recent allegations that individuals linked to such companies have donated hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Conservative party. Will the Chancellor confirm why exactly the Government are ignoring the providers and operators of the schemes? How many have been prosecuted specifically for their involvement in disguised remuneration, and not for other misdemeanours?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Eighty-five per cent of the funds recovered from the loan charge so far—about £3.9 billion in total—have come from the employers, therefore those who were running those schemes, so the hon. Lady is mischaracterising where we have gone so far. There has been one criminal conviction so far; others are in place. I repeat what I said to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), earlier: if they were that concerned about ensuring we go after the wrongdoers, they would have voted with us last night in the Finance Bill.¹

T9. [901390] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): At the meeting this evening, will the Financial Secretary review the injustice that prevents loan charge victims who have engaged with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but who cannot agree with their assessment, having any access to a tribunal?

Nigel Huddleston: I know my right hon. Friend has been campaigning on the issue. I respect and appreciate the information he has provided, and his contributions to the debate. I assure him that I am in listening mode and looking forward to the meeting this evening, because I want to ensure that I hold HMRC to account to make sure everyone involved is treated fairly and respectfully.

T3. [901384] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last week, the International Monetary Fund joined many others in urging the Chancellor to prioritise public spending and investment above tax cuts. Rather than seeking to appease his Back Benchers with tax cuts in the next Budget, will he finally deliver the level of public investment this country is crying out for,

including in a nationwide energy efficiency programme that would shield households from volatile gas prices, get their fuel bills down for the long term and create jobs? Or is he yet another one who is running scared of green investment?

Jeremy Hunt: I am sure the hon. Lady understands that I cannot talk about what will be in the Budget ahead of the Budget because no decisions have been made. I celebrate with her that the UK recently became the first major economy in the world to decarbonise by more than 50%, ahead of France, Germany, Japan and the United States.

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

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): If the Chancellor had an ambition to spend an additional £28 billion a year on something, will he explain to the House what level of tax that would impose on ordinary households?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question. I am curious to know where that figure of £28 billion has come from, but as she has asked the question, I will tell her that, if we were to stick to the fiscal rules, as the Labour party claims it will do, to increase spending by £28 billion would mean increasing income tax by 4% or increasing corporation tax, which Labour says it will cap, by 8%.

T5. [901386] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): With winter still upon us and fuel bills still rising, Ofgem is advising that the level of domestic energy debt is approaching £3 billion. When people cannot meet their current bills, how can they possibly be expected to meet that level of arrears? Is it not time to fund a debt write-off scheme, as proposed by National Energy Action and other fuel poverty campaigners, before hypothermia and misery worsen?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The Government continue to work with Ofgem. In fact, I met the chief executive officer very recently. Ofgem continues to monitor the levels of energy debt to ensure that consumers are protected. The hon. Gentleman will know that, last year, the Chancellor announced measures to ensure that households with prepayment meters paid no more than those with standard meters, and that is on the back of the energy price guarantee, which effectively paid 50% of people's household energy bills.

Sir Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Chancellor will be aware of a proposal from the World War Muslim Memorial Trust to establish a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum, honouring an estimated 750,000 Muslims who have fought for the British armed forces, with tens of thousands of them paying the ultimate sacrifice. Previous Budgets have supported memorials that honour those who have given us the freedoms that we enjoy. May I ask the Chancellor to personally consider this proposal and help make it a reality?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must remember and honour the sacrifices made by those of all nationalities and religions who fought for our freedom, including, I believe, nearly

1. [Official Report, 22 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 12MC.] (Correction)

150,000 Muslims who died in the second world war. My officials would be happy to engage with him to identify how best the Government can help make this vision a reality.

T6. [901387] Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Business owners and high street businesses in Oswestry told me that their biggest challenge is business rates. In his upcoming Budget, will the Chancellor consider a radical reform of business rates that puts the high street on an even keel and on a level playing field with the online retailers?

Nigel Huddleston: Over the past few years, we have helped to support our high streets by freezing multipliers and, importantly, targeting further relief at the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. Frequent revaluations are now par for the course, because of the recent changes we have made.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Last July, following a debanking scandal, I wrote to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about the risks of implementing so-called diversity, equity and inclusion policies. Far from being inclusive, their implementation has often been divisive, yet Labour put such policies at the heart of its financing and growth strategy just last week. Will my hon. Friend assure us that he will give clear direction to the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority to avoid all the risks of so-called DEI policies?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am studying those policies carefully. I am concerned about certain aspects of what is proposed, and I will be discussing the matter with the PRA and the FCA to make sure that we have sensible policies on this matter.

T7. [901388] Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): At the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced that he would explore selling off the Government's remaining stake in NatWest this year. As it stands, does he anticipate that this will result in a better or worse return for taxpayers, compared with the previous sales?

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Indeed, the Chancellor announced at the autumn statement last year that, over the next 12 months, the Government will consider selling shares in NatWest. That is all subject to value-for-money concerns and other matters, as he will appreciate, and it is market sensitive. Of course value for money will be at the heart of any consideration of the sale of shares, and the House will be kept fully informed over the coming weeks and months.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend and his colleagues will be aware of the challenges that businesses and households face in coastal communities. As the Budget approaches, may I urge him to be ever mindful of how we maintain the vitality of the economies in our coastal areas?

Jeremy Hunt: I absolutely will; that is a core part of the levelling-up agenda, and my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, since we started on that agenda,

two thirds of all new jobs created have been outside London and the south-east. We will continue to look at any proposals he may have in that respect.

T8. [901389] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Government have deliberately created a funding model for universities in which they are dependent on income from international students. Does the Chancellor share my concern about ensuring that nothing is done to undermine that income?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): The university sector is one of the jewels of this country and I am proud that we have four of the world's top 20 universities. I am happy to look at any individual proposals from the hon. Gentleman.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Last June the Exchequer Secretary announced the energy security investment mechanism, and I welcomed the announcement in last November's autumn statement that the floor price would rise with inflation from April. How and when will that be legislated for, and will he look at alternative ways of setting that floor price, other than the 20-year reference period that is already used?

Gareth Davies: The energy security investment mechanism was designed, as my hon. Friend points out, to give more certainty not only to the oil and gas sector, but to investors, ensuring that the energy profits levy is disapplied when prices return to historically normal levels. To provide additional certainty, on the back of urging from him and the industry, we have agreed to legislate for ESIM and will be announcing that shortly.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Regardless of what the Chancellor tells us, the reality remains that people in Bradford are worse off after 14 years of this Government. Healthcare, GPs and dentists are less accessible, homes are more expensive, colder and riddled with mould, jobs are less secure and badly paid, with stagnating wages, and household savings have been wiped out by rising food, water, energy and fuel bills. Ahead of the last Budget he will deliver before the general election, will the Chancellor apologise for 14 years of disaster that have devastated our communities?

Jeremy Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman some positive messages he can take home to his constituents in Bradford: violent crime and burglaries have been halved, school standards are up, the NHS has more doctors and nurses than ever in history and real after-tax income for people on the minimum wage or national living wage is up by 30% if they are working full time.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Can my hon. Friend tell me how many staff are now employed across the eight Departments based at the Darlington Economic Campus? What progress is being made on naming the new building "William McMullen House"?

Gareth Davies: I can tell my hon. Friend that 750 staff are employed across all Departments at the Darlington Economic Campus. The Treasury's aim is to reach 355 full-time staff by March 2025, and we are on track to meet that target. The official name of the campus will be decided closer to the 2025-26 delivery date and

will be consulted on by the Government Property Agency, but we have heard very clearly his suggestion of William McMullen House, and we will consider that in due course.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Chancellor knows jolly well that in April 2023 Sir Brian Langstaff made his final recommendations on compensation for those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal. The Chancellor also gave evidence in July to Sir Brian and said that work was under way. In December, this House voted for a compensation body to be set up. I would like the Chancellor to answer my question, please, not a junior Minister,

and explain exactly what is going on in the Treasury, what work is being undertaken and whether there will be an announcement in the Budget.

Jeremy Hunt: With great respect to the right hon. Lady, who has campaigned formidably on this issue, I do not think she is giving a fair representation of what the Government have done. I stand by every word I said as a Back Bencher, and as Chancellor I have tried to do everything I can to speed the process up. She has not mentioned that the Government have already given £100,000 to the families affected. We have accepted the moral importance of the duty to give compensation, and we will now work with colleagues in the other place to make her amendment workable.

Point of Order

12.34 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week, we saw the lid lifted off the secret empire of Tory Tees Valley Mayor Lord Houchen, and the 28 recommendations for improvement in the way he does business covered everything from poor decision-making and a failure to provide his board with proper information, to a lack of transparency and value for taxpayers' money. Yesterday, we learned that he had squandered several million pounds of that money in losing a needless legal action against PD Ports about access rights.

In the past, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has refused to call in the National Audit Office to examine how the Mayor did business, opting instead for his own independent inquiry. Given this latest revelation, can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how we can get the Levelling Up Secretary to make a statement from the Dispatch Box about the latest scandal, so that we can persuade him of the need to get the NAO in there to look at that colossal waste of public money and report his findings to Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I can assure him that I have had no indication that Ministers intend to come to the House to make a statement on that matter, but I am sure that the Table Office will be able to help and advise him on how to pursue it, so I know that he will not give up yet.

BILLS PRESENTED

SUPPORT FOR INFANTS AND PARENTS ETC (INFORMATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sally-Ann Hart presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the making available of information about support available for infants, parents and carers of infants, and prospective parents and carers, including reporting requirements relating to such support.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 160).

MINISTERIAL SEVERANCE (REFORM) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Emily Thornberry presented a Bill to amend the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991 in relation to grants to persons ceasing to hold ministerial and other offices; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Tuesday 27 February, and to be printed (Bill 162).

Social Energy Tariff

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

12.36 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a social tariff for energy.

During the autumn statement of 2022, the Government committed to developing a new approach to consumer protection in energy markets in order to consider the best options, including social tariffs. That commitment has been repeated multiple times since, including by the Prime Minister. In April 2023, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero reiterated that pledge by promising to consult on a social energy tariff in the summer of 2023. However, despite multiple commitments, and to the frustration of many, a consultation never materialised, and as we are now in February 2024, there is a significant risk that no new protections will be in place this year. All the while, low-income and disabled households have struggled to heat their homes over the festive period and the cold snap in January—and winter is not over yet.

I am introducing this Bill in an attempt to fight for protections for the most vulnerable in society. By their continued inaction on this matter, the Government continue to disregard the real and immediate concerns of many people. The great need for a social energy tariff is best demonstrated by the wide and varied support for its implementation. Disability groups, debt advice groups, politicians from across the political spectrum, consumer groups, local authorities, housing providers, Ofgem and even energy companies are in favour of one.

Such is the united front on this vital issue that it is even more surprising that the UK Government have failed even to hold the consultation that they promised. They have continued to bury their head in the sand, despite the fact that National Energy Action, Energy Action Scotland, Age UK, Scope, Citizens Advice, MoneySavingExpert and 150 other organisations, as well as MPs, wrote to the Prime Minister in September calling for the promised consultation on a social energy tariff. Now we are into 2024, and the situation is catastrophic for low-income households. I thank the many organisations that have provided briefings on this topic both for my debate in November last and once again today.

You may ask what a social energy tariff is, Mr Speaker. Admittedly, many different organisations and groups have slight variations in their approach to such a tariff, but in its most basic form, which is universally agreed upon, it is a system of targeted support through a reduction in energy bills for vulnerable, low-income and disabled households, in response to incredibly high energy bills. As one in three households will spend more on energy bills this winter than they did last winter—a figure that is closer to half for the poorest households—the need for a social energy tariff cannot be stressed enough. Citizens Advice research shows that energy bills are 61% higher than in 2021, while other research suggests that high energy bills will become the new normal for the rest of the decade. That highlights the desperate need for more meaningful long-term support.

When I held a debate on this topic in November, I was heartened by the cross-party support and atmosphere in Westminster Hall as Members from across the political spectrum presented a united front on this matter, each raising the need for longer-term, targeted support for the most vulnerable households. I was then immediately disheartened by the lack of a meaningful response from the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway), and now—over two months on from that debate, and 14 months on from the Government's initial call for a consultation—we are no further along.

Government Members highlight that energy bills have fallen from last year, but that does not paint a picture of the reality for many. Even though we are told that the energy market has stabilised, bills remain sky high, and winter 2023-24 is projected to be much worse due to the huge levels of energy debt accrued last year. Ofgem and Citizens Advice research shows that energy debt is at the highest level ever, and Ofgem's chief executive officer, Jonathan Brearley, has said that

“we think there is a case for examining, with urgency, the feasibility of a social tariff”.

In the absence of an energy bill support scheme this winter, many people have had to once again choose between heating and eating. Some conditions require the constant charging of essential lifesaving equipment, such as oxygen concentrators or feeding pumps. It is dreadful that, in the UK in 2024, some households have been forced to self-disconnect, but that is simply not possible for many disabled households, as they would not survive.

A coalition of charities—Age UK, Scope, Fair By Design, Mencap, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and Sense—warns that the cost of living crisis is still adding huge pressures to household finances, with millions facing the dilemma of how they are going to pay their energy bills. Around one in eight households in the UK—that is 12% of households, or 3.4 million—are experiencing fuel poverty this winter. Marie Curie shared with me the thoughts of Rhian, who is terminally ill:

“People with terminal illnesses feel the cold so much more than the healthy and need to heat their homes. People with terminal illnesses still have mortgage or rent and bills to pay. There are no specific benefits offered to help terminally ill people so they have to carry on working with debilitating symptoms. I live with incurable terminal cancer. My monthly heating bill is currently more expensive than my mortgage.”

A social energy tariff is the best way forward. That tariff must be in addition to the warm home discount and the default tariff price cap; it must be targeted at

the neediest and go beyond the benefits system, as National Energy Action has estimated that approximately two thirds of fuel-poor households do not receive any social security payments. All eligible consumers should be auto-enrolled using suppliers' existing data and/or data shared by the Department for Work and Pensions, and the tariff must reduce costs for consumers to pre-crisis levels.

We all know that a social tariff will cost money, so it is essential that those costs are met in a progressive manner. If not, the tariff risks creating a significant cliff edge, with those who narrowly miss out being much worse off. National Energy Action, Citizens Advice and Centrica all say that an energy social tariff should be funded by general taxation to ensure the greatest level of fairness. If that cannot be done, low-income households on the fringes of support must be exempted from paying towards the social tariff. The Government have said that the new round of oil and gas licensing would raise money to reduce bills. A social tariff would have numerous economic benefits; it would also offset costs, as illnesses brought on by having a cold and damp home cost the NHS between £500 million and £1.4 billion a year. Further, increased spending power could boost local economies, with more money spent on our high streets.

Millions of the most vulnerable households and organisations spanning all of civil society are shouting from the rafters for the implementation of a social energy tariff, and the Government cannot and must not continue to bury their heads in the sand. A society should be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable, and this Government, through inaction, are continuing to fail the most vulnerable households right across the country. There were 4,950 excess winter deaths last year in the UK that were down to people living in cold and damp houses, and that is why we need this Bill. Millions of people cannot wait any longer, and that is why I am asking for support for this motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Marion Fellows, Peter Aldous, John McDonnell, Cat Smith, Owen Thompson, Kirsten Oswald, Alison Thewliss, Patricia Gibson, Dave Doogan, David Linden, Alyn Smith and Drew Hendry present the Bill.

Marion Fellows accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 161).

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Knife and Sword Ban

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the debate on banning knives and swords from UK streets, I remind hon. Members that, under the terms of the House resolution on sub judice matters, they should not refer to any individual cases that are currently before the courts.

I call the shadow Minister.

12.47 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government for overseeing a 77 per cent increase in knife crime since 2015; recognises the devastating impact that knife crime has on victims, their families and the wider community; acknowledges that the Government recently announced measures to ban zombie knives and machetes; believes, nonetheless, that this legislation does not go nearly far enough, meaning that a number of dangerous types of knives and swords will remain legal and available on UK streets; therefore calls on the Government to address the shortcomings of the ban by extending it to cover ninja swords and consulting on a further extension; and further calls for the Government to establish an end-to-end review of online knife sales and introduce criminal liability for senior management of websites which indirectly sell illegal knives online.

Ronan Kanda was 16. He went to get a PlayStation controller from his friend, and was yards away from home when he was murdered. He was murdered by two teenagers, who used a ninja sword. They had obtained that sword by buying it online, using someone else's ID to collect it. They stabbed him in a case of mistaken identity. This is a heartbreaking, tragic story of a young life lost, with a family trapped in the most extraordinary grief, and we are here today because it is time that Parliament acts to tackle knife crime head-on.

Seventy seven per cent. That is how much knife crime has risen since 2015, according to the latest figures released by the Office for National Statistics and the Home Office in recent weeks. That equates to a staggering 48,716 violent and sexual offences committed involving a knife or sharp instrument in the past year. There is a huge human cost to this, with 261 lives lost in the year up to March 2022—the last complete data available to us—and roughly four in 10 murders involving a knife or sharp instrument. For those carrying a knife, almost half of cases led to no further action, with current rules allowing those carrying knives to escape further sanction by writing an apology letter.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because he is describing a situation that is virtually identical to the one we faced in Scotland 15-plus years ago. The initiative taken by the then Strathclyde police force and the Scottish Government since has been a very different approach to tackling it—that of treating it as a public health and social problem, with a violence reduction unit. There is nothing in the hon. Gentleman's motion that I would disagree with, but it is like playing whack-a-mole with the different sorts of knives available. Does not he agree that this issue requires a much more fundamental and radical approach?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and that will be part of my case, so I am sure I will be able to meet that test.

It feels like most days we wake up to another tragic story of death and families torn apart. The most basic search online tells us it is all over the country—Bristol, Feltham, Warrington, Haverhill. My own community of Nottingham was rocked last summer when my constituent Ian Coates and University of Nottingham students Barnaby Webber and Grace O'Malley-Kumar were killed with a knife, and I stand with their families in their attempts establish the facts and failings in this dreadful case.

Things are getting worse, not better, and that means more young lives lost, more children drawn into crime and more exploited by criminals. We know this has a huge impact on our society: hundreds of families crippled by grief for murdered loved ones; life chances of young people squandered; potential left unfulfilled; and the criminals getting away with it and going on to cause further misery. Knife crime destroys lives, devastates families and creates fear in our communities. That is why this debate matters. We must invest in our young people so that they are supported to make the right decisions in life, and we must come down hard on those involved in knife crime—real support, real consequences.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Under the Conservative Government and a Conservative police and crime commissioner, Cleveland has the highest crime rate in the UK, and only this weekend we saw another serious stabbing a mile down the road from me in Norton village. We hear the Government try to talk the talk but the bottom line has to be that they are not taking the necessary actions. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree.

Alex Norris: I share my hon. Friend's view. He talks of a case in his community, and we are waking up seemingly so many days in every week with another case in another area in villages, towns and cities. The public are rightly looking for action from us, and that is what I will be setting out in my explanation of this motion.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am glad the shadow Minister talked about "us". I understand that this is an Opposition day debate and the Government will be criticised, but is it not the case that what the public—on the left and the right and the apolitical—are looking for is cross-party consensus where it can be found in this place to deal with what is a very important issue, and that party politics should be set aside for greater cross-party working? Does he also agree that stop and search has a part to play? On machetes and zombie knives, banning them is not the only solution, although it is a good place to start, but the most radical step is to work together.

Alex Norris: We have been clear throughout that when the Government bring forward proposals designed to take this issue on we will give them our support. That is true of the forthcoming legislation on zombie knives, although we have concerns about the scope, but there has to be action, and where there is not action it is our role to point that out. I think the right hon. Gentleman will find that in the tone and spirit of my contribution:

we serve no one if we do not do that, but of course we will build consensus wherever we can, and I hope the whole House can get behind our motion today.

It would be a key mission of a future Labour Government to make the streets safe and halve knife crime within 10 years. Recently, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the Leader of the Opposition unveiled our plans to deliver this with a crackdown on knife crime today and a radical youth prevention programme, and this motion starts to build that out. We are clear: no more loopholes, no more caveats, no more false promises—we need a total crackdown on the availability of serious weapons on Britain's streets.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments on this often heartbreaking topic. My constituent Julie's daughter Poppy Devey Waterhouse was killed in her home with a knife already in her kitchen. Currently, offenders convicted of murder who use a weapon already available at the crime scene have a starting sentence 10 years lower than those who brought a weapon with them. Domestic violence murderers can bank on leniency. Does the hon. Member agree that women killed by knives already in the home need to see equal justice?

Alex Norris: The hon. Member raises an important point that needs parliamentary scrutiny. We have an anxiety, as hon. Friends have mentioned many times, that crimes happening in domestic spaces are in some way deemed less significant and that can be reflected in sentencing. This bears our parliamentary scrutiny.

To turn to the motion, we want to see restrictions on the sale of the most serious weapons, those with no functional purpose. Since 2015 the Government have released 16 different press releases about zombie knives but action has been slow to follow. We are pleased that two weeks ago we saw the statutory instrument aimed at taking some of the knives and machetes off the streets, and, as I have said, we will support the Government in that venture, but I hope to hear from the Minister an explanation of why that is a ban not for now or a few weeks' time, but for September, eight months away. This is an immediate problem that needs more urgency; where is that urgency and leadership? He can be assured of our support, so let's get on with it.

We also believe, as set out in the motion, that we should go further. We would broaden the ban to include a wider range of weapons and to toughen existing rules on serration and length. That would mean finally banning blades such as ninja swords, the weapon that killed Ronan Kanda. His incredible family are campaigning for this, ably supported by their Member for Parliament, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and they are right: any ban on offensive weapons that would not have taken off the street the blade that killed their son is insufficient.

There is also an unintended consequence of leaving out ninja swords. Those who sell these weapons are indifferent to their customers and their customers' intentions. If colleagues think I am overstating my case, they should just put into a search engine "zombie knives" or "ninja swords" and look at how they are marketed. If knives and machetes are prohibited, these firms will

just move on to pushing ninja swords at customers. This is a hole in the Government's plan and it must be plugged.

We can go further still here. Many banned knives continue to be sold where young people can buy them and have them delivered to their home within a few days. We would introduce, and believe the Government should introduce, criminal sanctions on the tech executives who allow knife sales on their online marketplaces—not just Ofcom sanctions as the Government have opted for, but proper criminal sanctions to send a very serious message to these leaders that if their platforms are being used, and they are not actively making sure they are not being used, for the sale of dangerous weapons, there are going to be very serious consequences, not ones that can be priced in as the cost of doing business. To add to that, we must ensure we have the right tools in law to deal with the digital age.

To drive this work forward, our motion calls for a rapid review of online knife sales from the point of purchase through to delivery, in particular looking at strengthening ID and age checks conducted by Royal Mail and Border Force for UK-bound parcels. Currently, all too often serious weapons can be purchased online with loose ID and age checks, with little oversight, and with no background checks. Every time oversight is loosened and checks are not carried out properly, these weapons potentially fall into the wrong hands and are used to kill. We must ensure we have the most robust system possible to prevent this. To those who carry these weapons, we need to send the unmistakable message that the law will come down hard on them—not apology letters, not weak warnings, but proper and serious interventions.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. Will he support two parents in my constituency, Leanne and Mandy, whose children were killed by knife crime? They are calling for much stronger sentences and greater deterrence for knife crime; does he agree with me and their families?

Alex Norris: I am going to set out a few of them shortly, but I would be very interested in meeting Leanne and Mandy, if my hon. Friend could help facilitate that, to hear what more they might want to see.

Our commitment is for every offender to be referred to a youth offending team and have a mandatory bespoke action plan to prevent reoffending. As part of that we need tougher new guidance so that serious penalties are always considered where appropriate, such as curfews, tagging and behavioural contracts. Too many of these are being overlooked and insufficient sanctions such as a letter of apology being used in their stead. That is wrong; we need stronger guidance from the centre on this. But speaking to the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), all of this on its own will not resolve and remove the issue of knife crime in our communities.

We must invest in young people, because prevention is better than cure. We need a total approach—not an either/or, but both. That is particularly germane to this debate, because we know that those who seek to profit from the sale of dangerous weapons shapeshift and adapt around legislation—that is one of the challenges.

[Alex Norris]

So we must tackle demand and tackle issues that mean that young people think they need to carry harmful weapons.

Building on the success of Sure Start—the last truly transformative prevention programme for young children—we would create the Young Futures programme to help prevent violent crime. It would be a targeted programme in every area to identify the young people most at risk of being drawn into violent crime and of buying these products that we are seeking to restrict. We would build around them a package of support that responds to the challenges they face.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): As well as providing support to young people—I welcome the £100 million of existing funding to divert and support young people through preventive work—does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial to provide positive role models through mentoring to every young person in the country? I have worked on that with the charity UpRising, which I have chaired for many years. Does he also agree that we should look at institutions such as the Royal London Hospital and its trauma unit, which has worked on the frontline dealing with the results of knife crime, whether in hospitals or out with paramedics? We can draw on a great deal of knowledge to tackle this epidemic.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because she has done incredible work that is admired by me and the shadow Home Secretary. A lot of what I am about to talk about is based on that experience, because that work has been very good.

The Young Futures programme will bring together services locally to better co-ordinate the delivery of preventive, evidence-based interventions around a young person that help to tackle mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and issues that people might get into with their friends and family. We will then bring that together in a national network that shares evidence, delivers support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime across boundaries and, where appropriate, could deliver universal youth provision. Then, crucially—this speaks to the point just made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali)—we would build out from that, with youth workers in accident and emergency units and in custody centres, and with mentors in pupil referral units, to target young people who are starting to be drawn to violence.

Those are change moments, particularly in healthcare and custody settings. We know it might be the moment when an individual who is sliding into serious violence, whether as a perpetrator or a victim, may need that intervention. It might be the moment where we can get that change in behaviour that will in many cases save their lives. That is why it is so crucial that we have this degree of investment into young people, because otherwise such measures will not work.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Member makes good point. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) pointed out, a lot of this work has been going on in Scotland. Has the hon. Member met Medics Against Violence, whose “Navigator” project does exactly what he is talking

about within a hospital setting? It intervenes through people with lived experience to try to get young people into that frame of mind where they might want to exit that lifestyle and that violence they have got themselves into.

Alex Norris: There is clearly much that we can learn from the Scottish approach. I have not had the opportunity to meet Medics Against Violence, but on the hon. Member’s recommendation I will seek to do that. We strongly support the idea of support and mentors in A&E and custody settings. The evidence shows that would be highly effective.

We need to end the exploitation of children and young people by criminal gangs, and that includes county lines. We need a new criminal offence of child exploitation and a new serious organised crime strategy to go after those cowards who make millions off the back of exploiting young people. To bring the change to deliver that, we need a new, proper cross-Government coalition to end knife crime, bringing together those who have key roles in tackling it and in keeping young people safe, whether they are Ministers, community leaders, faith leaders, the families of victims, sporting bodies, tech companies or young people themselves. Everybody should be brought into this fight. That is the sort of Government that we would seek to lead, if given the opportunity.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The hon. Member is making a passionate speech about bringing various people from across Government and communities together to tackle knife crime. When the shadow Home Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition held a summit in east London last year on knife crime, the Mayor of London, who is the police and crime commissioner, was nowhere to be seen. Can the hon. Member ask the shadow Home Secretary why?

Alex Norris: I have to say I am a little saddened by that intervention. This is a deeply serious issue about which the public expect to hear answers. I do not think the public would consider the policing of the diary of the Mayor, the hon. Gentleman or anybody else to be part of a substantive solution. I wrote my note for his intervention ahead of time, because I know that 86 days before a mayoral election, the Tories are much more interested in trying to fight that election than tackling the problem. If he really believes that is the approach—I do not, but it is for him to use his time as he chooses—let us put that to the people of London.

Mark Pritchard: On the point about working together, perhaps outside this House, rather than inside it, may I say I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman—yes, I agree with His Majesty’s Opposition—on working together more cohesively with local authorities, public bodies, health services and, in particular, around pupil referral units and exclusions? There are so many disparities throughout the country, and it makes sense to bring everybody together to look at best practice.

Alex Norris: That is a hugely important intervention from the right hon. Gentleman. I have real anxieties about pupil referral units, exclusions and internal exclusions. It was a problem prior to the pandemic, but what we are seeing with school absence only compounds that. There is a risk of there being a generation of young people

who are vulnerable to these types of behaviour, unless we take the field and fight for their hearts and minds. The right hon. Gentleman and I are in the same position on that.

I will draw my remarks to a close, because lots of colleagues have lots to say. The motion before us in the name of the Leader of the Opposition is tightly drafted and calls for three of the most pressing changes that we believe are needed to kick-start this process: the ban on ninja swords, with a consultation on further extensions to the proposed ban on zombie knives; an end-to-end review of online knife sales; and criminal liability for senior executives of those websites who do not adequately prevent them from selling knives. We believe those are reasonable changes that the whole House can get behind, and I hope the Government will take them seriously. They should support this motion today. The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire and I have been working on the Criminal Justice Bill Committee for many weeks, and we will be tabling changes to enact those measures, and the Government should accept them. If they take up our ideas before the Bill's next stages, we will support them, but we will not ignore the large-scale damage that knife crime is doing across the country. The public are rightly looking to us for leadership and action, and we stand ready to give them that.

1.7 pm

The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration (Michael Tomlinson): I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government and to speak about our record on fighting crime, including our work to get weapons off the streets and stop them falling into the wrong hands, which is having a real impact.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) said, we should remember what this debate is all about. He is absolutely right that it is not about party politics, point scoring, cheap jibes or sound bites, because the truth is that serious violence and knife crime leave the same trail of misery and devastation in their wake, regardless of the constituency we represent. The tragic reality is that many of us—in fact, far too many—on both sides of this House will have had the humbling experience of sitting with the loved ones of victims of crime whose lives have been cut short in the most tragic ways. There is little one can say in those circumstances that will ease the pain of losing a son, daughter, brother or sister. It is incumbent upon us all—by “us”, I mean the Government and the police, but also each and every one of us here who contributes to public life—to strain every sinew to stop others suffering as they have.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I have also been in the situation in the past month of having to write to the mother of a 21-year-old young man who was stabbed to death at Strawberry Hill station in my constituency last month. Understandably, parents, teenagers and other young people are raising concerns with me about how we can tackle this huge increase. In London alone, as the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire will know, we have seen an increase of almost a fifth in knife crime since 2022. If we are to ban all these weapons, we need good intelligence-led community policing, but in London since 2015 we have seen our police community support

officers cut by a third. What assurances can the Minister give my constituents that we will see an uplift in police officers, including in places such as Richmond upon Thames, which are often deprioritised because they are seen as safe areas? No area is immune from knife crime.

Michael Tomlinson: I agree with the hon. Lady's last point. Given the representatives in the Chamber, I think a lot will be said in the debate, and rightly so, in relation to crime and knife crime in London, including by her. It is right to say that every time somebody picks up a knife or another dangerous weapon, there is the potential for bloodshed, and every time somebody arms themselves, whether for protection or with violent intent, they risk ruining not only others' lives but their own life. That has been brought home time and again in the most devastating fashion in recent days, weeks and months. My thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends mourning such devastating losses. It is any parent's worst nightmare.

That the victims are so often young people with their whole lives ahead of them makes it all the more unbearable. In our shock and our grief, we must remain steadfast in our conviction that we can get knives and other dangerous weapons off our streets and that we can prevent young people from getting drawn into violent crime in the first place.

In the spirit of the intervention that my right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) made on the shadow Minister, I would like to reflect on a debate before the recess led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). During that debate, in which there was cross-party support, my right hon. Friend mentioned the Knife Angel in Aldridge-Brownhills, in the borough of Walsall. She also mentioned a campaign by the Brindley family, and the Brindley Foundation that was set up to bring about positive social action as a result of a tragedy. My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) made powerful interventions during that debate.

It is right to look at the numbers and the latest data. The latest data on hospital admissions of under-25s following an assault with a sharp object show a 25% reduction since December 2019. That is a good indicator—the most reliable indicator for serious youth violence. My right hon. Friend the Policing Minister will in due course mention the crime survey, which shows that violent crime has reduced by 51% since 2010. It is also right to say that nationally homicide has fallen, but it is obvious that data on a chart provides no comfort for victims' families, and that any incident of serious violence or knife crime is one too many. That is why the Government are continually looking at what more we can do to protect our citizens—especially children and young people—and drive those numbers down further.

The police are on the frontline in this effort. Forces up and down the country are aware that this is an issue of significant public concern, and they are firmly committed to tackling it. It is right that I, as a Dorset Member of Parliament, mention our police and crime commissioner David Sidwick, and I pay tribute to him, the work he is doing and the crime plan that he has put together for Dorset.

Thanks to our recruitment drive, which has delivered the promised 20,000 extra officers, we have significantly bolstered the police across England and Wales. With

[*Michael Tomlinson*]

every additional officer, the ability of forces to crack down on weapons carrying and violence is strengthened. That includes through the natural deterrence that flows from an increased police presence. There is the added benefit of reassurance to all our communities, who are clear that they want to see more officers on the beat.

Of course, it is about not just how many police officers there are, but what forces do with the resources and powers given to them. The Government have consistently and publicly backed the police to take the toughest possible stance when it comes to addressing serious violence, knife crime and weapons carrying. That includes supporting the use of stop and search, which is a crucial tool. Since 2019, the police have removed 120,000 knives and dangerous weapons through stop and search surrender programmes and other targeted action.

On that specific subject, every knife seized through stop and search is a potential life saved. In the year 2022-23, stop and search resulted in about 74,000 arrests and removed over 15,000 weapons and firearms from our streets. The significance of stop and search should not be downplayed, because every knife or weapon seized is a potential life saved.

Mark Pritchard: On criminal sanctions, the motion tabled by the Opposition—they will have to forgive me—is too generic, too sweeping and perhaps too adversarial. On criminal liability for the senior management of websites that indirectly sell illegal knives online, however, what is the Government's current thinking—unless, perhaps, the Minister does not want to tell me—vis-à-vis the Criminal Justice Bill, on which I know he is working closely with the shadow Minister?

Michael Tomlinson: The Criminal Justice Bill is passing through Parliament, having had its Committee stage. I do not want to steal the thunder of the Policing Minister, who will wind up the debate on behalf of the Government, but I encourage my right hon. Friend to be here for that.

In the round, we have some of the toughest knife crime laws in the world. For example, it is illegal to carry any fixed-bladed knife in public without a good reason, with such an offence carrying a maximum sentence of four years in prison. The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 strengthened the law on the sale and delivery of knives to under-18s.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): On tougher sentences—I know that the Government are bringing in very tough sentences for knife crime—does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is not just about tough sentences? Knife crime is due to a number of factors, including socioeconomic factors, gang activity, the county lines drug trade, which affects us in Hastings and Rye, and social media influence. Does he agree that building trust between communities and law enforcement is as important as effective community policing and tough sentences, and that as part of that building of trust, raising awareness about knife crime and educating young people about the risks can deter them from carrying weapons?

Michael Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will turn directly to violence reduction units, which will help to address some of those points.

The fact is, where gaps or loopholes are identified, we have shown time and again that we will do what is necessary, and we will always put the law-abiding majority first. My right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin mentioned the Criminal Justice Bill, which is the latest illustration of our unwavering commitment to that mission. It will give the police more powers to seize dangerous weapons, create a new offence of possession of a bladed weapon with an intent to harm, and increase sentences for those who import, manufacture or sell dangerous weapons to under 18s.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) mentioned, as well as tough enforcement, an emphasis must be placed on prevention. It goes without saying that the best thing we can do to make all our communities safe is to stop these crimes from happening in the first place. May I mention and develop my point on violence reduction units, which bring together communities and local partners to tackle the underlying causes of violence in the first place? She will be interested to hear that violence reduction units identify young people in danger of following the wrong path, bringing together key partners from local authorities, the police, health, communities and beyond to better understand the local drivers of violence and provide intensive support through mentoring programmes and the like. I know that she and other hon. Members—across the House, I hope—will support the work going on there.

In addition, we have supported the police in their implementation of the Grip hotspot patrols programme. Taken together, these initiatives have prevented more than 3,200 hospital admissions for any violent injury since funding began in 2019. This shows the real-world impact that our approach is having as we strive relentlessly to break the deadly cycle of violence that robs young people of a future and destroys families.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Minister is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the best thing we can do is to put police stations on our high streets, such as in Maltby, Dinnington and Swallownest in Rother Valley? I am sure he is aware that the Labour police and crime commissioner has underspent his budget this year to the tune of £3.5 million—money that could have been used to reopen police stations and get them going. Does the Minister back my campaign to use that underspent money to get police stations on our high streets?

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for his community; I know he will continue to champion this important issue and continue his campaign. I look forward to his further contributions, and I am grateful to him for raising that point. It is right that through the concerted efforts of the Government, police and partners, we have shown that this threat can be addressed, but we will not stop there.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for responding to this immensely important debate, but may I press him on the specific issues in the motion? Will the Government launch a new consultation on including ninja swords in the ban on online knife sales? If he agreed to that today, we would make a significant step forward.

Michael Tomlinson: The right hon. Lady will know from my response that I referred to previously that the police have told us the greatest risk is the criminal use of zombie-style knives and machetes. That is action that is already being taken, but we will, of course, keep the matter under review. We will not stop there: we will continue to think of the victims and their families, and reaffirm our commitment to getting weapons and knives off our streets. We can and must stop knife crime and make our communities safer. That is what this Government will work tirelessly to achieve.

1.22 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I rise to speak conscious of the tragic deaths of two teenage boys stabbed in my constituency last week, and the very live police inquiry being conducted. My thoughts are with the families and friends of those boys, in particular during this debate. I am conscious that we have had many debates on this subject, and that there are many Members present whose communities have also been hit by similar tragedies, but lamentably those debates have not stemmed the rise in knife crime, as we saw in my own community last weekend.

Over the past few months, regular meetings with the police were already being held in Knowle West, set up by some amazing women in the community. Fortuitously, a meeting was held on the Monday after the events, which I was able to attend, where people came together to express their grief and sorrow. There was a strong message at the meeting. The people there were very clear that they could see that events had been leading to a tragic outcome, and they wanted to know, where have the resources from their communities gone? Where are all the police on their streets? What has happened to their local healthcare and mental health services to support young people? What has happened to their youth services? What has happened to the council funding for services that make those streets and communities fit for living in, such as street cleaning, and make our communities so vibrant? Despite the high-falutin' statistics thrown around in this place, those people know that their community has lost out. People in Knowle West and the rest of south Bristol, like those across the country, have seen those services disappear because of political decisions made in this place since 2010. I am unashamedly political about that point, because those decisions have consequences in our communities.

I pay tribute to Avon and Somerset police for the preventive work they were doing with those communities before these tragic incidents and for the way they have worked since, and to Bristol City Council and organisations such as Youth Moves and Bristol City Football Club's Robins Foundation, which have been doing amazing work for a long time, but particularly in the past couple of weeks. Despite that, and despite working with the voluntary and community sector across Bristol, they cannot fill that gap.

The very clear message from that meeting, and indeed from our city, is that we are totally united in getting these crimes and these criminals off our streets. However, we need much more than the basics. These communities deserve the resources to help young people to thrive, and we owe it to the families of the boys who lost their lives to do everything we can to ensure that it does not happen again.

My constituents are looking for answers on how we can prevent crime, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, we also need to give them action. We have to redouble our efforts to bring Government support back into these communities to enable our local authorities, schools and the police force to take the preventive measures we need to tackle knife crime. It is vital that there are tough consequences for those carrying lethal weapons, and there must be sanctions, but we also need early interventions to stop young people being drawn into crime. As my hon. Friend said, the cowards who bring young people into crime must also face strong sanctions.

Working with the community, as the police are doing in South Bristol, is vital to help to intervene on early criminal behaviour. However, we also desperately need Government support for youth services and mental health support in schools to ensure that young people are safe. I pay tribute to all the schools working so hard across south Bristol to ensure that young people are safe and encouraged to go back into school and back out to live their lives. Young people need to be listened to and, crucially, have that stake in our society. That is why bringing together local partnerships of schools, neighbourhood policing and community groups is so important to prevent crime and tackle the crisis among young people. The communities I represent across south Bristol need to know that we in Westminster understand the urgency and the devastating effect that knife crime is having.

I hope the Government will do more to address the shortcomings of the current proposals by extending the ban to cover ninja swords and introducing criminal liability for the senior executives of the websites that are still selling those weapons online. We need a properly resourced cross-Government effort to tackle crime, with tough consequences for the perpetrators, support for the victims and a renewed focus on prevention.

1.27 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting in a meeting of an all-party parliamentary group in Parliament when I received a call from my 17-year-old son's school. It is unusual to get such a call, so I took it. His head of year informed me that he had been mugged by several youths wearing balaclavas and carrying knives. You can imagine my feelings of utter shock and concern for my son, Mr Speaker. It suddenly dawned on me that I was not alone; there are so many mums who receive that call. Sometimes, that call is tragic, and those mums never get to see their son again—or their daughter, although it is quite often our sons who are involved.

I am relieved to say that it was a case of mistaken identity and my son had not been mugged—he had witnessed the mugging further up the street. However, it reiterated the fact that nobody is immune from knife crime. It is not a socioeconomic issue that affects only certain demographics, but can hit any family, as we have seen in too many situations in this country over the years. It can be the kids of middle-class professionals or kids from estates—it does not matter. Knife crime will affect every child who is out there. That is why we all have to work together to ensure that our children are safe when they go out. I am one of those mums who cannot relax when my children are out until I hear that key in the door. I know I am not alone in that.

[*Nickie Aiken*]

This is not a modern phenomenon that is happening only now. It has happened for decades, and we must get a grip of it. Eleven years ago, a 16-year-old boy was slaughtered in Pimlico in my constituency. Hani was attacked by a group of young people and murdered. Five young men were sentenced to 26 years at His Majesty's pleasure. It dawned on me that because Hani lost his life, his mother Pauline will never hear his key in the door. The lives of the young people involved in that murder have also ended, as have the lives of their families. We must do more to ensure that children do not spend the rest of their lives in prison. Of course we do not want more victims, but those involved in such heinous crimes often are victims themselves, because they are involved in county lines or drug crimes. We must deal with that.

Unfortunately, my constituency is a hotspot for the Met. It has the highest number of knife or sharp instrument offences recorded in any borough of the Metropolitan police force. In the last 12 months, 1,930 knife offences were recorded in Westminster alone—an increase of more than 18% on the previous year.

Sally-Ann Hart: The Office for National Statistics showed that for the year ending March 2023, Sussex recorded 59 offences per 100,000 people—below the national average of 87 per 100,000. We have seen a 16% reduction in knife crime for that period. In contrast, for the Met police—the highest funded force in the country—ONS figures show a 22% increase in knife crime in London. That has a knock-on effect on all the surrounding counties. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan should take a leaf out of the book of Sussex Conservative police and crime commissioner Katy Bourne, and get a grip of serious knife crime—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Lady wants to speak, I will put her on the list of speakers, but her intervention is far too long and others want to speak. She has been here since the beginning of the debate, so I will certainly put her on the list if she wishes.

Nickie Aiken: I agree with my hon. Friend. As the largest city in the country with more than 9 million people, London will always have higher statistics, but it is being let down. Londoners have constantly been let down for eight years because of the current Mayor's failure to get a grip of knife crime. Too many families across London have been affected by knife crime and have lost their beloved children.

There were 156 knife offences in December 2023 alone. That will not stop unless we get a grip of it. It has to be a holistic approach. It is not just about stricter sentences; they have a part to play in the criminal justice system, but we must get to the nub of why young people carry knives in the first place. I have always believed that someone who carries a knife is more likely to use one. I am so concerned that today, too many young people feel that they have to carry a knife for their own protection. We must persuade our young people that there is an alternative. We have heard about different approaches from several Members. We should learn from what is happening in Scotland, which has a lot to offer.

We need a public health and community approach. When I was cabinet member for public protection at Westminster council in 2013, I was shocked to find that Westminster—a borough that people think of as affluent, with areas such as Mayfair, Belgravia and the west end—was No. 3 in the Met's serious youth violence table in 2013. We were even higher than Hackney. I remember going to see the then deputy Mayor for policing, now my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who told me that if I did not get on top of the problem immediately, it would only get worse, and it would never change.

I immediately worked with my brilliant officers at Westminster City Council and the police to establish the first ever integrated gangs unit. I set up a scheme called “your choice”, because I wanted to send a message to young people that they had a choice: they could be involved in gangs and knife crime, but that would end either in the morgue or in prison. There were alternative ways, where young people could work with us. I was clear that we had to understand why young people were involved. I also sent a message to the parents. Often, parents do not know what their young people are getting involved in when they are out, and they do not know how to handle the problem. I offered a helping hand to parents. I am delighted to say that we went straight back down those tables within a year to where we are usually, around 16th out of 19.

There needs to be a full approach, where all the agencies work together. The integrated gangs unit included the police, probation, special needs, schools and social workers. Interestingly, we discovered that a lot of young people on the periphery of knife crime had speech and language issues. They could not properly communicate, and they had not really progressed since primary school. They had had a nightmare moving into secondary school, and they had been lost in the system. We grabbed those young men, and I am delighted that we improved the situation. We have to work together. It should not be a political issue but a community issue where we all work together, as our young people deserve.

We have heard about violence reduction units. We have one in London, run by a very impressive woman, Lib Peck, whom I have known for a long time. She is not getting the backing and seriousness from the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. In 2018, he held a knife crime summit just before the local elections. The then Home Secretary attended, as did the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the deputy Mayor for policing. The Mayor chaired it—he did not speak; he was not held to account. I will never forget that he never allowed himself to be held to account on the situation. He has got to be held to account.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): We talk about accountability, but it works both ways. I agree with everyone who has said that the result is not political, as it affects all political stripes, but we have got here because of political decision making. The hon. Member talks about children not being able to speak or read or write—that is the political decision of 14 years of this Government eroding our education system. We talk about not enough resources for the police—that is a decision to erode community policing. Will the hon. Member take some responsibility for 14 years of this?

Nickie Aiken: I have to gently push back. We have come up from 25th in the PISA tables under the previous Labour Government to 14th for reading under the Conservative Government, which is an impressive result. I am sure that the Policing Minister will mention later that this Government provided the current Mayor of London with funding for 1,000 extra police officers, but he failed to recruit those officers and the money went back into the pot, to be given to other police forces, which I am sure have taken advantage of it. This is not a political issue. I take responsibility for the period in which I was leader of Westminster City Council when we cut youth services, and saw a direct link to problems on the streets. I put my hands up to that, and we put £1.5 million back into the pot. It is right that we make sure that young people have choices and the ability to do things after school and college, and that we give them the best start in life.

We are talking today about a knife and sword ban and the legislation that would be required. I find it quite incredible that manufacturers do not take the responsibility they should take, and that they can use loopholes in legislation. They get away now with producing zombie knives without writing on, because zombie knives with writing on are banned. I cannot understand why anyone would want to manufacture zombie knives; there is only one use for them, and that is not a use we want to see. I suggest that Ministers produce more flexible legislation that talks about “blades”, rather than focuses on specific products. We need to widen the legislation to cover many existing and future products. It is also important that we look at other corporates, such as record labels that willingly put out drill music, which often celebrates gang culture. There must be a direct link to young people feeling that to carry a knife and to be willing to use it is culturally the right thing to do.

I welcome this debate. It is important that we work together, across the parties, to send a clear message to all young people that carrying a knife is not a solution. Every young person in this country, in whatever town, city or village they live, whatever their background, deserves to be safe.

1.41 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I am pleased that the Opposition secured this debate today. It is an important debate and an emotional one for many of us, certainly for me.

Serious violence, including knife crime, is a critical issue in cities, towns and villages across the country. It is important to acknowledge that it is not just a London problem; it affects many constituencies across the whole country. Knife crime alone has risen by 77% since 2015, and the impact is felt widely—not just the devastating and all too often fatal impact felt by immediate family and friends, but the trauma and distress felt by the wider community.

In Batley and Spen, unfortunately we have felt at first hand the traumatic and life-changing impact of knife crime. Since my election, I have worked with two extremely brave local families whose lives have been torn apart by truly dreadful incidents involving horrific attacks with knives. Robert Wilson, from Birstall, was stabbed to death in January 2020 outside the factory where he worked, just doing his job; the attack was carried out by two youths wielding a samurai sword in what the judge

called a “frenzied and senseless” assault. Robert’s wife, Elaine, is a remarkable woman who has shown incredible strength and selflessness following this heinous attack. She is determined to raise awareness of the horrors that knife crime inflicts on families and communities. Despite her unimaginable personal pain, she speaks to young people in schools about her experience, to help them to understand the potentially life-changing consequences of carrying a knife.

In June 2020, just a few months after Robert was killed, Bradley Gledhill, a local 20-year-old, was attacked and stabbed to death in Batley by six young men, five of whom were teenagers. This despicable attack on Bradley and on two of his friends, who were seriously injured, shook the community. It was unprovoked, robbed a young man of his future and showed the very worst of humanity. Having met his incredibly strong mum, Kelly Hubbard, and his sister, Bryony, I do not have the words to describe the trauma and devastation wrought upon Bradley’s family. Like Elaine, however, they have channelled their trauma, with incredible resilience and strength, to campaign to tackle knife crime by establishing the “Bin the Blades” campaign on social media, and working with local schools, speaking to students to convey at an early age the seriousness of this issue and the consequences of carrying dangerous weapons.

I recently worked with Elaine, Kelly and Bryony on a soon-to-be-released short film, commissioned by the BBEST group of schools across Batley and Birstall, specifically about the horrors and impact of knife crime, in which I also reflect on my personal experience of the murder of my sister, Jo Cox, in 2016. It was an extremely emotional experience for all of us, but we all felt that we had a duty to spread the message about the real horrors and personal impact that knife crime can have. This important work is having an impact, and I cannot praise these brave individuals and the schools involved in the project highly enough for what they are doing. No other family should have to go through what these families, the other families we have heard about today and my own family have gone through.

Sadly, there is no single simple solution to eliminate knife crime and remove dangerous weapons from our streets. Families and communities need national leadership if we are to tackle this most serious of issues, and I am always happy to work across parties, but the national leadership has been lacking in recent years. That is why I am pleased that Labour has a five-point plan that will deal with knife crime in a holistic, multi-agency way.

Of course we need tougher consequences for carrying a knife and of course we need more officers on our streets, but we also need early intervention in schools, including youth hubs. We need youth workers embedded in A&E units, pupil referral units and custody centres, and the establishment of mental health and mentoring programmes. We must also, finally, crack down on the availability of these hideous weapons and take action where, sadly, the Conservatives have failed to do so. We should also go after the gangs and tackle the exploitation of young people who are drawn into criminality. All of this should be co-ordinated across Government in a Home Office, Health and Education approach that addresses the root causes of the issue, not just the symptoms—an approach that will break the chains of criminality, prevent young people from getting into

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these groups and gangs, and, if they are drawn in, provide help and mentoring by offering a tailored and supported route out.

Like colleagues across the House, I visit schools in my constituency most weeks, as well as local community groups, sports clubs and businesses. I applaud the work they do across Batley and Spen to build strong communities, but I also hear about the fear many of them feel about antisocial behaviour and violence, including knife crime, in our communities, and their worries about young people being drawn into dangerous behaviours, or simply ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Only a tough approach, but one that is targeted and multi-agency, will succeed. It is hard work, and it will take time, resources, determination and co-ordination. It is not a gimmick. The Labour plan demonstrates how seriously we take this issue, with our mission-led approach, which has been sorely missing in recent years. Only Labour has a detailed plan to make our towns and villages safer, to restore safety to our communities and to get these dangerous weapons off our streets. We owe it to Robert and Bradley, to their families and to all the other families we will hear about today to put that plan into action. I am pleased to endorse the Labour plan today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): On behalf of the whole House, let me say to the hon. Lady that we all appreciate the courage it takes for her to speak on this subject. We as a House, and as friends and acquaintances, will never forget the sacrifice made by her sister, Jo Cox, while she was carrying out her duties as a Member of Parliament.

1.48 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I would like to place on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) for her courage in speaking about her personal experience.

We have heard a lot about how this should not be a political debate, but I am afraid that the choices made have been very political. “London highlights what Labour can do in power”—not my words, but those of the Labour leader in a rare moment of consistency. For once, I agree with him. Just look at the regional crime data and at the data specifically for our capital city, London. The only “PC” Londoners are likely to come across is political correctness. The two areas where knife crime has risen the most, London and the west midlands, both have a Labour police and crime commissioner in charge. If those two areas are taken out of the national figures, they show that across the country knife crime actually fell last year, proving yet again that the shadow Front Benchers need to get their own house in order before preaching to others.

“Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”—empty words that we have heard Labour politician after Labour politician parrot for the last 30 years. But when they were in power, those words from the pound-shop Blairites could not have been further from reality. For all the playground politics of this place, we must remember that these failures have real-life consequences for both the victims of crime and our communities.

When I was growing up in Bexley, one of London’s suburbs, life was always relatively safe, with Bexley consistently ranked in London’s top five safest boroughs. Issues such as knife crime and gang crime were viewed as a distant inner-city issue, which many families, including my own, thought they had left behind when they chose a better life for their children in Conservative-run Bexley. Fast-forward to today, and while Conservative-run Bexley is still one of the safest boroughs in London, with a crime rate approximately a third lower than that of the rest of London, fears about knife and gang crime on our doorstep are very real. Several serious incidents have tragically taken place in my constituency in recent months, and my thoughts remain with all those families, and those across London, who have lost loved ones.

The latest crime rate data highlights the fact that violent crime has been on a consistently upward trend since Sadiq Khan became Mayor, and tragically Bexley is not immune from Labour’s shameful record in London over the past eight years, which has seen more than 1,000 people killed. Life after life has been destroyed by the scourge of knife crime in London, with Londoners let down time and again by politicians in this place who are not brave enough to openly back effective policing measures such as stop and search, which take an average of 400 dangerous weapons off the streets each month. The Labour spokesman could not even bring himself to mention stop and search today. Let us not forget that it was this Labour Mayor of London who openly pledged to

“do all in my power to further cut”
the use of stop and search.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr French: Now look at the state of London after eight years of Sadiq Khan’s politically correct policing. Just look at the data. In London, we have seen a 54% increase in knife crime since Labour took office. According to the Met’s official data, the number of stop and searches carried out in 2023 was 18.9% lower than it had been in the previous 12 months, and at the same time knife crime offences rose by 17.1%.

Helen Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr French: Before anyone accuses me of stoking a culture war—which, as we all know, is the left’s new buzzword to try to shut down critical debates about their woke ideas—let me also point out that the official data shows that white people were the most searched ethnic group in this period: 10,000 more over a two-year period. That is why I make no apology for my support for frontline officers using the likes of stop and search to help take dangerous knives off the streets, and why I back this Government to close the legal loopholes on zombie knives and to roll out scan-and-search technologies as quickly as possible. As politicians, we should all be showing real leadership in this place and doing the same.

Helen Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr French: The public have rightly had enough of empty gesture politics and warm words from politicians when yet another life is unnecessarily taken. They want action. They want their political leaders to get a grip on

crime and make all our communities safer again. In London, the need to get a grip on crime and get back to basic policing could not be clearer. Not only are the Metropolitan police in special measures, but their leadership now faces a confidence crisis, from the perspective of both the public and many serving frontline police officers. Morale in the Met has arguably never been lower. It is little wonder, when decent, hard-working frontline officers feel that time and again they do not have the backing of the Mayor and their leaders to do the dangerous job of being a police officer in London, whether that means using stop and search to take dangerous knives off the streets, or specially trained firearms officers still having the confidence to pull the trigger in those split-second life-or-death moments when they guard us in places like this.

I am genuinely sad to say that I was not surprised to learn that the Met was the only force in the country that had failed to hit its recruitment target, despite millions of pounds in support being provided directly by the Government. That is yet another failure on the part of the Labour Mayor and police and crime commissioner, and one that has cost London more than 1,000 police officers—1,000 extra police officers could be walking the beat, actually attending burglaries or helping to stop what feels like a never-ending rise in knife crime. Seriously, what chance do ordinary Londoners have when criminal gangs roam the streets of London targeting their next victims, with the only questions normally being whether a watch, a car or a phone has been stolen this time, and whether the police will even bother to investigate the crime?

True to form—and this is what Labour Members are trying to do here today—the Labour Mayor of London continues to deflect all of these failures on to the Government, rather than taking any accountability as the police and crime commissioner for London. In fact, I understand that the Office for Statistics Regulation recently had to correct Sadiq Khan's misinformation on knife crime, stating that it had "significantly increased across" his tenure and not declined, as he had claimed.

Quick to plead poverty at every opportunity, the Mayor always manages to find money for his mates or money to waste on his latest pet projects rather than more funding for frontline policing. All that is paid for, of course, from the wallets of Londoners, including a staggering £200 increase in the Mayor's share of council tax and his continued hammering of motorists across London. And look how he spends taxpayers' hard-earned money, with £30 million for his union mates despite a record number of strikes—

Kim Leadbeater: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr French: He has spent £29.5 million on additional staffing costs, including a 57% rise in Mayor's Office costs and a 33% rise in press office spending; and let us not forget the £10 million for Met officers to learn what colour their personalities are. Now I do not know what colour my personality is, but what I do know from my experience of life is that when you see red ahead, you should follow the warning signs and stop. When it comes to crime and transport, the Great British public should look very closely at the sorry state of our capital city to see the big bright red warning sign highlighting what to expect if another left-wing, human rights London lawyer were ever in charge of our United Kingdom.

As the Leader of the Opposition has said himself, London highlights what Labour can do in power. With taxes up 70%, with London now officially the slowest city in the world in which to drive—that is, if your car has not already been stolen—and with more than 1,000 people tragically killed under this Labour Mayor, a Labour-run United Kingdom is a scary prospect indeed.

1.57 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I wish I could say that it is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), but I would not like to mislead the House in any way.

Mr French: In what way?

Ms Brown: No—I mean that I, not the hon. Gentleman, might mislead the House by saying that I enjoyed his extraordinary rant. Let me gently say that if he wants to audition to become the Conservatives' failing candidate in the mayoral election that is about to be held, there are better places to do it than here, especially if he is too frit to take an intervention from the other side. I would, again, gently say that that suggests that he is not capable of listening to anyone or engaging in debate. He is very comfortable with his own voice.

Last July, in West Ham park, Rahaan Ahmed Amin was killed by a knife wound to his heart. Rahaan was allegedly stabbed with a foot-long ninja-style sword. He was 16 years old, and his death was absolutely devastating for his family and for our community. Those who have who have been charged or arrested in connection with Rahaan's death were the same age, or even younger.

What happened to Rahaan was simply appalling, and it comes after so many other cases of young lives destroyed, families devastated, and communities broken by fear and distrust and struggling to heal. That fear and that harm continue. Just last week we had three separate stabbings in Newham. Last Monday a 14-year-old boy was stabbed on a bus. Last Tuesday one of our local teaching staff was stabbed in Woodgrange Road. Last Thursday evening another man was also stabbed in Forest Gate. It is a testament to our police and to our NHS that no one died.

For many years, this place has debated and passed laws on zombie knives and machetes, but these laws clearly have not done the job. My constituents want to know from the Minister why he feels that the drip-feed of small amendments to the law around knives has not worked. Why are there loopholes? Why have the Government not banned so-called ninja swords like the one that allegedly killed Rahaan? And why are our existing laws so poorly enforced, especially online?

I understand—most of the Conservative Members have alluded to this—that knife crime is complex. None of us thinks that all access to knives can be prevented, and we all understand that there are many different causes that prompt a child or young person to pick up a knife, so surely what we need is comprehensive action to tackle both the availability of knives and the root causes of knife crime. One cause of many young people's deaths in Newham has been involvement with the gangs who groom and exploit young people, ruining lives for profit. Hon. Members may remember that I have been banging on about this agenda for about

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seven years now, but I do not think we have actually got a grip on the criminal networks that cause this massive harm.

In October 2022, I published a report on child criminal exploitation. I talked to experts across the police, the schools, social services and charities, and one of our main recommendations was for the Government to focus on disrupting those who control the organised criminals who groom our children. I am obviously delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the shadow Home Secretary, has pledged a new criminal offence of child criminal exploitation and a new strategy to go after the gangs who are profiting from the exploitation of our children.

Nickie Aiken: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member on this point and I hope that the Government will do something similar, but does she agree that this is also about demand? Too many middle-class professionals probably do not realise that behind their taking of cocaine or whatever are young people being exposed to crime.

Ms Brown: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Some people who buy cocaine and other drugs think that it is some kind of victimless crime, but it is not. We are seeing the impacts of those crimes in the deaths, the grooming and the destruction of so many young lives.

I am truly disappointed that the Government have not made progress on a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation or on making it a dedicated offence. The need for such a change has been raised repeatedly over the years, including by the Children's Commissioner and the Education Committee, so I would be really grateful if the Minister could offer an update. Will the Government support and push through the private Member's Bill for a new offence put forward by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), or will they match Labour's commitment and create a new offence of child criminal exploitation in Government time? We must all acknowledge that some of this is about wider social problems such as poverty and the lack of access to opportunity. These problems are getting much worse due to the cost of living crisis, because poverty creates vulnerability to grooming and destroys a young person's trust in their future.

In closing, I want to mention the terrible rise in unmet need for mental health treatment, particularly for young people. The truth is that our mental health services simply cannot cope with the level of need, and this is yet another devastating symptom of 14 years of Tory failure, where services have been trashed by a lack of desperately needed resources. We clearly need a joined-up approach, so I would be grateful to know whether the Minister is working across Departments to identify the resources and the reforms that we desperately need. We need a Government who will support early intervention across the board, in schools and A&Es and through community organisations and youth work, but the record of this Conservative Government is one of trashing prevention and dithering about getting deadly weapons off our streets, so it is quite clear what my constituents need: they need a Labour Government.

2.6 pm

Steve Tuckwell (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for calling me to speak in this incredibly timely debate. No one in this House today wants knives on our streets. My constituents do not want knives on the streets of Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and I certainly do not want knives on the streets in the community that I have been elected to serve. One more day when just a single knife remains on our streets is a day too long, and that is why the Government's work to try and achieve this is welcome: 120,000 knives have been taken off our streets in the last four years, but there is of course more to be done. There always is, but I believe that this provides an impetus for how we can navigate this issue.

Other changes in the law, including allowing courts to hand down longer custodial sentences and the seizure of weapons in suspects' homes will go a long way, as will so-called hotspot policing and stop and search. These changes cannot come soon enough, as I know those on the Front Bench recognise, especially for my constituents and for law-abiding citizens across the capital.

Earlier in the debate I heard a reference to the Knife Angel. I would like to pay tribute to Rev. Andy Thompson of St Margaret's Church in Uxbridge and other faith leaders across my constituency who have arranged for the Knife Angel to visit my constituency, which will benefit youth engagement on many of the points that have been talked about in the House today.

However, it bears noting that public safety and policing in London fall within the remit of the Mayor as the capital's police and crime commissioner. This is the same Mayor of London who suddenly U-turned on Uxbridge police station in the run-up to the by-election, the same Mayor of London who has seen instances of knife crime grow over 50% since he took office in 2016, the same Mayor of London under whom the annual knife crime figure has swelled 22% to just under 14,000 in the most recent total, the same Mayor of London who is in charge of policing in our city and who now sees an average of 38 knife crime offences a day, and the same Mayor of London who will not talk about those figures.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary noted in a recent letter to the Mayor that if the figures for London were discounted, the national trend would show a 1% reduction on last year. That is small, but it is a sign of progress. In London, however, with nearly 14,000 instances of knife crime, the Office for National Statistics suggested that we can see a 5% increase. Enough is enough. London can no longer be ignored by the current Mayor, who is also the police and crime commissioner. Crime figures for London since 2016 have deteriorated against national trends, and our capital city deserves better.

2.9 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): In the past decade, the Tories have cut 21,000 police officers across the UK and knife crime has gone up by 77%. This Government's response has been completely inadequate. The serious violence strategy is more than five years out of date, the serious violence taskforce has been disbanded, and everyone knows from their own communities that too little is being done to divert young people away from violence and crime.

People in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale have been left to face the consequences of Tory knife crime failure, and the B23 postcode in my constituency has the highest rate of knife crime in the west midlands, with 39 people stabbed last year, yet we have just a single weapon surrender bin.

If we are serious about ending the blight of knife crime in our communities, we need the Government to be serious about funding. In the west midlands, we have lost 2,221 officers and have had £175 million slashed from our budgets since the last Labour Government. That is felt most harshly in areas that are already struggling. Of the 225 left-behind neighbourhoods in the UK, two are in my constituency, which is the fifth most deprived in the country.

With the increase in county lines and gangs, young people do not feel safe walking to and from school—it is as simple as that. Even when my constituents contact the police, the massive funding failures and long waiting times in the criminal justice system mean they very rarely see any justice.

A constituent told me that she had raised the issue of a gang in her block following a recent stabbing. She told me that, when her neighbour was threatened with a knife by a group of young people and she reported it to a police community support officer, she was advised that the best thing she could do would be to “make friends” with the gang.

One of the most worrying aspects of knife crime is the large amount of youth violence across the UK. When a stabbing is reported in areas like Erdington, it is too often a child being stabbed by another child. This means that prevention is key, and Departments must work together to prevent knife crime before it happens.

Last March, I asked the Secretary of State for Education how many schools in my constituency use metal detectors to screen pupils, and how many weapons had been recovered as a result. The Department could not tell me because it does not record this data. It is unbelievable that the Department for Education does not know how many schools across the country use metal detectors, or even how successful they are. If we are missing this important preventive information, what else are we missing? It just is not good enough.

It is not right that people in Erdington, and across the UK, have to fear violent crime when walking to the shops or when their children walk to school. The primary objective of any Government must be to keep people safe, which is why it is so concerning that, in total, the Prime Minister has announced a ban on zombie knives 14 times. Since the Government first attempted a ban in 2016, there has been a 24% increase in murders involving a knife or sharp instrument. Something clearly is not working.

Labour is committed to halving knife crime across the UK in the next decade, thereby preventing the further serious crime, youth offending and tragic loss of life that come with it. We would implement guaranteed sanctions and serious interventions for young people found carrying knives, we would refer every offender to a youth offending team, and we would introduce a mandatory, bespoke action plan to prevent reoffending.

Labour would completely crack down on the availability of knives on Britain's streets, including where further laws are required on online knife sales. It is clearly time for an election, because communities in my constituency, and young people across the UK, deserve better.

2.15 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): One of the things I most enjoy about this job is when people come to see me in the Palace of Westminster and I get to show them where I work, because whatever they think of hon. Members, this building and this democracy are theirs, and I want to show them this wonderful place and why it matters.

A few months ago I took people from High Heritage, a charity in my constituency, around the House of Commons. I showed them the history of the building, and afterwards we sat down on a bench in Westminster Hall and had a conversation. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), who is not currently in her place, was next to me talking to a school from her constituency. She did a far better job of extolling the virtues of her role as a Member of Parliament than I did. I listened to her speech, and then I spoke to the people from High Heritage.

One of them was Joyce, whose son, a Peterborough lad known as Alfred, had been stabbed and murdered only months earlier while he was at university in Northampton. What Joyce said to that group of people who came to Parliament will never leave me. She said, “Let’s not shy away from this conversation about knife crime, because our children and young people need to know the devastating effects that carrying a knife can have.” I asked her what she thought the Government needed to do to make the message clear to young people that carrying a knife is unacceptable, and to get knives off the street. She said, “Quite honestly, it would be a tough, zero-tolerance approach, because only tough love is going to stop young people carrying knives.” That really hit home, because this is a mother who has lost a son. This is a mother who is determined that something good comes from perhaps the most appalling thing a parent could imagine. It will always remain with me. I remember another conversation in Cathedral Square, where Joyce was speaking to a number of people about her terrible experience.

A man called Andrew Bowley has also told me about his experience. He was stabbed five times in Peterborough in 2017. He lived and has dedicated a good proportion of his life to talking about his experience and why knife crime is so appalling. It is still happening, and it is still happening in Peterborough.

Although it is good news that we have seen arrests, the fact that they come after such devastating incidents is obviously not good. Five Peterborough teens who carried out brutal knife attacks in a city park have been locked up. They have been jailed for a maximum of 70 years between them, with some of them getting 19 years. I am pleased they received such tough sentences, but not only have they ruined the lives of the people they attacked, who will suffer the consequences for many years; they have also ruined their own lives. They are also going to be in prison for an extremely long time. Obviously, that is good in the sense that potentially very violent people are off the street and the public are safe, but it is tragic to see five more lives ruined.

What else do I want to talk about in this speech? I want to reflect more on that zero-tolerance, tough approach, but let us park that for a moment and come back to it. First, I want to pay some tributes. At the end of last year, Peterborough's police had a knife amnesty,

[Paul Bristow]

which resulted in 170 blades, knives and offensive weapons being taken off the streets. They can no longer be used in the way we would not want them to be used, and that is good. I heard the statistic earlier of 120,000 knives having been taken off the streets thanks to amnesties. Obviously, that is a good thing.

Our Criminal Justice Bill is going through Parliament, and it will create new offences and ensure that we do what we can to tackle knife crime. Let me give my opinion and, I believe, that of Joyce. The maximum sentence for carrying a knife is four years and many repeat offenders are going to prison on a regular basis, but I want to see the zero-tolerance, tough approach that Joyce advocated, as there is no excuse for carrying a knife in public. I know that a lot of young people, unfortunately, get themselves drawn into difficult circumstances, but the message needs to go out loud and clear from this place: if you are carrying an offensive weapon, a knife, a bladed weapon such as we are hearing about today, like zombie knives—you will go to prison. You will receive a custodial sentence. Only that zero-tolerance, tough approach will get that message through to people. The message needs to get through to families and parents that if they allow their children to get involved in knife crime, those children will ruin their lives and go to prison. Prison is probably the least worst option for them, as they could end up dead—no one wants to see that happen.

No one becomes a politician or comes into this place because they do not want to see a solution to an issue such as knife crime. A cross-party approach should be taken on this. Let me say gently to some Opposition Members, whom I respect and like enormously—I know that many of them care deeply about the constituencies and communities they represent—that as soon as we start bringing party politics into this, people such as Joyce and the young people I spoke to, including those at High Heritage, switch off. I see Opposition Members pointing, and I know that it just not Members on one side of the House who are guilty of this, but once we start talking about plans with the word “Labour” inserted in front of them and saying, “Only this is ever going to resolve any of the problems, because it is written by some bright spark at Labour HQ”, people turn off.

That is not what this debate should be all about. It should be about what we see in our constituencies and what we can do to solve it. It should be about what we can do as Members of Parliament, whether we have the word “Conservative”, “Labour” or “Liberal” next to our name, and as people rooted in our communities, elected by our local people to listen to our local people and to stamp out knife crime in our constituencies. I can stand here and talk about the need for a zero-tolerance approach and what I think needs to happen, which is that anyone caught carrying a knife should go to prison, but deep in our communities we can do what I did, and what I am sure many hon. Members have done, which is listen to people such as Joyce and the High Heritage charity, the people affected by knife crime, and be their advocates. I know that many Members of Parliament on both sides of the House do that, but it is just a shame that we have not articulated that more clearly in this debate.

2.23 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On 6 January, two people were convicted of the murder of Kalabe Legesse, a 29-year-old young man who was stabbed on 30 December 2022 in Peckham Rye park, in the neighbouring constituency to mine, while being robbed of his mobile phone. Kalabe was my constituent. He was a graduate, the oldest son in his family and very much loved by everyone who knew him. Kalabe was killed by a single stab wound to the heart with a large hunting knife, which was later found at the home of one of his attackers.

On Monday 4 September, I stood at the police line on the Angell Town estate, in my constituency, following the murder of 21-year-old Ronaldo Scott with a huge knife in broad daylight. On 3 October, I stood at the police line on Coldharbour Lane following the murder of another young man, whom I cannot name because of legal proceedings. Again, he had been murdered with a huge knife. Just last Monday, another stabbing took place. This time, it was of a 19-year-old and it happened on the Kingswood estate—thankfully, he survived his injuries. Each time such horrific events take place, a family has its heart ripped out and the wider community are devastated and traumatised. Young people are left terrified to leave their home, and parents are left feeling fearful each moment that their child is out of their sight. Knife crime extinguishes lives, but it also snuffs out hope, aspiration and any sense of a better future.

Knife crime is not inevitable. It is not a normal part of life that we should accept just happens in some places—it is not acceptable. It is not unsolvable. It has been allowed to spiral under this Government because of the political choices they have made: the political choice to make local authorities bear the brunt of austerity, with the resources that funded youth work, early help and support for families, Sure Start centres, play equipment and community centres stripped away year after year for more than a decade: the political choice to take £1 billion out of the budget for the Metropolitan Police Service, decimating neighbourhood policing, the bedrock of good police-community relations, and damaging the trust and confidence of communities in policing; and the political choice to do literally nothing about the growth in the use of the most dangerous bladed weapons—zombie knives, machetes and ninja swords—despite promising to do so since 2016. The Government have repeatedly said that they would do so “when parliamentary time allows”, as if they were not the same Government who have control over the allocation of parliamentary time and can choose to prioritise whatever issues they like.

This Government have chosen not to prioritise taking the most dangerous weapons off our streets. The clinical director of King’s College Hospital’s emergency department has described these weapons to me as “weapons of war”, capable of inflicting horrific injuries, breaking bones, slicing through internal organs and often leaving victims with no chance of survival and leaving those who do survive with life-changing consequences. The ban the Government have now announced is partial and has significant loopholes.

The appalling losses we have seen in my constituency have led to some exceptional work to tackle serious violence. I want to pay particular tribute to Ecosystem Coldharbour, which is funded by the Mayor of London’s

violence reduction unit's MyEnds programme. Ecosystem brings together a number of trusted local organisations that work with young people and families. For the past three years, they have been delivering a range of positive activities for young people to help them pursue their ambitions; trauma support for people affected by serious violence; and grant funding for a range of smaller community organisations to be able to deliver targeted interventions.

That includes an extraordinary group of women who go by the name of Circle of Life Ignite, all of whom have lost a child to knife crime. They are campaigning, in memory of the children they have lost, to install bleed-stop kits to provide the emergency intervention that is needed when a stabbing happens. I have no words to express the courage of women who are turning their own tragedies into hope so that other victims do not have to do. Ecosystem is showing how serious violence can be tackled at a community level, and that is the approach that the next Labour government will implement across the country.

Young Futures partnerships will bring community organisations together with local councils, the police, youth justice services and others to provide targeted support to young people at risk of serious violence. We will ensure that mental health support is available for young people in every community in the country. We will close the loopholes in the partial, piecemeal ban on large knives that the Government have announced. We will act where the Conservatives have failed.

I want to give the last word to a young constituent named Joshua Eyakware, who wrote the following poem about the work of Ecosystem:

"See in the ecosystem, we show the young people that there's a better way,

Give them the tools to succeed and make a better place,
Just give them the space to grow to learn and to feel free,
And show them peace and happiness are what they can achieve.
So, let's celebrate our young people, because they're our future,
Our next leaders and heroes so let's make them feel super,
to give them a better life let's give them love and our time,
and one day the darkness will fade because we taught them
how to shine."

That work in our communities is having an impact and is genuinely transformative, but those in my community who work to tackle serious violence, and those across the country who do the same, need more leadership and support from central Government. That is the leadership that a Labour Government will provide. We need a general election so that it can be delivered.

2.30 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): This Government are letting our young people and communities down when it comes to tackling the devastating impact of knife crime. Under the Tories, knife crime has gone up by more than 77% since 2015, and sadly we have seen the tragic consequences in towns such as Luton.

I rise to speak in support of Labour's motion. I press the Government to strengthen their legislation and ban not only zombie-style knives and machetes, but ninja swords and other dangerous knives, which would remain legal under their current plans. But if we are to reduce the needless loss of young lives, we must do more than

legislate and enforce our way through. Of course we must ensure that carrying knives and knife crime have significant consequences, but we also need support in place to stop our young people feeling that they need to carry knives and being drawn into knife crime. I support Labour's knife crime plan to guarantee sanctions and serious interventions for young people found carrying knives, and to provide tough new guidance so that serious penalties, such as curfews and tagging, are used where appropriate.

I will focus on Labour's Young Futures early intervention programme: a targeted programme in every area to identify young people most at risk of knife crime; a plan that will bring together services at a local level, to better co-ordinate the delivery of preventative measures; a national network of youth hubs to deliver joined-up support for young people; a plan for youth mental health, with support in every school and open-access hubs in every community, with action to tackle mental health waiting lists too; and a programme that will see youth workers in A&E units, custody centres and our communities, with mentors in pupil referral units to better target and support young people at risk. The Young Futures programme will work alongside a new serious organised crime strategy to go after the gangs that are making millions from the exploitation of children and young people in our communities.

In Luton, sadly we have seen too many young people and children killed by other young people and children. Lives have been lost and changed forever for all involved, especially the families who are left behind. I have listened to families whose children have been killed and to our Luton community, who do not want to see yet another young life lost in our town. It is heartbreaking because so much loss could have been prevented, but for the political decisions of this Conservative Government that have destroyed the youth services that carry out vital preventative work, diminished the visible presence and intelligence of neighbourhood policing that helps our communities feel safe, and failed to deal with the criminal gangs that exploit and draw our young people into knife crime.

Despite this sorry picture of 14 years of Conservative Government stripping back our public services and making huge cuts to councils in the name of austerity, we have some hope through excellent partnership working at a local level, such as the Luton Youth Partnership and the multi-agency support hub work, which is a systemic approach developed over a number of years and led by Dave Collins at Luton Council. I pay tribute to the work that he and so many others involved in that collaborative approach carry out.

A collaborative approach is at the heart of Labour's Young Futures programme, with a cross-Government initiative to oversee it, bringing together all the relevant Departments to set objectives, oversee delivery and assess outcomes. Importantly, Labour will work with local councils to establish new Young Futures partnerships. They will build on existing successes, such as in Luton, by co-ordinating and better integrating existing services for teenagers and young people in their areas; by involving council youth services, including youth offending services, social services and community safety officers; and by using the police, mental health services, schools, and voluntary and community organisations to map the provision of services, establish data and systems to

[Rachel Hopkins]

identify children and young people at risk of exploitation and crime, and to establish appropriate referral and intervention.

I emphasise the importance of the excellent work done by our voluntary and community organisations in Luton, many of which have had to pick up the pieces after Conservative cuts to our local council and health services. They are working together to support our young people and communities, be they from our local youth groups such as the scouts and guides, mentorship by groups such as Unleashing Potential, as well as grassroots community activists such as the excellent Wingman Mentors, which I recently met with my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). That group told us about its campaign to get more bleed kits in community locations, recognising that if we are not able to fully prevent stabbings, we can try to ensure that lives are saved by the early use of bleed kits by local people on the scene before paramedics arrive.

To close, we know that knife crime destroys lives, devastates families, and creates fear and trauma in our communities. Our young people deserve better. A Labour Government will give young people their future back, but we need a general election to do so.

2.36 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker:

“I just want it to stop. I just don’t want it to be happening here...where there are little kids playing in the park.”

That is how one Coventry teen described how he felt growing up in the shadow of knife crime, and he is far from alone. In the national media, knife crime is often talked about as if it is just a London thing, but in truth it touches young people across the country. One in six children between the ages of 13 and 17 reported being a victim of violence last year, and around half say that violence, or the fear of violence, affects their day-to-day lives.

Things are particularly bad in the west midlands. According to data from last year, the region had the highest rate of knife crime anywhere in the country, with 178 offences per 100,000 people. That is five times higher than north Yorkshire, which ranked bottom. Nationally, knife crime is up a shocking 77% since 2015. While this House is unanimous in recognising the problem, too often politicians look for quick fixes or put appearing “tough” above providing real answers.

What is striking about knife crime is that we know what drives it and what reduces it—and that is not easy, *Daily Mail* headline-grabbing answers. It is not a matter of locking up more kids for longer while ignoring the drivers of the real problem, as the actor Idris Elba has warned. I pay tribute to him for his work campaigning on the issue. Since custodial sentences for young people are associated with high levels of reoffending, proposals such as mandatory prison sentences for first-time knife possession are likely to draw young people further into criminality, while failing to tackle the causes of why young people carry knives in the first place. Part of the answer is closing loopholes in the ban on the sale of dangerous weapons, but that is not the whole story.

As those familiar with the issue know too well, Britain has a clear example of how to tackle knife crime. Two decades ago, Glasgow was known as one of the murder capitals of Europe, with one of the highest rates of homicides in the global north. Rather than a simple law and order response, a public health approach was taken that sought to diagnose and prevent violence, rather than just reacting after the event. That involved increasing support for young people at risk of getting swept up in violence. After 10 years, the number of hospital admissions from knife attacks had fallen by 62%. Again, that might not make *Daily Mail* headlines, but the evidence is there.

If young people at risk are offered talking therapy, extracurricular activities, such as sports programmes, or enrolled in mentoring programmes, they are less likely to get caught up in knife crime.

Paul Bristow: I hear what the hon. Lady says about providing services and alternatives for young people, but does she also believe in a serious deterrent and in enforcement? Does she agree that if a person is caught carrying a knife or other offensive weapon, a custodial sentence is the most appropriate punishment?

Zarah Sultana: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As I mentioned in my speech, we in this Chamber are often quick to resort to law and order and custodial sentences, but that is not the whole response, because it does not fix the problem. As I will mention, there is an issue around poverty and deprivation. We are not giving young people hope and we are not giving them opportunities, but people do not want to talk about that, because it involves a long-term strategy and investment. What we have seen over the past 14 years is the complete opposite of that. We have seen youth centres close down and schools stretched beyond measure when it comes to coping with the pressures that young people experience. So yes, it is not the only response, and it is not what we should always fall back on.

In Coventry, we have seen a significant fall in youth crime after an approach similar to that seen in Glasgow was adopted. Launched in May 2023, the “community initiative to reduce violence” programme has sought to identify young people at risk and offer them tailored support to help develop positive routes away from violence—from assisting with housing, health and debt to access to education. After six months, the programme has been credited with helping to cut knife crimes in the city by almost half. Of course, there is more work to be done. Just last weekend, two young people were stabbed in separate incidents in the city—my thoughts go out to them and their families. The evidence clearly shows that providing support for young people at risk, rather than just abandoning them, is how we address this issue at a deeper level.

Although we must roll out these violence reduction approaches across the country—I am pleased that Labour’s Young Future programme looks set to do that—we know that knife crime has a deeper structural cause as well. There is a wealth of evidence showing that these social ills are correlated with deprivation and inequality, with countries that have higher levels of inequality and poverty being more likely to have higher rates of violent crime. That is not surprising. When young people are abandoned, when their job opportunities disappear, and when their futures look bleak, it is little wonder that they are angry and feel hopeless.

The answer to kids being scared of knife crime in Coventry is not to lock up more young people for longer. The answer is not just to ban more dangerous weapons, however needed that is. The fundamental answer is through offering young people a route away from these problems, by giving them the support that they need to get on and giving them hope in their future, and that is what the next Labour Government must do.

2.42 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and to be the last Back-Bench contributor to this debate, which on the whole—with one exception—has been thoughtful, insightful, heartfelt and really sensitive.

I rise to speak today on behalf of my constituents in Luton North, who I know care a great deal about knife crime—when I say “care”, I mean that they are worried and scared about knife crime. There is no doubt that knife crime has become a national crisis, increasing by 77% since 2015. It is a scourge on our society and it has tragic and often fatal consequences. Knife crime not only takes lives, but devastates families, destroys futures and ambitions, and has a detrimental ripple effect on all our communities. Unfortunately, we know the impact of this all too well in Luton, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) has already highlighted.

In September 2023 alone, in just one month, there were five stabbings in our town, one of which tragically led to my constituent, 16-year-old Ashraf Habimana, losing his life. Two loving parents lost their son, Ashraf’s teachers and friends lost his bright and energetic personality, and our community has lost another young person under appallingly violent and, importantly, avoidable circumstances. His family and friends now have to grieve the loss of Ashraf and wait hopefully to see justice served, but the lasting trauma of this event will remain with them and our community forever.

Two years ago, another 16-year-old boy, Humza Hussain, was stabbed to death outside school—what another tragic loss, what another waste of life, what another future stolen. Our young people are most at risk when it comes to knife crime. In the year ending September 2022, there were more than 46,000 recorded offences involving a knife or sharp instrument in England and Wales, with young men and boys most likely to be both the perpetrators and victims of this crime.

I recently had the honour of meeting staff from Bedfordshire’s brilliant violence and exploitation reduction unit with my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South to find out more about their “Just Drop It” knife campaign. At its heart is the voice and experience of a mum, Roseann, who tragically lost her young son, Azaan “AJ” Kaleem, in 2018. Too often nothing is done when there are signs that a young person is getting into trouble, being groomed by gangs, or falling into danger online. To me, the important part of today’s debate is about the child exploitation side of it—the side of it on which this Government have lagged behind. I do not care whether it has “Labour” or “Conservative” on the front of it. Parents, families and communities just want it done. To me, the people who prey on innocent young

lives, regardless of their intentions—whether it is crime, sexual exploitation or drugs—are all the same and we should treat them exactly like that.

When teenagers say that they do not feel safe, or that they are struggling themselves with trauma or abuse, no one listens and no help is provided. That is what we are up against. The “Just Drop It” strategy aims to tackle these issues, providing accessible opportunities for young people to help them achieve their potential, ensuring that they feel supported and safe, and helping them to realise that there is an alternative to a life of knife crime and violence. All of these young boys and men leave families mourning the loss of life and the loss of a future that should have been bright and, importantly, safe.

The brilliant organisation, Boxing Saves Lives, works with hundreds of young people in Luton. It was set up and is now run by the inspirational JP, who often highlights the work that rightly goes on tackling violence against women and girls, and asks what about violence against boys and men. I could not agree with him more. Far too many young boys are exposed to violence and fear from a very young age. What is the Minister doing to tackle that? If the Government are taking any action, why is it not working?

If these deaths were as a result of a physical illness killing our young people, teams of doctors and researchers would be working day and night to find a cure. But we already know the cure; we know the lessons that need to be learned. The cure is all the things that have been stripped from our communities over the past 14 years: decent community policing; youth centres; decent schools; Sure Start centres; decent housing; mental health support; and tackling poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South says, shockingly, there are more food banks than police stations.

The results of knife crime have no political stripe, but how we have got here does. These were all political choices that led to the perfect storm of knife crime that we see in our society today. When we held community meetings after young Ashraf’s death, hundreds of people came and they said, “Here we are again”. Sadly, they were right. Sadly, until all the things that we know work are put in place, we will be here yet again. When the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box, I ask him please not to give us more warm words that lead to cold comfort for those families, as I know that it is only a matter of time before we are consoling yet another mother in Luton. Families are losing their children, children are losing their friends and whole parts of the country are losing their future. That situation should shame a Government of any colour, so I ask the Minister again please not to get up at that Dispatch Box and tell us that all is rosy, because it is not.

I am grateful for the fact that, all the while this Tory Government fail our communities, we have people in Luton such as Haleema Ali, who is fundraising for critical bleed kits in our town, and the Wingman Mentors, a not-for-profit organisation that works with vulnerable young people who are on the cusp of getting involved with crime, carrying knives, and serious violence. It has launched a campaign to install critical bleed kits in strategic locations across our town. The kits contain essential supplies to control severe bleeding effectively and can be used in the event of an emergency incident, whether a road traffic incident, a dog attack or a knife

[Sarah Owen]

crime. I would be grateful to hear whether the Minister will be supporting that campaign. The organisation's founders, Si and Michelle, believe that those kits are just as vital and lifesaving as defibrillators. They are also delivering training for people to familiarise themselves with bleed kits and their practical use, to give those who may be on the scene as zero responders the necessary skills possibly to save a life. I pay tribute to the vital work that Wingman Mentors and others are doing, but they should not have to rely on donations and funding from local businesses to make the installation of bleed kits a reality.

Yes, we have heard that knife crime is a cross-party problem and that we have to work across organisations and across parties—and I am happy to do so. However, the Government in their response to this issue have been wholly inadequate. The serious violence strategy is more than five years out of date. The serious violence taskforce was disbanded and everyone knows from their own communities that too little is being done to support young people to move away from violence and crime. Why is it that we have to continue with this farce of police funding in which Bedfordshire Police is classified as a rural police force? We have Luton, Dunstable and Bedford all within that area. Will the Minister please dare to comment on that and say when the farce of rural funding for Bedfordshire Police will end?

Much more needs to be done and we need a proper plan with meaningful funding behind it to make these changes. I am therefore proud to support Labour's commitment to tackling this issue at its source, establishing a new Young Futures programme to stop young people being drawn into crime, implementing a total crackdown on the availability of knives on our streets and imposing tougher sentences for perpetrators. Knife crime and violence have no place in our society. We all have a responsibility to tackle the problem within our communities, but tackling knife crime no longer just means learning lessons; it means acting on them so that we are not standing here again speaking of our constituents, of loved ones tragically lost to knife crime and of those left behind who are traumatised and changed forever.

2.51 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I start by expressing my thanks to hon. Members across the House for their powerful contributions this afternoon. They include my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), for West Ham (Ms Brown) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen), the hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Steve Tuckwell), and the rest. They all spoke powerfully about the tragedies that knife crime causes for victims and families.

Knife attacks have become far too deadly and frequent, especially for young people, as we have heard in this debate. They ruin lives, families and communities, and I speak for the whole House when I say they must be stopped. Zombie-style weapons and ninja swords must

be banned, but they are currently far too accessible. A quick Google search not only brings up heartbreaking stories of the weapons being used, but shows where people can easily buy them. They are readily available on marketplaces for under £40. That cannot go on. We should not have to be in the Chamber today talking about banning zombie knives. If the Government's ban in 2016 had worked and had gone far enough, more lives could have been saved. We must act now and introduce criminal sanctions for online marketplaces.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen and other hon. Members for mentioning the alarmingly high levels of knife crime across our country. I remind the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) that knife crime is up 77% since 2015 across the country, not just in one city. Yet less than half of knife possession offences led to a formal sanction last year. That is law and order in Tory Britain in 2024.

It is young men who are most likely to be both the offenders and the victims of knife crime—young men who have their whole lives ahead of them, including the 17-year-old boy who was stabbed with a zombie knife in my Enfield North constituency only two weeks ago, Kalabe and Ronaldo in Dulwich and West Norwood, Alfred in Peterborough, Robert and Bradley in Batley and Spen, Ashraf in Luton North, Rahaan in West Ham, 39 people in Birmingham, Erdington and hundreds of young people whose names we did not know today. Each loss shocks a family and a community, but too little is being done to divert young people away from violence and crime.

Our young people deserve better. They are not being dealt a fair hand. That is not just the case in Enfield or in Birmingham; it is happening up and down the country and it demands instant action. Those weapons have no place in the hands of anybody on our streets, never mind children in parks and playgrounds. What have the Government been waiting for—a celebrity to step in so that they have to act? That is what it feels like for many across the country.

We have had 17 press releases from the Government regarding zombie and zombie-style knives since 2015, as we have heard, yet a full ban is still not in place. What are the Government waiting for? As eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham, the “drip-feed of small amendments to the law”

has not worked. For many, it feels as though there is no end in sight. I am relieved that a new ban is coming, but we would not be here today if the first press release had actually meant something—if the Government's ban in 2016 had gone far enough and actually worked and the Tories had delivered on their promise to keep our communities safe. Sadly, this is a tired, hopeless Government, unable to deliver for families across our country.

Let us be clear: this ban needs to go further. It needs to cover ninja swords and other dangerous swords. However, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire said that if there were other things—referring to weapons or blades—that needed to be brought into scope, the Government can do that much more quickly. My question is this: why wait, if they can ban those weapons now? Why wait for the criminals to shift to other weapons of choice? There is no reason we should let criminals win at the expense of grieving families. As we have heard in the debate, the consequences of not closing those loopholes

are devastating. That is why we are calling for the Government's ban to go further now. With each day that passes, young people in particular are at risk of having their futures taken away from them, and we can prevent that.

I stress that ninja swords should not be accessible at a click of a button. Ronan Kanda was murdered with a 22-inch ninja sword. The weapon was ordered online using someone else's identification and collected without any identification. How can it be so easy to commit a crime of that kind? I think Members across the House can agree that there are very few legitimate reasons to own and carry a 22-inch sword on the streets of this country—and that is exactly why we are debating this motion. It has become far too easy to own and to use those weapons on our streets, with far too few consequences for doing so. That is the culture that has been allowed to thrive across Britain under this Government, and it must stop. Labour will close the loophole allowing marketplaces to escape liability for dangerous knife sales online.

Paul Bristow: May I ask the hon. Lady the same question I asked the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana)? Does she agree that someone caught in possession of a knife or bladed weapon such as she describes should go to prison?

Feryal Clark: Currently, as I have said, in more than 50% of cases where young people are caught with a bladed weapon, nothing is being done and they have been allowed to go off. The hon. Gentleman should question Ministers about that—[*Interruption.*] I will continue.

As I touched on earlier, too little is being done to give young people the best start in life. Too often, when teenagers say they do not feel safe or that they are struggling with trauma, abuse or mental health issues, no one listens and no help is provided. I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South said so eloquently about how community services have just disappeared. The Government have hollowed out our youth services, mental health services and policing teams, among others. In fact, over the past 14 years, there has been no serious cross-Government effort to stop young people being drawn into crime. Who pays the price? Young people, victims, their families and communities all over the country, including in my Enfield North constituency. They cannot wait any longer.

We need early intervention to stop young people being drawn into crime on our streets in the first place. That is what Labour will do through our Young Futures programme. We will invest in young people and bring together a national network of youth hubs in our communities, with joined-up multi-agency targeted work. We will put youth workers in A&E units and mental health workers in schools to ensure that they are on hand to help our young people when it matters most, giving them the best possible start in life. That will support our aim of halving serious violence, including knife crime, and youth violence within a decade. We will step in where the Government have failed. Communities across the country are behind Labour's plan, so why aren't the Government? We have done it in government before, and we can do it again.

The crisis in knife crime needs to be dealt with urgently and cannot be ignored any longer. The Government need to get a grip and put an end to the suffering. If their ban had been successful, we would not be debating the issue today. We need the ban on zombie-style knives to go much further; we need to introduce a criminal sanction for websites that indirectly sell illegal weapons online; and, in the long term, we need to support our young people to prevent them from being dragged into crime in the first place. I think the whole House agrees that our young people deserve better. We must give them the best possible start in life and keep them safe. That is why I urge all Members from across the House to do the right thing and vote for Labour's motion to get the weapons off our streets.

3.1 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am grateful to have the opportunity to talk about this important topic. I thank Members on both sides who have contributed thoughtfully to this afternoon's debate, which is of huge importance to our constituents up and down the country.

Too many families have been touched by the tragedy of knife crime and the unspeakable agony of losing a loved one. In fact, by coincidence—it was arranged before this debate was scheduled—I met yesterday with a few families from across London who have lost sons, brothers and, in one case, a daughter to knife crime. That group of families included the immediate family and cousins of Elianne Andam, a 15-year-old girl from Croydon—the borough that I represent in Parliament—who was tragically murdered on Wednesday 27 September last year. Her alleged assailant is now in custody. I remember attending Elianne's funeral in Croydon a few weeks later. The outpouring of grief from the whole community, particularly from her parents, Michael and Dorcas, and her little brother, Kobi, moved everybody who attended on that Saturday morning a couple of months ago—I think more than 1,000 people were in attendance.

Nothing illustrated more powerfully how important this topic is than seeing those family members and that whole community united in grief at the loss of Elianne. Of course, like the Andam family, too many families up and down the country, in London and elsewhere, have suffered tragedy in that way. It is up to all of us in public life—whether here in Parliament, in city government, police and crime commissioners, in local councils and so on—to do everything we possibly can to deal with this issue. It is in that spirit that many Members have approached the debate.

We have heard quite a lot about figures. Everyone knows that we need to do more, but any informed debate has to start with a proper understanding of what the figures are. A number of Opposition Members have quoted the figure of knife crime being up 77% since 2015. That is a police recorded crime figure. A number of other figures are available. The Office for National Statistics says:

“police recorded crime does not tend to be a good indicator of general trends in crime”

for higher-volume offences—not my words, but those of the ONS. Let me explain why: police recorded crime depends on the propensity of the public to report it and on how good a job the police do at recording it when it is reported.

Sarah Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I will just make the point about statistics and then I will give way. Over the last few years—largely driven by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and its crime data integrity initiatives—the police have got a lot better at always recording offences. On what is the more reliable measure, the ONS says:

“The Crime Survey of England and Wales remains the best estimate of long-term trends in crimes against the...population”—for offences included in that survey.

The crime survey, which is, according to the Office for National Statistics, the

“best estimate of long-term trends”,

shows a reduction of 51% in violent crimes—I am talking specifically about violent crimes, not all crimes—since March 2010. The figure stood at 1.841 million in the year ending March 2010. In the year ending September 2023—the most recent period for which data is available—it had gone down by about 1 million offences, or by 51%, to 894,000 offences. However, there are other measures—

Yvette Cooper *rose—*

Chris Philp: I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary and then to the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen).

Yvette Cooper: The ONS states:

“Police recorded crime provides a better measure than the Crime Survey for England and Wales of higher-harm but less common types of violence, such as those involving a knife or sharp instrument (knife-enabled crime).”

Does the Minister agree? Does he acknowledge that knife crime has gone up 77% since 2015 and that it is a deep, deep tragedy for our country?

Chris Philp: I would agree that for lower-volume crime, police recorded crime does provide an accurate measure. Of course, the principal example of that is homicide, which is relevant here. I have the homicide figures for the shadow Home Secretary since she asked about police recorded crime for lower-volume serious offences. In the year ending March 2010—the last year that she was in government—there were 620 homicides. In the 12 months ending September 2023—the most recent period for which data is available—those homicide figures had declined from 620 when she was in government to 591 in the most recent period. Each of those homicides is a tragedy and one homicide too many, but the number has gone down in that period, even though the population has grown significantly.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Philp: I did promise to give way to the hon. Member for Luton North, so I will do so.

Sarah Owen: I thank the Minister for being generous with his time. On police recorded crime, the 77% figure is surely the bare minimum given that the level of under-reporting, particularly among young people, is extremely high. Does he agree that the Government’s claim that knife crime has somehow gone down will sit like a bucket of cold sick with communities such as mine, which know that the scourge of knife crime is rife under the Tory Government?

Chris Philp: No one is suggesting that knife crime is not a problem that needs dealing with. I am just giving the hon. Lady and the House the facts. Using the most accurate measure of higher-volume crimes according to the Office for National Statistics, such crime has come down 51% since 2010, with homicide down as well.

Let me take another measure of serious crime: hospital admissions following a stabbing injury. Quite frankly, if anyone—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: If I may, I will finish this point and then move on, as I have more to talk about beyond the statistics.

If someone is stabbed, they will go to hospital, so one of the measures we look at in the Home Office is the number of hospital admissions with an injury caused by a bladed article—that is to say, a knife. Since 2019, those hospital admissions have gone down by 21%. I do not mention those figures out of complacency, or to score some political point; I mention those figures, which are endorsed by the ONS, to make sure that the House has an accurate and sober assessment.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I do want to move on. Having said all that, I want to talk about prevention, the law and enforcement. Let me start with prevention.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is obvious that the Minister is not taking an intervention at this point.

Chris Philp: I have given way several times on the point about figures, and have explained in detail where the figures come from.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to make sure he is not providing inaccurate information to the House. He has implied that the ONS believes that the crime survey, rather than the police recorded crime statistics—[*Interruption.*] No, this is about factual information from the ONS.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Front Benchers must not speak during a point of order.

Yvette Cooper: There is a factual point about what the ONS believes is the most accurate measure to use for knife crime. I have quoted at the Minister the ONS’s words about the police recorded crime statistics being the most accurate measure for knife crime, and the Minister has tried to deny that that is the case. I want to give him the opportunity to give accurate information to the House, and to be clear that the police recorded statistics—which show that knife crime has gone up over the past eight years—are the ones that the ONS recommends.

Hon. Members: That is not a point of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is very kind of everyone to tell me how to do what I am in the process of doing. The right hon. Lady knows that what she has just said is a point of debate, not a point of order for the Chair. If she is asking me to answer a point of order, my answer

to her is that it is not a point of order, and it is not for me to adjudicate from the Chair how any statistics should be interpreted. The right hon. Lady knows that the Minister was not taking an intervention from her. He has the floor. It is up to him, and she should not use a point of order to make a point of debate. However, she has now done so, and I am sure the Minister will answer.

Chris Philp: Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for dealing with that point of debate disguised as a point of order. I will reiterate what I have said, and quote again what the Office for National Statistics said:

“Police recorded crime does not tend to be a good indicator of general trends in crime”

for higher-volume crime. It has also said that the crime survey of England and Wales

“remains the best estimate of long-term trends”

in crimes against the household. According to the crime survey, violent crime is down by 51% since 2010. When we look at one of those lower-volume crimes for which the ONS says that police recorded crime is more appropriate—I obviously accept what the ONS says—homicides have gone down from 620 to 591, which is buttressed by the 21% reduction in hospital admissions since 2019. *[Interruption.]* I will now move on to address the question of prevention.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister moves on, the Back Benchers are being really quite well behaved—thank you. Both sets of Front Benchers are shouting at each other across the Table while the Minister is on his feet. Now, stop it!

Chris Philp: I have had worse, Madam Deputy Speaker, but thank you for your assistance. As always, it is gratefully received.

Members on both sides of the House have rightly raised the issue of prevention. Of course, we want to prevent young people from getting on to a path that leads to committing acts of violence. We want to intervene early, taking someone who may be as young as 12 and putting them on a path where they do not become a 16 or 17-year-old perpetrator. As Members can imagine, that was a topic of discussion at the meeting I had yesterday, which was attended by the London violence reduction unit. In the current year, we are funding violence reduction units in the 20 police force areas most affected, to the tune of £55 million. That funds interventions such as mentoring schemes, apprenticeships, work experience and even cognitive behavioural therapy—there is a really good evidence base for the fact that that intervention can steer a young person who is at risk of heading down the wrong path in a better direction.

We are also working with the Youth Endowment Fund, and have invested £200 million in it. It is spending that money partly on directly commissioning interventions that help young people at risk of getting into gangs or into a life of violence, but it also does research into what works best. It has a very good evidence base for what interventions are really effective—it has a top three. There are also some interventions that, on a common-sense basis, we would think will be effective, but the evidence base says are actually not effective. We are trying to work with VRUs to make sure that the work they fund is more oriented towards those effective interventions.

I was also struck at yesterday’s meeting by the impact that grassroots organisations can have. Those organisations are often run by people who have experience themselves: either they have been victims of knife crime, or one of their family members has tragically been killed or seriously injured. Working with those grassroots organisations can have a very positive impact, and I would like to do more to encourage it.

A Member—it may have been an Opposition Member—made a point about identifying youngsters who are at risk of getting on to the wrong track and intervening at an individual level. That is something I plan to do more on with local authorities. I am aware of a case in which a 12-year-old was involved in what we might call low-level criminality, but then went on to commit more serious offences. That is an example of where we need to identify individuals and work with local authorities, children’s services and others—including mental health services, if necessary—to intervene and make sure an at-risk 12-year-old does not become a 17-year-old perpetrator.

Drug treatment is an associated issue. Too much violence is associated with drugs: either acquisitive crime to fund a drug habit, or violence associated with drug supply. We are investing £780 million over three years in increasing drug treatment capacity, which has to be the right thing to do, especially for opioids, which are associated with the worst offending behaviour.

Finally on prevention, I completely endorse what was said by the hon. Member for Luton North: bleed kits are vital, and I want to work with local authorities and local police forces to make sure more are available, including tourniquets, which can reduce the number of people who suffer either a very serious injury or a fatality if there is a tragic incident. Some of those things are already under way; others are areas in which we can do more.

I will now turn to the law, which we have discussed quite a lot this afternoon. In relation to sentencing, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) rightly made some points, carrying any knife, regardless of whether it is banned—even a kitchen knife—in a public place without good reason is a criminal offence and currently carries a sentence of up to four years, and it is right that it does. Through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, we have recently tightened up the legislation to say that if a person gets caught carrying a knife a second time, there is a strong presumption, which will apply in all but exceptional circumstances, that a six-month minimum jail sentence will be imposed. Those powers are in place.

We are also legislating through the Criminal Justice Bill, which will have its Report stage in the House in a few weeks’ time, to ensure that where someone supplies a knife to an under-18—which, as we have discussed, is a very serious matter—they will receive a higher sentence of two years. We are also creating a new offence that will be considered more serious: that of possessing a knife in a public place with intent to cause injury. Sometimes, people have advertised their intent on social media, and when they have done so, that should be treated more seriously.

Mark Pritchard: Earlier in the debate, I asked the Minister’s colleague, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael

[Mark Pritchard]

Tomlinson), a question, which he suggested the Minister might answer. I do not want to corner him, but what is the current direction of travel on the thinking in relation to the criminal sanction proposed in the Opposition motion:

“criminal liability for senior management of websites which indirectly sell illegal knives online”?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend for his very good question, and I will come on to that matter now. We want to tighten up the sale of knives online. The principal vehicle for that is not so much the Criminal Justice Bill, although we are increasing the criminal sanction for supplying a knife to an under-18 to up to two years in prison, as the Online Safety Act 2023, which was given Royal Assent in October and will be commenced in stages as Ofcom drafts its codes of practice. The Online Safety Act puts a duty on social media firms—including, critically, online marketplaces—to proactively prevent priority criminal offences from happening.

For a time I was the Bill Minister for the Online Safety Bill, as it then was, and I think I am correct in recalling that the priority criminal offences are set out in schedule 7 to that Act. However, I am speaking from memory, so if the shadow Home Secretary wants to make a point of order and correct me, she is very welcome to do so. I think it is schedule 7, but she is unusually quiet. One of those priority offences is concerned with the supply of knives, so social media firms and online marketplaces will have a duty to proactively take steps to prevent the sale of two types of knives that are illegal and to prevent the sale of knives in general to under-18s.

To answer the question about criminal liability, Members will know, or should know, that the Online Safety Act includes provisions that create personal criminal liability for executives of large social media firms in a number of circumstances. In fact, for precisely the reasons my right hon. Friend mentioned and that the Opposition probably had in mind when they drafted today's motion, those measures were strengthened as the Online Safety Bill passed through the House. The Online Safety Act, as it is now, is the mechanism through which those points, including personal criminal liability, are being addressed.

By the way, the measures in the Criminal Justice Bill include giving the police the power to seize lawfully held knives that are legal, such as kitchen knives, if the police reasonably suspect that they are going to be used for criminal purposes. If a drug dealer has 10 of these knives, which might technically be legal, but has them at their home address, the police can seize those lawful knives where there is a suspicion that they are going to be used for criminal purposes. That is in the Criminal Justice Bill.

We are also acting via a statutory instrument laid a week or two ago, which has been referred to, to ban even more zombie-style knives and machetes. We set out in that statutory instrument the characteristics that those knives must have—over 8 inches in length, for example, or certain features concerning serration and sharp edges. The reason why that will not take effect until September is that we need to allow people who

currently hold knives that will become illegal the chance to surrender them. That scheme will run over the summer, and the ban will take effect in September.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who has been campaigning on this topic for some time. She convened a knife crime summit last year with a number of police and crime commissioners, including Essex's excellent police and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst. Their campaigning—hers and Roger Hirst's—led to this measure coming forward. I hope it is clear from those comments that the law has been tightened already and is in the process of being tightened even further.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) asked a good question about children being coerced or manipulated into committing offences, and she asked in particular about a private Member's Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). This is something that we have studied carefully and taken advice on, as she would expect. It is already an offence, in relation to both children and adults, to encourage, control or cause them to undertake criminal activity. Sections 44 to 46 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 do what she is rightly asking for, and there are also provisions in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. I think they are in section 45, but I am again speaking from memory. Those provisions in the Serious Crime Act are very wide-ranging—in fact, more wide-ranging than those in the Modern Slavery Act—and they apply to children and to adults, and I would like to see the police using those powers a great deal more.

Ms Lyn Brown: I say very gently to the right hon. Gentleman, and I am genuinely grateful to him for listening to what I asked for and for responding, that the experts in the field believe those provisions do not do what they need to. Would he allow me to write to him and have a discussion so that we can take this matter forward?

Chris Philp: Yes, I am very willing to work with the hon. Lady and to look at detailed representations. I have been advised that those sections are quite broad-ranging. I have read them myself and—on the face of it, and reading them as a Member of Parliament would read any bit of legislation—they do strike me as very wide-ranging in their scope. However, I am of course happy to listen to particular representations and to discuss them. If those sections of the Serious Crime Act and the Modern Slavery Act contain lacunae, I would be willing to discuss that. I am looking forward to hearing from the hon. Lady on that topic and working with her if there are gaps to be filled.

We have talked about prevention and about the law needing to be strong enough, and we must come on to enforcement because we must protect our fellow citizens from criminal activity, knife crime in particular. Clearly, it is important to make sure that the police have the relevant resources. An Opposition Member referred to police numbers, and in March last year we achieved a headcount of 149,566 police officers—more than at any time in history. In fact, it is about 3,500 more than under the last Labour Government.

I would like those police officers to do a couple of things. I would like them to be patrolling in hotspots where crimes are a particular problem. We have been doing hotspot patrolling in 20 force areas, in what is

called Project Grip and that has delivered very significant reductions in violent crime. We also trialled hotspot patrolling in 10 force areas, including Essex, Staffordshire and Lancashire, for antisocial behavioural last year, and those delivered reductions in antisocial behaviour of up to 36%.

Because that is working, from April this year—just a couple of months' time—we are putting new funding of £66 million behind it, over and above the record police settlement. By the way, that settlement will see an extra £922 million go to police and crime commissioners, with that £66 million to fund hotspot patrolling in every single police force area in the country, targeted against antisocial behaviour and serious violence, because we know it works. I am sure Members will be lobbying their police and crime commissioners to make sure that those hotspot patrols take place in areas of concern to them. I know, for example, that one of the parts of Essex where those hotspot patrols have taken place is Southend, and it has been effective at reducing antisocial behaviour there.

Stop and search is another important part of this equation. It would seem that the Mayor of London and some Opposition Members do not like it, and I understand their concerns, but we need to use stop and search confidently and proactively—done lawfully and respectfully, of course—because it has taken 60,000 knives off the streets in the last four years. Every month, in London alone, 400 knives are taken off the streets by stop and search. We need to use it confidently and proactively and not pull back from using it, because it will save lives. When we talk to the families of victims—who, sadly, often come from ethnic minority communities—they say, “If only my son's murderer had been stopped and searched on the way to the murder.” That is the kind of thing we hear people say.

If anyone is concerned about disproportionality—it was a topic I wanted to look at myself—the rate at which knives or drugs are successfully found on people who are stopped and searched is about the same regardless of ethnicity; whether someone is white, black, Asian or any ethnicity, the find rate is about the same, at approximately 22% or 23%. If there was disproportionality or unfair behaviour by the police, we would find a difference, but we do not. So I urge all chief constables and PCCs to use stop and search confidently and proactively.

My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) mentioned scanning technology. Technology is being developed—it is not ready for deployment yet, but it is being developed and we are putting funding into it this year—to scan people walking down the street, for example, semi-covertly. It is not a knife arch but is a much smaller scanning device, and it can scan people to see whether they have a knife somewhere on their person. That is obviously much less intrusive than a stop and search, does not lead to some of the tension stop and search can lead to, and it is obviously much quicker to do. I am hopeful that if we can deploy that scanning technology, it will make it near-impossible to carry a knife in a high-traffic place such as a high street in London. We are investing in that technology.

There is also an opportunity to catch more perpetrators using facial recognition, including live facial recognition, which we discussed in the Bill Committee at some length.

Alex Norris: Don't do this again!

Chris Philp: The shadow Minister is worried that I am going to spend the next 20 minutes describing it; I am not going to do that, but I will say that in the last week there has been a further deployment of live facial recognition in Croydon and it has caught wanted people. Over the past few weeks, people have been caught who were wanted for knife offences, rape and other very serious offences who would not otherwise have been caught. So live facial recognition can help us there as well. A strong approach to enforcement is critical, too.

We heard some political points from the Opposition Members. I have tried to deliver these concluding remarks in a spirit that is not too political, but a few Members said they thought the solution to this problem was a general election. I would politely and gently say that the largest police force in the country is London's, and it has a Labour police and crime commissioner. Labour Members have said the way London is run is a model for a future Labour Government, but of the 43 police forces I oversee, Labour and Sadiq Khan's stewardship of London is pretty much the worst. In the last year, knife crime in London has gone up while in the rest of the country it has gone down. It is the only police force to have missed its police uplift recruitment target. In fact it could have had an extra 1,062 police officers, for which there was Government money available, but it did not recruit them. If that is a model for a future Labour Government, heaven help us all.

In the meantime, where there are measures we need to take to go further, we will. I am very open to having constructive discussions such as those I have agreed to have with the hon. Member for West Ham, because I know all of us are united in our desire to fight the scourge of knife crime. Those of us who have attended the funerals of victims, as I did with Elianne Andam's family a few weeks ago, and indeed all of us are under a moral obligation as well as a public duty obligation to do everything we can and leave no stone unturned in fighting that scourge, and I will work with Members on both sides of the House to make sure we do exactly that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House condemns the Government for overseeing a 77 per cent increase in knife crime since 2015; recognises the devastating impact that knife crime has on victims, their families and the wider community; acknowledges that the Government recently announced measures to ban zombie knives and machetes; believes, nonetheless, that this legislation does not go nearly far enough, meaning that a number of dangerous types of knives and swords will remain legal and available on UK streets; therefore calls on the Government to address the shortcomings of the ban by extending it to cover ninja swords and consulting on a further extension; and further calls for the Government to establish an end-to-end review of online knife sales and introduce criminal liability for senior management of websites which indirectly sell illegal knives online.

Ministerial Severance: Reform

3.33 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury)
(Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to immediately introduce legislation to amend the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991 to ensure that—

(i) departing Ministers who have not attained the age of 65 receive an amount equal to one-quarter of their earnings over the previous 12 months as a Minister, minus any period covered by a previous severance entitlement, where that is lower than an amount equal to one-quarter of the annual salary paid to that Minister before their departure;

(ii) any person who returns to ministerial office after three weeks but within the period equivalent to the number of days of salary that they were paid in severance must return the corresponding amount of their severance payment;

(iii) no person departing ministerial office while under investigation for allegations of gross misconduct or breaching the ministerial code will be entitled to a severance payment unless and until they are cleared of those allegations by the relevant authority; and makes provision as set out in this Order, to take effect unless such a Bill has been introduced by no later than Monday 26 February 2024:

(1) On Tuesday 27 February 2024:

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

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (18) of this order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Ministerial Severance (Reform) Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Tuesday 27 February 2024

(3)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Tuesday 27 February 2024 in accordance with this Order.

- (b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00pm.
- (c) Proceedings on any money resolution which may be moved by a Minister of the Crown in relation to the Bill shall be taken without debate immediately after Second Reading.

- (d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 7.00pm.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on Tuesday 27 February 2024

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

- (a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;
- (b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(5)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

- (b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

- (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
- (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
- (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
- (d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a designated Member;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15) of this Order.

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

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

(8) If any Message on the Bill (other than a Message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any Message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords on any future sitting day, the House shall not adjourn until that Message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.

(9) On any day on which such a Message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that Message—

- (a) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order), any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;
- (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the Question on the previous question, and may not put any Question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:

- (a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;
- (b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—
“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further Messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

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

Miscellaneous

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

(14)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

- (b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.
- (c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.
- (d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.
- (e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(15)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.

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

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this order apply.

(18)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

- (b) Standing Order 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

- (a) the Rt hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury; and
- (b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Rt hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury.

Today we seek the permission of the House to make time for legislation in the weeks ahead to reform the system for ministerial severance payments. Those payments were first introduced exactly 40 years ago for Ministers

in the House of Lords, with rules that were almost identical to the ones that now apply to this House as well. Departing Ministers were to receive a quarter of their annual salary, equivalent to three months of pay, provided that they were under the age of 65, that they had been in post for at least two years, and that they did not return to the job within three weeks.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I have informed the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis) that I will be referring to him personally in this debate. He is the only Minister of the 97 in question who has claimed two severance payments in 2022-23, totalling almost £33,000. The second payment was worth three months’ pay after just seven weeks in the job as Justice Secretary. Does my right hon. Friend agree that at the height of a cost of living crisis it was nothing short of a disgrace that the right hon. Gentleman felt entitled to claim so much money from the taxpayer when delivering so little in return?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend is spot on. For those on the Government Benches muttering about claiming, it does not really matter whether the money was claimed, or if it was given to someone and not given back—the point is that the money was still pocketed by the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth, and no one was expecting the rules to be used in that way. That is the point of this debate.

The payments were extended to other Ministers in 1991 based on a recommendation by the then Top Salaries Review Board, which commanded broad cross-party support. The only change from the previous rules was to remove the two-year qualifying limit, but it is worth noting that in every debate that preceded the 1991 legislation, MPs remained clear that these payments were intended for the benefit of long-serving Ministers, who were having to make what Geoffrey Howe called “an abrupt and significant financial adjustment...on relinquishing ministerial office”.—[*Official Report*, 17 January 1990; Vol. 165, c. 311.]

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady accept that when our party came to power in 2010, we cut ministerial pay, and we have kept it frozen ever since? In the unlikely event of her side getting into power, would she commit to maintaining that freeze?

Emily Thornberry: If the hon. Lady has a moment to look at the motion before us today, and to consider it in the spirit of fairness and how public money should be spent, I hope that she would agree that the current system has been abused over the past few years by her colleagues in the Chamber and outside it. That is simply not the sort of thing that the public wants. They would be appalled if they knew what was going on with the severance payments we are talking about today.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I will make a bit more progress, and then I will give way.

We are talking about severance payments today. Government Members may wish to speak about red herrings and other issues, but let us talk about the abuse

[Emily Thornberry]

of the severance payments system that we have seen over the past few years, because we should take a clear-eyed look at it. We are not seeking to scrap those payments, nor should we. As Geoffrey Howe said, they were introduced so that Ministers who had given long and dedicated service to their country could adjust to the loss of that salary. I do not think anyone on the Opposition Benches has any quarrel with that. Over the 40 years that those payments have existed, there has never been any previous occasion where it has been open to question that the rules by which those payments were made were wrong. Then, however, we came to 2022-23. It was a year of chaos in our politics, unprecedented in modern times. Sadly, it was a year in which the current severance scheme had its flaws suddenly exposed and its loopholes shamelessly exploited.

Before I address what went wrong with the system in that financial year, I will do something that I find personally unusual, which is to praise some members of Conservative Cabinets. It will be hard for me, and I feel my ancestors starting to shift uneasily in their graves, but I want to give credit where credit is due, and that credit goes to a small collection of Secretaries of State who, for want of a better phrase, did the right thing when it came to severance entitlements during that year of chaos. I praise the current Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who was sacked as Health Secretary in September 2022, but reinstated by the current Prime Minister seven weeks later. What did he do with his severance payment? He returned it in full when he regained his old job, so he deserves praise for that.

I praise the current Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who resigned after two days as Education Secretary in July 2022, but turned down the £16,000-plus severance payment for which those two days had made her eligible, and she deserves praise for that. I even want to praise the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), the former Chief Whip, the former Defence Secretary and the former Education Secretary. He claimed his £16,000-plus severance in 2019 when he was sacked for leaking top-secret information. He claimed his £16,000-plus severance again in 2021, when he was sacked for all his various school fiascos. However, he finally turned down his severance payment in 2023 after two weeks in the Cabinet Office, because he recognised that it would be inappropriate to accept it while under investigation for bullying. So let us praise him for that—if for nothing else.

What those examples show is that it is entirely possible for individuals to choose to waive their severance payments, or return them, when they feel that accepting them would not be right. Perhaps those individuals even reflected that, at the height of the cost of living crisis—which had been greatly exacerbated by the actions of their Government—it would seem inappropriate to accept thousands of pounds from the taxpayer as a reward for the contribution they had made to the chaos. Perhaps they realised how much like a smack in the face that would feel to their constituents. Either way, those individuals did do the right thing.

However, the hard fact is—numbers bear this out—that, for every one case in the last financial year where a Tory Minister decided that accepting that severance payment would be inappropriate in the circumstances, in at least six or seven other cases the opposite was unfortunately true. That is why we find ourselves here, trying to fix a system of ministerial severance that has been brought into disrepute by dozens of its most recent beneficiaries.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend has mentioned many Secretaries of State. We also had a short-lived Prime Minister, who is entitled to some payments for the rest of her life. Should we not also look at whether it is appropriate for people who leave in disgrace to end up with lifelong pay cheques?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is an important argument that will need to be considered.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The right hon. Lady is arguing that a certain lax culture has grown up under successive Conservative Governments that benefits few but taints us all, and I think it goes beyond severance pay. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) proposed a private Member's Bill—the Elected Representatives (Prohibition of Deception) Bill, which would have made it an offence for Ministers to knowingly and wilfully lie to the public. Is there any chance that an incoming Labour Government might adopt that?

Emily Thornberry: If we are given the great honour of serving the public as the next Government, our Ministers will not deceive the public. We will be straightforward, and we will do our utmost to serve them to the best of our ability. We will be a Government to be proud of; we just need to have an opportunity.

For the purposes of explaining our motion, I will go through each of the five categories where a flaw in the rules was exposed in 2022-23 and give one example for each of how someone benefited. Mr Deputy Speaker, I have informed each of them that I am going to be raising their case.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Before the right hon. Lady moves on, will she give way?

Emily Thornberry: I will.

Mark Pritchard: I know this is an Opposition day debate, where the Government will get bashed—that is part of the convention and traditions of this House. However, on an important constitutional point, I think the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) alluded to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). Does the right hon. Lady think that ex-Labour Prime Ministers and ex-Conservative Prime Ministers—thankfully I do not think we will ever have a Lib Dem one; we can agree on that—should have no private office arrangements supported by the state? Those people have been at the highest level as First Lord of the Treasury, having had access to top-secret and classified materials, and will probably be under constant threat for the rest of their lives. Is she honestly saying that a Labour Government would no longer support former Prime Ministers of whatever political party?

Emily Thornberry: I am saying that this is an important issue that needs to be considered. I suggest that perhaps together the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) put in for a debate so that we can air these matters properly. Today, I want to talk about ministerial severance payments.

Jerome Mayhew *rose—*

Emily Thornberry: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, and then I hope that I will not need to give way to him again.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. Is not the fact we are getting interesting ideas coming from Labour Members an example of how the motion before the House is so ill thought out? Those ideas are not in the motion. Does she not agree that this is not the way to create legislation?

Emily Thornberry: I am proud to say that my party is full of good ideas, but unfortunately we are unable to put them all into one motion. Let us have a little discipline today by concentrating on the motion at hand and the important issue we are raising. We believe that five particular problems were highlighted by the chaos in 2022-23. I will go through each of them, give an example and explain why the changes we want to put forward will solve those problems, and why we would therefore ask the House as a whole to seriously consider our proposal to ensure that we can pass legislation to change the situation, because it does need to be fixed.

First, let us look at what I call the short stayers problem. More than two dozen individuals occupied Front-Bench roles for just nine weeks at the fag end of the Johnson Government, or just seven weeks during the bedlam of the Truss experiment, all of whom walked away with three months of severance pay. Let us look at the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) as an example. Never a shrinking violet when it comes to calling out others, he served just 49 full days as a Minister in the Department for Education, earning less than £3,000 in wages, yet when he returned to the Back Benches he received almost double that in severance—three months' severance for 49 days' work. Perhaps the Minister for common sense will tell us whether that makes sense to her.

Secondly, we have the problem of the short-lived promotions: individuals who found themselves elevated from junior ministerial roles to more senior positions, and whose severance was therefore calculated not based on the salary they had earned for most of the year, but based on the much higher salary they had earned for only a few weeks. Let us think of the example of the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke), who spent a year as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, earning a salary of almost £32,000, but then spent seven weeks as Levelling Up Secretary on a salary of more than double that amount. As a result of those seven weeks alone, the right hon. Gentleman received severance pay of almost £17,000. Again, I look forward to the Minister for common sense explaining where the sense is in that.

Thirdly, we have what I might call the quick returners—more than a dozen Ministers who claimed their three months' severance pay after quitting the Johnson

Government, or being sacked by his successor, but who ended up returning to the Front Bench a matter of weeks later while still enjoying the benefits of their severance payments. Take the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who not only accepted three months in severance after only two months as Veterans Minister, but told *Plymouth Live* point-blank that he had not accepted a severance payment, and then had the sheer chutzpah to return to exactly the same job seven weeks later without repaying a single penny. Once again, I hope that the expert on these matters will tell us whether that sounds like common sense.

Fourthly, there is a much smaller category—I have decided it is best not to give them a name at all. We also saw severance payments awarded in 2022-23 to two individuals, Peter Bone and Chris Pincher, who left their Front-Bench jobs while under investigation at the time for acts of gross misconduct. The 1991 rules are silent on this issue, and we can only assume that it was thought that any individual forced to quit in those circumstances would have the basic decency not to accept a handout from the taxpayer. However, I am afraid what the Pincher and Bone cases have shown us is that we cannot rely on the decency of individuals like that.

Finally—perhaps most incredibly—five severance payments in the last financial year were made entirely by mistake because the Government forgot to apply the age limit that says no one over the age of 65 can receive one, which is how Peter Bone and Nadine Dorries received their payments. Before the current incumbents of the Cabinet Office tell themselves that they have brought order to all this chaos, it is worth noting that the largest of those mistaken payments, which was made to a Minister in the Lords, was made not during the chaos of the summer and autumn of 2022, but in what one might call the cold light of day in January 2023.

The proposed changes to the severance rules set out in Labour's motion would address each of the five issues that I have set out.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that had any of our constituents been face to face with the Department for Work and Pensions in a similar situation to that which she describes, the results might have been different?

Emily Thornberry: Any of our constituents struggling to get to the end of the week on their wage packet, and who see the amount of money being handed out—essentially as payment for failure—would be astonished that it was allowed. That is why we are trying to change the rules today.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The right hon. Lady, in her meaningless and bitter speech, is missing the essential point that ought to be at the heart of her argument. When people are struggling, it is galling that someone who already earns a salary of £80,000 a year for being a Member of Parliament, and more on top of that for their ministerial duties, is given another payment when, for whatever reason—the Prime Minister does not like them or perhaps they have not done a particularly good job—they get a severance package. Is the truth of the matter not that Labour should be calling for no severance packages for any Minister when they lose their job?

Emily Thornberry: If our motion does not go far enough for the hon. Gentleman, let me propose that he votes with us tonight anyway, because at least we are heading in the right direction. If his colleagues vote simply to keep the status quo, he will have a great deal of difficulty explaining to his constituents how, given his views, he has allowed it to continue.

Let me move on. We want to make changes to deal with the five issues. To deal with short stayers and short-term promotions, Ministers would be paid a quarter of their actual earnings over the previous 12 months, not a quarter of their final salary. To deal with the quick returners, our reforms would require individuals who return to the Front Bench while still enjoying the benefits of their severance payments to repay the corresponding amount. To deal with those who do not deserve any payment, we demand that Ministers who quit while under investigation for gross misconduct or breaching the ministerial code have their severance payment withheld unless or until their name is cleared.

If all those rules had been in place in 2022-23, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North would have received £748 in severance, not almost £6,000. The short-lived Levelling Up Secretary, the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, would have received just over £9,000, not almost £17,000. The right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View would have received £1,300, not almost £8,000, and the former Members for Tamworth and for Wellingborough would have received exactly what they deserved—nothing at all. In total, if the proposals in our motion had been in place in 2022-23 and the age limit rules had been properly enforced, the total severance bill that year would have been cut by more than 40%—a saving for the taxpayer of almost £380,000. If our rules had been in place, 75 of the 97 Ministers who claimed severance pay in that year would have seen their payments reduced by an average of just over £5,000.

That is why our motion is so important, but Government Members may reasonably ask why it is so urgent. Why is it necessary to reform the rules in this way? Why does Labour need to take control of the Order Paper? Very simply, if they think what happened in the last financial year was a one-off aberration that could not happen again, they have not been paying attention. Do they not know about the plotting of their own colleagues and the plans for yet another palace coup against the current incumbent of Downing Street? Yet again in the coming months we could see mass resignations from the Front Bench, to put pressure on a weak and failed Prime Minister. Yet again we could see a Reform-adjacent radical put in his place, eager to engage in experiments with the British economy. Yet again, we could see it all go horribly wrong, leading to heaven knows what in the aftermath.

Frankly, if that is how the Conservatives want to spend their time between now and the general election, part of me just wants to say, “Well, get on with it then.” But a bigger part of me says that they should not be allowed to gamble again with the future of the British people, and they should certainly not be allowed to profit again from the results of their own failures. Indeed, it would be a shameful indictment of our political system if we were to allow yet another round of excessive and undeserved ministerial severance payments to be made between now and the next election when we have the opportunity today to stop that happening.

I appeal to the Conservative Members I mentioned at the outset of my speech, and the handful of others like them who decided to send back their severance payments in 2002-23, who chose to accept smaller amounts, or who decided to repay part of what they had received. In the circumstances in which they found themselves, and, I hope, in the circumstances they saw their constituents facing, they made a personal choice to do the right thing. I hope that at the end of this debate they will make another personal choice and again decide to do the right thing. They have the opportunity today to restore the rules on severance payments to the purpose for which they were originally intended, and to fix the system that, sadly, their colleagues have broken. If they do not take this opportunity, the conclusion we will have to draw—perhaps the right conclusion after all—is that the only way to get the change we need in this country will be to elect a Labour Government and put on the Benches opposite MPs and Ministers who believe in serving their communities, not just in helping themselves.

3.56 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Esther McVey): It has been interesting to hear the Labour party—yes, the Labour party—make the case for the terms and conditions of workers to be changed unilaterally, in one day, and without consultation or a proper review. I am sure that Labour’s union paymasters will be fascinated to hear the case made by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) today.

I start by making it clear that the motion before the House departs from the fundamental principle that it is the Government of the day—that is the party that won the election, voted in by the public—who are able to determine the business of the House. That is something the House itself has long recognised, in Standing Order No. 14. By setting aside Standing Order No. 14, the motion would enable the Opposition to bring in a Bill and race it through Parliament by proceeding through all its substantive Commons stages in one day. The truth is that if the right hon. Lady is so keen to decide the business of the day in the House, she should not have supported her neighbour, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), to become the Prime Minister. Given that she did support him, she clearly is not all that keen on being in charge of parliamentary business.

Although it is sometimes necessary for Parliament to legislate at pace—in exceptional circumstances and in response to emergencies—this is not a policy matter that warrants setting aside the procedure of the House. To do so would inhibit proper parliamentary scrutiny. We have just had an Opposition day debate on knife crime, which has gone through the roof in Sadiq Khan’s London. Does it not say everything about the priorities of the Labour party that it proposes emergency legislation in respect of this debate and not that one?

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Perhaps the third minute of her speech will be when the Minister starts to talk about the topic, which is ministerial severance pay. The “Minister for common sense” had personal experience of this in 2015, 2018 and 2020, and may soon do so again. In the meantime, can she tell us how she decided which of the payments for which she was eligible to accept and which to turn down? Does she

think that decisions on what to accept should remain at the discretion of the individual, even in cases where the individual is guilty of gross misconduct?

Esther McVey: The hon. Member has raised a point about redundancy payments, and that is fundamentally what we are talking about. Severance pay is a redundancy payment, in that Ministers can be turfed out of office without any notice of termination and without any proper consultation. They have been given what would otherwise be called redundancy payments. I entirely agree that people have accepted those redundancy payments, just as Labour Ministers did when the Prime Minister changed from Blair to Brown, and just as Labour Ministers did when Labour went out of office in 2010.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Esther McVey: I will carry on for a little while longer. I want to talk about what the Opposition are doing today, which is, as I said at the outset, seizing the business of the day and trying to make this a case for emergency legislation, which it is not. So many emergencies confront the country and the world, and it is striking that of all those emergencies—it could be the middle east, it could be Ukraine, it could be illegal migration—the Opposition deem this to be the most important. We know why that is: it is because they have no plan to deal with any of those big issues of the day. They do not know what to say, they do not have a clue, and they change their minds, flip-flippity-flop, all the time, so they have been reduced to talking about this issue.

Given the importance that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury attaches to the issue—wanting to seize the business of the day, wanting to push through emergency legislation—can she confirm that this will be the first piece of legislation that any new Labour Government would introduce?

Emily Thornberry: No, because we are going to win the vote today. Common sense will prevail, and we will know that this has to be sorted out now. There is no need to wait for a Labour Government; you guys can help us to pass this legislation.

Esther McVey: So it is not going to happen today, but in fact the Opposition are not going to do it if they come into power—which, hopefully, they will not. That is how much of an emergency it is.

However, there is some good news here. The right hon. Lady is putting herself at the vanguard of cutting waste, which must be a first for the Labour party. Will she take this opportunity to apologise for the private finance initiative schemes that her party inflicted on the country and on much of its public services? Will she take this opportunity to apologise for the hundreds of billions of pounds' worth of waste? I will give way to her if she would like to make an apology for those huge amounts of PFI waste.

Emily Thornberry: Could we perhaps talk about the £10 billion wasted on personal protective equipment? I really think that the Minister ought to consider talking about ministerial severance reform, but that is, of course, a matter for her.

Esther McVey: So the right hon. Lady could not apologise. She could not, or did not want to, stop the waste of hundreds of billions of pounds.

I will say this: the Government accept that the current legislation is now a third of a century old, and that this may be an appropriate time to review it and consider changes, but this is not the right time or place to take action. Proper consideration must be given to new legislation.

As Members will know, severance pay is governed by legislation. The statutory provision for ministerial severance pay is contained in the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991. It has therefore been in place for successive Administrations, and has been paid to Members of all three parties who have made ministerial office during this period. Under the Act, Ministers who leave office are entitled to a payment equivalent to a quarter of the annual salary that they were being paid in respect of the ministerial office that they are leaving. To be eligible for a payment, they must be under a certain age—65—and must not be reappointed to ministerial office within three weeks of leaving their previous office.

I note—and I thank the right hon. Lady for drawing it to my attention—that in 2022 a small number of severance payments were made incorrectly to departing Ministers. I want to make it clear that the Cabinet Office guidance to Departments is that they should seek to recover any mispayment in line with His Majesty's Treasury's guidance, "Managing Public Money". While the incorrect payments were caused by an administrative error and the former Ministers concerned were at no personal fault whatsoever, it is important that the Government seek to recover that money. I am sure I am not the only one who recalls the catastrophic overpayment of tax credits when Labour was last in office, and the fact that many families got into huge difficulties because of that. It is such a shame that the right hon. Lady was not so exercised about that when they were in office.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Esther McVey: No, because we are talking about waste. We are talking about appropriate measures taking place and this faux emergency legislation that the right hon. Lady wants to bring in.

Turning to ministerial severance pay more generally, it is important to note that this is the long-standing policy that successive Governments from both sides of the House have retained. The reason they have retained it that the principle of paying severance remains sound. The Prime Minister, in his constitutional role as a principal adviser to the sovereign, can recommend the appointment and removal of Ministers at any time. This flexibility, necessary as it is within our political system, means that having a reasonable severance pay policy to reflect the uncertain nature of ministerial office has had wide support from across the House since its introduction.

Members will be aware that similar arrangements are in place for Members of Parliament, who also hold the status of officeholder. In certain circumstances, Members of Parliament who lose a seat at a general election are eligible to receive a loss of office payment. The eligibility for the loss of office payment is determined by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, which is responsible for setting and regulating MPs' salaries, pensions, business costs and expenses. Severance payments recognise the unpredictable nature of ministerial office.

[*Esther McVey*]

The fact that a Minister can lose their office with no notice when the Government or a Prime Minister change will inevitably lead to a substantial increase in the money paid out in that financial year—

Emily Thornberry: £1 million!

Esther McVey: From a sedentary position, I get £1 million quoted at me. I remember, although maybe the right hon. Lady does not, that it was over £1 million in 2010 when Labour lost office, and that is quite a long time ago.

It is for these reasons that the Government do not currently intend to reform severance pay for departing Ministers, although I am happy to review it, as I mentioned earlier. The current system respects the essential constitutional principle that Ministers serve at the discretion of the Prime Minister and that it is right to provide some protections associated with the loss of ministerial office. The principle has applied, as I said, to all Governments since the Act was passed in 1991, and we need to be careful not to change policy on the basis of exceptions that will occasionally occur under Governments of all forms.

Justin Madders: If the Minister is going to review the system, can she guarantee that it will be reviewed and implemented before the next general election?

Esther McVey: I am sad to say no I cannot, because we have said that it is essential that there is due process on the Floor of this House—not like the Opposition, who want to whisk it through in a day.

We are completely transparent about the payments of severance, and all such payments are published in departmental annual reports.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): In the interest of objective debate, could the Minister please confirm why Ministers above the age of 65 from any of the major parties are less deserving than those who are under 65?

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I think that that would be looked at under the review as well, should we review this, but the law that was set out at that time stipulated that age. That is something else that I agree would need to be looked at.

I want to be clear that severance pay cannot be looked at as a stand-alone issue. It is part of an overall picture that governs payments made to Ministers. More broadly, the Government have consistently demonstrated restraint and always sought to minimise the cost of government, at the same time as modernising ministerial office to bring it into the 21st century. This is most clearly demonstrated in the Government's policy on ministerial pay.

Ministerial salaries today are lower than they were when this Government took office in 2010, which in real terms constitutes a significant pay cut. My noble Friend Lord Cameron introduced a 5% cut to ministerial pay when he came into office in 2010. Since then, Prime Ministers have asked Ministers to waive the increase in their statutory pay entitlement year on year. For example, ministerial salaries are roughly half—that is half—of

what they would have been had Lord Cameron not introduced the salary reduction when he became Prime Minister. In April 2010, Ministers of State earned £42,370, which is £63,594 in today's money, yet a Minister of State today receives £31,680.

I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury did not want to reply to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), but will she confirm today that her party would continue with the ongoing cut in ministerial pay?

Emily Thornberry: That is not what the motion is about, so I am afraid that I cannot help the Minister. Is she aware that £2.9 million was spent on severance payments to all the special advisers who lost their job in the same year, 2022-23?

Esther McVey: That is well dodged again by the right hon. Lady. She will not confirm that Labour would keep a tight fiscal grip on ministerial pay. Obviously, one of the key things about today's motion is waste and expenditure. We will see what happens. As always, money runs away with the Labour party.

This Government passed the transformative Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021, which for the first time enabled Ministers to take paid maternity leave and be replaced in their Department. Several Members have now benefited from this legislation when in office, and I am sure it will continue to be of immense value. The Government are committed to returning to Parliament in due course to set out proposals on extending the Act.

I conclude by reaffirming the Government's commitment to recovering the money paid in error to a small number of former Ministers. I reassure the House that departmental processes have been strengthened to ensure that this error does not happen again. For the reasons I have set out, the Government do not think there should be wholesale legislative reform on this matter during this Parliament. We believe that a Government committed to the principle of integrity in public life is the most effective way to control the cost of government to the taxpayer.

In that spirit, we will continue to demonstrate restraint in how we are paid and we will continue to modernise ministerial office to meet the expectations that the public rightly have of us. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury could not say whether her party would maintain our cuts to ministerial salaries, could not apologise for the last Labour Government wasting money on PFI schemes and could not say whether this Bill, because it is such important emergency legislation, would be the first piece of legislation introduced by a Labour Government, so we can safely conclude that the Labour party does not care about taxpayers' money.

4.13 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Labour party for tabling this motion, which highlights the difference between this place and reality. Nearly £1 million in severance pay was handed out during last year's political chaos. Some Ministers received severance pay despite being in office for only 38 days. In a 38-day period, an asylum seeker would receive £47.96 if they are being housed in a hotel. That is enough to pay for First Bus day tickets for nine days, provided that they

buy nothing else. In contrast, the former Chancellor would be able to pay for 3,309 First Bus day tickets, which is a full bus of day tickets for every one of those 38 days. And that is just from his severance pay.

In clear and stark contrast, Scottish Government Ministers have had a pay freeze for the 16th consecutive year. A Scottish Government Minister is currently entitled to £99,516—that includes their MSP salary, by the way—but, under the voluntary pay freeze, they receive the 2008-09 level of £81,449. A Cabinet Secretary in Scotland has an entitlement of £118,511, but receives £96,999. The voluntary reduction is taken from net pay and is returned to the Scottish Government, to be made available for public spending. A number of Conservative Members mentioned the freezes in ministerial pay here. According to the Library briefing, ministerial pay in the House of Commons has been frozen at 2014 levels, but ministerial pay in the House of Lords has been frozen only at 2019 levels. If the Government are going to appoint Secretaries of State in the House of Lords, they will cost us more than they do in the House of Commons.

Cabinet Secretaries in Scotland and Scottish Government Ministers are each handing back more money to public funds annually than the former Chancellor received in his severance pay. The Tories are absolutely clear that people can live on universal credit, despite all evidence to the contrary, yet the 38-day Chancellor accepted a severance payment worth nearly four years of UC for a single person over-25. The UK Government seem absolutely determined to highlight, at every opportunity, how out of touch they are. They have refused to zero rate VAT on mortgages, yet for 38 days' work, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) accepted a payment that could cover 70 months, or five and a half years, of the typical owner-occupier mortgage increase, according to the Bank of England. It is deeply ironic that all homeowners are having to pay for his mistakes while he is being rewarded for them.

As people are pushed into ever-increasing poverty, having to make devastating choices between heating and eating, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne could fund 280 food parcels from his severance pay alone, and he is far from the only one. Tory and Brexit chaos has not just caused rampant inflation and increased the cost of mortgages, meaning that people are having to choose between heating and eating; it has meant Government reshuffles every five minutes, with an Institute for Government worker commenting:

"I'm not saying there's been a lot of ministerial turnover since 2010, but you could now play an 11-a-side football match between Ministers for the Cabinet Office and Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in that time".

The ministerial trough is institutional, and it is indicative of the rot ingrained in Westminster. The public rightfully deserve and expect value for money, yet with record levels of turnover on the Government Benches, resulting in so many people eligible for severance payments, this is a ludicrous waste of public money during this cost of living crisis. In the eight years since the Brexit vote, there have been 13 Housing Ministers, nine Education Secretaries, eight Home Secretaries, seven Foreign Secretaries, seven Chancellors, seven Health Secretaries, seven Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretaries and five Prime Ministers. How is it possible that former Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries was accidentally paid £17,000 in a severance payment? The right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) served a

pitiful 45 days as Prime Minister, crashed the UK economy with her fantasy think-tank economics and made the electorate, who did not vote for her, pay for her mistakes.

Better Together said in 2014 that a no vote would bring better, safer, faster change for Scotland, yet all we have seen in Westminster is constant chaos, with it mired in the ceaseless rot of corruption and cronyism. I defy anyone to tell folk out there that their lives are better now than they were before the independence referendum in 2014. Westminster is institutionally designed to promote the entrenchment and passing of power between a select few hands while enriching the participants. Ministers are granted extremely broad powers, with a lack of oversight by Parliament. We saw that once again yesterday during the Finance Bill, where they unilaterally changed the Ways and Means resolutions after the line-by-line scrutiny debates. We see these things on a regular basis. The call from the Brexiteers was, "Taking back power." They have taken back power, but to the Executive, not to Parliament. Parliament is being stymied at every opportunity by this UK Government.

When Ministers inevitably fail or are pushed out due to Westminster's political power games, they take a ministerial severance payment. After they are finally evicted from their seats by constituents, they can receive cushy money-for-nothing jobs and rewards for the rest of their lives. While Ministers in Westminster abuse their positions to give contracts and public money to their friends and financial backers, these are not failings unique to the Tory party but rather institutional design features of the Westminster system, which has inherited hundreds of years of aristocratic baggage and is entirely unfit as a system for governing a modern country.

Labour has promised to reform Westminster from within for over 100 years, promising to abolish the House of Lords, reduce prerogative ministerial powers, and now lower ministerial severance pay. That promise is not worth the *Hansard* it is written in. Every time the Labour party is elected on a promise to reform Westminster, it instead integrates into the system and digs in to use it for its own ends, stacking the Lords rather than abolishing it or making extensive use of the prerogative powers rather than minimising them. When Labour takes power again, I have no doubt it will that long tradition of entrenchment.

The Leader of the Opposition continues his flip-flopping, and if he becomes Prime Minister, he will doubtless lose or sack Ministers. When that happens, they will make just as much use of the ministerial severance pay as their Tory cousins. The only solution is a radical overhaul of Westminster and of the entrenchment and the current positions. Only a vote for the SNP and independence will finally lead to the reforms necessary for Scotland and the rest of the UK to move forward and become modern 21st century democracies that work for all the people, not just overpaid politicians.

4.21 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): If anyone had any doubt that the Opposition are not fit to govern this country, that doubt must have been dispelled this afternoon. There were many things they could have chosen to debate. It is Children's Mental Health Week. There are all sorts of incredibly important things going on today about Safer Internet Day. It is the start of National

[Anna Firth]

Apprenticeship Week. It was World Cancer Day two days ago. We could have debated the economy or the middle east. As a Parliamentary Private Secretary, I went to a brilliant debate about the Homes for Ukraine scheme today. But no, they have used their second Opposition day debate to talk about party politics. That is all this debate is about, and it is an appalling waste of taxpayers' money that we are debating this subject today.

The Opposition know jolly well, as the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, that ministerial severance pay is established in legislation passed by Parliament in 1991 and has been used by successive Administrations over decades. It is a statutory entitlement implemented by Governments of all stripes. Payments were made and accepted by outgoing Labour Ministers throughout the Blair and Brown years, as well as by Liberal Democrat Ministers in the coalition Government.

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend refers to the initial legislation in 1991, but that was followed up, as she is no doubt aware, by the Scotland Act 1998, which was brought in by Labour and repeats the same approach for Scotland. Does she agree that it is the height of hypocrisy from the Opposition to claim outrage now, when they brought in similar legislation themselves?

Anna Firth: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's brilliant point, which brings me naturally to my next point. The last Labour Government had the opportunity to amend the 1991 legislation in any one of the 13 years they were in office. Instead, they chose to do absolutely nothing. Even more outrageously, following Labour's defeat in the 2010 election, when the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) left that infamous note saying, "Dear Chief Secretary, I'm sorry, I'm afraid to tell you there is no money left."—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It did not say that.

Anna Firth: It said, "I am afraid to tell you there is no money left."

Kevin Brennan: That is not what he said.

Anna Firth: That is an exact quote: "There is no money left." I do not mind saying it again, because that is the mess that Labour left us with. The point here is that having said that there is no money left, what did outgoing Labour Ministers do? They pocketed £1 million in that year in severance pay. In today's money, that would be £1.6 million—truly shocking. That was irresponsible then, and their actions are 100% hypocritical today.

In stark contrast, when we entered office, what was our approach when we saw the mess that Labour had left us in? We cut our ministerial salaries and have kept them frozen ever since.

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about Labour, but we have heard from the Scottish National party that somehow it is better north of the border. Does she agree that that is surprising given that the *Scottish Daily Express* said:

"SNP spin doctors received more than £200k in 'golden goodbyes' in 2023 as Humza Yousaf rung tiny changes."

What does that say about the SNP?

Anna Firth: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. That is absolutely appalling. We also know that shamed SNP MSP, Derek Mackay, who has left office, claimed £155,000 in expenses, including, as I understand it, severance pay. The SNP approach is incredibly hypocritical.

While we were sorting out Labour's mess, cutting our own pay and keeping it frozen, every single Labour leadership candidate in 2010 refused to hand back their taxpayer-funded severance pay, including the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and the Mayor of Greater Manchester, both of whom were entitled to £20,000, and they still hold elected office today.

When we questioned those severance payments, given the mess that Labour had left us in, a Labour party spokesman responded by saying that it was a pathetic attempt to create a smokescreen around serious economic issues—[*Laughter.*] Yes. I would be grateful if those on the Labour Front-Bench team can confirm to the House today that this motion is a pathetic and hypocritical attempt to create a smokescreen around their total lack of a plan for Britain. There is no plan for the economy, no plan to tackle welfare, and no plan to deal with immigration. In fact, we know that Labour would take us right back to square one.

As usual, while the Opposition are sniping from the sidelines and making these cheap political points, we are actually getting on with the job of serious government. In the past 14 years, the Conservative party has been focusing on delivering for the people of Britain. Let me remind Labour Members what that delivery looks like: better state schools than ever before; more students securing top grades in maths, physics and chemistry—

Andy Slaughter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna Firth: I am not far from finished, so I will carry on.

There are more students from state schools at our best universities. School performances are skyrocketing up the PISA tables, and we now have the best readers in the western world. We also have record employment: 4 million more people in a job than there were in 2010—that is over 800 jobs every day.

Kirsty Blackman: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna Firth: No, I will not. I am about to finish my remarks.

We have a national living wage, a welfare system that is simpler, fairer and better targeted, more hours of free childcare, including overseeing the largest single expansion of childcare in English history, and the fastest decarbonisation of any major economy, leading the way in renewables, which will be key to our future. I could go on and on. This is a record of which we are extremely proud. We have stuck to our plan: we have halved inflation; we have cut taxes for 27 million working people, worth £450, starting last week for an average worker; and of course we continue to support the most vulnerable in society, keeping the triple lock and doubling the personal allowance.

I will conclude by saying that any review of the long-standing ministerial arrangements for severance pay should be done properly, with due process. It should not be done in this desperate and political fashion. The Conservatives are delivering for the people of Britain. Labour would just take us straight back to square one.

4.30 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I think the best that can be said for the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), was that she spent six minutes and 50 seconds speaking about anything but the motion and then the last 10 seconds on severance pay. I am sure other than that she is a delightful Member of the House, but on this occasion I am afraid she did not really get there.

In supporting the motion today, I want to highlight a trio of payments that were made during the chaotic period in the autumn of 2022, which capture the essence of why the rules on ministerial severance were brought into disrepute during that period and how reforms can fix the problem. It is impossible to make those points without speaking about individual cases, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said from the Front Bench, and I have informed two Members that I will be discussing the payments given to them as examples of what happened.

If we cast our minds back to September 2022, colleagues will remember that in the earlier days of the premiership of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) there was some turmoil in her Whips operation. Mind you, the early days were swiftly followed by the middle days, and the final days were not very far behind—and it is fair to say there was turmoil all the way through. Anyway, in those early days, three assistant Whips were sacked and three more put in their place. The appointments were made three days before the mini-Budget and they lasted just 38 days, until the right hon. Member left Downing Street.

The three assistant Whips spent almost their entire time in office propping up a doomed regime while it continued to do huge damage to the country—damage for which my constituents are still paying the price in the shape of crippling mortgage payments. In those circumstances, we might have thought that those who were appointed by the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk would have walked away from their brief time in office feeling some measure of contrition, perhaps even shame, at the role they had played in that disastrous Administration, and wanting only to apologise to their constituents for what they had done.

Instead, unbelievably, each of the three assistant Whips walked away with three months of severance pay—a £4,479 handout from the taxpayer—after just 38 days' work. They received two and a half times more in severance pay than they were paid in salary during those 38 days. At the same time, a number of departmental Ministers received £5,593 in severance pay, compared with £2,248 for their salary in five and a bit weeks as Ministers. All that happened at a time when people all round the country were struggling to put food on the table, to fill up their car and to pay their bills in the face of a cost of living crisis that those Ministers' time in office had just made substantially worse.

Average growth in the UK has been 1.5%, compared with the 2% when Labour was in office between 1997 and 2010. That lower growth has meant £150 billion less in GDP, £40 billion less in tax revenues for public services and infrastructure and £10,000 a year less on average per household for each of those years, across the UK. Those are the figures—the price of failure of 14 years of Conservative government. When the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk crashed the economy through her reckless, unfunded mini-Budget, it just turbocharged the damage done. My constituents, and all our constituents, are still living with the consequences of what the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), dismissively referred to as “turbulence”, in the form of higher food prices and mortgage payments.

The premium for economic failure, which was created when the right hon. Members for South West Norfolk and for Spelthorne crashed the economy, is still priced into markets today, and private investment in the UK is still at a record low. The scale of severance payments as reward for being part of that disastrous mismanagement of the economy is nothing short of disgraceful. However, it does serve one purpose at least: it makes the case for reform indisputable. It is a shame that the Minister chose not to engage with the substantive point about the severance payment system having been shown not to be fit for purpose as a result of what happened in 2022.

Under Labour's proposals, the three assistant Whips would have received not a quarter of their annual salary, but a quarter of their actual earnings, reducing their severance payments from £4,479 to £454, which is almost a tenth of what they originally received and a much fairer and more sensible amount. The hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) was at pains to point out in his recent comments to the *Liverpool Echo* that the payment he received was an automatic entitlement—in other words, he was just following the rules as they stand. The £4,479 that he received—compared with the £454 that would have been due had the legislation referred to on the Order Paper been in place—really says it all. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) made a similar defence to the *Lancashire Post*, to which she said that severance payments

“are governed by Acts of Parliament”.

Our proposal would have seen her severance payment down from £5,593 to £562, which is much more proportionate to her time served.

I am more than happy with what both Members said in public, but I hope that they accept that in no other job would the severance payments from which they benefited be allowed. That was among the questions that the Minister did not address—in what other job is full severance pay available from day one in that way, or in the event of gross misconduct? Those are the reasons why the measures proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury are so important.

The good news is that Conservative Members, including the beneficiaries of excessive payments, have the opportunity to make amends today.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point, and I want to ask him to explore it a little more. The immediate availability of redundancy

[Jerome Mayhew]

payments, if I can call it that, would not be affected by the motion, so is he suggesting that the motion is not fit for purpose either?

Bill Esterson: It sounded to me like the hon. Gentleman was defending the status quo, while we are trying to make the system proportionate and fair. He and his colleagues will have a chance to do something about this unfair system, which has been shown to be completely out of order by what happened in 2022. Those who took advantage of the rules can do something about it by voting with us tonight. Rules, to use the word of the hon. Member for Southport, can be changed, and Acts of Parliament, to use the words of the hon. Member for South Ribble, can be replaced.

This evening, all the Members who benefited from severance payments when the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk resigned can do something about the excessive nature of those payments. They can take advantage of the opportunity that we are offering and take the logical step of voting to change the rules by supporting Labour's proposal for a fairer and more proportionate severance payment system for Ministers.

4.39 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I begin by making a disclosure to the House, which is of course in the public domain and has been for some time: I have received severance pay in the past. I want to make that clear from the outset. I also want to make it clear from the outset that, in my respectful view, some of the ad hominem attacks on named Members of Parliament that we have heard damage the institution of politics rather than working in a partisan way. Those individuals did not do anything wrong: they were part of a system that allocated funding to them, so there should be no legal or moral opprobrium attached to them in their absence, whether they have been notified or not. It is fine to say that the system ought to change, but surely it is not fair to criticise people for being subject to a system that has not been changed.

As I said, I have received severance pay, but I served in Government roles of one sort or another for over 10 years, if one includes non-ministerial positions. In terms of ministerial positions, I served as Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Transport, Solicitor General, Attorney General for the first time under one Prime Minister, Paymaster General, Minister for the Cabinet Office, and Attorney General for the second time under a second Prime Minister. In fact, I served under four Prime Ministers in one role or another, and in Cabinet on three occasions. Should I not receive severance pay?

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked where else this would happen in the outside world. Well, where else in the outside world would we have a situation where there are no redundancy arrangements, no notice periods, no contract between the parties and no consultations, and the employees—if they were employees—could be removed without cause? I am not criticising those things: that is the way Government works. Ministers take on those roles knowing that that is the position, so they should not criticise it—that is the way the cookie crumbles, and those who do not like it should not take the position.

However, there is no point in comparing chalk and cheese. The system operates in a different way from the outside world: we have a constitutional situation in which the Prime Minister, whether he or she be Labour or Conservative, has to have the right of hiring and firing his or her ministerial team. That is an essential prerequisite of the role, and the way it must work—the only way it can work—is by giving the Prime Minister that *primus inter pares* role, where he or she has that function.

Kevin Brennan: I agree with the right hon. and learned Member: Ministers should get severance pay, as I did when I was a Minister. That is absolutely right, but the motion does not suggest that they should not. He was a former Deputy Leader of the House; does he think it is right that a Deputy Leader of the House who served for 81 days should receive three months' severance pay? That is the question that we are debating today, not the general principle. I agree that there should be appropriate severance pay, and I think other Labour Members do too, for exactly the reasons he has given.

Sir Michael Ellis: When one has a system in law, whether it was created 10 years ago, 30 years ago or 100 years ago, it must apply to all. If the system falls out of favour, it can be reviewed, but the example that the hon. Member has criticised is of someone who served in a role and was entitled to take a severance payment. As he himself alluded to, people in the last Labour Government received these payments; in fact, they received payments that were statistically more generous than has been the case under this Government—some £1.6 million in real terms in today's prices. As has already been said, none of the four Labour leadership candidates in 2010 returned their severance pay; I think they were under some pressure to do so at the time, but declined. When Ministers have no contract, no notice period and no consultation or redundancy arrangements, and can be removed without cause, it is right that that is differentiated from what happens elsewhere, because there is an increased risk.

Justin Madders: The right hon. and learned Member makes an interesting point, but if working conditions are so poor, may I suggest that he joins a trade union?

Sir Michael Ellis: How does the hon. Member know that I am not already a member of a trade union? Actually, I am not, but he did not know that.

Let us talk about trade unions, because this motion is rather alien to the concept of what I understand trade union organisations work to do—indeed, I think they would be appalled by the motion. By the way, as a lawyer, I have always considered that trade union organisations are very robust in defending their own members and their legal rights. They are very robust, and they throw the kitchen sink at it, with the best-quality lawyers and the best-quality legal advice, if they think the case is appropriate. That is how they represent their members, and I think they would be appalled by this motion, because they would say that it is contrary to the ethos of how trade unions work.

If we look at trade unions, we see that they used to support Labour—they still do—in the 1890s and 1900s, when Parliament did not pay salaries to MPs. It was because of trade unions that early Labour Members of Parliament—and before that Liberal MPs—could afford

to be here at all. In those days, prior to 1911, if I am not mistaken, Members of Parliament were not paid at all. When they started to be paid in 1911, they were paid £400 a year, at a time when the average salary in this country was £70 a year. Labour argued that it was right and proper that those salaries should be started, because then everyone could afford to become a Member of Parliament. However, what we have to remember—and I encourage those on the Labour Front Bench to remember it—is that that argument is inconsistent with today's argument, because what they would be arguing for is that only wealthy people would consider becoming Ministers.

Labour Ministers were earning double what Ministers have earned under the Conservative Government since 2010, because my noble Friend Lord Cameron froze ministerial salaries. They have stayed frozen since the 2010 Parliament, which has had a major impact. It is also worth noting that Labour Select Committee Chairmen and Chairwomen and senior Labour MPs on the Panel of Chairs have taken salary increases during the course of these Parliaments. I would suggest that is also inconsistent with the thrust of the argument of those on the Labour Front Bench, because if they think it is too much for one, they should say it is too much for all.

I think there are some significant inconsistencies, and we must bear in mind that we have to serve the public in the best way we can, which means encouraging people to come to this place to serve and to do their duty. I think that Ministers of the Crown—and, in fact, Members of Parliament from across the political divide—do come here with a view to doing that, and that is why I disagree with the motion.

4.48 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): When I saw the amounts being talked about in this debate, I could not help but think about an organisation called Haringey Giving, which does brilliant work in my constituency. It was set up and managed by residents, and it allows various groups to make applications to it. In the five years that Haringey Giving has been operating, it proudly boasts that it has been able to support 136 local grassroots organisations and help thousands of people in the community through the provision of £900,000 of funding. That is £900,000 of funding painstakingly raised and distributed over five years, and it is still not as much as the amount that this Government were able to spend on severance payments in the single year of 2022-23.

When I have been knocking on doors—in recent times I have done rather a lot of that, in really interesting parts of the country—one thing that people have fed back to me is that they do not like chop and change. The motion is not, as the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) suggested, a critique of salaries for doing political work such as being an MP in general; it is criticising the chop and change of the various Governments since 2019.

At Christmas, Haringey Giving held its annual fundraising drive, with local residents and businesses all playing their part, and it managed to raise £17,000. That is about the average amount received by the 20 Cabinet Ministers who claimed severance payments in 2022-23. In fact, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis), who has been mentioned many

times today, could have kept one of his severance payments and donated the other to Haringey Giving—if he is listening to the debate, he still has a chance to do that. That would have been double the total it raised in December.

I say that because it highlights the difference with the real world and the lives of so many of our constituents. When we talk about these severance payments, it is vital to remember exactly what is happening in the country as a whole, which we see at our advice surgeries. Sometimes families come to the advice surgery and a child has no teeth; they have stubs for teeth because there have been no dental appointments. I have heard from a family who have had a pair of shoes that one child wears to the sixth-form one day and then they are available at the weekend for another child to wear to do a part-time job. This is the sort of child poverty we are talking about.

The headline 12-month inflation rate started the year at 9% and ended it at 10%, and peaked at 11% in October 2022, the month in which 38 Ministers claimed severance payments. Food prices rose especially fast, with ordinary families facing a 19% increase in the cost of their weekly shop from March 2022 to March 2023. These amounts of money really matter because they buy things like food and shoes, and they should not be going into the pockets of Ministers who have failed and who have been through the revolving doors and become Ministers again.

The average pump price for petrol and diesel hit an all-time high, with petrol rising to £1.91 per litre in the last week of June 2022 and diesel hitting almost £2 per litre in the first week of July 2022, the same week that 21 Ministers claimed severance payments after joining the coup against Boris Johnson.

Of course, there are also mortgage payments. The Bank of England base rate started the year in April 2022 at 0.75% and ended the year in March 2023 at 4.25%, with the biggest spike taking place in the wake of the kamikaze Budget. Millions of households saw their mortgage rates soar and millions more have felt the pain since their fixed-rate deals have come to an end. That pain has been made all the worse thanks to the direct actions of the Government.

So there we have it: 2022-23, a year when families across the country were struggling more than ever in the face of the cost of living crisis—struggling to put food on the table, struggling to fill up their cars, struggling to pay their mortgages and keep a roof over their heads, facing impossible choices and having to make incredible sacrifices. That is without even mentioning the record peacetime tax burden that the Government have also imposed on the country during that period.

What were Tory Members doing while all this was going on? They were fighting with each other, and scrabbling around for promotions, pay rises, severance payments and resignation honours like they were prizes in a game show. During that disastrous year for the country, their only priority was looking after their own backs and filling their own boots. I hope that this evening they will think about their constituents struggling to make ends meet, and all the charities in our constituencies who work for every penny they raise. They should think about people at the Haringey Giving scheme scraping and striving to raise a few thousand pounds. They should show a bit of contrition and vote to let these reforms proceed.

4.54 pm

Jerome Mayhew: It has been an absolutely fascinating debate, and I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for proposing this motion, because it has given us an opportunity to explore what responsible government really is. I will tell the House what it is not: it is not about creating one-paragraph legislation to get a soundbite on this evening's news. One need only listen to the debate that we have had to see how the current drafting of the motion is totally inappropriate. It makes only one recommendation. It states that retiring Ministers should

"receive an amount equal to one-quarter of their earnings over the previous 12 months as a Minister, minus any period covered by a previous severance entitlement, where that is lower than an amount equal to one-quarter of the annual salary paid to that Minister before their departure",

but that applies only to those under the age of 65. However, in this relatively empty Chamber we have heard several suggestions as to why that is inappropriate—whether it does not go far enough or it is missing important additions.

This is a serious issue and an area that could do with review. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) suggested from the Front Bench that the Government are open to reviewing it, but this is absolutely not the right way to do it, as this debate has demonstrated, and we need only look at the contribution from the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). He fairly raised the issue of the prime ministerial pension or severance payment, which continues beyond the moment of retirement. It is not just a one-off payment, but continues for the rest of his or her life, as I understand it. That is a perfectly proper area for review, although it is not mentioned in this motion.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) made the very good point—I intervened on him at the time—that the entitlement comes from day one. Is that reasonable? My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) recognised that there is a contradiction. Those under the age of 65 are entitled to these severance payments, but times have moved on; we work much later, and the retirement age is rising to 67 and then to 68. There was an article in *The Times* just yesterday suggesting that in future years it might rise to 71, yet the legislation has this arbitrary figure of 65—why? That is a perfectly reasonable area to explore as part of a wider review of a piece of legislation that is perhaps coming towards the end of its natural life and needs to be reviewed. This motion, however, is not the way to do it.

Labour Members cobbled together this drafting last night when they were thinking, "What's a good wheeze that we can have to create a soundbite or a bit of a line in our social media content this evening, saying 'Conservatives vote against...'" That is not legislation, and in my submission it is particularly inappropriate to use the exceptional mechanism of disapplying Standing Order No. 14 to achieve it. There are many benefits to Brexit, but one of the costs is the adoption of this mechanism to interrupt the workings of Parliament by disapplying Standing Order No. 14. If that disapplication is acceptable in any situation, it is in exceptional and urgent situations, not to get a soundbite for the evening news.

Emily Thornberry: I am not standing before the House saying that this motion and this legislation will fix every single issue that people can possibly think of in relation to the payment of Members of Parliament in every circumstance, but it will at least deal with the situation whereby someone can work as a Minister for two months, get three months' severance pay and then seven weeks later go back to exactly the same job and essentially be paid twice. That is what this legislation is here to stop. Surely the hon. Gentleman can support that.

Jerome Mayhew: As I said at the start of my speech, there are elements where there is genuine cause for review, but if we followed the right hon. Lady's train of thought, we would have thousands upon thousands of one-paragraph Acts clogging up the legislation. We need to do better than that. With responsible government, which is what we on the Government Benches try to focus on, we review appropriately, we use advice from civil servants and then we propose legislation.

Beyond the poverty of Labour's motion drafting, there is the wider issue of ministerial pay and value for money. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) pointed out in her good speech, when the Conservatives came to power in 2010 as part of the coalition, it was not a case of just accepting what had gone before. The Government, under the leadership of David Cameron, cut ministerial salaries by 5%. More importantly, every single year since then—throughout the coalition period and the Conservative Government period—ministerial salaries have been frozen.

Let us look at value for money and the difference we get between a Labour Administration and a Conservative one. I see the Labour Whip, the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), is in his place. In 2010, under Labour, he would have benefited from a salary of £40,926. [HON. MEMBERS: "He doesn't get anything."] Under the Conservatives, that equivalent position—if he were in government—receives a salary of £17,917.

For Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, Labour Members paid themselves £48,270 in addition to their parliamentary salaries. Under the Conservatives, that has been reduced, in modern terms, to £22,375. At Minister of State level, under the Conservatives they are paid £31,680; under Labour, they paid themselves the equivalent of £63,594—they would have had no trouble with their mortgage payments. Cabinet Ministers under the Conservatives are paid an additional £67,505; Labour thought it appropriate to pay theirs £122,598. We have heard how the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) said there was no money left, and now I am beginning to understand where it all went.

We come to the position of Prime Minister. This Prime Minister is paid an additional £75,440. Labour Prime Ministers think it appropriate to pay themselves £204,329, in today's money, on top. When we add the Pensions Increase (Pension Scheme for Keir Starmer QC) Regulations 2013—the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has his own special pension arrangements from his work as Director of Public Prosecutions, disapplying any lifetime allowance for him, not for anyone else—to £204,329 for being Prime Minister, plus his MP's salary of £86,584, it is no wonder he votes Labour. He can afford to be a socialist.

The question for Labour is, will it commit today to continue the freeze on ministerial salaries? The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury was asked that by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, and she was unable to answer it. I gave her the opportunity again to answer it, and she refused. If she does not know the answer, perhaps she can write to me.

Emily Thornberry: I don't know the answer—I am doing this debate.

Jerome Mayhew: Why can she not commit to that?

Anna Firth: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. *[Interruption.]* He absolutely is. Would he like to comment on Labour Members' conversion on the road to Damascus, with their sudden desire to tackle something they had 13 long years to do? Not only did they not do it, but they went on to add to the system.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for that intervention. It was mentioned earlier—once, if not twice—that in 2010 the Labour party leadership candidates were invited to return their severance payments, having refused to do so. The suggestion that they should was described, on behalf of the Labour party, as “pathetic”.

This motion is half-baked. We have seen over the course of a couple of hours a number of interesting suggestions that could apply to potential legislation in this event. It is clearly an improper use of the disapplication of Standing Order No. 14. Look at the Labour Benches: if it such an emergency, why are those Benches so bare? Even Labour Members of Parliament do not think that this is urgent. I have no hesitation in voting against this motion and I invite everyone else to do the same.

5.5 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) in this debate, which—I have to take issue with the Minister on this—is important. It is an opportunity for which I thank the Labour party. I do not mean it is an opportunity to throw criticisms at Ministers who were sacked—all 147 of them, I think it was, in one year. It is not an opportunity to do that because, as the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) pointed out, a lot of them did actually hand back the money they were given; nor is it an opportunity to throw brickbats at the Labour party and say, “You didn't do this while you were in government, and you think this about ministerial salaries.”

Above all else, this debate is an opportunity to say to the constituents out there who come to us every week—who are struggling to pay their mortgages and rents; who have been made redundant and do not have another job with another salary that they can fall back on when they get redundancy payment—that we appreciate what is happening. This was a terrible period for the country. It was chaotic; it cost a fortune. We are looking at preventing it from ever happening again. That is what today should be about: putting ourselves in the place of those constituents and thinking what they might be thinking watching this debate right now.

I have to say, I am acutely aware that my constituents are probably watching and saying to themselves what quite a few people have said to me over the years—I am

sure this has been said to many other Members present too—which is that too many of us are only in it to line our own pockets. We have sat here today and debated redundancies for Ministers and complained about ministerial salaries in a country facing a cost of living crisis, where people cannot pay their energy bills. I am sorry if it sounds like I am taking a schoolmarmish attitude to this matter, but I am slightly embarrassed that any of us could think that this subject is not worth reviewing.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Lady makes some powerful points—I hope I made similar points clear in my speech—but given her views on the cost of living crisis, does she agree that the freeze on ministerial salaries should be maintained into the future?

Christine Jardine: I am actually more concerned with redundancy payments, which this debate is about. The level of ministerial salaries is something that should be debated on its own, and should be the subject of regular review. What pains me is that I have constituents who, when they are made redundant and get the statutory minimum, have nothing to fall back on. When Ministers are sacked for incompetence, they still have the salary for the job they are actually sent here to do, which is to serve as a Member of Parliament. They have the privilege of serving as a Member of Parliament; they then get paid more for the extra privilege of being a Minister. I think a lot of the public watching this debate today will be asking, “They get a salary for being a Minister? They get redundancy payments for being a Minister?”

We need to think about this very seriously. We need to think about what our constituents will be thinking. I do not want to throw brickbats at individuals, but I will just take one example very briefly: when the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) resigned as Prime Minister, her golden goodbye was more than the minimum salary in this country. It would have gone a long way for a lot of families. We should be thinking about what those families think about that, not what we think about or whether the Labour party or the Conservative party is wrong, or the SNP—frankly, we should not take any lectures on financial probity from that party.

We should be thinking about what our constituents think. For many, it would have felt like a kick in the teeth. They could not pay their mortgage and they were struggling to pay for their children. They saw—this is not my judgment, but theirs—dozens of Conservative MPs raking in thousands of pounds in severance pay, completely down to the chaos that the Government caused during a cost of living crisis. To our constituents, it would have felt like taxpayers' money was paying for the revolving door of Ministers. In their view—and mine—the Conservatives trashed the economy, but our constituents were paying for it.

That is why these payouts have to stop. I completely respect the Members who have paid them back—we should recognise that that was the right thing to do. They should be stopped because, as has been said several times today, the legislation was introduced in 1991. It could have taken no account of the sort of situation that we would see in 2022-23, because it is beyond anyone's imagination that such a situation would have arisen—we did not take account of it when it happened. Today we have an opportunity to rectify that. We have

[Christine Jardine]

an opportunity to say that there was a unique set of circumstances that the 1991 legislation did not foresee. We can have a review and we can look at it, but we need to recognise that when millions of families in this country were at their lowest point, they looked at the television and saw Ministers who had worked for a few days, and been sacked for incompetence or falling out with the boss, getting thousands of pounds more, when they got nothing.

The Liberal Democrats have proposals. There should be a major overhaul of ministerial severance pay. MPs who have resigned, for breaking the ministerial code in particular, should not be able to claim severance pay. Ministers should have to serve in post for a reasonable period of time, and payouts cannot be claimed if they are reappointed to the Government within a year. None of that is unreasonable. More than anything else, it would give us the opportunity to go out there and look our constituents in the face and say, “No, we are not in it to line our own pockets, we will not take anything that we don’t deserve, and we will not take for granted the privilege of being here and expect more than you think we deserve.”

5.13 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If damaging the economy and people’s living standards, as well as degrading our health service, councils and other public services, were not enough, this Government have also enriched themselves and cost the taxpayer close to £1 million as a result of their sheer incompetence and infighting. We have found out that Ministers—some of whom were in post for only a matter of weeks, faced serious accusations or were ineligible through age—have received handsome sums of taxpayers’ money.

The question on my lips, and no doubt the lips of many of our constituents, is: why are Ministers given such special treatment? Just one day in post as a Cabinet Minister entitles an individual to £16,876 as a severance payment. For one day in the job for a Minister of State, it is £7,920. One day as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State gets them £5,594. These are vast sums of taxpayers’ money available only to a select few, and they come with absolutely no caveats for performance, conduct or length of service.

We do not disagree with the principle of loss of office payments to Ministers; like all workers, they should be entitled to some form of payment in the event of suddenly losing their job and income through no fault of their own. However, I suspect many of my constituents will not have much sympathy for that, given that those in such a position will still have their MP’s salary to fall back on, and we know that some Members have other sources of income. Those salaries are well in excess of what most of our constituents earn. Being a Minister is not easy, I am sure, but that should not distract from the fundamental issue that the treatment given to those in governmental positions is completely different from that given to the wider public—even the members of the public working in the very same Departments that those Ministers serve.

Kevin Brennan: One person who cannot fall back on their MP’s salary is Peter Bone, who was the Deputy Leader of the House for 81 days and received a redundancy

payment, even though he is over 65, of £5,593. He is no longer the MP for Wellingborough, but should we not be told whether he has paid the money back, not least because there is to be a by-election in that constituency in a few days’ time?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for making that very good point. I am sure Peter Bone’s former constituents, many of whom will have had calls from the Department for Work and Pensions when benefits overpayments were made and they had to pay them back, will expect him to have done exactly the same as they had to do. It is clearly a matter of public interest.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that people who have £1,000 to make a bet—on anything—may be a bit out of touch with how most people live their lives in this day and age?

Justin Madders: Yes, anyone who can afford to wager that sort of sum on anything, never mind a matter as important as national public policy, does not experience the lives most of our constituents live.

In the 2022-23 financial year, four Ministers left office after facing allegations of misconduct or for breaching the ministerial code. Two received the full severance payment, one selected a reduced payout, and another turned it down altogether, but regardless of the circumstances of their dismissal, they were entitled to those payments as a right. All those forced out of their position while facing allegations of misconduct or falling below expected standards were entitled to payments totalling tens of thousands of pounds. That only half of them took the money is immaterial; what is at issue is the principle that those individuals had an entitlement that no one outside Government has access to.

In any other workplace, an employee against whom gross misconduct allegations are upheld would surely expect to be dismissed immediately without pay. Likewise, if they had been found to have acted in a way that was below the standards expected of them, they would be liable to dismissal with no automatic right to compensation. In the real world, the only protection offered to an employee who has been dismissed for reasons other than gross misconduct is a statutory notice period, which that employee still has to work—unlike Ministers, who do not have to work a notice period—and the notice period is just one week until an employee has two years’ service. In stark contrast, Ministers have, from day one, minute one, an automatic entitlement on dismissal to a quarter of their salary without even having to work any notice period. Those are day one rights that most people can only dream of having.

The evidence is clear when we look at the eyewatering sums Ministers have gobbled up, in some cases qualifying for them after only a matter of weeks’ service. Our analysis finds that a total of 57 Ministers were in post for less than three months before taking their ministerial severance payment. To put it another way, they were able to cash in on their party’s chaos and receive more money in severance pay than they earned doing the job in the first place. I will say that again, because I find it absolutely staggering: 57 Ministers got paid more for leaving the job than they were paid for doing it. That sums up what a shambles the last few years have been.

The story does not end there though. There are now nine former Ministers who spent a grand total of just 37 days as a Minister in their whole career, all within that disastrous 44-day lettuce premiership, which we are still feeling the effects of. When they were effectively sacked by the current Prime Minister, they were all allowed to pocket £5,593—not far off three times the amount they earned actually doing the job. A Government who hit the pockets of millions of Britons with their unfunded tax cuts also hit the public purse with these giveaways.

In the real world, thanks to this Government's lack of regard for workers' rights, an employee has to be in a job for two years before they get any kind of compensation. That is an outrageously long period. In addition, for ordinary people, after two full years of continuous service, the redundancy payment is modest compared with what Ministers can expect. Depending on the age of the individual, between eight and 12 years of continuous service are required to entitle them to 12 weeks' redundancy pay, which is the equivalent of what Ministers are entitled to no matter how long they have served. It is galling that Ministers who had served for a matter of weeks were able to claim a level of payment that it would take those relying on statutory protections up to 12 years to accrue—and let us not forget that if this is someone's only wage, the commitments made on the back of it are likely to be substantial, which means that the sense of jeopardy if things go wrong is palpable and the consequences of failure are real. The deal offered to Ministers who are effectively made redundant has none of those strings attached.

I think it abundantly clear that the generosity of the 1991 Act has been tested beyond breaking point over the course of the past two years. I cannot believe that when the Major Government introduced the Act, they ever thought we would have such a rapid turnover of Ministers—it is hardly a basis for good government—but, as we know, many conventions have been tested to the limit in recent years.

At the time of its introduction, the condition in the rules that outgoing Ministers can only receive the payment if they do not return to the Government within three weeks was probably seen as an extremely unlikely scenario—after all, ministerial appointments are not meant to be a carousel—but we now know that 20 Ministers decided to take, and keep, their severance payments despite finding themselves returning to a Government role within three months of their initial departure, and some returned even more quickly than that. It just shows how much the Tories love fire and rehire, although in the real world the worker does not become thousands of pounds better off as a result. Perhaps Ministers think that everyone gets thousands of pounds for no reason when fire and rehire happens to ordinary people. That, I think, is the only possible explanation of why they allow that outrageous practice to continue.

This money merry-go-round is self-evidently against the spirit of the “loss of office” system and the original Act. The severance payment is designed to help an individual to make the financial transition after being in the Government, not to be effectively a bonus for Ministers who are temporarily out of the fray. Those who drew up the rules simply could not have foreseen the level of chaos to which the Government have subjected us. It is hard to escape the feeling that there is a profound injustice in the system and the way in which it

was exploited in 2022. Nearly £1 million of public money was handed out in the form of severance payments during that year, a figure which, had the reforms that we are proposing today been in place, would have been reduced by 40% to just over £550,000.

I return to the question “What makes a Minister so special?” Are a couple of weeks of being a Minister equivalent to the eight or even 12 years' service that our constituents would have to give to receive the same level of payment? I think we can all agree that that should not be the case. This is not just about levelling down Ministers' payments; it is about improving workers' rights, and our new deal for working people will transform working conditions for everyone in the country.

I want to make a point, which I think is important, about the lack of transparency surrounding these payments. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) has already mentioned the payment to the former Member of Parliament for Wellingborough. I accept that this has been the case for many years, but we only find out what payments have been made by a particular Department when it publishes its annual report for the preceding financial year, which Departments are not required to do until 31 January in the subsequent financial year. Anyone who has recently filed a self-assessment tax return will note that the annual reports work on exactly the same timetable. By 31 January, people must report on what their financial situation was at the end of March in the previous year—although I suspect that Departments do not experience the frustration experienced by my constituents who wait for hours on end to speak to someone at the end of the HMRC helpline.

The reason it is only today that we are debating the final severance bill of £933,000 is that we only learned about the final group of payments last week, when the Department of Health and Social Care published its report adding another £41,000 to the total. However, this also means that we are eight weeks away from the end of the 2023-24 financial year, and we do not yet know whether a single severance payment has been claimed by any of the Ministers who left their jobs in that year.

We know that several Cabinet Ministers have had to resign in disgrace or have been sacked, but we do not know whether their bad behaviour was rewarded in the same way as other Ministers' actions. What we do know is that the last reshuffle, in November 2023, created a theoretical severance entitlement of £112,000, although we do not know how much of that was claimed or by whom—and here is the crucial point: as things stand, we are not entitled under law to be told any of the answers to those questions until 31 January 2025, which is, of course, beyond the final date by which a general election must be held. In other words, a number of former Ministers will be standing for re-election but taxpayers will not have the right to know what severance payments they received over the previous year. If we cannot even have transparency, we ought to at least have some reform.

The frequency of reshuffles over the past few years has taken the idea of Government instability to a new level—a level that frankly makes a mockery of us all—and when that absurdity not only has no negative consequences for those in charge but sees them rewarded for their misdemeanours, it is little wonder that so many members

[Justin Madders]

of the public look at this place and think it is inhabited by people who are totally out of touch with reality. A Minister losing their job has none of the risk attached to it that many of our constituents face every day, including the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will be given enough hours next week to put food on the table because they are on a zero-hours contract, the risk that because they are in bogus self-employment they have no comeback if they have a dispute with the company, and the fact that they have to be in a job for two years before they get any protection against unfair dismissal.

Precariousness, risk and uncertainty are the defining characteristics of work for too many, but the defining characteristic of Ministers' jobs is reward, and this reward comes whatever the length of service and whatever the reason for their departure. That is why so many of my constituents feel that there is one rule for the elite and another for everyone else. We know that in most workplaces if you break the rules you are out, with no compensation. Here, if you break the rules, you might be out, but you might be back again a few weeks later, but either way you still win because you can expect a handsome payoff, no matter the reason for your departure. We have a Government who are literally rewarding bad behaviour. It is no wonder so many people look at this place and think politicians have no understanding of how the real world works. It is about time we refreshed the way we do politics and put the service of the public ahead of the service of ourselves.

5.26 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am pleased to add to the important points that have already made by my right hon. and hon. Friends and thoroughly ignored by Conservative Members. I want to look specifically at the proposed reform relating to how the severance payment should be calculated for outgoing Ministers.

When the rules were introduced, I am confident that the expectation was that any individual claiming three months of severance pay would almost certainly have served a decent length of time in that post. In fact, to be sure of that, I looked back at the Second Reading debate of the Ministerial and Other Pensions and Salaries Bill 33 years ago this week. I was struck by the words of Joe Ashton, the legendary Labour MP, who was unhappy at the idea that a Minister could receive three months' severance after

"having had possibly only two years in a ministerial job."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 1991; Vol. 184, c. 1147.]

Only two years in a ministerial job! Can you imagine if Joe had known that, 33 years on, Members in the Whips' Office would be claiming three months' severance after just 38 days in the job? It is daft, it is wrong and it is a betrayal of the people who send us to this place. Can you imagine if we had told Joe that Cabinet Ministers would be claiming almost £17,000 each after just nine weeks as a Secretary of State?

I have no doubt that if the MPs who agreed those rules in 1991 had known how they would be abused three decades later, they would have designed the rules differently, and I am confident that those rules would have looked something like the proposals before us

today. First, this reform would say to a Minister, if you have served only a few weeks on the Front Bench, your severance will be calculated at a quarter of a few weeks' salary, not a quarter of a full year's salary. That is clear, sensible and fair. Secondly, when a Minister has served most of the year at junior level but has been elevated to the Cabinet for a few weeks, this reform would say that their severance should be calculated as a quarter of their actual earnings over the past year, not a quarter of just their final annual salary. Again, that is clear, sensible and fair.

Critics of these changes might argue that what happened in 2022-23 was a one-off and does not warrant wholesale changes in the rules. They might say that Joe Ashton did not envisage Ministers claiming three months' severance after less than three months' work, but he also did not envision there being three different Prime Ministers in the space of 16 weeks. Abnormal circumstances produce abnormal results. I accept that, but once a loophole in the rules is revealed, the loophole ought to be closed, and when that loophole is as grossly abused as we have seen in the last financial year, we have an absolute duty to act on it. We owe that to the British taxpayer, and we owe it to our predecessors in this House, to Joe Ashton and all those who could never have contemplated that the law they passed in 1991 would be used, or even abused, in this way. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) made clear, Ministers do not lose their day job when they are sacked or decide to resign. They still have their £86,000 a year salary as a Member of Parliament, and surely that is enough.

I am fully behind this motion, but I feel it could have gone a little further on the related issue of the public duty costs allowance paid to former Prime Ministers after their departure from office. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) raised this earlier but, for those unfamiliar with the allowance—I hope nobody in the Chamber is, but the vast majority of taxpayers in my constituency and around the country will be—the current rules stipulate that, when a Prime Minister leaves their post, they are entitled not just to a one-off severance payment of almost £19,000 but to a payment of £115,000 every single year for the rest of their life, to assist them in their future work.

The right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) challenged my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) on whether she would remove from former Prime Ministers the money for their security. No Opposition Member would do so, but the House will be interested to know that the Government website has something to say about this:

"these costs can include managing an office...handling correspondence as a former Prime Minister; and support with visits and similar activities. The allowance is not paid to support private or parliamentary duties, nor is it used for security purposes."

Agreeing with us would therefore not be a problem for the right hon. Member for The Wrekin.

As with the severance payments we are debating today, it does not matter how long someone has served as Prime Minister, and it does not matter the circumstances under which they depart. The law says that, once they have held that position, the public duty costs allowance is theirs for life, which has, of course, left us in the frankly ridiculous position where the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip is able to claim the

allowance despite bringing disgrace to his office and shame on this House, and where the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who I have informed, will receive £115,000 a year from the taxpayer towards her public duty costs after spending just seven weeks in the job. That is £3,200 a year, every year of her life, for each day she spent in office. The expression she made famous in relation to the high level of fruit and cheese imports is very apt: “That is a disgrace!”

The right hon. Lady is relatively young, and I wish her a long life, but she could end up taking millions from the taxpayer over the next three, four or five decades. Yes, that is a disgrace. There is no public scrutiny of this allowance, unlike for our office costs allowance, which can be claimed in addition to this huge sum of money. To my mind, both former Prime Ministers have brought the public duty costs allowance into disrepute, just as surely as some of their colleagues have brought severance payments into disrepute. I think there is a strong case for reforming both systems, rather than just the latter.

5.33 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is my birthday today, and I can think of no higher honour on this day than being called to speak in the House of Commons. I consider it an enormous honour to serve as the Member of Parliament for the good and amazing people of Putney, Southfields, Roehampton and Wandsworth town.

I am speaking about 97 Ministers who must have thought all their birthdays had come at once in the summer of chaos, when they were handed additional sums that were excessive and undeserved. We are throwing a light on the ministerial severance pay scandal today.

This debate's importance has been questioned by Conservative Members, but I say it absolutely is important. Indeed, it goes to the heart of our democracy. When we stand here in the House of Commons—even on our birthday—and when we go out into our constituency to ask what issues we should take back to vote on in this House, it is all based on the trust and confidence of our constituents. Issues such as the additional, excessive and undeserved ministerial severance pay bring this House into disrepute and question the confidence that our constituents have. The latest poll of trust by Ipsos showed that only 9% of voters trust politicians to tell the truth. That is the lowest level since Ipsos started asking that question in 1983, and it is down from a pretty low bar of 12% in 2022. In June last year, research by the Institute for Public Policy Research showed that just 6% of the public have full trust in the current political system. Those are sobering statistics, and it does not have to be this way.

The longer this Government cling on to office, the more out of touch they are and the more people feel that it is one rule for them and another for the rest of us. The complete Tory chaos of the summer of 2022 has had a long-term effect on our economy, with crippling mortgage bills for my constituents. It also resulted in a summer of huge payoffs for Ministers who waltzed in and out of office, having done very little, because they did not have the time and ability to do much. They picked up not only extra pay for that time in office, but then the severance pay.

Let me give a real-world example now. I have been campaigning for a long time for my constituents on the cladding crisis. All through that summer, that issue was,

in effect, put on hold because there were only temporary Ministers in place; they knew they would not be in power for very long, so they could not make any decisions. A whole summer was lost on an issue of huge importance to my constituents. So we are not just dealing with an abstract issue about pay and conditions, because that summer of chaos has had real-world consequences.

I thank my right hon. Friend the shadow Attorney General for uncovering the extent of this and the fact that in 2022-23 alone, the total bill for Ministers' severance pay was an unacceptable £933,000. Many had their jobs for just a few weeks in the dying days of Boris Johnson's time or during the doomed 45-day premiership of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—I informed her I would be mentioning her. They received three months' severance pay, but one returned to the Cabinet after six weeks, another after two months, another after three and a half months and another after four months. One returned to exactly the same job nine weeks after leaving, but they still received the full 12 weeks' severance pay.

This Labour motion would stop that and reduce the amount of severance pay for serial Cabinet returnees. The amount should not be three months' pay regardless of time served. Some Ministers served for just seven weeks and received the full three months' pay. Fifty-seven Ministers served for less than the three months. Some have returned the money and, as other Members have said, that is to be commended. However, many have not done so, and we do not know the extent of how many have returned it, because, as has been pointed out, we will not receive the departmental accounts for a long time. Five Ministers also received a total of almost £50,000 despite being ineligible because they were over 65. Whether or not being 65 should have any bearing on someone receiving severance pay is an issue for another day, but the fact that this was delivered incompetently, as well as wrongly, is an issue.

I would like to make the comparison with Lord Rooker, who served for 26 years in this House as the Member for Perry Barr and has served with equal distinction in the other place for more than 20 years since. He is a hugely dedicated parliamentarian and public servant. He gave 11 and a half years' continuous service as a Minister, from May 1997 to October 2008, before he finally stepped down, at the age of 67. Despite that length of service, he received no severance payment, because those were the rules. Yet under the current rules someone can be a Minister for two days and still receive three months' severance pay. The rules were not intended to apply to the circumstances we saw in the last two years, and they need to be reformed, as the Minister said in her opening remarks. While we would welcome such reforms, we do not believe the Government are willing to undertake them, which is why we have brought forward the motion.

For far too long, Conservative Ministers have been paid off for jumping aboard a sinking ship. That is nothing short of a complete waste of taxpayers' hard-earned money, and they have brought a system put in place in 1991 into disrepute. Labour is calling for urgent action, because we cannot afford another million-pound bill if the latest Conservative Prime Minister cannot keep his party together.

All this comes at a time when the country has been going through the worst cost of living crisis in generations. The draining of resources is simply disgraceful. I ran a

[Fleur Anderson]

community centre before I became an MP, so I think about the amount we spent on different projects and the good those projects brought to our community, compared to the money that has been wasted. There is a feeling on the doorstep that we are all on the take. The policy on ministerial severance pay adds to that feeling.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, as always. What hits home for me is the fact that the payment of some £33,570 made to the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis) is almost identical to the mean average salary of a UK citizen, yet that was just a bonus payoff. Does my hon. Friend agree that is an outrage?

Fleur Anderson: I agree, as would all our constituents. It does not seem right that in many cases those large sums of money have been paid out for such a short term of service. That is not what the system was designed to do, so the system must be reformed. It is high time that the system, exposed by the Conservative summer of chaos that resulted in nearly £1 million paid out to a conveyor belt of Tory Ministers, is reviewed.

To ensure the public get good value for money from their Government Ministers, Labour is making sensible and reasonable proposals today, which should be supported by all Members of the House. Labour will change the rules so that failed Ministers who have been in post for only a matter of weeks are no longer entitled to a quarter of their final top annual salary. Instead, they will receive a quarter of their actual earnings as a Minister over the previous 12 months, minus any period covered by a previous severance entitlement. If they return to a ministerial position after three weeks but within a period equivalent to the number of days of salary they were paid in severance, they must return the corresponding amount of their severance payment. At the moment, that is up to the good will of a Minister who, out of the goodness of their heart, returns the money. The system should not be left like that—it should be clearcut.

Labour will also ensure that any Minister who has had to leave their job while they are being investigated for misconduct has their severance suspended, and then cancelled altogether if the allegations are upheld. We should not have to put forward this legislation: the reforms should be obvious and should have been introduced as soon as the system was brought into disrepute by former Members. It should not be up to the Opposition to call out the Government on the failure of the system.

Labour will go much further, if we have the honour of becoming the next Government. We will introduce an integrity and ethics commission to clean up our politics, because trust in our politics has plummeted to an all-time low in recent years. It is up to us in the Labour party to clean up politics, to restore trust and to show that it is not one rule for them and another for us. We are putting the Government on notice: if they will not clean up our politics, Labour will.

5.43 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I do not know whether I am alone in finding the contributions from those on the Government Benches rather prickly

and defensive. I listened to the opening speech of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), the Minister for common sense, or rather the Minister for nonsense today, and not only did it not touch on the motion at all—a theme followed by almost every Conservative Member who spoke—but it was simply very poor. Maybe she wanted to show her disdain for the motion by instructing her office to draft something of that quality, but I think that is unfair, because what the shadow Attorney General and others have done in preparing for the debate is actually quite a lot of detailed work about 97 members of the Government over a relatively short period.

The motion does not propose punitive remedies. The motion would simply remove the abuses from the system. It is not against the principle of severance—rather confusingly, the shadow Attorney General has been criticised for that by Conservative Members—and it addresses specific anomalies. It addresses, first of all, a mistake. To be fair to the Government, they accept that, where a mistake has been made, the money paid in error should be refunded. I think that we can all agree on that.

The motion also addresses what has been described as the Bone-Pincher anomaly, which is where there has been clear misconduct. I think it would be quite difficult for Conservative Members to defend that behaviour. The shadow Attorney General has also identified excessive amounts of pay, which is either where the Minister has served for a short period of time, or where their salary has gone up dramatically and their severance pay is based on the end salary, which is substantially higher than what it was.

Finally, the motion addresses where a Minister has been sacked or has resigned and has received their three months' money and then is reappointed to the same or a very similar job within those three months. In that case they should not get double bubble, as it were. This is perhaps the easiest area to understand and I cannot see any objection to any of that. It is very close to being unjust enrichment in all cases, and the remedy for that is restitution. It is to provide redress in the event that one party has received a benefit from another in circumstances where it would be unjust for the recipient to retain that benefit. The donor here is the taxpayer, and the recipient, with very little excuse, is 97 Ministers.

There have not been, as the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) said, *ad hominem* attacks. Yes, of course we have to identify individual Ministers in that way, but it is the collective system that is being criticised. Some may say that 2022-23 was an exceptional year—let us see what happens this year, shall we? We might be in for another exceptional year. But even if that were an exceptional year and the sum of £1 million, which is a very large sum of money, is not repeated, there is a principle at stake here.

I could run through all 97 cases, but I could not be bothered to email all the offices in order to do that. I was already emailing the office of the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) anyway, because he spends most of his time canvassing in my constituency now—at least the parts that I am transferring to him—and I spend a lot of my time canvassing in his. I thought that I would also say that I was going to mention him in this debate. It is nothing personal; it never is between neighbours in that way. None the less, his is a pretty clear case: he backed the wrong horse when the right hon. Member

for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) was elected Prime Minister, so he lost his job. He got his three months' severance, which is £7,920. And 33 days later, when the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk was already running out of friends, she reappointed him to her Government.

Under the system that the shadow Attorney General has outlined, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham would have received a severance payment of £2,886—some £5,033 less than he received. Some may say that perhaps he deserved it. I am not so sure, because what that means is that whereas for the first month, when he was out of office, he was being paid through severance, for the next two months he was being paid both his severance and his salary. He was quite literally getting double the money for that period of time. The right hon. Gentleman has not responded to me to say that he has paid that all to the local Labour party or some other deserving charitable body in the interim—[*Interruption.*] Not a charity in law, but a body with many charitable aspects to its operation. Perhaps he has done that. I hope that all 97 will take that course of action, and I am sure the Attorney General will be writing to them all individually to invite them to make those payments back, because that is no way to deal with public money.

I am not going to go on about the right hon. Gentleman, because I think he will be dealt with by his electorate in due course and in fairly short order, and the excellent Labour candidate for Chelsea and Fulham, Ben Coleman—many of my hon. Friends have been down to support him—will be a refreshing change as the new MP. I see the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), sitting on the Front Bench; he is a resident of that constituency, and is clearly considering what options he may take when he is called upon to vote.

I will conclude on this point, because it is a serious one. We should not play fast and loose with public money in that way. We should not misuse public resources, and when—even if we could say it is through no fault of our own—we are unjustly enriched in that way, we should make reparation. That is all that our motion is calling for, and I think it is difficult on that basis for Conservative Members to oppose it. We will see, when we vote in a few moments' time, whether that is the case.

We have heard a lot of red herrings about other payments that may be made to Ministers or MPs. However, as many hon. Members have said, if we think of our own constituents and the hard times they are going through, it does make us look out of touch if we say, “Well, it's only £5,000”—or only £25,000, in some cases—“and I've done a good job and worked hard.” So have my constituents, and they are not rewarded in that way. If hon. Members could focus on that for a few moments when we come to vote on the motion, I do not think they will find it difficult to vote with Labour.

5.52 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to wind up this debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and other Opposition Members have laid out very clearly why we need reform and why rules that never envisioned the churn and chaos that we have seen over the past 18 months need to be tightened up.

We have heard from numerous Opposition Members and one or two Government Members as well. The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), emphasised just how out of touch this Government are, reminding us of the stark choices that many of our constituents have to make between heating and eating. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) described the case of the three assistant Whips getting two and a half times more in severance pay than they did in salary, taking away some £4,479 each, whereas under our reforms they would only be entitled to £454. He also made the point very clearly that under the leadership of a Labour Government we had 2% growth, whereas, sadly, under this Government we have seen only 1%, which has a huge knock-on effect for all our constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) also made reference to the hardship faced by her constituents, who are being hammered by record peacetime tax burdens, and called for some contrition from Tory Ministers. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) pointed out the anomaly that, under the current system, for just one day in the post of Secretary of State, an MP can receive some £16,000 in severance pay. That is why reform is really needed. He contrasted that with his expert knowledge of what ordinary people can expect in terms of statutory redundancy pay, and the horrible shadow of zero-hours contracts, where people often worry whether they will have enough hours to make ends meet.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) pointed out that MPs such as Joe Ashton were even questioning back in 1991 whether a full 13 weeks' severance should be payable for just two years. He would certainly be astounded about MPs taking ministerial severance pay after just a few weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) pointed out how nothing got done in the summer of 2022 about matters of immense importance to her constituents, such as cladding. As she reminded us, Labour has full plans, if in government, for a proper ethics and integrity commission to clean up politics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made a strong case for reform, illustrating it with the case of the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands). The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) reminded us that there is genuinely a valid case for proper reform of ministerial severance pay, especially with the rapid turnover in ministerial posts, as constituents are paying for the way in which the Tories have trashed the economy.

Now, as a former teacher and examiner, I must say to those Conservative Members who spoke that not adhering to the title of the question is usually rewarded with nought out of 10. I might perhaps give the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) one out of 10, and the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) and the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) maybe a two or a three. As for the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith has made it clear what we think about that particular speech. I hope that in his closing remarks the Parliamentary Secretary at the Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

(Alex Burghart)—my opposite number—will address the content of our reforms and not just deliver a tirade against the Labour party.

Anna Firth: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dame Nia Griffith: Very briefly.

Anna Firth: I would be very interested to know what score she would give to each of the four Labour leadership candidates who did not give back a single penny of their severance pay after losing the general elections, and after leaving this country with no money whatsoever in 2010?

Dame Nia Griffith: It might surprise the hon. Lady, but I am going to stick to the topic of this debate, which is severance pay.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury, I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and to the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who I understand gave back some ministerial severance pay upon taking up new ministerial posts, but it is a great pity that no other Members recognised how totally inappropriate it was to take 13 weeks' severance pay for a post that they had held for a much shorter time than that, or to keep the full 13 weeks' pay when they were reappointed in a shorter time than that. Today, they have the opportunity to vote to reform the system that their party has brought into disrepute.

Those in government have a duty to get value for money and to respect the hard-earned taxpayers' money with which they are entrusted. Let us not forget the financial turmoil caused by the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), when she and her team pushed through the Budget in September 2022, ignoring expert advice and leaving people with hundreds of extra pounds to pay on their mortgages—and not just for a couple of months, but for years to come. From this Conservative Government, we have had not just higher mortgages but higher rents, rampant inflation, a real cost of living crisis causing people up and down the country to struggle to make ends meet, and, of course, hollowed-out public services that are scarcely able to meet demand.

When the ministerial severance payments scheme was set up back in 1991, no one would have imagined the absolute pantomime that we have seen over the past couple of years, with nearly 100 Ministers leaving office and taking with them some £993,000—nearly £1 million—of taxpayers' hard-earned money in ministerial severance pay. Back in 1991, the expectation would have been that Ministers would be in post for a number of years, and that those leaving under the age of 65 would receive a quarter of their final annual salary—13 weeks' pay—as severance pay.

However, let us fast-forward to the summer of 2022, when MPs were hastily appointed to fill gaps after the frenzied mass resignations from the Johnson Government, supporters of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk were brought in to serve during her time at No. 10, and supporters of the current Prime Minister, who resigned from the ministerial jobs to put pressure

on his predecessors, returned only a few weeks later when he became Prime Minister. We are not saying that the rules were broken, except in the cases of the handful of over-65s who were not entitled to severance pay. Under the existing rules, the rest of those Tory Ministers were legally entitled to three months of severance pay at their final salary level, no matter how long they had been in post, no matter how they came to lose their post and, in most cases, no matter how quickly they returned to the Front Bench afterwards. Those are the glaring loopholes that Labour's proposed reforms seek to close.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Lady has referred to value for the taxpayer and the contributions of the hard-working people who send us here. Would she support the ongoing freeze on ministerial salaries were Labour to come into power?

Dame Nia Griffith: As I have said, I am going to speak to the topic on the Order Paper, and I am not going to be distracted by any other topic.

If Labour's proposed reforms had been in place in 2022, that would have saved the taxpayer some 40% of those payouts, or some £377,000. During the Tory turmoil of the past couple of years, some Ministers have received more in severance pay than in actual pay. For example, Ministers who only served for a matter of weeks—perhaps only eight or nine weeks—have been entitled to walk away with 13 weeks' severance pay. That is clearly totally absurd and unacceptable. Labour is proposing a pro rata system, whereby those Ministers who serve for less than a full year should only receive in severance pay a quarter of what they have actually earned. In other words, if a Minister had been in post for eight months, they would be entitled to two months' severance pay; if they had been in post for eight weeks, they would be entitled to two weeks' severance pay.

Likewise, we propose to strengthen the rules concerning Ministers who are reappointed. Under the existing rules, ministerial severance pay is only withheld if the departing Minister takes up another post within three weeks of quitting, which covers a normal reshuffle situation. However, with the revolving door we have seen, some Ministers have returned after more than three weeks but less than 13 weeks and yet kept their full severance pay, which is in accordance with the current rules. That is another loophole that our proposals seek to close: individuals who return to the Front Bench while still benefiting from severance pay would have that pay clawed back. For example, if a Minister were entitled to eight weeks' severance pay but took up another ministerial post after five weeks, they should clearly forgo the remaining three weeks' severance pay, as they would of course be receiving their new ministerial salary.

Thirdly, we propose that individuals who leave their jobs while under investigation for gross misconduct or breaches of the ministerial code would not receive any severance pay unless and until they were cleared of those allegations by the relevant authority. We would therefore not be in the situation where the disgraced former Member for Tamworth, who should never have been appointed in the first place, has been able to walk away with full ministerial severance pay.

Likewise, under the current rules, the shameful behaviour of the former Member for Wellingborough was no bar to his taking severance pay. However, as he is over 65,

he should never have had that payout in the first place. In fact, nearly £50,000 has been wrongly paid out to former Ministers who were over 65 at the time they left their posts. One would hope that the handful of individuals involved would pay back that severance pay immediately, as I believe the former Member for Mid Bedfordshire, Nadine Dorries, has promised to do. Perhaps in his closing remarks, the Minister could update us on whether Ms Dorries has indeed repaid that money, and also on what progress has been made in clawing back the severance payments that were wrongly made to other Ministers over the age of 65. Make no mistake: ordinary citizens owing money to HMRC or the Department for Work and Pensions would certainly be expected to repay it in a timely fashion. Furthermore, I ask the Minister to address the content of each of our proposals and say whether or not this Government will support them, and if not, why not.

I appeal to Conservative Members to do the decent thing and support Labour's reforms, and to support bringing forward the necessary legislation in the next fortnight, as set out in our motion on the Order Paper. If they do not support our reforms, we will have to conclude that they are more interested in lining their own pockets than protecting taxpayers' money. I commend the motion to the House.

6.4 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I would like to begin by wishing the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) a very happy birthday. We are delighted to be spending it with her in these conditions.

We can only imagine the scenes—the absolute scenes—in Labour HQ that preceded this debate: the heirs to Bevan, Attlee, Wilson and Mandelson wrestling with the great issues of the day and wondering what they would bring to the mother of all Parliaments for this Opposition day debate. Would it be the war in Ukraine, the future of NATO, conflict in the middle east, the situation in the Red sea, Children's Mental Health Week, the failure of the NHS in Labour-run Wales, the collapse of Labour-led Birmingham, National Apprenticeship Week, the Mayor of London's failure to control crime, deepfakes and the future of democracy, the strength of UK manufacturing or the halving of inflation? No, the eureka moment, when it came, was reform of the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991. Yay! They have waited 33 years for this moment, and now they are going to strike. We can imagine the panic giving way to relief as they set about handing out their lines to eager Back Benchers.

This motion has given the country something it did not have before: that rarest of beasts, that most elusive of fowl, the red squirrel or red-footed booby of politics—a Labour policy. To be fair, it is not utter chod. The truth is that the legislation from 1991 has been on the books for a very long time—a third of a century—and it is due for review, and when that time comes, it will be right to consider a number of things. It will be right to consider the length of service and severance pay, it will be right to consider those who swiftly re-enter work after a period out of it, and it will be right to consider the status of those who are under investigation when they lose their job. I say “consider” very specifically, because—as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the whole House will know—that

is how we legislate in this place: we consult, we debate and we consider. When this subject is next considered, there will be other issues that Labour did not have time to put in its motion as it was scrabbled together at the last minute.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) asked whether there should be severance pay at all, and that would need to be debated. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) asked whether the law on over-65s and severance pay is right, and that needs to be considered. A number of hon. Members questioned the status of former Prime Ministers, and that should be considered. There will be other issues—many other issues—and, as I say, when the time comes to do this, the Government will consult, consider and allow proper time for debate, not the less than two hours that the Labour motion would give for Committee stage of this legislation. It is an absolutely ridiculous way of going about trying to pass legislation.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Amateur!

Alex Burghart: It is, as my right hon. Friend says from a sedentary position, amateur.

This Government are not going to legislate on this issue before the general election, not because the issue is not important, but because there are other things that are more important. It is because we understand priorities and we understand our constituents' priorities, which was a point very well made by the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). We will be legislating to support renters and leaseholders, to back a free press with our Media Bill, and to strengthen law and order with our Sentencing Bill, the Criminal Justice Bill and the Victims and Prisoners Bill. We will be strengthening animal welfare, strengthening our economy with the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill and the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, and giving greater power to our national security forces with the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill. We are doing all these things and more, because they are our priorities and they are our voters' priorities.

We look forward to the next Conservative Government after the next general election having a chance to consider these and many other issues, but it will be done properly, not in a panicked Opposition day debate by a desperate Opposition scrabbling for something to say. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) said, this is a “smokescreen” for a lack of policy. It is a political game, and this Government will not support it.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 192, Noes 275.

Division No. 74]

[6.9 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Begum, Apsana
Abrahams, Debbie	Benn, rh Hilary
Ali, Rushanara	Betts, Mr Clive
Anderson, Fleur	Blackford, rh Ian
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Blackman, Kirsty
Bardell, Hannah	Blake, Olivia
Barker, Paula	Blomfield, Paul
	Bonnar, Steven
	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben

Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Mearns*)
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily

Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gerald Jones and
Kim Leadbeater

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam

Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mark Francois*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben

Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henry, Darren
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea

Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant

Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig

Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
 Suzanne Webb and
 Mr Gagan Mohindra

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INTERNATIONAL IMMUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES

That the draft European Organization for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere and the European Space Agency (Immunities and Privileges) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 18 December 2023, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (High-Risk Countries) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 (SI 2024, No. 69), dated 22 January 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to the House for not mentioning my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests before my speech last Monday. I should have referred to my entry and I did not. I apologise to the House for not doing so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the hon. Lady for giving notice of this point of order and for coming to the House to make the position clear.

PETITIONS

Road safety and Brent Primary School

6.26 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am pleased to present to the House a petition on behalf of the Brent Primary School, a fantastic school in my constituency. The school took part in Parliament Week last year, and when I attended, they asked me to present this petition. Mrs Rye, Miss McNally and the whole senior leadership team lead an excellent group of teachers, and an equally excellent group of pupils.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The petition of residents of the constituency of Dartford,

Declares that every pupil at Brent Primary School wants to feel safe when travelling to and from school and near local roads; further that the pupils would like the roads surrounding the school to be 20mph instead of 30mph and free from speeding traffic; further that this is an important issue to pupils as road crashes have had devastating effects on families and communities, including, sadly, a pupil of the school who lost her life due to a speeding, unsafe driver; and further notes that if road safety is improved, pupils will be more likely to walk and cycle to places and therefore live healthier lifestyles.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to change the speed limit surrounding Brent Primary school to 20mph, and introduce other speed reduction measures including speed cameras, speed bumps, posters and police checks so that the speed limit is adhered to.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002901]

Road freight rates

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk in relation to road freight rates. Virtually everything we eat, wear and consume travels by road haulage. It is a vital industry for all our constituents. However, it faces multiple challenges, with road freight rates increasing alarmingly because of a whole range of cost factors, such as the reintroduction of the heavy goods vehicle levy, clean air charges, rising fuel and a multitude of other costs. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to consult with the road haulage industry to introduce tailored support to ensure that companies can continue to operate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[To the House of Commons.

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the road haulage industry contributes to approximately £13.5 million annually to the UK economy; further that everything we eat, drink, wear and consume depends on road haulage services and the companies and drivers that operate them; notes that 98% of all food and agricultural products in the UK are transported by road freight; further that road freight rates have seen their biggest increase in almost a year, with UK rates climbing by 3.3%, month on month, in September, which is the sharpest rise since December 2022, according to the TEG Road Transport Index; and further that, this in part has been propelled by the reintroduction of the HGV levy, clean air charges, rising fuel prices and higher business charges.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consult with the road haulage industry to introduce tailored support to ensure that companies can continue to operate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002907]

Protection of Breakwater Beach in Brixham

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am pleased to present a petition to Parliament calling for the protection of Breakwater beach in Brixham. The petition has been organised and assembled by Robin and Rebecca Hooker, who have pulled together more than 2,000 signatures to call for town and village green status to be awarded to Breakwater beach. Such status would protect the beach from development, as well as ensure that an important part of south Devon's coastline can be protected for future generations. I am grateful to all Brixham residents for their support in signing this petition. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Torbay Council to ensure that Breakwater Beach Brixham be declared a Town and Village Green.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Brixham in the constituency of Totnes,

Declares that residents are concerned about the proposed development at Breakwater Beach in Brixham; notes that whilst no formal plans have been submitted to Torbay Council, the drawings that were recently unveiled have not been welcomed by residents due to the adverse impact the development would have locally; further declares that Breakwater Beach should be protected due to the beauty and nature of the surrounding coastal area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Torbay Council to ensure that Breakwater Beach Brixham be declared a Town and Village Green.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002910]

Ceasefire and the state of Palestine

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Last month I was honoured to join worshippers for Friday prayers at Hillview Islamic centre in Shettleston, who expressed their horror at the humanitarian crisis that sadly is unfolding in Gaza. I stand in solidarity with their calling on the Government to call a ceasefire now. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urges the Government to join with others in the international community in urgently pressing all parties to agree to an immediate ceasefire, and to call on the UK Government to recognise the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[To the House of Commons.

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that the attacks by Hamas on Israel on 7th October 2023 were acts of terror, and unequivocally condemns the taking of hostages and the loss of innocent lives in those attacks; further that the petitioners condemn

the disproportionate response of the Israel Defence Forces, and affirms that there must be an end to the collective punishment of the Palestinian people; further declares for the urgent release of all hostages and an end to the siege of Gaza to allow vital supplies of food, fuel, medicine and water to reach the civilian population; further declares support for the calls by the United Nations and many other international actors for an immediate ceasefire on all sides of the conflict and supports the global consensus in support of a two-state solution with a sovereign, prosperous Palestinian state, living side by side with a safe and secure Israel; and notes the resolution of the House of Commons on 13th October 2014 calling on the UK Government to recognise the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to join with others in the international community in urgently pressing all parties to agree to an immediate ceasefire, and to call on the UK Government to recognise the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel.]

[P002911]

Support for Civilians Fleeing Gaza

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

6.32 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak briefly on the plight of innocent civilians in Gaza, although it breaks my heart that the debate is necessary. About 1.8 million people are trapped in Gaza right now. Almost all of them are multiple internal refugees, who have been forced to flee their homes elsewhere in Gaza and again several times, as places that were promised would be safe soon became anything but.

I do not want to go into the arguments about the legality or illegality, morality or immorality of what is happening there, and what has happened previously in Israel. Those debates have to continue, but I want to use this opportunity to ask what steps the UK Government are taking to save the lives of people who are in mortal danger. To no one's surprise, I will suggest that they are not doing nearly enough.

We have already seen more than 27,000 deaths in Gaza, mostly women and children. The vast majority are completely innocent civilians who have never wished any harm on anyone. There is a real and imminent danger that that horrific death toll will increase exponentially if, as still seems likely, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is forced to stop or significantly scale down its lifesaving work in Gaza. People are already dying not just because of military action but because essential supplies of food, water and medicines are not getting through in sufficient quantities.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful start to his speech. He mentioned the innocent civilians who are being subjected to horrendous conditions. My constituent Dr Salim Ghayyda has 40 family members living day by day, trying to avoid death, the horrendous circumstances, and everything else that people have to put up with there. Is it not about time that the UK Government put in a scheme, even for relatives of UK citizens, to get them safe harbour away from the atrocities that they face every day?

Peter Grant: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Many of our constituents have hardly slept for months, because they never know when they are going to get the phone call telling them of the death of a relative, or in some cases, the deaths of five, 10 or 15 relatives at the same time. It is an unimaginable worry for people to be living with.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing forward this debate, on a subject we all have in our mind. Does he agree that the most vulnerable people under attack in Gaza need a clear path to safety? Will he join me in urging the neighbouring nations also to step up their efforts to welcome refugees with open arms? Does he further agree that our Government should be ensuring that we do all we can to make sure that aid gets to the people who clearly need it the most?

Peter Grant: I do not disagree with anything the hon. Gentleman said, although I would point out that some of the neighbouring countries are hosting between 1 million and 2 million refugees from Syria. That is why this is a global problem; the whole world has to take action.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. A constituent of mine is a Palestinian international student at university in York. His family remain in Gaza, and he is desperate for his children to join him, yet the Government have not opened up an opportunity or a scheme to bring his family to him. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the humanitarian thing for this Government to do is to open up visa opportunities for families to be reunited?

Peter Grant: Absolutely. I think the message emerging is that this situation is affecting significant numbers of people in the United Kingdom. A large number of our constituents have close family members who are in mortal danger. We cannot stand by and then wonder afterward why some did not survive.

Lives have been lost because aid has not always got through in time, and certainly not in sufficient quantities. If UNRWA has to scale down significantly, or even stop its activities, the situation will worsen—250 deaths a day is bad enough; it could get unimaginably worse. It is no exaggeration to say that if we do not start to act soon, we could see more civilian deaths in Gaza than there were in Rwanda in 1994. Gaza could become the new Rwanda. Regardless of what terminology people choose to use to describe the actions of the various warring factions in and around Palestine, regardless of the terminology used to describe what is being done to innocent civilians, and regardless of who we choose to point the finger of blame at, it is not tenable to suggest that we can stand back and let today's figure of tens of thousands of preventable deaths grow into hundreds of thousands, or even more.

Part of the response has to be to get people out of harm's way as quickly and in as large numbers as possible. What I am asking the Government to do, as a first step, is something that I know for a fact other countries have already done, so let us not pretend that it is something the Government cannot do. First, where civilians in Gaza have close family members in the United Kingdom, the UK Government should, at the very least, be negotiating safe passage for them to get out of Gaza. Secondly, the Government should be guaranteeing their right to come to the United Kingdom and join their families, not necessarily permanently—that is not what Palestinians want—but as a short-term, emergency measure, to keep them safe until their homeland, the land they want to return to, is once more safe and fit for human habitation. I appreciate that is not palatable to some Government Members, but the alternative is far less palatable.

I have referred to my constituent Dr Lubna Hadoura several times in this Chamber. She came here as a student, like the constituent the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned, but she liked Scotland so much that she stayed. She has given over 30 years—her entire adult lifetime—of service to our NHS as a consultant surgeon, most of it in Fife. She has probably saved the lives of many of my constituents.

She has about 20 close relatives living under bombardment in Gaza, ranging from her elderly mum to two babies too wee even to walk. Dr Hadoura loves living in Fife. Most of her family have no intention of coming to live permanently in Fife, or indeed anywhere else in the United Kingdom. They want to live their lives in Palestine; that is home for them. But most important of all, they want to live, and living is becoming almost physically impossible in Gaza.

I make a particular appeal given Dr Hadoura's outstanding contribution to her adopted country. We owe her, and I think that even getting her mum out to safety constitutes only a fraction of that debt. Most of the Members who are present have already made similar appeals on behalf of their constituents' families, but—this is only my personal view—I do not think that we should be stopping at people with families in the UK. I do not think that we should knowingly leave anyone to die, but sadly I hold out little hope of the Government's willingness to go as far as that this evening.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I wanted to add my voice to that of my hon. Friend, because, as he knows, his constituent has a sister who is my constituent, and who has also given many years' service to the NHS. That family are in a position to financially support any relatives who might come from Gaza to the UK temporarily.

I agree with my hon. Friend that as well as considering families like those of our constituents, we should have a wider humanitarian visa. In the last few months there have been nearly twice as many civilian deaths in Gaza as in Ukraine. What difference does my hon. Friend think there is between the position of the Gazans and that of the Ukrainians that is preventing the British Government from issuing a humanitarian visa?

Peter Grant: I can only speculate on what the Government's thinking might be. I see no difference whatsoever, and I refuse to accept any distinction between any two human beings who are in mortal danger. We do not expect firefighters to check bank accounts or passports before deciding who is to be taken out of a burning building. We do not expect ambulance crews to check who someone is before deciding in which order to treat casualties after a road accident, although some people do. We certainly do not expect to see the heroes who man—and woman—lifeboats stopping to check people's identities before deciding whether to pull them out of the sea. In the same way, we should not be making distinctions between those who should be allowed to live in the United Kingdom and those who should be left to die in Gaza or anywhere else, but sadly, as I have said, I do not think we will see that amount of movement from the Government today or at any time. So far, they have refused even to meet me to listen to the moral, humanitarian and imperative case for letting Dr Hadoura's elderly mum survive, letting the rest of her family survive, and letting as many of those 1.8 million people as possible survive.

The most recent reply that I received from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office was very sympathetic, very apologetic and utterly, utterly dismissive. It would be easy to look at that letter and think that it had been written by someone who genuinely could not care less about the plight of Palestinians right now. I do

not think that that is a correct description of anyone in the Foreign Office, but that is the impression that the letter gave my constituent.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for initiating this important debate. I too have encountered issues involving several constituents. Surprisingly, there do not seem to be that many—I think that three have written to me—so I do not think there is a huge number that the Government should be concerned about. However, these are family members who are contributing to the UK economy. My constituents Rami Alfaqani and Alaa Safi have lost 52 members of their family, and another family member needs urgent medical intervention. That is why we should do the humanitarian and right thing for those people.

Peter Grant: The hon. Member is right to talk of doing the humanitarian and right thing. I would suggest that the situation in Gaza has become so critically desperate that the humanitarian response is the only one that can be morally tenable for any of us.

I said that the letter from the Foreign Office was dismissive, and I am sorry to have to say that it was also less than 100% honest. In a letter that was one and a half pages long, the writer talked eight times about what the Foreign Office could and could not do. Let me say again to the Minister that I am not asking the UK Government to do anything that they cannot do. I am not asking them to do anything except what I know other countries, including some of our closest international allies, have already done for the families of their citizens to get them out of Gaza. For the Foreign Office, it is not a question of “We cannot do anything more”, but a question of “We choose not to do anything more”, and I think that that is an untenable position for anyone to adopt at this time.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points, and I share his frustrations, having also written to the Foreign Secretary on this issue on behalf of my constituent, Sama, whose family have been evacuated six times. A recent Israel Defence Forces bombardment destroyed the family home, which took them 30 years to build. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be some route for families in that situation? At the moment, Sama has no answers from this Government and there is no way of getting her family to safety.

Peter Grant: I agree with my hon. Friend’s comments. One thing that is causing immeasurable upset to my constituent, Dr Hadoura, and to many other Palestinians in the United Kingdom is that they are in contact with Palestinian families in other countries and seeing them getting their loved ones out of Palestine. They know that the UK Government say that they cannot do anything about it, but they see other countries’ Governments being able to do something. Those Governments might have reasons for not wanting to publicise it or for it to be too widely known, but they are willing to go beyond the legal minimum to get people out and reunited with their families.

The last letter I got from the Foreign Office Minister finished by saying:

“I recognise this will be disappointing news”—
disappointing? Disappointing?—

“but wanted to relay it as soon as possible, so that your constituent can take informed decisions about his family’s next steps.”

Incidentally, it was clear in my letter that Dr Hadoura was a she, not a he. That made me convinced that this was a cut-and-paste job from another letter and that they had not even bothered to tailor it to the individual constituent. And relaying it to me “as soon as possible” meant sending me a letter two months after I had contacted the Minister. By contrast, on Friday last week, within the space of about two hours, my office had two emails and two phone calls from the Foreign Office wanting to know what today’s debate was about. What does that tell us about its priorities? That it was more urgent to sort out which Minister would respond to the debate than to agree to meet Members of Parliament to try and find a way of stopping people dying unnecessarily.

But it was the bit after that in the letter that I found callous beyond belief: it had been sent so that my constituent, Dr Hadoura, could take “informed decisions” about her “family’s next steps”. Precisely what decisions are available to Dr Hadoura, to her family and to the 1.8 million others? What on earth are they supposed to decide about? There are no options. There is no survival plan for those families in Gaza because it is becoming impossible for anyone to survive there. An earlier Government response suggested that they should all apply for visas to travel to the United Kingdom. What a really great idea! It is impossible for them to apply for a visa in Gaza. Where are they going to apply to? Who still has a consulate operating in Gaza? If they try to travel somewhere else in Gaza to get a visa, there is a very high risk that they will be shot. If by some miracle they manage to reach the Egyptian border—remember, the only borders they have are with Israel and Egypt—the border guards will say, “Have you got a visa to travel somewhere else? No? Get back to Gaza, then.” And the whole thing goes round in a circle. They cannot get a visa without getting out of Gaza, and they cannot get out of Gaza without a visa. The Government fully understand that, and they are not prepared to issue visas from here, which, as has been mentioned, they have done for people fleeing from other parts of the world.

Dr Hadoura’s family’s only chance—and the only chance for any of those 1.8 million people—is to be taken out of Gaza under the protection of another Government, as some have been. They need a Government who will negotiate safe passage for them out of Gaza. They need a Government who will give them refuge until it is safe for them to go back home, where they want to live out their lives. They need a Government who will care, not only with their words but with their actions. They need a Government who can look at this human catastrophe with the eyes and hearts of human beings. Within the next 15 minutes or so, we will know whether that description can be applied to this Government.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for securing this debate and for his thoughtful contribution. The Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), could not be here as he is attending to other duties, but I am pleased to respond to the debate on his behalf. I will try to cover the points that have been raised. I will ensure that the hon. Member for Glenrothes receives

[Leo Docherty]

timely and accurate replies pursuant to the specific case he raised, and I will work with officials to make sure those responses are in good order.

All Members will agree that the situation in Gaza is desperate. Innocent Palestinians are suffering terribly amid the substantial and growing humanitarian crisis. The death toll has now topped 27,000, with more than 66,000 reported injured, mostly women and children. Fewer than half of Gaza's hospitals are even partially functional, and they lack the staff, equipment and resources they need. Meanwhile, large numbers of people are living in overcrowded shelters without the most basic amenities and are suffering unthinkable trauma from the near constant bombardment. More than 1.7 million people have fled their homes, with nearly half of Gaza's population packed into the southern region of Rafah.

The hon. Gentleman asked what the United Kingdom is doing in response to the situation, and he indicated that his view is that we are not doing enough. Of course, there are several aspects to the response, and I will address them in turn. He asked about those seeking to flee Gaza. To answer his question very directly, at this time we are not considering a bespoke route for Palestinians affected by the conflict. Moreover, the issue of resettling Palestinian refugees is, of course, complicated by the right of return, which we must carefully consider. That issue is at the heart of the middle east peace process. For many of those fleeing Gaza, permanent resettlement to a third country is not the right solution. Indeed, it may be the worst option for those whose dearest hope is to live out their days in a recognised state of Palestine. The House will know that we are a generous nation—half a million people fleeing danger have been offered a place in this country via a safe and legal route since 2015. But a bespoke route is not the right solution for the current situation.

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) was very clear that he is looking for temporary visas because, as the Minister says, Palestinians will of course want to return when and if it is safe to do so. Does the Minister not think that the United Kingdom has a particular responsibility, given the history of our involvement in the region and the Balfour declaration?

Leo Docherty: We all have a responsibility. All developed nations have a responsibility to ensure that the urgent humanitarian disaster in Gaza is made less severe by our interventions. That is what we are doing.

Right now, it is clear that we need measures to increase the provision of humanitarian aid to help those in desperate need. The Government are therefore focused on these efforts, alongside our efforts to achieve a sustainable ceasefire. That is how we will help those suffering in Gaza.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Minister talks about a sustainable ceasefire, but at what point will this Government actually call for a ceasefire?

Leo Docherty: I will come to that. We have called for a humanitarian pause and a sustainable ceasefire. I will remark on what that means presently, but colleagues

should be aware that we have trebled our aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 7 October, committing £60 million this financial year. This supports crucial partners such as the British Red Cross, the UN and the Egyptian Red Crescent Society to help civilians with food, fuel, water, healthcare and shelter.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister says there is aid provision, but it is simply not getting through. I attended a briefing by ActionAid, among others, this morning, and I heard that dignity packs for women are stuck in a warehouse and not getting over the border. Meanwhile, women are having to menstruate into bits of tent. Does he think that is acceptable?

Leo Docherty: No, we are not satisfied that enough aid is getting through and we are working very energetically on our diplomatic efforts to increase the flow of aid. We need to see water, fuel and electricity restored. We want to see the Erez crossing open to allow direct aid to north Gaza. We want to see Ashdod port opened. We want to see unencumbered access to aid coming from Jordan. We want the Kerem Shalom crossing open seven days a week, rather than just five. We want to extend the opening hours and capacity of the Nitzana screening facility and the Kerem Shalom checkpoint so that a greater volume of aid can pass via trucks. We want to ensure that the United Nations has the people, vehicles and equipment necessary. Part of getting that increased flow of aid is about a humanitarian pause, and we are expending a huge amount of diplomatic effort on pushing for that. The Minister for the middle east is travelling in the region pursuant to that this week and the Foreign Secretary will be doing the same in the coming weeks.

Rachael Maskell: Let me return to the point in question. My constituent is here under the British Council's scholarship scheme. He has two tiny children and his wife in Gaza. He could not afford to bring them over here on a visa, as he is a student, studying at the British Council's request. He wants to be reunited with his little children, who have seen many of their friends and family killed. Why will the Government not reach out to that family and allow them safe passage so that they can be reunited?

Leo Docherty: Safe and legal routes do exist and if there is a case—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady's question describes elegantly the limits of the Government's executive capacity. Of course safe and legal routes do exist, but the way we can have a positive impact to set the conditions for people such as those she mentioned is for us to push for a humanitarian pause and a ceasefire. It is irresponsible to talk in hypotheticals otherwise. The way the situation will be improved is for us to achieve a humanitarian pause. For us to make rhetorical statements that do not pertain to reality would be simply irresponsible.

I should point out to the House—

Peter Grant: Will the Minister give way?

Leo Docherty: No, as I must make some progress. During his visit to al-Arish in Egypt, the Foreign Secretary met representatives from the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, who are co-ordinating the relief effort at the Rafah crossing. We heard how the UK's contributions of shelter, blankets and other vital equipment have been

providing much-needed relief to the people of Gaza, but of course we also heard about the many constraints on the humanitarian operations that we face. That is why our judgment is that Israel must take steps, working with partners, including the UN and Egypt, to significantly increase the flow of aid. That includes allowing prolonged humanitarian pauses; opening more routes into Gaza; and restoring water, fuel and electricity.

The Foreign Secretary is directly engaging with Israeli leaders on that and has announced work alongside Qatar to get more aid into Gaza, with our joint consignment containing 17 tonnes of tents being flown in last Thursday. When he met Prime Minister Netanyahu at the end of January, he reiterated the need for Israel to open more crossing points, for Nitzana and Kerem Shalom to be open for longer, and for Israel to support the UN to distribute aid effectively across the whole of Gaza. We are also continuing our work with Egypt on steps to increase humanitarian access via the Rafah crossing.

Peter Grant: May I take the Minister back to his comment about safe and legal routes? Nobody can cross from Gaza to Egypt unless they have documents that prove they have been given the right to enter a third country, and nobody in Gaza has any way of getting such documents. Could he just describe exactly where the safe and legal route is and how Gazans are supposed to get there?

Leo Docherty: The only way that anyone will be able to come to safety is if there is a humanitarian pause and a sustainable ceasefire. So Ministers making statements about how many people we may or may not take would be rhetorically impressive but practically meaningless. We are therefore focused on the purposeful work and serious diplomacy of pushing for a humanitarian pause and then a sustainable ceasefire.

The Government want to see an end to the fighting as soon as possible. The Foreign Secretary has worked tirelessly across the middle east to push for a humanitarian pause and a sustainable ceasefire. Two weeks ago, he travelled to Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Qatar and Turkey, and last week he visited Oman, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Face-to-face talks with leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu, Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed bin Salman are invaluable in setting out UK views and understanding the positions of countries who can help end this conflict.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Leo Docherty: As the Foreign Secretary has set out, we want to see an immediate pause in the fighting to allow vital aid into Gaza and to give space for a deal that would get the hostages out.

We are also working to turn what would be a fragile truce into a sustainable, permanent ceasefire without a return to more fighting. That means giving Israel the reassurance that it needs to end its campaign. This means the Hamas leaders must leave Gaza and the attacks against Israel must end. All Israeli hostages must be released and a new Palestinian Government formed that can deliver for all its citizens, accompanied by an international support package. It also means giving the people of Gaza and the west bank the political perspective of a Palestinian state and a new future.

Turning to reconstruction efforts, while the long-term future of a Palestinian state is important for a lasting peace, there is the immediate task of rebuilding Gaza. We should be in no doubt that reconstruction will be a daunting task. It will take a giant international effort because of the scale of destruction, and it is beyond the means of any one country, so a wide coalition of western countries, Arab and Muslim states, as well as Israel and the Palestinians, will be needed. Gaza will need as many people as possible to join the effort. Building this support is another of the Foreign Secretary's diplomatic objectives. We will continue to push for a humanitarian pause and a sustainable ceasefire.

Rachael Maskell: I want to return the Minister to the subject of this evening's debate and the desperate situation that my constituent's children find themselves in. They cannot come to the UK unless the UK Government give them the right to come here. The UK Government are not giving them that right, so when will the Minister allow those children, together with their mother, to be reunited with their father, here in the UK?

Leo Docherty: We are seeking to improve the humanitarian situation, including that of the individuals the hon. Lady refers to, by ensuring that there is a de-escalation, a pause in the fighting and a sustainable ceasefire. That is the way we will attend to the desperate situation that affects more than those two individuals she mentions. That is our serious purpose. Our commitment is beyond doubt, both in resource and diplomatic effort. That is the purposeful and sincere effort of the Foreign Secretary and the entire Department.

Our immediate focus is on getting more aid in and securing an immediate pause in the fighting. That is how those affected will have their lives improved. We must do all we can to generate momentum to build a permanent peace and rebuild Gaza.

Question put and agreed to.

7.3 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 February 2024

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

Freedom of Religion and Belief in Nigeria

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion and belief in Nigeria.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting the motion. This subject is close to my heart. I visited Nigeria the year before last with the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I declare an interest as chair of that group. We speak for those with Christian belief, those with other beliefs and those with no beliefs, because we genuinely believe, as I know you do, Mr Paisley, in the love that our God has for others and the importance of reaching out across the world, where many obscene, difficult and heartbreaking things are happening, to speak up for human rights and to be a voice for the voiceless—those who have no one to speak for them. We will try to put forward that voice in this House in a constructive and positive way.

The debate was requested, and the Backbench Business Committee agreed to it, primarily because, at Christmas last year, almost 200 Christians were murdered because of their beliefs. They were attacked, murdered and abused by Fulani tribesmen. Those who were able to do so fled into the forest. Their houses and churches were destroyed and their property was taken. Those events were massive and really worrying.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this subject to the House, and for all he does to ensure that the concerning situation of people who are persecuted and discriminated against because of their religion or beliefs is continuously highlighted in this place and in the country. Does he agree that when there are attacks like the one at Christmas in Plateau state, this Government ought to ensure that they, with others, bring immediate help and relief, and look to see how they can help with rehousing, for example, and meeting all the urgent and immediate needs of people who suffer such atrocities?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. We need to be effective and probably urgent in our response. We have much faith in the Minister; I am sure that when he responds, he will give us some ideas about how that can be done better.

Ever mindful of Nigeria, on which we are focusing today—I referred earlier to the attacks before Christmas, my visit to the country and some of the lessons we learnt—it is frustrating and particularly worrying that, just over a year since we visited, things are no better. When we were there, campaigning was starting. We arrived in the early hours of the morning—I think it was about midnight or 1 am—and wondered, as we went from the airport to our hotel, why there were crowds. I found out the reason when we got to the hotel, because a political document had been left on a chair:

all the rallies were happening in the early hours of the morning. That was when we were hoping to see some change, but I understand that the elections have been postponed. We have great concerns about that.

The influence of people from Northern Ireland is always greater than people suspect. When I was leaving Nigeria, a young man came up to me in the airport and said in a Northern Irish accent, “Hello, Jim. How are you doing?” What are the chances of speaking to somebody with a Northern Irish accent at the airport after midnight in Nigeria? He turned out to have worked in the office of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) many moons ago; he was there as part of a lobbying and information group that was working on behalf of the opposition. The chances of having the change that we, and the Nigerians, all wish for have to be considered.

I am a well-known advocate for those who cannot speak out or who try to speak out but simply cannot be heard. Today is another opportunity to highlight the desperate daily battle that people face, seemingly without anyone knowing or understanding their plight. Today I seek to again speak out and draw attention to the horrific situation that exists for too many people throughout Nigeria at present.

Violations of FORB, along with broader discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, are often particularly serious in situations of crisis, emergency and conflict, which exacerbate it. I think we can all agree that the world is in turmoil. The Bible says that there will be wars and rumours of wars. How true that is across the world at this moment, nowhere more so than throughout the African nations, particularly Nigeria. What happens in Nigeria will dictate what happens across all of Africa. With a population of almost 220 million, Nigeria is the cauldron for the rest of Africa. That middle band of Africa is awash with weapons, arms and people with evil intent. That concerns me.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for all the work he does in this area. Does he agree that some of the figures provided in preparation for this debate show a stark increase in the number of Christians being killed or abducted? Just four years ago, 3,600 Christians were killed per year, and now it is almost 5,000. The persecution is increasing. Thankfully, a number of us have tabled motions in the House on this issue—I tabled the most recent one, last week. That is what we need to do to highlight this issue and to get action, not just from our Government, but from Governments internationally.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline that point, and those stark figures illustrate it very well. Unfortunately, it seems to be the killing ground for those of an ethnic or religious minority background, particularly Christians.

Fiona Bruce: I spoke with a member of the Nigerian diaspora yesterday. He called what is happening, “a prolonged national nightmare of tragedy after tragedy,” as these attacks continue unabated and asked, “Who are supplying the AK47s and the rocket launchers to herders in the crisis-ridden middle belt? Who is sponsoring these wars and these crimes in Nigeria? Who are the

[Fiona Bruce]

international funders?” Is that not a question that all of us in this country should be asking, together with the international community, so that we can address this?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady again makes a very pertinent intervention, which illustrates the issue I referred to earlier. Nigeria and the middle belt of Africa are awash with weapons. We need to address those issues.

The ethnic nationalist groups fighting for greater power for ethnic Fulani people overwhelmingly target civilians with violence in northern Nigeria. In north central Nigerian, Christians represent the majority of victims of that violence. There was a recent attack, at Christmas, in which 200 Christians lost their lives. As parliamentarians, it is our duty to denounce and address such action against freedom of religion or belief, which is a basic human right. One young American lady said to me just last week that the United States has failed to address this situation—I understand that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was in the States for a weekend, and I am sure she heard similar remarks. Just last week, that American lady urged me to ensure that we do not fail. We are having this debate today, and we will not fail when it comes to addressing the issues—those who are here will ensure that.

I am fully aware of the limitations of our Government's ability to control the situation in Nigeria. But by the same token, I believe that there is more that we can and must do to make changes on the ground to get help and support to those who need it most, and simply to do what is right—it is right to do these things. In addition to the recent Christmas massacre, Islamic insurgent-directed Fulani gangs killed at least 10 Christians in Taraba state—another in a catalogue of murder—while a dozen similar gunmen kidnapped over 150 people in Zamfara state, and Boko Haram killed 15 rice farmers in Borno state. It seems to never end.

Those incidents serve to further escalate tensions in a country where violence divides people and erodes trust, threatening Nigerians' freedom of religion or belief. Historically, violence in Nigeria has fallen along ethnic or religious lines. Violence by Boko Haram, the JAS—I will not try to pronounce the full name; you might understand if I said it in an Ulster Scots accent, Mr Paisley, but I suspect that no one else will—and Islamic State in West Africa threaten the freedom of religion or belief of Nigerians. Despite statements in favour of inter-faith unity, the Nigerian Government—I say this respectfully—have generally failed to enact meaningful policy reforms and changes to address the drivers of the violence impacting on religious freedom. I remember being outraged when I first heard about Boko Haram's actions against women and children and the trafficking of those young girls. Even today, one young girl, Leah Sharibu, is still under the control of Boko Haram.

Fiona Bruce: Is it not correct that Leah Sharibu is still in captivity because she refused to renounce her Christian faith? Is it not also correct that while, for example, moderate Muslims and others suffer attacks, it appears that Christians in particular are being targeted? Churches are attacked during services, as Owo church was at Pentecost last year, and there was the attack at Christmas in Plateau state. It is a tragedy that, somewhere in the world, every two hours a Christian is killed, and that more than four fifths of those are in Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and for her other contributions to this debate.

When we visited Nigeria, I remember well the stories we were told by some of the Christians who had been displaced. Those internally displaced peoples informed us that when they were being attacked, the police station was only about half a mile the other side, but while the attack was ongoing, there seemed to be no movement, unfortunately, by the police or the army to reach out and help. It is frustrating that we should have to record such incidents, where the Nigerian police and army have been unable or unwilling to respond when they should. It also annoys me that sometimes the media are silent. It is time for the media to highlight the increasing numbers of murders, atrocities, persecution and kidnappings of young people, as well as the murders of their mums, dads and grandparents.

In Nigeria, 12 northern states have adopted sharia law, even though the constitution recognises the right of freedom of religion or belief—in other words, a right to have a different religion, and not to be subject to another religion in any place. Christians, however, are charged in sharia courts, even though such courts have no jurisdiction over them according to the Nigerian constitution, and even though Christians' evidence and their testimonies are worth half that of a Muslim. Will the Minister give us some idea of what discussions have taken place between the UK and Nigerian Governments about ensuring that sharia law, contrary to the constitution, does not take precedence over Christians and their beliefs across Nigeria?

A predominantly Muslim ethnic group, the Fulani, have also experienced significant persecution and statelessness across west Africa for several decades. As a primarily pastoralist community, the Fulani have experienced growing disenfranchisement in the country. The marginalisation stems from federal and state government preferences for developing agriculture and the livestock sector, on which the Fulani solely depend. There are other issues, especially ecological shocks from climate change and growing competition for resources. Government authorities have failed to curb the flow of weapons—the hon. Member for Congleton referred to that—or to protect pastoralists' property from growing criminality.

We need a strong hand from the Nigerian Government, through their police and their army, to protect their people. What is the duty of our Government here, and of our Army and our Minister? It is to protect our people. I commend our Government for their stance; Nigeria and its people deserve the same.

Open Doors, a charity that I support prayerfully and practically and whose information I highly regard—others in this Chamber have the same opinion—has provided information about other religious minorities that are also being attacked and abducted by the majority groups. Followers of African traditional religions are subject to attacks and abductions in their hundreds—not just ones, twos, tens and twenties, but hundreds. Muslims who do not partake in militant attacks are also vulnerable to attack, because they do not participate.

When we were in Nigeria, we made the case clearly. We met many people of the Muslim faith who told us that they were as absolutely disgusted at what was happening against Christians as we were. We have to

divorce those who are involved in terrorist campaigns from ordinary people who have a different faith but do not try to push it on to others.

In the north-west and north-central states, many Muslims have been killed, abducted or forced to flee their villages. Ethnic Shi'ites are banned in Nigeria—again, they deserve to have their faith and to worship their God in the way they wish—and it concerns me when I hear of such things happening.

The Government response to extreme violence against civilians has been insufficient to meet their obligations to ensure security and justice for victims. In the north-east, communities have alleged that Government security forces deliberately avoid responding to warnings of violence until after attacks have taken place. Even when they do respond, Christian civilians have reported that they respond with stronger force to alerts about impending violence against Muslim communities than to violence against Christian communities. That institutional bias must be addressed, as the hon. Member for Congleton said. It is clear that what people told me on my visit to Nigeria happens regularly, which is concerning, so I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

Due to the lack of a federal response, some state and local officials have called for civilians to take up arms and defend themselves. Although they do that with good intent—there is good reason to do it—the result is the militarisation of identity groups and an increase in the human rights abuses associated with poorly trained vigilante groups with little to no accountability, so that is not the best way of doing things. It is only right that there is Government enforcement; it is not up to individuals, paramilitary groups or church groups to carry out such actions, but they continue in the southern part of Nigeria.

What worries me is that a conflict that started in the north-east of Nigeria has moved into the centre, and is now moving south. In the south, the Igbo, a largely Christian ethnic group, have issues with political representation, given that the country's quota system for state revenue distribution privileges the comparatively more populous north and south-west of the country. At the same time, more political, religious and human rights groups are the target of violence. It worries me that the Igbo, the largest ethnic group in the south, are being disadvantaged because they happen to be Christians. No group should be displaced or prevented from accessing aid, grants and advice for that reason.

Fiona Bruce: Several years ago, when I was in Nigeria, the UK Government sent some of our military personnel to work with the Nigerian security forces to address the issues causing the attacks by Boko Haram, but that did not stop them; indeed, as the hon. Gentleman said, the attacks have increased way beyond the northern part of Nigeria and now take place in the middle and even southern areas. What more can we do to assist the security forces? Working with others from the international community to do so is urgent.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for those words. We have a fantastic and incredibly important relationship with Nigeria; there are rich cultural, historical, economic and family connections between our two countries. When I was in Nigeria, I had the opportunity to speak to the British consulate, and the attaché, who was at some of those meetings, indicated that the United Kingdom

Government were working closely with the Nigerian Government, but perhaps we have not seen enough of what could be done in a more tactical and advantageous way. One of the things we were told was that Nigeria was keen to have more helicopter support. The Minister is here to report from a human rights and religious point of view, but he has seen long and gallant service in the Army over many years, and he will understand the issue very clearly. I think we could do more, from a Ministry of Defence and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office point of view, to help the Nigerian army to take on the terrorist groups.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Member is being very generous to me in allowing interventions—I appreciate it greatly. I join him in acknowledging the Minister's experience with regard to military matters. Is it not correct to say that it would not be simply an altruistic act for the UK to get involved in ensuring greater peace and security in Nigeria? It is also in all our interests, as it is in the world's interest, because if young people in that huge country—Nigeria's population is composed largely of young people—become disillusioned and disenchanted with their home country and seek to emigrate elsewhere across the world, denuding Nigeria of its young people and the skills they could be trained in, that would be an absolute tragedy for international peace and security, not just security in Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. In my introduction, I mentioned the fact that Nigeria has almost 220 million people, and it is clearly the cauldron for what happens in the whole of Africa—what happens in Nigeria will indicate what happens elsewhere. So the hon. Lady is right to re-emphasise the importance of dealing with terrorism and atrocities and dealing fairly and equitably with each and every person, of whatever faith, in Nigeria. Ensuring that their human rights are respected, that the aid gets to them and that they are secure, happy and safe in their homes is so important, because if that fails in Nigeria—this is what the hon. Lady is reminding us of—it fails for all of Africa. That is why this debate is so important and, as the hon. Lady said, so critical.

To refer back to the Igbo people in the south, armed separatists defending Igbo interests target Muslim civilians, based on ethnic or religious identity, and have also attacked individuals of various faiths travelling to worship and to celebrate holidays in the region. The FORB violations in Nigeria impact everyone in Nigeria; that is where we are—everybody is affected. What happens for the Christians will have an effect elsewhere. What happens with the Muslims will have an effect elsewhere as well.

In terms of FORB, even the judiciary are an area of concern—I have to underline this issue. In the past year, a sharia court sentenced Sheikh Abduljabbar Kabara to death for blasphemy, which is contrary to the constitution of Nigeria, as a sharia court should not have the power to do so. Other judicial authorities sentenced humanist leader Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison for blasphemy and other charges. Mubarak Bala has been incarcerated since 28 April 2020. We used our visit to speak to some of the judiciary and judges in Nigeria and to make a case. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) will speak today for the Scots Nats. His hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) was in

[Jim Shannon]

that delegation and made a very good case for the release of Mubarak. We thought we had made some headway on that, and the indications coming from the judiciary seemed to say that, but he is still in prison. I understand that he was given an option to leave the country, and his wife and child deserve to be able to be reunited with him, wherever that may be, in freedom. I said at the beginning of the debate that I speak up for those with a Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith, and I mean that. The other members of the APPG mean it as well, and I think everyone in this room also means it. It is important to say that.

Additionally, a high court in Nigeria ruled that the blasphemy laws in the sharia penal codes are constitutional. In September, armed officers conducted a surprise raid on the presiding judge of the Kano court of appeal, who was the only judge who dissented from the ruling. Is there undue influence from the police and army on the judiciary? The question has to be asked. How impartial can those decisions be?

The Nigerian Government have failed to address the drivers of this violence and to prioritise justice for its victims. We must take action to address the systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom and human rights. The failures are clear. The Minister and his officials must think that I believe they have a magic wand. If only we all had a magic wand, imagine what we could do to fix things. I do not think they do have a magic wand, but I do think we can use our influence economically, culturally, historically and through families, because of the rich bond that is shared between Nigeria and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I know that there are limitations, but I do not believe that we are on the cusp of the limits; I believe that there is more engagement that can and should take place. When the Minister responds and tells us what has been done by the United Kingdom Government, I would be glad to hear that we are heading in a positive direction.

I believe that more on-the-ground missionaries could get involved. I have many in my constituency; in almost every church there are missionaries with contacts across the world, including in Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, Nigeria—in large numbers—Swaziland and South Africa. I make that point because there is a non-governmental workforce that could be used as part of the Government network. I have suggested before that missionary groups are there for one purpose: not to be political or to change the direction or focus of the Government, but to help people. I think they could be part of the network that we have in the UK. I know that there may be a sense of, “What else can we be asking for?” when Members see my name next to a debate, but lives are in the balance. There are people in Nigeria who I will never meet in this world, but hopefully we will meet in the next. The innocence of children is at stake, and I believe we have more to give.

When I used to get tired at home and feel like there was nothing left to give, I would recall a biblical verse that my mum ingrained in me. I mentioned in the main Chamber yesterday that my mum got me a bank account when I was 16 and got me my pension when I was 18. She is a lady of great influence. She is the same height as the hon. Member for Congleton—about 5 feet 6 inches—

and I am over 6 feet. I get the height from my dad, not my mum. My mum ingrained in me a thought that comes to mind.

Mr Gregory Campbell: A wise mum.

Jim Shannon: Very wise. We are always glad if we have a wise mum.

One thought comes to mind, and I will leave it with the ministerial team today. Galatians 6:9 says:

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

This debate is all about not giving up. It is about continuing to reach out and help those in Nigeria, and there is much more to be done.

I ask the Minister and his team to partner with us, with the spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Glasgow East, who is a dear friend of mine and has been since the day he came to the House, and with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown). When I told her some weeks ago that we would be having a debate on Nigeria, she said, “Jim, I’ll have to get up early to get here.” She has honoured that promise and is here to speak up for Nigerians. We are all here for that purpose. We are here to make a difference and to know that we have done the best we can for people, without ever giving up.

9.58 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as ever, a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley, and to serve under your chairmanship. I genuinely and most sincerely thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. The reality is that if there is any debate on freedom of religion or belief, you can bet your bottom dollar that the hon. Members for Strangford and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) will be tag-teaming. I do not say that to be flippant; I say it in genuine appreciation of the fact that they have really put their passion into this issue. Arguably, they are using their gifts to advocate in this place, as the hon. Member for Strangford says, for people who cannot speak for themselves.

I welcome the opportunity to focus specifically on Nigeria. Like the hon. Member for Congleton, I put on record my concern about the plight of Leah Sharibu. I have done some work with Christian Solidarity Worldwide in advocating for her over the years. This is not something I take great pleasure in, but every year we go to the Nigerian embassy in London on Leah’s birthday, which happens to coincide with mine. There is no way that we want to be marking these birthdays while she is being held in captivity. I thank the hon. Lady for putting Leah’s case on the record again.

Nigeria is characterised by its tapestry of rich religious, ethnic and cultural diversity and is home to almost 103 million Christians, but its once celebrated diversity has in recent times been marred by accounts of persecution, discrimination and human rights violations. As the hon. the Member for Strangford pointed out, Christians are confronted with a brutal reality for practising their invaluable human right of religious freedom, particularly in the Muslim-majority north of the country. Instances of mob killings, forced conversion to Islam, violence, extremism, kidnappings and targeted attacks on Christians have tragically become commonplace. Houses of worship, schools and communities have become battlegrounds, leading to devastation and destruction.

All the while, various arms and tiers of the Government have displayed sheer complacency and inaction in securing the very basic safety of Christians and other religious minorities in Nigeria. That slow, unsustainable and unyielding reaction emboldens extremist groups such as Boko Haram and Fulani militants to wage insurgencies on defenceless Christian communities in northern and middle-belt regions.

As our Christian brothers and sisters find themselves caught in the crossfire of ethnic and religious tensions, extremist ideologies, religious polarisation and conflicts have cultivated a climate of fear and insecurity, forcing many to flee their homes and abandon places of worship and communities that they have held dear for generations. It is crucial for us to acknowledge the suffering of our fellow Christians, work collectively to address those injustices, and, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, speak out for those who cannot speak.

As the hon. the Member for Strangford highlighted, the recent launch of the Open Doors 2024 world watch list sees Nigeria ranking sixth against the shocking backdrop of more Christians being killed in Nigeria than everywhere else in the world combined. This year's research highlights that the hostility that Christians face has intensified; 90% of 4,998 Christians killed in 2023 were Nigerian.

Following a devastating year for Christians, many were looking forward to a peaceful Christmas celebration with loved ones as we celebrated the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, but instead they found themselves brutalised once again. I wholeheartedly echo Members' condemnation of the abhorrent massacre of civilians that took place on Christmas eve 2023 at the hands of Fulani Islamic extremists.

The Nigerian Government's failure to protect Christians during the most holy period resulted in 295 Christians being killed, more than 1,500 homes burned, eight churches burned, and 30,000 people displaced, according to Barnabas Aid. Those horrendous acts of persecution not only violate the fundamental right to freedom of religion enshrined in article 18 of the UN declaration of human rights, but undermine the fabric of our society if we simply turn a blind eye to such injustice.

"Come to our rescue" and "We cannot even mourn in peace" are just a couple of the calls for peace written on posters held by mourning peace marchers in the wake of the deadly attack. It is incumbent on us while we are here in Parliament to continue to demand that those unprovoked attacks stop and that the peace marchers' calls are not brushed to the sidelines.

I commend the work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which I referenced earlier, in collecting the personal testimonies of those murdered, the survivors who managed to escape the carnage of the attacks, and many others. The stories paint a poignant reminder that while we debate here today in the Palace of Westminster, 365 million Christians worldwide face persecution for simply having the temerity to follow the teachings of Christ. That is why the UK Government must ensure that there are safe and legal routes for refugees fleeing to the UK due to religious persecution and human rights concerns instead of criminalising them.

I cannot let this morning go by without acknowledging the frankly grotesque scenes last night of the Prime Minister placing a bet on live national television with

what can only be described as a questionable journalist, making light of the plight of refugees and bargaining cash on whether they can be deported to Rwanda. The very people that we have turned up to discuss in this place—people fleeing religious persecution—could be the types of people put on the planes subject to a bet by the Prime Minister. I do not make any apology for calling that out, because I would do so if it were somebody in my own party.

Listening to the hon. Member for Strangford outline the complex array of challenges faced by Nigeria, from security threats from extremists to farmer and herder conflicts, solidifies why I believe the British Government must reinstate its international obligation to spend 0.7% of the UK's GNI on official development assistance. I will be frank: if the UK can afford to find money—roughly £1 million a go—to launch arms into the Red sea, surely we can also find money for development. It is concerning that the UK Government are reducing official development aid to Nigeria by 19.85% for 2023-24 in the face of a blatant rise in violence against Christians and religious minorities. Given everything that I have outlined, there is no doubt that the relationship with Nigeria is complex, but the decision to reduce ODA, which is targeted at some of the most vulnerable people, must be revisited.

Despite their constrained resources, my colleagues in Holyrood, the Scottish Government, are supporting projects to tackle the effects of climate change, such as religious hostilities over resources in northern Nigeria, for example through a £3 million climate justice fund—all while, I say humbly to the Minister, the Government continually refuse to recognise their role in protecting religious minorities and freedom of religion across the world. A lot of good work was done under the previous Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). However, notwithstanding the wonderful work done by the hon. Member for Congleton, I am concerned that the focus of the Government at Foreign Secretary level could be better on that front.

Fiona Bruce: I am listening very carefully to everything the hon. Gentleman is saying. I know that he feels very sincerely about the issue of freedom of religion or belief and the persecuted across the world. However, I do not think it would be out of turn to put on record that I have had a conversation about this very issue with the Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, and I believe that he personally shares our concerns about those who are persecuted or discriminated against because of their religion or beliefs across the world. It is a priority for him.

David Linden: I am genuinely not seeking to quarrel or have a debate about that. If that is the case, I am very glad to hear it. The only thing I will say is that I would like to see His Majesty's Government implement that view across all Departments. Certainly, as an MP who does quite a lot of Home Office casework, I find that there are far too many occasions when my constituents who are seeking refuge or asylum in the UK based on religious persecution are put through the most intolerable hoops. So that is a view I would like to see shared a bit more across Government.

With all that in mind, let us not remain silent spectators of the suffering of our fellow Christians. Let us work towards fostering a society where religious freedom is

[David Linden]

not simply a principle that we debate in this place, but a lived reality for Nigerians, and indeed every person of faith, or no faith at all, across this land.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for giving us the opportunity to allow the Minister, and indeed this House, to refocus on the plight of religious freedom.

10.9 am

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. He is, as ever, a devoted campaigner for freedom of religion or belief around the world, and I sincerely thank him for that. I am grateful to him for recognising the complexities of the situation, including the marginalisation of Fulani communities, the role of climate change and the need to tackle the flow of weapons. We need to collectively consider all those issues. I also agree that our influence rightly has limits, but I believe that there is more we can do within our partnership with Nigeria, and I will address that in my speech.

As we know, Nigeria is a country of rich diversity, with more than 500 languages, over 300 ethnic groups and a massive range of different churches and branches of Islam. Our connection with Nigeria benefits enormously from our diaspora communities, which, as we know, include British Nigerians of all faiths and backgrounds. It is right to say that at the beginning of my speech, because it provides the context for where we want to go. However, against that background of co-existence and flourishing diversity, there have been many appalling violations of freedom of religion and belief. They include attacks on Christian communities, priests and churches. We must continue to remember the utterly horrifying attack on St Francis Xavier Church in Ondo state two years back, when 41 innocent worshippers were murdered during the Pentecost mass. We continue to stand with the survivors and with that devastated community. I ask the Minister how the Government are engaging with the Nigerian authorities to help ensure justice for that attack, because it must not be forgotten.

The hon. Member rightly highlighted the terrible killings in Plateau state in December. Amnesty International Nigeria reports that over 140 people were killed across 20 villages in just 48 hours. That is truly appalling. Others reported that several churches were burned alongside many homes, and there is speculation that the attacks were a form of indiscriminate reprisal by local herders for cattle rustling and village burnings that had started the previous day. The scale of it is simply horrifying. Is the Minister aware of any progress following the Government's engagement with the authorities on this issue? We should not rely on speculation. There is a genuine need for a full and impartial investigation of those attacks, and we must see action to prevent those horrors from being repeated, as they have been in recent years.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Is it not right that unless endeavours are made to bring to account those involved in such atrocities, impunity is fostered, and that means more attacks can occur?

Ms Brown: I agree with the hon. Lady, as I often do. It is about ensuring that there is no impunity for attacks of that nature. It only fosters, as she rightly says, impunity for future actions.

As we know, there is also a huge continuing threat from jihadist terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province, and we must continue to support Nigeria in its fight against those groups. Terrible violence and insecurity in large parts of Nigeria continue to affect millions of Nigerian people of all faiths. I hope that we can agree here today that narratives about religious wars are not accurate, because I honestly worry that that kind of narrative risks making the situation even worse.

I would like to draw hon. Members' attention to the perspective of Archbishop Ndagoso, of the Catholic archdiocese of Kaduna in north-west Nigeria. He said:

"In the northwest the farmers are mostly Muslims, and they also have conflicts with the Fulani. As you move to the middle belt, it is inhabited mostly by Christians, so there it will most likely be a Christian farm. Religion and ethnicity are very sensitive problems in Nigeria, they are always used for convenience, but primarily this conflict is not religious, I am absolutely sure."

The archbishop went on to say that opportunists

"use these factors to their own advantage, but if you go to the root, you discover it is little or nothing to do with religion."

The archbishop, like many in Nigeria, is absolutely focused on the desperate insecurity affecting his parishioners. In the same interview, he was understandably very critical of the Nigerian Government and of us in the west. He was, rightly, very clear about the many forms of legal and administrative discrimination that Christian organisations face in his state, and others in northern Nigeria. His is an expert perspective that we should consider.

In 2022, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project found that while, as we know, attacks on Christians had significantly increased, only 5% of the attacks on civilians were specifically targeting Christians based on the fact that they were Christians. However, I know that we in this Chamber will agree that even a 5% increase is far too great.

It is a simple fact that the extremist groups exploiting and victimising large areas of Nigeria kill and destroy the livelihoods of Christian and Muslim communities alike. We must call out targeted attacks against Christians, and we need a holistic approach to insecurity. We need to provide solidarity with all communities, because Nigerian communities of all faiths and ethnicities depend on the Nigerian state; and where there are failures, we need to support our Nigerian friends in addressing them.

When communities do not have access to state services, including access to justice that resolves and redresses grievances, it fuels vigilantes, bandits and revenge attacks. It creates a sense of abandonment and discrimination, which is fertile ground for the recruitment narratives of terrorists. When young people have no decent access to jobs, and families are without education for their children or food to keep them from going hungry, there is a push towards alternative economic models, such as crime. It is the same the world over, but in Nigeria, that might include kidnapping for ransom, livestock rustling, or, appallingly, even recruitment into the terrorist groups that continue to wreak such utter carnage on innocent communities.

I know that some colleagues may disagree, but many experts and international organisations are clear that climate change plays a role in this conflict. The African Union, the International Crisis Group, the World Bank and others believe that to be true. When grazing land becomes scarce, it drives herders to migrate. They, in turn, push into settled communities, and atrocities can result. We see similar stories happening right across the Sahel and beyond—from Mali to the Lake Chad basin, from South Sudan to north-west Kenya. Those conflicts are, sadly, nothing new, but they have become more and more intense.

Fiona Bruce: I do not think any of us deny that climate change is one of the causes of the sad situation that we are discussing, but one of the problems is that extremist groups are hijacking the issue and fuelling the violence. As we have said, they bring in arms and other materials to do that. Those groups have their own extremist agenda, and they are taking advantage of all those involved who are struggling, often at subsistence level, in Nigeria. The international community needs to address this issue with greater alertness and urgency.

Ms Brown: I agree. The impact of a changing climate is not a simple issue of cause and effect; it is about poverty and destitution.

I can understand the anxiety about states in Nigeria continuing to imprison people for exercising religious freedoms. We all know the case of Mubarak Bala—we have spoken about that in this place, with the same audience—but there are others imprisoned in Nigeria on blasphemy charges. We cannot just respond to insecurity and terrorism by calling out individual human rights abuses. We need to provide practical support to prevent further atrocities. Regardless of whether religious motivations have helped to cause an attack, I believe that we can absolutely support religious organisations to provide solutions.

I hope that the Minister will tell us much more today about how the Government are engaging with all communities of faith in Nigeria to support peace building; how we are encouraging interfaith work that creates trust and understanding; and how we are engaging with religious leaders to support their communities to adapt to more climate-resilient methods of agriculture and ways of living. How are we supporting the early warning systems and civil society networks that can help communities to de-escalate when a conflict becomes likely? How can we support the programmes of the federal Government or individual states that would aid that agenda? Are we offering support to the efforts of Nigeria and the Economic Community of West African States in tackling the spread of weapons, which make these conflicts so appallingly deadly?

I hope colleagues will forgive me if I finish on a much more positive note. In much of Nigeria, people of different faiths and none are living side by side in peace. That is utterly normal, and it simply goes without saying. Interfaith marriages are common. We should not lose sight of this. I worry that an image of Nigeria is emerging that is scarcely recognisable to many Nigerians, because it does not reflect the dynamism, the inter-mixing, the excitement, energy and opportunity of Nigeria today. I believe that to support protections for all Nigerians, including those of freedom of religion or belief, we need to engage with those opportunities, deepening our partnership with Nigeria for our mutual benefit.

10.23 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning, Mr Paisley, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. I know colleagues will join me in commending him for his long-standing commitment to freedom of religion or belief, especially with regard to Nigeria. His sincerity and passion are of note and are much appreciated.

I am here on behalf of the Minister for Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who takes a great interest in this issue in the context of the continent, but is engaged in duties elsewhere. It is my great pleasure to be here and I aim to cover off all the points raised. I am grateful for the contributions; it has been a sincere and passionate debate. I am particularly pleased that the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), is also here contributing.

We are united in horror at the scale and ferocity of attacks against religious groups in Nigeria, which were shockingly described by the hon. Member for Strangford. Of course, particularly in our minds is the massacre of Christians at St Francis Xavier Church, and we continue to press the Nigerian Government for justice to be done in that case.

The hon. Member for Strangford referred to Open Doors, and its report paints a very harrowing picture. More than 4,000 Christians were killed in Nigeria last year alone. It is our firm conviction that every Nigerian should be able to practise their faith and it is the constitutional obligation of the Nigerian Government to ensure that all Nigerians should be able to practise their faith or belief in safety, free from fear and persecution. I commend the dedication shown by Members in this Chamber and across the House, and I will use this opportunity to lay out some of the actions that the Government are taking.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister will come back to this point, but one of the issues that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and I highlighted was the effect of sharia law, which has been introduced in some Nigerian states. It discriminates against those who are of a Christian belief. Even though it is not in the constitution, it has been introduced and some people have borne the brunt of the law on blasphemy, including through attacks and judges being influenced. Perhaps the Minister can address that issue, because the constitution says that all religions are equal, but there is something wrong when sharia law is able to tell Christians what they should do.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman is correct: the constitutional obligation of the Nigerian Government is to ensure, at federal level and state level, that Nigerians are free to practise their religion. Through our high commissioner, we continue to make that case to our partners in Nigeria, for the settled benefit of constitutional affairs and religious freedom in the country.

Fiona Bruce: I am very pleased to hear the Minister speak about the high commission raising cases. Will he ask UK diplomats in Nigeria to raise, in particular, the case of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, the 19-year-old Sufi Muslim

[Fiona Bruce]

who wrote a song that he sent to a friend on WhatsApp, which the friend then circulated. As a result, Yahaya was arrested in Kano state, charged and there was a court hearing. He had no legal representation and because he was found guilty of blasphemy, he was sentenced to death by hanging.

Fortunately, Yahaya's case came to the attention of members of the international community who are concerned about freedom of religion or belief and a lawyer has now been found for him. I met that young lawyer twice in the last year, but the fact is, unfortunately, that when an appeal was made to the Court of Appeal, Yahaya lost. The case is now going to the Supreme Court in Nigeria. This is a very important case, because blasphemy should not be an offence and it certainly should not be subject to the death penalty. Will the Minister ask our representatives in Nigeria to advocate on Yahaya's behalf as he awaits the date for the Supreme Court hearing?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that case, which is one of gravity and importance. I will ask the Minister for Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, to write with an update on the representations that we are making through our high commissioner in Abuja.

The UK Government are committed to supporting Nigeria to end faith-based persecution and violence, and to uphold its constitutional commitment to religious freedom for all, as we have discussed. This is a long-standing priority in our partnership with Nigeria. The British high commissioner and his team in Nigeria work closely with local authorities, communities and faith leaders to address these issues, which include wider inter-communal violence and insecurity that exacerbate the threats to religious groups. Some of those trends have been discussed very usefully this morning.

We regularly raise these issues at the highest level. Last July, the British high commissioner raised the report by the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, which was entitled, "Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? Three Years On", with the Nigerian President's chief of staff. In August 2023, the former Foreign Secretary discussed insecurity with President Tinubu and the Nigerian national security adviser. Most recently, the British high commissioner has raised the attacks in Plateau state with the national security adviser and discussed solutions to intercommunal conflict and insecurity.

In all those meetings, we have reiterated the need to uphold the security of all communities affected by violence and to bring perpetrators to justice. We continue to underline our commitment to supporting the Nigerian Government in tackling these persistent security issues.

Meanwhile, we are working to advance freedom of religion or belief through our work on the world stage. I am very pleased that the Prime Minister's special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, is here today; she remains closely involved in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a network of countries including the UK that are dedicated to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief for all.

The United Nations Human Rights Council undertook its universal periodic review of Nigeria last month. The UK Government were an active participant in that

process, and we remain committed to protecting all human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. It is important to recognise the complex factors that increase insecurity between communities, which have been laid out in this morning's passionate debate. Religious belief is one such factor; others include economic disenfranchisement, historical grievances and natural resources.

We should remember that this insecurity in Nigeria is deadly both for Christians and for Muslims. We should also remember that intercommunal violence and criminal banditry are a significant factor causing a rising death toll and therefore increasing tensions between communities across Nigeria. These grievances are very easily tied to a community's religious or ethnic identities, which are of course closely associated in Nigeria; conflicts can therefore take on a religious dimension as tensions build between communities and reprisal attacks take place. I am very grateful to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), for elegantly laying out the complex set of factors that often escalate economic or geographic conflicts into conflicts of a religious nature.

The hon. Members for West Ham and for Strangford asked about our support more broadly. The UK is supporting peace and resilience in Nigeria through a new £38 million programme that aims to tackle the interlinked causes of intercommunal conflict, including security, justice and natural resource management challenges. That is even more important in the context of climate change and grave water shortage: it will help farmers to access and collect water more efficiently and to provide better routes for livestock. Together, we expect that our support will help 1.5 million women and men to benefit from reduced violence in their communities and will help 300,000 people to better adapt to the increasingly pernicious effects of climate change.

The FCDO has also funded peace-building projects in Kaduna, Plateau, Niger and Benue states that aim to promote tolerance and understanding between communities affected by intercommunal violence. Those projects have included work to train peace ambassadors, including faith leaders, to engage with young people—the vast majority of the population, as was raised in the debate—who are at risk of becoming radicalised.

Jim Shannon: I referred to the many missionary organisations and NGOs that are involved. Nearly every church in my constituency has a connection with a missionary somewhere in Africa. I recognise the great influence and help that those partnerships with NGOs and missionaries could be. Although I am ever mindful that the Minister is not the Minister responsible for this area, I feel that more should be made of that. It would be to the benefit of everyone. It is a great source of talent and a great group of people: people of commitment, energy and faith who could work alongside the Government in a partnership that could deliver.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. We note the tremendous positive energy of the various church groups. I am sure that the high commissioner and the team take good account and make good use of those connections in their interfaith work. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has put that on the record.

Fiona Bruce: I really appreciate the Minister taking these interventions. Will he refer to the high commission the atrocity that took place at Owo on Pentecost well over a year ago? Aid to the Church in Need, one of the excellent NGOs to which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will no doubt refer, has repeatedly asked for help for those who suffered as a result of that atrocity. On Red Wednesday, I brought Margaret Attah and her husband Dominic to the House. She lost an eye and two legs in that attack. Aid to the Church in Need and other Church representatives are asking for help for those who were injured in that attack. I agree that strategic structural help is important in peace building—when I was out there, I met some of the young women who are being worked with in order to engage with local communities—but there is also a need to give immediate support to those who suffer such atrocities.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady has made numerous substantial and detailed interventions—I have lost count now. I think the House would have benefited from a speech from her, as opposed to a series of interventions; I encourage her to bring us a speech next time because of her detailed knowledge of what she is presenting to the House.

Leo Docherty: I am very pleased to say that as a consequence of this debate we will ensure that our high commissioner is made aware, if he is not already, of Aid to the Church in Need's perspective and requirements. I am happy to make that commitment.

I turn to violent attacks by Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province, predominantly in north-east Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, against those who do not subscribe to their extremist ideologies. The region's predominantly Muslim populations have borne the brunt of the insurgency, but those groups have also targeted Christians, including through the large-scale abduction of women and children. We of course unequivocally condemn those acts. This has been an absolute saga of tragedy. Colleagues mentioned Leah Sharibu, who, following her abduction, remains in captivity. We continue to raise her case with the Nigerian Government, and we have called for her release and the release of those who continue to be held by terrorists. That case continues to concern us all.

We are a leading provider of lifesaving humanitarian assistance to support Nigerians affected by this conflict. Since 2022, we have contributed £66.8 million to the humanitarian response in north-east Nigeria, including providing food and cash assistance to more than 600,000 people, including religious groups, and helping more than 1 million children with lifesaving nutrition services. That is in the context of our bilateral ODA contribution to Nigeria over the past 10 years of some £2.4 billion. Our contribution is substantial and has a very significant practical impact.

For religious tolerance to flourish, we must also tackle insecurity and close the space for criminals and extremists to operate. During our annual security and defence partnership dialogue with Nigeria this week, which colleagues raised, we will discuss strengthening our practical support to defend Nigeria against such threats. In that dialogue, we will consider what more the partnership can do in the pure security context to advance these issues.

Jim Shannon: I had the same conversations with the British consulate in Nigeria. In response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), I referred to a request for more helicopter support for the Nigerian army, which indicated that that would help it in the battle against terrorists, although I know that it must do a lot more than that. I am mindful that this is not the Minister's responsibility, but will he have those discussions with the relevant Minister to ensure that we consider any military assistance, such as helicopters, that can be given to Nigeria?

Leo Docherty: The focus is currently on training police and working with local communities, but I know that the defence partnership dialogue will consider exactly that. I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that I will pass on that suggestion to my Ministry of Defence colleague.

The security work builds on our work as a partner in the multinational joint taskforce, which has seized weapons intended for use against civilians in Nigeria. However, the ongoing work is hugely important, because disrupting the flow of weapons is a critical security factor. The UK Government will continue to work closely with the Nigerian authorities to address the deeply troubling violence against those who are simply trying to follow their faith, including by raising faith-based violence and wider insecurity at the highest levels and with country-based partners and the wider international community to promote a more secure and stable Nigeria in which everyone is free to follow their faith or belief without fear of persecution or violence.

Once again, I thank hon. Members for this debate. I am grateful that my friend the hon. Member for Strangford quoted from Galatians 6:9:

"Let us not become weary in doing good".

He is certainly not weary, and our team in Nigeria is not weary. Despite the many challenges and the huge scale of the threat, we are confident that our actions have a positive impact. I am grateful to have laid out this morning some of the actions that we are taking, but a great deal of work is ahead of us.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): With that benediction, Minister, I ask the hon. Member for Strangford to wind up for a couple of minutes.

10.41 am

Jim Shannon: May I thank everyone for their participation, their conviction, their contributions and their words of wisdom? I began by saying that we were here to speak up and be a voice for the voiceless, and I think Members of all parties have done so in this Chamber today. It has been a very positive debate. I hope that those in Nigeria—my brothers and sisters in the Lord, and those of other faiths—can take some encouragement from our conviction.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to the increasing numbers of attacks. The stats from the Library and from Open Doors, Aid to the Church in Need, Release International and other groups indicate that Nigeria is sixth in the world watchlist, which indicates the severity of the crimes.

[Jim Shannon]

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said that our being here is a matter not just of principle, but of conviction. He is right, and I know that that is how he feels in his heart. He delivered that message well. He also referred to how Christians are attacked and how their houses, homes and churches have become a battleground. We have to address that.

If you do not mind my saying so, Mr Paisley, I think that the interventions from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) helped to cultivate the debate at each stage. I thank her for that, and I congratulate her on getting a Bill through Parliament to establish in law the position of the special envoy, under all Governments. That is a really big thing—well done to her. I thank her for everything that she has done to establish a special envoy permanently, and for all her interventions.

I was pleased to hear that the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) would be speaking in this debate, because I knew that her contribution would be really on the ball. She referred to the 41 people killed in the Pentecostal mass some two years ago. Justice is needed; the hon. Member for Congleton reinforced that point, and I think the Minister tried to do so. Progress is needed on justice and accountability, and there should be no impunity for anyone. The hon. Member for West Ham also referred to the insecurity of the territory. She always makes a helpful contribution to these debates.

I know that this issue is not in the Minister's portfolio, but he always encapsulates and appreciates the points of view put forward. He answered clearly on the issues that are important: preventing the persecution of Christians, protecting their freedom to worship and bringing perpetrators to justice. He referred to the peace ambassadors and how religious tolerance must flourish. That is what we wish to see: a Nigeria where everyone can follow their faith.

The Minister said, "Let us not be weary." We are not wearying, because this is the right thing to do: we have a duty in this House and further afield to stand up for our brothers and sisters and for those of all faiths around the world. What a privilege it is to do so today in this Chamber with purpose and conviction, and to have a Minister who responds positively.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for their detailed contributions to a very important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freedom of religion and belief in Nigeria.

10.45 am

Sitting suspended.

Fly-tipping

11 am

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): In a moment, I will call Sarah Jones to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates, but I suspect there may be interventions from other colleagues, which of course is perfectly in order.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the matter of fly-tipping.

Fly-tipping is a pernicious and inexcusable form of antisocial behaviour that causes great distress to many of my constituents. I will set out the extent of the problem, highlight some of the fantastic community efforts to address it, and then turn to the potential solutions. I have not secured this debate to score political points. The Minister may have a few pre-prepared lines, but I want this to be a constructive discussion about how we bring about change, and I hope he will respond in the same spirit. Many of my constituents have written to me with fantastic suggestions of what could be done. I am immensely grateful for their ideas and look forward to sharing them in the course of the debate.

Fly-tipping is a persistent and acute problem in Croydon, but it is not just a problem in Croydon. This blight on our communities should not be treated as some inevitable feature of city living—quite the opposite. The statistics show that fly-tipping affects all parts of our country. Around 3,000 incidents of fly-tipping hit communities across England every single day, costing local authorities up to £58 million each year. Worryingly, the mountain of rubbish being heaped on Britain's streets is growing. Over the past two years, the number of large fly-tips that were tipper lorry-load size or larger has increased by 13%. Whether we live in rolling hills or in a concrete jungle, no one should have their neighbourhood polluted by piles of junk. People in Croydon are angry and frustrated at the persistence of fly-tipping on their streets, from Central Parade in New Addington to Gonville Road in Thornton Heath.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. She is obviously describing the situation in her constituency in Croydon, whereas I represent a rural constituency in Somerset—Somerton and Frome. Farmers experience fly-tipping on a massive scale. It costs them an enormous amount of money and time that they frankly do not have. Does she agree it is deeply unfair that farmers are often forced to cover the cost of removing the rubbish themselves and that it has an environmental impact on the countryside?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Member is absolutely right. This is a problem across the whole country, and we see it in different forms in different places. I am sure her farmers in Somerton and Frome are very frustrated at this persistent crime, as it is sometimes hard, particularly in rural areas, to catch those responsible. This is a big part of the cost that farmers bear, on top of all the other challenges they have to face, so she makes a good point.

Fly-tipping is dangerous. It is a public health hazard that attracts rats and vermin. I am frequently contacted about a hotspot on the corner of Sherwood Road and Lower Addiscombe Road in Croydon, where, as well as discarded mattresses and furniture, black bin bags filled with used nappies and sanitary products are being ripped open by foxes and strewn across the pavement. Fly-tipping is damaging to local economies. People living near London Road, a busy main road in my constituency, frequently tell me how frustrated they are by the rates of fly-tipping there. For areas that are home to many small businesses, cafés, grocers and hairdressers, the feeling of dirtiness and neglect that fly-tipping causes is far from helpful to their custom.

Fly-tipping is also unsightly, which is a problem in more than just an aesthetic sense. The environment we live in can have a profound impact on our sense of wellbeing. The streets we tread each day help to bind our communities together—that is, our neighbours, the staff of our favourite café and the postman. When streets are clean, we get more than cleanliness in return. Clean streets tell us that we are part of a community and that people take pride in the spaces they share, the memories they make there and the community they are part of. People in Croydon are immensely proud of their community. There is already a great deal of work being done to try to keep our streets clean. Rowenna Davis and Ellily Ponnuthurai, two Labour councillors in Waddon, have been fighting tirelessly to get the mess on Purley Way, probably one of the biggest fly-tips in London, cleared up.

The Litter Free Norbury group is doing fantastic voluntary work and frequently organises group litter-picking sessions. Croydon Council's Love Clean Streets app, which allows users to report fly-tips for the council to clear them away, is very effective in getting fly-tips cleaned up. There are many individuals across the country, as well as in my patch, spending their free time cleaning up our streets. We recognise and commend their tenacity and their determination to make sure we can all enjoy our boroughs at their best, but we cannot and should not just rely on the generosity of community groups to address the problem; we need to prevent it in the first place.

In advance of this debate, many of my constituents wrote to me with many excellent ideas about how we tackle fly-tipping, but there is not enough time to outline them all. I will therefore focus on three. I am acutely aware that local authorities are severely limited by resources—the Government's record on that is a debate for another time. The reality is that local authorities have to work much harder to use the resources they have to effectively tackle fly-tipping on a budget.

Sarah Dyke: It is great to hear about the initiatives in the hon. Member's constituency; perhaps I will be able to take some back to Somerset with me. Owing to the financial difficulties facing many authorities across the country, Somerset Council is considering closing up to five household waste recycling centres across the county, including one at Dimmer in my constituency, which will increase the likelihood of fly-tipping in what is an incredibly rural area. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to urgently give local authorities the funding required to keep important recycling centres open, particularly in rural areas, reducing the cost burden on our local authorities and also on our environment?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady makes another good point. We have seen, probably across the country, many areas where recycling centres have closed. If people do not have cars or if they struggle to travel, it is even more difficult for them to reach those areas. She is absolutely right. We could have a much wider debate about funding for local authorities, but I will focus on some of the ideas that some local authorities are using.

Under Newham Council and Keep Britain Tidy's award-winning and innovative crime scene investigation approach, fly-tipping was cut by up 70%. Fly-tips were surrounded by bright yellow tape and left for a few days, to highlight their lasting impact on the area to perpetrators, before then being cleaned up. It was an imaginative approach and demonstrates the spirit that we need to combat a persistent problem. That is why the suggestions that follow are as much as possible aimed at utilising the powers that councils already have.

The first idea is mega-skips. Many people have told me that the accessibility of waste removal services and centres—the hon. Lady made this point—is a major barrier to bringing down levels of dumping. Nearly one in five jobs in my constituency is paid below the London living wage, yet services to dispose of bulky items of household waste are often expensive. On top of that, levels of car ownership in the borough are at record lows, putting recycling centres out of reach of many in our community.

One fantastic suggestion that I support is to replicate the mega-skip days run by Wandsworth Council, whereby skips are provided around the borough on certain days of the year so that residents can simply get rid of items for free. I hope the Minister will join me in encouraging Croydon and other councils to look at mega-skip days. Are they something that he would support?

The second idea is changing behaviours. Many who wrote to me were dismayed by the feeling that fly-tippers were getting away without facing any consequences. That is extremely understandable, given that official statistics show that Croydon is the second easiest place in the country to fly-tip and get away fine-free. Last year Croydon Council issued just 10 fixed penalty notices, despite recording more than 20,000 instances of fly-tipping.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. She raises a really important point about fixed penalty notices. So often people are literally dumping waste, especially in the countryside, on an industrial scale, costing local authorities across the country hundreds of thousands of pounds—indeed, millions of pounds. The deterrent is not there, so does the hon. Lady agree that increasing quite dramatically the fixed penalty notice that local authorities can charge the people they catch would help, but that we should also send a message to magistrates, so that people know that fly-tipping is not worth it, because when they are taken to court—as South Staffordshire Council has done—they will be hit with very hard penalties?

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If we look at the stats that I just cited—more than 20,000 instances of fly-tipping and only 10 fixed penalty notices—it is clear that people feel that they can get away with it. Of course we need more enforcement and

[Sarah Jones]

appropriate punishment, when it is right to do that. This is a really pernicious, horrible crime, and the response in our courts should reflect that.

The promise that crimes will have consequences is central to our justice system. One idea that I think is interesting is Merton Council's wall of shame, which puts that principle into action. The council uses its roaming CCTV to capture images of fly-tippers, and it puts those images up as posters around fly-tipping hotspots. Merton has only just started doing that, but it achieved seen results. Merton has even filmed, with the CCTV, people coming with their rubbish and looking at the poster and then walking away, because they realise that there might be consequences to their actions. What Merton is doing could be something that the Minister might look at on a more national scale.

Next, I want to talk about having a strategy. As we have established, fly-tipping is widespread across the country. Croydon Council has focused on blitz clean-up approaches to hotspots, which is a good in itself, but I agree with the suggestion that I have had from many constituents that a more joined-up approach is needed. Each council—Croydon Council being one—should develop a fly-tipping strategy that explores the root causes of fly-tipping, identifies the hotspots in each borough, outlines what tools the council already has at its disposal, and produces a plan to deploy those tools to address the problem. Let me give one example of councils using the resources that they have. Several councils use their YouTube page to show pictures of perpetrators of fly-tipping—again, to try to shock people into realising that they are committing an offence and should stop.

I am grateful to have had this debate to highlight the pestilence that is fly-tipping, to commend community efforts to address it and to outline some ways to address it. Everyone deserves to live in a neighbourhood that they feel proud of. The levels of fly-tipping in Croydon and across the country are completely unacceptable. I am suggesting to Croydon Council that it set up mega-skip days to provide freely available skips so that residents can more easily get rid of unwanted items for free, that it set up a fly-tippers wall of shame—learn from Merton Council and publicise images of fly-tippers—and that it approach fly-tipping strategically. We need to use the enforcement measures and other tools that we have, look at what we can do in the online space, and develop a fly-tipping strategy to tackle the problem across the borough. We cannot and must not allow this situation to continue. We know that there are solutions. We know that things can be done. I want to see a future in which fly-tipping is drastically reduced, and I look forward to working with the local community, council and Government to clean up Croydon.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for tabling this important debate. I also thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I will pick up on the points that have been raised. I know from my own constituency, from Keighley and Ilkley, just how much of a nuisance fly-tipping can be in

our areas and in relation to the wellbeing of our communities. It is an absolute disgrace that it happens as much as it does across all our constituencies, whether they are urban or rural environments. Fly-tipping harms the environment, blights our local communities and burdens our local economy. The estimated cost of fly-tipping to the UK was £392 million in 2018-19. The reports of fly-tipping are higher today. Local authorities reported more than a million fly-tipping instances in 2022-23 and over 80% of farmers say that they have been affected by fly-tipping on their land. We are all familiar with the financial implications when they are left to deal with the consequences of waste left on their property.

In recent years, we have given councils tougher powers and grants to tackle fly-tipping hotspots, and have worked with stakeholders to co-design a fly-tipping toolkit to help landowners, councils and businesses to tackle common issues. The latest statistics may show that the tide is beginning to turn, with fly-tipping on public land down for the second year running, but we know that there is much more to do.

I want to turn to some of the key themes raised in the debate, before picking up on some of the ideas that the hon. Member for Croydon Central proposed. In March last year, the Prime Minister published the antisocial behaviour action plan, which sets out the steps the Government would like to take to support councils to take tougher action to deter people from fly-tipping, and punish those who have done so.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been delivering against those commitments at pace. In July, the maximum penalty councils can issue for fly-tipping was increased significantly from £400 to £1,000. We also increased the penalty for householders who gave waste to a fly-tipper from £400 to £600. That builds on other powers that councils have, such as the ability to seize vehicles suspected of being involved in fly-tipping.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I thank the Minister for pointing out that the amount councils can charge in a fixed-penalty fine has gone up. Would the Minister look at that, so that instead of £600 it could be £2,000 or £3,000 and is a real disincentive to fly-tipping?

Robbie Moore: I was about to come on to that point. My right hon. Friend makes an important point, but the challenge at the moment is that, although that power is available to many local authorities, the uptake in prosecutions is not there, even at the higher rate of £1,000. Many local authorities do not issue any prosecutions in a year. We have to ask why a power that is available to many local authorities is not being used. Rather than simply look at increasing the penalty, the first step of deterrence must be to ensure that local authorities use the powers awarded to them.

I am pleased to see that some councils such as Buckinghamshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council have begun to adopt those higher rates, showing that those crimes are being taken seriously in those areas. We want councils to make greater use of the income they receive from those penalties. From 1 April, that income will be ringfenced in law, to improve and expand enforcement capability, and clean up mess from fly-tippers. Local authorities will be able to ringfence for those offences if they wish.

We have also increased scrutiny of how councils are using those powers through the publication of our fly-tipping enforcement league tables, which are now in their second iteration. Those show that some councils are already taking the fight to these criminals. As I have said, however, some councils, with significant fly-tipping issues, are barely scratching the surface, and are not issuing any fixed-penalty notices in the first place. We have to ensure that those penalties are imposed, to create a deterrent. The Department has written to those councils, reaffirming expectations that they should take tougher action, and encouraging them to reach out to others to learn how better to tackle fly-tipping.

The overarching goals of enforcement should be to change the behaviour of those who offend and to deter others from doing so. It has been our long-standing position that penalties should never have to be used to raise revenue, but when they are utilised we expect that local authorities can ringfence those funds to help to cement our priority of reducing fly-tipping waste.

Fly-tipping is a serious crime, and offenders can face an unlimited fine and imprisonment if convicted in court. It is right that councils use the full extent of these powers to prosecute where appropriate, and we are helping them to do that effectively. We have engaged legal experts and worked with the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group to produce a guide in 2021 on how councils and others can build robust court cases—and I am pleased to see that the average court fine has since increased by 12%. We will continue to explore other options to further strengthen sentences, such as working with magistrates and judicial colleagues, to raise awareness of the severity of fly-tipping and the harm it causes.

We are also funding councils across the country to directly intervene at fly-tipping hotspots. Across two rounds of fly-tipping grant schemes we have now awarded £1.2 million to help more than 30 councils. However, it is disappointing that some councils want to close their household waste and recycling centres. Indeed, in my own constituency of Keighley, Bradford Council wants to close a household waste and recycling centre in Ilkley, and the Sugden End HWRC in the Worth valley. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) mentioned this issue as well.

I would urge local authorities to look at the negative consequences associated with fly-tipping as a result of closing household waste and recycling centres. I would urge them to keep those centres open, because the negative financial consequences could outweigh the positives.

Sarah Dyke: My point was that local councils are being forced to close household waste and recycling centres because of the lack of funding. Many councils are now in a financial crisis and on a cliff edge; they are having to make some very stark, difficult and heartbreaking decisions.

We know in Somerset—a very rural area—how important those household waste and recycling centres are. Closing them is the last thing the council would like to do, but it needs the funds to keep them open and ensure we prevent fly-tipping in the beautiful area we live in. I urge the Minister to consider giving councils more funding to ensure that we can keep those household waste and recycling centres open, and avoid any detriment for our countryside.

Robbie Moore: I thank the hon. Lady for her interventions, but I would add that councils need to look at the negative implications associated with the financial cost of increased fly-tipping as a result of closing household waste and recycling centres. That will be a cost to the taxpayer that local authorities should pick up. Closing household waste and recycling centres should be an absolute last resort, and it is frustrating to see that option being explored, particularly in my own area.

In addition, many councils are installing CCTV in hotspot areas, with others using funds to place physical barriers such as fencing in those areas. Case studies have been published so that councils can learn from others about where those interventions have been most successful. For example, in the area covered by Durham County Council fly-tipping has been reduced by over 60% in places where CCTV was installed on existing lighting columns, and Dover District Council has seen a 100% reduction in fly-tipping at hotspots where beautification measures, such as planters, have been installed.

That brings me to the point made by the hon. Member for Croydon Central. We need to take a partnership-led approach where we work not just with local authorities but with the police and community organisations to identify hotspot areas and ensure that we take a collective approach to tackling fly-tipping and other negative consequences, which can lead to crime in those areas. We have pledged £1 million of further support for local authorities, which will be awarded in the spring, to help even more councils to deal with this issue.

Of course, it is not all down to councils. We work with the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group, which includes organisations such as the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Environment Agency, to identify issues and create the tools that organisations need to tackle this issue. That includes a guide on setting up and running effective local fly-tipping partnerships, drawing on the success of members such as the Hertfordshire Fly Tipping Group, where information sharing between partners allows for predictive mapping of hotspot sites, and the Kent Resource Partnership, where partnership working led to the recent closure of the Hoad's Wood waste site due to illegal dumping. The point is that it takes all organisations working in partnership to drive down the negative implications of fly-tipping.

Members have mentioned the negative implications of fly-tipping for our rural areas, and we appreciate the difficulty and cost for landowners. Through the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group, we work with stakeholders such as the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association to promote and disseminate good practice, including how to prevent fly-tipping on private land. However, we recognise that there is much more to do, which is why we committed in our "Unleashing rural opportunity" paper to fund a post within the National Rural Crime Unit to explore how the role of the police in tackling fly-tipping can be optimised, with a focus specifically on rural areas. That will include training for police officers and work on intelligence sharing across borders. I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) and others realise that there are complications when acting across borders, particularly in rural environments, and that collective sharing of intelligence

[Robbie Moore]

is incredibly important for tackling waste crime. Yesterday I was pleased to welcome PC Phil Nock to his new role, which deals with this specific issue.

Citizens have a vital role to play in tackling fly-tipping, as nearly two thirds of such incidents involve household waste. To help people dispose of their rubbish responsibly, we recently banned charges for household do-it-yourself waste at local household waste and recycling centres, enabling householders to take DIY waste there free of charge. Householders must check the register of waste carriers to avoid giving their waste to illegal man-and-van operators, who promise quick, cheap waste collection but only go to dump their waste on private property or on our streets. Councils can fine individuals who give their waste to a fly-tipper, and I have mentioned that the cost has increased from £400 to £600. We have also worked with the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group and communications experts within government to produce tools to help councils and others raise awareness of the household and business waste duty of care. These tools will be published in the spring and build on communication materials available on the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group website.

Educating households and businesses about the importance of using registered waste carriers should reduce the amount of waste handled by rogue operators. As well as reducing the burden on local authorities' budgets of cleaning up fly-tipping on public land, it could help to protect private landowners, who are also victims of fly-tipping. Our upcoming reforms to how waste carriers, brokers and dealers are regulated, and the introduction of mandatory digital waste tracking, will make it easier for regulators to identify where waste is mishandled and take action. In particular, the requirement for waste carriers to place their permit number on advertising will make it easier for the public and others to identify illegal waste operators and report them.

I want to pick up on a couple of the suggestions made by the hon. Member for Croydon Central. She mentioned a wall of shame, which I have seen operate in other local authority areas across the country. Personally, I think that is a good idea, but it is already in the gift of local authorities. As she identified, it has been utilised in Merton and other areas. That is good, because it is about holding individuals to account in their local area.

The hon. Lady mentioned mega-skip days. The only thing I would say is that we do not have control over what waste is going into the skips, and we want to encourage as many people as possible to use household waste and recycling centres. However, it may be something that local authorities want to explore in certain hotspot areas.

The Government are committed to continuing to drive down fly-tipping on our streets and in our countryside. Through tough enforcement and regulation, better education and improved infrastructure, we will put a stop to waste criminals.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Potential Extension

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant Documents: e-petition 642280, Provide Ukrainian refugees with settled status to enable a stable life in the UK; e-petition 632761, Give Ukrainians on humanitarian visas rights to extend stay and settle in the UK.*]

2.30 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of extending the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, I think, Mr Sharma. The United Kingdom established the Homes for Ukraine scheme in response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in March 2022—we are coming up to the second anniversary. We established three immigration routes to support Ukrainians wishing to come to or remain in the UK beyond their existing rights: the Ukraine sponsorship scheme, known as Homes for Ukraine, the Ukraine family scheme and the Ukraine extension scheme.

The Homes for Ukraine scheme allows refugees to join a UK-based sponsor willing to house them for at least six months. The Ukraine family scheme allows refugees to join UK-based family members already enjoying the right to remain in the UK. The Ukraine extension scheme allows Ukrainian nationals already in the UK and their immediate family members to apply for permission to reside in the UK if their current rights to remain are expiring. Each of the three routes provides temporary sanctuary for Ukrainians seeking refugee from the war in their home country.

The first visas issued under the schemes will expire in spring 2025, so we need to start thinking about what will happen next to those Ukrainians living in the UK, because they need security and certainty. It is not just the Ukrainians themselves who need that; employers, schools and others need to know whether the refugees can stay here for longer, especially as the war does not seem to be ending.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for eloquently outlining the schemes. The University of St Andrews in my constituency confirmed to me that it has 21 Ukrainian students currently studying there, and it is looking for certainty so that they can continue their studies. Does she agree that transferring to a student visa is not the right outcome for those students, and that the Minister should respond to that ask?

Mrs Latham: The main thrust of my speech will be about continuing education for Ukrainians, so if the hon. Lady waits a moment, she will hear what I have to say about that.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. Many of our Ukrainian guests are highly qualified, but they rarely get a job that matches their experience or exceptional qualifications. Surely an extension to the

scheme would give employers certainty that they will not be there just for a few months or a year. That would allow them to get a job, and employers to get the skills they require.

Mrs Latham: It is important that we have certainty that Ukrainians will be staying, not just for them but for employers who either want to employ them or are employing them. They have jobs to do, and they need certainty.

I will talk about the three most important topics that the Government must consider as they plan for the future of the schemes: education, homelessness and the rebuilding of Ukraine. My greatest concern about the schemes is the provision of education. Let me set out a case study of a Ukrainian family in the UK. Masha is sitting her GCSEs this year. In the summer, she would like to stay on in the UK, living with her 24-year-old brother—she will be 16—but her mother wants to return to Ukraine to support her husband. She believes she can get work there again as a nuclear engineer. I am sure Rolls-Royce would snap her up, but she does not feel that her English is good enough, so she is working in a takeaway restaurant, in a position way below her qualifications.

Masha has settled in really well. She is fluent in English, is an excellent student in all her studies and has made good friends here. She really wants to be able to apply to the sixth form or to sixth-form college; after that, she would like to go to university here, but she cannot—rather, she can, but she may have to drop out and leave, which she really does not want to do. Pupils like Masha need to plan and apply to universities, but with their visas expiring any time from March 2025, they are unsure whether they will have the right to stay here for the duration of their course.

Many of these pupils from Ukraine are very bright and incredibly hard-working, and have done exceptionally well to study in a second language. Many have been continuing their Ukrainian studies online, too. They go to school and do their education in English, and then come home to their home in the UK and study online with their teachers in Ukraine, so they will have double the qualifications at the end.

These pupils came to the UK at such a significant time in their lives and will prove to be a valuable asset to this country in time, following the completion of their studies. They have a lot to offer us economically, socially and culturally. If they are allowed to stay on, I am sure our country will benefit greatly from the education experience they have gained here. But currently, Ukrainians with three years' permission to reside here under the Ukraine schemes will be expected to leave the UK from March onwards, depending on when their permission began. A student applying to university and starting their course partway through their visa could be expected to leave the UK at the end of the three years unless they apply for another type of visa before then.

The Government have said that they are considering whether to extend leave to remain under the schemes beyond three years, but they have not said when they will decide. A potential student like Masha, whose study would extend beyond their three-year Ukrainian scheme visa, would need to apply for an international student visa to extend their leave for the duration of their course. That is all well and good, but the usual requirements and application fees would apply to Masha

at present, and applying for leave to remain as a student on such a visa could make her liable to pay international tuition fees and lose her access to student loans.

On multiple occasions, Ministers have reaffirmed that the Government are keeping an extension of leave to remain under review, but they need to make some of those decisions now. Masha and her fellow Ukrainian friends need certainty to plan their future. They need to know whether they can remain in the UK for the duration of their degree course, whether they are eligible for home fee status for the entirety of their course, and whether they are eligible for student financing for the whole of their course. Masha and her friends are motivated, bright, hard-working students. They are determined to do well in life and to create a better and stronger Ukraine once the war is over. The Government cannot stand in their way by creating uncertainty over the future of their education.

Our country has done so much to support the continuing education of Ukrainians. The UK-Ukraine twinning initiative is assisting Ukrainians whose studies have been disrupted. UK universities are partnering directly with Ukrainian institutions for a minimum of five years to mutually recognise credits so that English-speaking Ukrainian students, wherever they are, can take online courses with UK universities that count towards their final degree. Furthermore, Student Finance England has already paid student support for the 2022-23 academic year to 617 students who were granted leave under the Ukraine sponsorship scheme. The net amount paid out is just over £9.1 million, which pales into insignificance compared with the £2.5 billion package recently announced to support the Ukrainian defence effort. If we strongly believe that Ukraine will come out of the war victorious, it makes sense to invest in the future of their country by educating their future citizens while they are over here in our care. It would be a shame to fail the Ukrainian nation at this final hurdle.

I turn to my second consideration: homelessness. We should consider how we will minimise the risk for Ukrainians who are threatened with homelessness as the Homes for Ukraine scheme comes to an end. Sponsorship for the earliest Ukrainians housed under the scheme is coming to an end this March. Even though the Homes for Ukraine visa is valid for three years, the optional thank you payments to the sponsors who have offered their spare rooms or properties to the refugees last for two years under the scheme's current design. Many sponsors cannot afford to continue to house the refugees, and many Ukrainian families would like their own home in order to become independent. I know of sponsors who are desperately trying to find private accommodation for Ukrainians, which is very hard because it is in short supply. Without a guarantee of renewal, it will become increasingly difficult as the expiration date for the visas draws ever closer. Landlords need certainty.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The hon. Member is giving an excellent speech. In south Wales and Cynon Valley, many Ukrainians who arrived under the sponsorship scheme have thrown themselves into Welsh life, including by going to school and learning Welsh. They are very concerned at the moment about what the future holds, as she has so eloquently outlined. Given that the expiry date of the scheme is imminent, does she agree that we need confirmation about what will happen? What sort

[*Beth Winter*]

of reasonable notice is likely to be given? It would also be good if the Minister told us what discussions he is having with his Ukrainian counterpart on the deadline of the scheme.

Mrs Latham: Certainty is what is required—that is what I have been majoring on. Of course, when the scheme was first set up, everybody thought the war might be over quickly. It clearly will not be, which is why we now have to reassess things and look at how best we can help all Ukrainians who are here in the UK.

According to National Audit Office statistics, by August last year, 4,890 Ukrainian households had been assessed by local authorities as being homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in England alone. That represents 8% of the total number of Ukrainian families helped under the scheme. As if 8% is not a shocking enough figure, it is likely to be an underestimate, as a third of councils did not provide homelessness data to the Government. Charities such as Reset, other civil society organisations and local councils have been calling for concrete answers about the future of the scheme. What will happen to funding for hosts and guests this year?

Anyone who is following developments in Ukraine will know that the war is not coming to an end any time soon. It would be remiss of us not to take prudent measures to help stabilise the lives of Ukrainians in the UK. They have had to flee an unstable and unsettling conflict, and many have done so at a crucial time in their lives. We in the UK will breach our assumed duty of care towards individuals welcomed into our nation if we allow them to suffer the ignominy of homelessness.

I turn briefly to my third point: the rebuilding of Ukraine. I recognise that the Government wish to act in accordance with the will of the Ukrainian Government, who want citizens to return home and rebuild Ukraine when the war is won and over, and many Ukrainians in the UK want to do that. Ukraine remains home for the majority of them, so they will want to go back. It is a sensible attitude to adopt, and we should help them as much as we can, but the situation in Ukraine is getting worse and shows no sign of improving. The Government have said that the Ukrainian visa schemes are not routes for permanent relocation to the UK, but allow temporary protection until Ukrainians can return home to rebuild Ukraine. With that in mind, it has been and continues to be the Government's objective to provide a proportionate period of leave to remain in the UK through the visas issued under the scheme. That policy position must be balanced with the needs of local authorities, sponsors, other resource providers and not least the needs of Ukrainian residents in the UK.

Local authorities need to know whether they must fund additional support services for Ukrainian speakers in local healthcare and educational settings. Local authorities, charities and sponsors need information now so they can begin to prepare for the future. They need to know whether they must provide emergency accommodation to Ukrainians who are threatened with homelessness, and they need to know whether additional support will be extended to local authorities, beyond initial tariff funding, to fund ongoing support for them. They need to know whether charities must stack up to co-ordinate any responses that local authorities or present

sponsors cannot handle alone. While we can look forward to the day when we can assist the reconstruction of Ukrainian society, we must not discount the decisions stakeholders in the UK must make today. The least we can do is give them time to plan.

I call on the Government today to bear in mind Masha and so many other hard-working Ukrainian children in considering when and how to extend the Ukrainian visa schemes. I call on the Government to ensure that a Ukrainian on any visa scheme is guaranteed home fee status and access to student finance loans for the duration of any university course on which they are accepted. I urge the Government to consider extending the “thank you” payments for Ukrainian sponsors to prevent Ukrainian homelessness this year, and to consider how they may help local authorities to support Ukrainians who are already homeless. I urge the Government to publish their intentions for what will happen to the visa schemes when they start to expire in March 2025.

I am a huge admirer of the Ukrainian people in the UK for all that they have endured to get here, and I recognise that there is a big debate about the best and most effective way of continuing to assist those who fled and settled here. They have had to leave their home in very uncertain times, and we must start to give them certainty about their time here in the UK. The Ukrainians are hugely grateful to the UK for the assistance provided so far, and I hope the support will be ongoing for the foreseeable future. I welcome this opportunity to voice the concerns of those refugees whose future is uncertain, and I remain confident that, working together, the Ukrainian schemes can be developed in a way that will benefit all stakeholders and give greater certainty.

2.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is pleasure to be called to speak in this debate so early, Mr Sharma. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). I have enjoyed serving alongside her in debates since she came here in 2010, and I am very supportive of the debates that she introduces. She has been a stalwart advocate for the people of Ukraine and is deserving of the honour bestowed on her by that nation. In all sincerity and honesty, I have long admired her principled and compassionate stand, and I am very happy to stand alongside her and support her in this debate. I know that she is not running again at the coming election—she told me that one day in the voting Lobby—and personally I will miss her in this place. I thank her for her friendship over the years and the debates that we have done.

The clock has been ticking since the Ukrainian home scheme was due to close, and the Government advised that people would have a year to leave from the date of the letters, due to have been in spring. We are still in winter, but as the days lighten—and it is good to see that happen—it is clear that spring is on its way. For most of us, that is good news, yet for those Ukrainians involved in this scheme who have had to leave their homes, it will not feel like spring. It will feel like a decline into a long winter. The hon. Lady has outlined some of the cases in relation to that.

There are a number of Ukrainians in my constituency who are working. Their children are in school, and have settled into the semblance of a life with a home away from home. I am going to give some examples of their

experiences, because I have seen their engagement in society. For them, the letter will not be as joyfully received as the end of the need for them to stay and the end of their pain, because the war is ongoing; their families are still fighting the Russian invasion and the munition fire continues. We all know of our Government and Ministers' stalwart commitment to the people of Ukraine, and I put on record my thanks to them for that—nobody could doubt their intentions in that regard.

As my speech was being prepared, a notification came through that another four people had been killed by Russian artillery fire in the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine. The war is not over—why then is our help seemingly coming to an end? The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire is right: it is still needed. It will be needed for a longer time to give people the chance to progress their education at school and university, and it is needed by those who are making a significant contribution to society.

I could give myriad examples of such people in my constituency, where I have been very fortunate to have a very good working relationship as the MP for Strangford with people from Ukraine. I have sorted out lots of their passport and visa issues and their housing issues, and I have helped them to get placements in schools and employment. People from Ukraine work in the factories of companies in my constituency, especially in the agrifood sector, where their commitment, contribution and hard-working ethic ensures that they are an important part of the economic life of my constituency.

My heart aches for those young people in education who do not know whether their exam results will mean anything or whether they will have an opportunity to stay in education at university, which the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire outlined incredibly well. That is not a life; it is a temporary holding pattern. I am glad to see the Minister in his place, and I look forward to his contribution and his answers to what we have been saying. I ask him to consider very carefully those students whose lives are in limbo, which they find incredibly stressful and difficult.

There are lots of Ukrainian students in schools right across my constituency, including Ballynahinch High School. I visited before Christmas and am very friendly with the principal, who has just been appointed to a permanent post. When I went to see him and congratulate him, he said, "Jim, did you know we have got a great class of Ukrainians here?" I said, "Have you?" He said, "We have 12 in one class." He took me to meet the 12 Ukrainians; most of them had a good grasp of the English language, and the others were learning.

The students had a classroom assistant, who was part of the teaching for that class of 12, and a teacher who was Ukrainian but who had a grasp of the teaching capacity in that school. The school had domestic staff who were from Ukraine. That school was quite clearly providing job opportunities, including an opportunity for the teacher to teach and for a classroom assistant to be a part of that teaching, as well as opportunities for those 12 students. It is for those 12 students, for that Ukrainian teacher, for that Ukrainian classroom assistant, and for those domestic staff that I make my plea.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech. Perhaps we should think about offering solutions to the Government on what they could possibly

do to assist the cohort that the hon. Gentleman is so aptly describing. There is an extension scheme available, but it is only available for those who are already here on work visas. They can get the three-year benefits that those newly arriving in the UK have already secured. Why do the UK Government not just offer the same entitlement to those who are already here, as an extension of that scheme? The extension scheme is in place—we should make it available to everybody who is here now in the UK.

Jim Shannon: I thank my colleague for that. That is exactly what I wish to see, and I think all of us here today wish to see that too. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: this is about solutions. We can always highlight the negatives, but what we should do is highlight the positives and the solutions, and the solution the hon. Gentleman suggested is one I wish to see. I will say a little more and highlight that.

I say to the Minister that we have the opportunity to do this right. Let us make sure that those who are here on the three-year scheme have another three-year extension so they can get by in their education at school and university, and so they can make a contribution to all the businesses in my constituency that need them. I understand the pressure that the Home Office is under regarding asylum seekers. I admit to a sense of despair as we see what appear to be healthy, single young men coming over by the boatload.

It is clear that the scheme we are referring to, which was referred to by the hon. Gentleman, has been used massively by women and children. In Northern Ireland, there were three times as many adult women as men. I am going to speak for all those women and children and for the adult males who make a contribution. That is almost replicated throughout the United Kingdom. To me, that shows that this is not about taking an opportunity to come to the UK to live. It is about fleeing from danger at home, and I believe we need to continue to offer that lifeline.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is important that the hon. Gentleman stresses the point about mothers and children, who are the primary group of people coming to this country. In Newport West, we have a number of families. I would make the plea he has already made. Does he agree that we need certainty for the children in education and the mums who want to work? Would that certainty not help them in a difficult situation?

Jim Shannon: Yes, it certainly would. What does someone need when their visa is coming to an end? Continuity and the ability to say, "I am going to be here for my A-levels, or to finish my degree at university, or to make my contribution by teaching in this school, or at the factories where the opportunities are." What we need and ask of the Minister today is reassurance and, if we get that, we will be happy.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and apologise for not being here at the beginning of his contribution. He was at the same event as me. The point about education is really important. I have many people from Ukraine in my constituency, and they are now part of our community. One of them interned in my office. The parents of a young Ukrainian in my constituency are very concerned

[*Hannah Bardell*]

about dual education. The uncertainty means they have to maintain two levels of education, and they need to understand what the future holds.

Jim Shannon: That is another case that I hope the Minister will add to the concrete case we are trying to make on behalf of the continuity of the scheme. I understand, accept and welcome the fact that the United Kingdom Government have been incredibly generous, but we need a wee bit of an extra hand at this point.

I note that the online scheme guidance points to an update due on 8 February. I look to the Minister to add my thoughts and those of others, through interventions and speeches. The Ukrainian people are under attack and we stepped in to say, “We have a place for you to send your women and children until it is safe.” That was the right thing to do, as every one of us here believes to be the case. It is still not safe; the war is ongoing. Quite simply, the scheme must be ongoing for another three years, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) indicated.

I conclude with these comments. I support the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire in asking for an extension of the scheme. By all means review; I understand if that has to be done. Give certainty to those children and mothers, and those who are making incredible contributions to society. Give certainty to those children studying, so that their education will not be in vain. They can achieve their qualifications, I genuinely and sincerely believe, because of the compassionate nation we are. We can help them reach their qualifications and goals, to be in a better position to rebuild the Ukrainian nation. When that despot Putin is finally defeated and dispatched from this world, it will be a better day for us all.

2.59 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. This is all about certainty: certainty for the Ukrainians who are in the United Kingdom, certainty for local authorities so that they can plan for the future and, to a large degree, certainty for families like mine that are still involved in the hosting process.

There have been some wonderful speeches today, but I want to speak about a personal journey. I want to say to the Minister, “This is what I have gone through,” and say why it is so important that we make sure we look after these people until the very end. I will apologise now, because this will probably be quite a difficult speech for me.

As many hon. Members will know, I was the first MP in the country to bring Ukrainians into the United Kingdom. They came to live with me in North Norfolk on 3 April 2022. I could not be there on that day, unfortunately, because I had covid. My little six-year-old made it to Luton airport with my wife to pick up Anna, a Ukrainian mother—I always get her age wrong, and she gets very cross, so I shall not even try—and little Sviatik, who was six. He was just a couple of months younger than my little daughter. They bunk-bedded together for many months and formed a real bond.

Anna and Sviatik came from Kyiv and, like so many refugees—I hate that word, and I will come on to that in a moment—they came with the most terrible story. Little Sviatik was separated from his parents. He was in Melitopol with his granny and grandad when the war broke out. His father had to make a heroic journey behind Russian lines to extract him. There was then a 10-hour queue through Ukraine to get him into the United Kingdom. That was back in April 2022.

It was absolutely harrowing. They turned up with just a couple of rucksacks. The little boy had just one toy to his name. The mother did not even have a hairdryer or a pair of walking boots, which is something you need when living in my constituency. The outpouring of love from my constituents over 48 hours supplied them with everything they needed, as well as a box of toys that that little boy has had ever since.

Of course, they left behind their family. They left behind Vitali, who has become a friend. He is a botanist at the University of Kyiv. Luckily, he is not fighting, and hopefully he will not get called up to fight, but I see the pain in that woman’s face every time I see her, which is every other weekend, and I can see how hard it is to be separated. They have not seen each other for the best part of a year now.

People say that we are lucky because we have had a really good experience, and they say that we have changed their lives. Well, we are not “lucky”; they have changed our lives. Two thirds of people who went through the hosting process, as I have, have had the most wonderful experience. I would never change it. We have holidayed together. We spend every celebration, birthday and Christmas together. We have lunch together every weekend, if we can—

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his deeply emotional and personal contribution, which highlights the real scale of compassion and generosity of people across these isles. I hope he agrees that we are all keen to see that compassion and generosity extended for a longer period. Does he agree that it is vital that we can all continue to host Ukrainian people? Not only are they welcome, but they make a hugely welcome contribution.

Duncan Baker: I thank the hon. Lady for being so kind as to help me in that way. I totally agree with her.

I have been to Ukraine twice: in November 2022 and in February 2023. I remember meeting Vitali for the first time in November 2022. Handing another man his child, who he had not seen in nine months, was probably one of the most emotional things I will ever do. We went back in February 2024 and took 122 generators, donated by the people of North Norfolk, in three vans—I still cannot believe that we managed that. We could not take Sviatik that time, so he has not seen his dad for nearly a year. That was the time the Russians started to bomb energy infrastructure, so people did not have enough power to turn on a light or cook food. We decided to provide generators, because it was the right thing to do.

What pains me the most about this war—of course, there are many things that we find painful—is that I should not be the one teaching that little boy to ride his bicycle, taking him to his first day at school and taking him fishing. On Christmas day when he gets a football, I should not be the one he asks, “Will you play with me?” It should be his father.

If there is one thing this Government can do, it is to damn well help these people to the end. We owe it to them. We owe it to a nation to carry on. These people have problems of their own to deal with, including the trauma of being separated from their families for this length of time. They do not need more worry about whether the British Government will send them back home when it is not safe—and it is not safe. I know that the Minister is a good man and will follow this through to the end.

In February 2023, when I stood on the side of a road in Lviv, which was the safest part to go to, I made a promise to Sviatik's father. I said, "I'll look after your boy till it's time to come home." Please don't break that promise.

3.6 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate, for all her work on behalf of Ukraine—we travelled there together last year—and particularly for the hugely important work that she does on recognising the holodomor as a genocide. I also thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), whom I know well from my time on the Environmental Audit Committee, for his absolute and utter commitment not just to the family he is hosting, but to the Ukrainian people in general, particularly through the work he has done in bringing generators to Ukraine.

As we have heard, this is a time of utter crisis for the people of Ukraine. They will soon have been at war for two years. I went twice last year and visited many places that had been under Russian occupation. I saw the devastation that has been wreaked in Kherson region and Kharkiv, which is twinned with my city of Leeds. I saw destroyed apartment buildings, schools and hospitals, and devastated towns and villages along the road. None of the people who live in those places can realistically return, so it is our country's responsibility to host them until there is peace and the Russian invader has been expelled.

I am really pleased that we have welcomed more than 140,000 Ukrainians into this country, but we are coming to a crunch point. Last September, at a local community centre, I hosted an event for Ukrainians and their host families in my constituency. It was absolutely full, and the two biggest questions that I was asked were, "What is going to happen when my visa runs out?"—some of them had visas dated until March 2025—and "My time is running out with my host. What will happen to me? What help can I get?"

I have also spoken to hosts who, understandably, have families or individuals—usually young women—who want to move into their own accommodation, but there are significant obstacles to that. I hope the Minister will address the postcode lottery. I praise the Government for giving councils the flexibility to use the local authority tariff to help Ukrainians to access housing, but the biggest issue is having money for a deposit, which Ukrainians clearly do not have. I do not know about other places, but in Leeds landlords sometimes demand six months' or a year's deposit before allowing somebody to move into a house. Who has that sort of money?

It is a little different when the local authority stumps up. There is also help to find the first month's rent and help through providing furniture, covering moving costs, speaking to landlords and supporting crowdfunding arrangements and top-up payments to sponsors to prevent the homelessness that would be inevitable if these arrangements were not in place. Understandably, some local authorities have been able to do that, while others have not, or have been able to offer only part of that support. Even then, there are areas in which private rented housing is in shorter supply than it might be in my own city, where there has been demand for guarantors. I think it is unfair to ask hosts, who have already given so much, to then act as a guarantor for a Ukrainian for a second household.

These are really important issues. Perhaps not all of them are within the Minister's purview, but I hope he can address them, because they are exactly the issues that Ukrainians are dealing with day in, day out. I do not think we can be at all critical of anybody hosting Ukrainians in their home, even if it is for six months, because they have opened up their home and taken people in, and everybody's circumstances are different. The state needs to step in where they may not be able to continue doing that or where the Ukrainians want to live independently, which is absolutely understandable. Who wants to live in somebody else's home indefinitely? I certainly would not if I were in their situation.

We also have hosts who want to carry on hosting, who are generous, just like the hon. Member for North Norfolk. Retention of hosts is also important, so there needs to be more Government support for hosts, including more training and financial support. There needs to be work with hosts to support their guests in finding jobs and school places and dealing with the social security system—things that put a strain on normal family relations, never mind relations with people who have been hosted for only a short time. In Leeds we set up a welcome hub, which has helped to provide some of the wraparound services, but not every local authority can do that.

The data is incomplete, but the figures I have say that until 31 August 2023, 4,890 households—8% of the total estimated households that had arrived on the scheme in England at that time—had been assessed by a local authority as being at risk of homelessness or as being homeless. That is not really acceptable, considering that we have been put in a position of trust for these people in a time of war. It might be far worse, because one third of local authorities are not providing homelessness data to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We should perhaps press those local authorities for data, because that might give a clue as to how they are operating. As we are now seeing a much larger number of host sponsorships coming to an end, the risk of homelessness is likely to ramp up. That is why we need the Government to step in to extend the scheme, to provide additional support for hosts and to provide additional support for the Ukrainians.

Although the expiry of the visas might seem like a long time away, it is causing incredible stress for people who were already suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues. They have anxiety about their visas ending and a lot of them feel fear, although it might be unfair, that they will have to return to Ukraine in March, April or May 2025 as their visas expire.

[Alex Sobel]

I want the Minister to give some reassurance to those people. I do not think anybody in this Chamber or in this place thinks that that is acceptable, but they have a real fear that it is going to happen. Hearing a Minister of the Crown reassure them that it will not would put so many minds at rest and would give such comfort.

My mailbox is filling up with requests relating to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the visa scheme. It is so important that people feel that we are still as supportive of them as we were on 24 February 2022 when the invasion happened, and that we are not in any way walking back a centimetre our support for Ukraine and its people in this or any other regard. That is vital for so many people, both here and in Ukraine.

Lesia Vasylenko, the chair of the British group in the Rada, spoke to me only last week about the real need to put people's minds at rest. There is an active debate in the Rada that goes as high up as the President's office about the importance of the UK coming forward and supporting people through Homes for Ukraine and the visa scheme. I hope we can hear some reassurance from the Minister today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm.

3.15 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) raising some important questions, which I know the Government are starting to think about because we all have constituents starting to ask us what will happen.

I was touched by the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). All the families that have come to this country have a story to tell, and all in their own way are different, but they all need a little certainty about what will happen over the hill. Most families in this country are always planning ahead for what is going to happen with their kids—university, jobs, houses, cars and everything else—but if someone is on a limited, fixed scheme, it is clearly difficult to plan or feel secure.

My first question to the Minister is, what sort of information do we have? The Office for National Statistics did a survey a while back of Ukrainian families who had arrived and to assess the number getting into work. There were particular problems with finding flats—not necessarily because of the deposit, but because most people need sponsors or guarantors on a flat, and they were not necessarily available to Ukrainians. We also have email addresses for a lot of people, because they had to fill out forms to come here. I wonder whether the Home Office or, indeed, the ONS might survey some of the families on who wants to go back and who, because of family reasons, wishes to stay, because that might provide some hard information about the intentions of these 100,000-plus people, who are perhaps all going in different directions.

The original intention, of course, was for those coming to this country to be a temporary thing and for them to return to Ukraine, and one can understand that the Ukrainian Government clearly want the asset of their

people to return. If we can get beyond the war, with the bravery the Ukrainians are showing fighting for their independence, Ukraine will probably be one of the boom areas of Europe in the medium term. It has an educated population. It will need to rebuild a substantial part of the country. It will no doubt get large amounts of international aid. About a million Ukrainians were working in Poland before the war. There will probably be jobs and opportunities for many of those people to return to Ukraine and rebuild it. It will be interesting for Ukraine, and a lot of Ukrainians will want to return, but real life means that not every Ukrainian will want to, because people form relationships, get better jobs and get used to living in another country. In the short term, we need first to extend some of the schemes so that people can start to plan their lives, but we also have to turn our minds to the fact that quite a few people may not go back, because they have jobs or have taken the opportunities this country has afforded them.

I can perceive that there may be a slight problem if one member of a family gets a well-paid job and migrates, but the others—because their English or their qualifications are not as good—have to go back while the breadwinner of the family stays in the UK. We will need a sensitive and rather permissive regime in dealing with those families; otherwise, we will end up with families breaking up.

I have great confidence in the Minister. I have had a few conversations with him privately about this matter, and I know discussions are going on, which I presume involve the Foreign Office, the Department for Work and Pensions and, as always, the Treasury. The message of the debate is that we need an early decision to assist these families to plan their immediate future, so that they can get on with their lives, educate their children, pursue jobs and pursue their interests. If a decision is not taken, we will create quite a lot of problems for these people and, indeed, the families that host them. I hope that we will deal with this matter sensitively—I am sure we will—but we need decisions sooner rather than later.

3.19 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing this important debate on the schemes the UK introduced in response to the war in Ukraine. I point Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for the help I receive from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy Project on this issue. I am also co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration.

It has been almost two years since the war in Ukraine broke out, and since then thousands of households across the UK, including many in my constituency, have opened their homes and welcomed Ukrainian refugees who have sought sanctuary here. Two years on, sadly, it is clear that the war is not coming to an end anytime soon, so why is there still so much uncertainty about the future of the scheme we are debating? That uncertainty needs to be addressed urgently, and the Government must act swiftly to provide longer-term leave to remain and to ensure that lasting protection of Homes for Ukraine is accompanied by free access to family reunification. Without longer-term plans to protect the scheme or a route to settlement, Ukrainians face integration challenges and mental health problems.

The risk of homelessness for Ukrainian refugees, which has been discussed in the debate already, remains particularly concerning. According to the Local Government Association, 8,900 Ukrainian households have presented themselves as homeless across England, and recent research by the British Red Cross found that Ukrainians are around four times more likely than the general population to face homelessness—a staggering figure.

With cost of living pressures continuing, it is imperative that the “thank you” payments to new or rematched sponsors are increased in order to widen the pool of new sponsors and to prevent the further escalation of homelessness. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire rightly highlighted, the importance of home status and student loans for those who need them should not be forgotten in this debate.

One of the key lessons from the Homes for Ukraine scheme is that, when given the opportunity, communities up and down the land open their arms, because we are a very welcoming country. However, as we sit here discussing the future of the scheme, I am dismayed by the continued lack of safe routes available for the majority of refugees fleeing war and persecution around the world. There are more lessons to be learned from the benefits of the scheme.

Last month, the Government released their “Safe and Legal Routes” report as part of their commitment under the Illegal Migration Act 2023. Despite its title, I was dismayed to find that the 37 pages of the report did not offer a single new safe or legal route for refugees to reach the UK, nor any real suggestions about how to improve the few resettlement schemes we have in place, including this one. While we discuss the merits of the Ukraine scheme, I would like the Minister to explain why such schemes have not been made available to other people, why we are not learning the good lessons from it and why we are still struggling with family reunion and resettlement, which has massively declined in recent years and is at the lowest level that it has been in the UK for a decade.

We are a proud country with a proud history of welcoming refugees, and I am proud to say that many people have decided to open their homes to support refugees fleeing Ukraine, but Ministers are not doing their part in continuing that tradition if they do not extend the scheme. Through the introduction of a lot of new legislation recently, they have made it their mission to openly attack that principle, and we need to be prouder of what we can do with this scheme. We must make sure that the Ukrainian people know we are on their side and will continue to be on their side while it is needed.

We need to step up and assure Ukrainians that they will have long-term protection in the UK. We need an urgent recommitment to introduce more safe and legal routes, so that refugees fleeing war and persecution can reach the UK safely. No Ukrainian should have to enter our asylum and refugee system as a result of the failure to increase the length of stay that people are allowed here.

3.24 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham),

who is my in-laws’ MP, on securing this afternoon’s debate. It is certainly very welcome and timely, judging by my own casework and the uncertainty that many people are facing over their future. Ukrainians who came here would have hoped very much that they could have returned to their homes in Ukraine by now, but it is certainly not looking like that, so the Government must prepare for all eventualities and give people some certainty. The position of the SNP is certainly to support that aim.

As pointed out in the House of Commons Library briefing, and as I have seen in casework I have dealt with, some of the confusion here is because many Ukrainians in the UK are likely to have biometric residence permits with an expiry date of 31 December 2024, but that does not necessarily mean that that is when their visa expires; it is just when the BRP expires. Homelessness services in Glasgow have been quite concerned about this issue and have raised it with me in recent days. They worry that there will suddenly be a whole load of people who have no status.

I understand that the Home Office’s aim is to move to a digital biometric status. I have a lot of concerns about that due to errors I have seen with the Home Office systems for producing physical BRPs, and I do not have great confidence that digital BRPs are going to be any more accurate. Can the Minister confirm how exactly he intends to send out information to all who will be affected by this, including agencies that currently expect to see a physical BRP when they interact with those who hold one? They deserve more clarity on that.

In Scotland, we have done our bit in welcoming people from Ukraine. Our super sponsor scheme was incredibly successful and brought over 20,000 people to Scotland and to safety. That has been gratefully received by many, and people from Ukraine have put down roots in Scotland as a result. I pay tribute to the community of Ukrainians in my own constituency in Glasgow, who have done a great deal to ensure that Ukrainians feel supported in Scotland.

I agree with other Members about the need for support with accommodation and for those who are hosting people in their homes. As generous as people are, they are seeing increases in their own bills and pressures due to the cost of living crisis. Government support to help make ends meet was very valuable, allowing people to act as hosts without feeling any financial detriment, because there is only so long people can live like that. Given the pressures on housing in the UK more generally and the number of people facing homelessness in all our constituencies, the UK Government need to give greater consideration to how this issue is going to be managed. We cannot have a situation where people, from wherever they have fled, end up on the streets. That would be a complete failure in our duty to everybody we wish to support.

Scotland has invested in properties to try to help. The Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund has brought over 1,200 homes into use across Scotland and has approved 16 capital projects. As of January this year, 906 homes have been completed. People have moved into many of those, and that has made a huge difference. Should those Ukrainians wish to return to Ukraine, those houses can go back into the pool of housing stock in Scotland and be of long-term benefit to everybody.

[Alison Thewliss]

Of the Ukrainians surveyed in spring 2023 who had been in the UK for between eight months and just under 12 months, 45% were still in accommodation with their initial host. Points have been made by various Members about what happens next and what happens with deposits. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked about the issue of deposits in his constituency, and there is real concern, because people cannot move on if they need a significant deposit to do so. What support have the UK Government given to rent deposit schemes, which have been operational in Scotland and have helped people in the meantime to get the accommodation they require, without being impossibly out of pocket? Further, what are they doing to ensure that there is complete data on the impact of homelessness on this group? It sounds very much as though the data that is there is pretty patchy and needs to be better understood before the Government go forward with it.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) correctly spoke about the lessons to be learned from this scheme and about the benefits of safe and legal routes, which this Government do not yet have in mind for many other groups who are not Ukrainians. It is certainly true that we are not going to find Ukrainians in small boats, because they have a safe and legal route by which to travel to the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the point that it is primarily women and children who are coming to the UK. The reality of that, sadly, is that men are not allowed by their Government to leave Ukraine at all in case they are called up to fight. So there is a real reason why that is happening, but they should be supported regardless of their status. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) spoke incredibly emotionally about his experience hosting a family, and I am grateful to him and to all the people across these islands who have been in a position to do that. It is an incredible act of kindness and generosity, and I know the support given will be greatly welcomed by those who have been hosted.

It strikes me that in many of the immigration debates that we have in this House, we often fail to recognise the individual cases of the people we are talking about. Every single person who comes here, whether they are from Ukraine, Eritrea or Afghanistan, does so for a particular reason. We must recognise the issues of separation, real pain and trauma. When we put ourselves in the shoes of those people, when we understand their plights, when we listen to their stories, when we recognise their situation, we must all commit to helping these people. Their stories all matter, they are all important, and we have an obligation and a duty to try to support them as best we can.

3.31 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Sharma, and I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this vital debate. I pay tribute to her excellent work in this area and the very powerful way in which she made the case to the Minister—I am sure he was listening carefully to her words and exhortations.

I thank all the Members who have spoken in this debate. It has been excellent, and many of the contributions were very moving, particularly that of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who really put over the human side of this issue. These are people and families who have loved and lost so much through this terrible conflict, and he put those points across very movingly. I also thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), who made their cases with such passion and conviction.

Everybody in this debate has made it clear that we all stand ready to support the Ukrainian people in any way that we can. I am very proud to stand here today and reaffirm Labour's unwavering commitment to that cause. The Ukrainian people are on the frontline in our battle for liberty and democracy, and we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to President Zelensky and the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people in the face of Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion. Our commitment to Ukraine, both on the Opposition Benches and across the House, will not waver. If Labour is fortunate enough to form a Government after the general election, we will be honoured to continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in its fight for freedom.

The Labour party has always supported the resettlement schemes for Ukrainians, which is the topic of our debate, and we will certainly continue to do so. We are immensely proud of the generosity and warmth of the British people in opening their doors to Ukrainians, and we are very proud of Members across this House who have hosted Ukrainians in their homes. It has been truly inspiring to see 200,000 households offering to host Ukrainians, largely women and children, fleeing from the Russian invasion. The initial three-year visa offer comes to an end for the first of those Ukrainian refugees just over a year from now. Although we hold firm to our belief that the Ukrainian people will triumph and win the war, we are realistic that it might not be safe for Ukrainians to return to their homes as early as 2025. We therefore fully expect and urge the Government to extend the Ukrainian visa schemes well in advance of the general election, because, as every speaker in this debate has stated, families require certainty and need to be able to plan for their futures.

Many parents have children at school here in the UK and they need to be able to make appropriate plans. Children have been working hard to learn English and stay in school, and mothers have been working hard to ensure some stability in their children's education. Other parents will need to address uncertainty about their jobs, but there are still challenges for them in the lack of co-ordination between the Ukrainian and British education systems.

Pete Wishart: I agree with every single point that the hon. Gentleman makes. Would it not be a remarkable and extraordinarily fantastic gesture, given that on Saturday 24 February, it is two years since the invasion of Ukraine took place, if the Government turned round and said, "We are now prepared to offer an extension to all those who have come to the UK", along the same lines as that which they offered to those on the work scheme? Does he agree that that is what the Government should do?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that excellent point. It had not occurred to me, in all the thinking about this, that 24 February is indeed the

anniversary of that dark day in Europe's history when the invasion took place. It would be appropriate and fitting if the UK Government confirmed what we are asking for on 24 February, unless, of course, the Minister is prepared to do that here today.

To make another point about education, the Ukrainian teenagers who are now in year 10 will have exams next year. If their Homes for Ukraine visa runs out two months before they are due to take their GCSE exams, what will they do? They must be allowed to complete those qualifications. What about an 18-year-old Ukrainian taking A-levels this year who wants to train to be a doctor? Can they apply to university in the UK, or will their visa and the university support be taken away after six months? For the sake of children who have already faced a huge amount of disruption, I urge the Government to give them early reassurance by announcing plans for visa extensions and for what happens at the end of the three-year visa as soon as possible.

Labour Members and Ukrainians across the length and breadth of our country fervently hope that the Minister will give that reassurance—if not today, in the very near future, and perhaps, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) suggested, by 24 February at the latest.

Unfortunately, the generosity and adaptability shown by the British people were not always matched by the performance of the UK Government. Initially, Tory Ministers managed to turn that story of generosity into a bureaucratic challenge for many of the Ukrainians who came here. In my role as a shadow Immigration Minister, I was alerted to the case of a family who were told that their visas were ready, but when they went to collect them, the one for their three-year-old child was not there. There were a number of other deeply troubling cases.

Members from all parties have told me how they were frustrated at the time by the speed at which the Home Office responded on casework. For too many, the so-called hotline went cold. On one occasion the queue for the MPs' query desk in Portcullis House, which I am sure many colleagues will remember, was more than three hours long. Even though Ministers had taken caseworkers off the dysfunctional Afghan scheme, they were still struggling to organise a system for Ukrainians who sought refuge here from Putin's barbarity. More recently there has been the deeply troubling report of 6,000 homeless Ukrainian families. It was always going to be the case that many British households would not be able to continue hosting indefinitely, yet the Government had no plan for what would be done in such cases.

I wrote to the then Refugees Minister, the noble Lord Harrington of Watford, in September 2022 to warn him of the emerging homelessness crisis. At the time, 1,300 Ukrainian families were already facing homelessness. I asked why more was not being done to match the huge surplus of hosts with the families who were becoming homeless, and I set out a number of other questions. Unfortunately, as has been the story of the last few years, the Minister promptly resigned, and I did not receive a reply. The ministerial merry-go-round continued, and a total of 6,000 Ukrainian families were later reported to be homeless.

It would therefore be extremely helpful if the Minister set out what he plans to do right now for those homeless Ukrainians. Perhaps he could answer the following

specific questions. Does he know how many Ukrainians are homeless? What additional funding and support are central Government giving to local authorities to end all homelessness, including rapidly increasing refugee homelessness and, specifically, Ukrainian homelessness? What work is being done to increase the number of hosts on the Homes for Ukraine scheme and to raise awareness of the need for Britain to continue to play its part in supporting the Ukrainian people? Above all, could the Minister please be clear on when we can expect confirmation that the Government will do the right thing and extend the Ukrainian visa schemes? Thank you, and Slava Ukraini.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing the debate, for the enormous passion with which she speaks about the issues, and for the thoroughgoing way in which she raises them with Ministers. She knows that I am very fond of her; I have many brilliant colleagues, but she is undoubtedly one of them who gets stuck into an issue, sees it through to the end and speaks with great passion when going about that work. She has shone a light on an issue that I know Members across the House are very keen to debate, and she speaks for a lot of people in the country on the issue of certainty. I thank colleagues from across the House for coming along in good numbers to debate it; I think it represents the strength of feeling across the United Kingdom about the future.

The United Kingdom stands in absolute solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We are almost two years on from the beginning of the conflict, but the implications and consequences of Russia's barbaric war waged on Ukraine are felt every single day. The Government's commitment to doing the right thing by Ukraine is as strong now as it was on day one. We have a responsibility to do what is right in the face of that unjustified and appalling aggression.

The three schemes that we have touched on today have welcomed or extended sanctuary to more than 230,000 Ukrainians, and remain open to new applications. The largest scheme, Homes for Ukraine, relied on the generosity and support of the British public, who welcomed more than 140,000 Ukrainians and their families into their homes. I thank officials across Government for the work that they have done to help to bring those schemes together and to operationalise them. That includes officials not just in the Home Office, but across Whitehall and beyond—officials out there in the country, on the ground, helping to make this happen and working with local authority partners and other statutory partners who have played such a big role.

The enormous pride we all have in our respective communities has been reflected in the debate. Certainly, as the Member of Parliament for Corby and east Northamptonshire, I am enormously proud of the voluntary work and the work done by the local authority and others to help make this a reality. It speaks to the very best of our national traditions. We can all think of remarkable people who have opened their homes, opened their community buildings, and stood up and been counted as part of the response to this most terrible of crises. As a country, we should be enormously proud of

[Tom Pursglove]

that generosity of spirit; it has been reflected not just in words, but in deeds at so many levels. On behalf of the Government, I would like to say a huge thank you on the record to everybody who has been involved in that response.

The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) were enormously moving, and really got to the heart of the depth of feeling across the country about the support that we are providing, the importance of that sanctuary and the very personal stories that underpin it. It is impossible not to be moved when we hear those stories, and about his experiences and the difference made to that remarkable family that he has been supporting, at a time in their lives that is virtually unimaginable for any of us.

Through our sponsorship efforts, Ukrainians have been integrated into our communities across the UK. The British public have welcomed new Ukrainian colleagues to their workplaces and classmates to their schools. That is one factor that we have tried to reflect in the “thank you” payments, which we are providing monthly to do exactly that: say thank you. We all look forward to the end of the fighting in Ukraine and for the Ukrainian people to be victorious, but while the conflict continues, we will do all that we can to support Ukraine and its people. That is why our Ukraine schemes remain open and free to apply for. The offer of sanctuary very much remains.

I will get through as many of the points raised during the debate as I can in the time available. On the substantive issue of visa extensions, I am cognisant—as are my officials and Ministers elsewhere in Government—that the first of those visas will begin to expire in March 2025, which is 13 months from now. I am very much alive to the need and desire for certainty, not only for sponsors and the Ukrainian people who are directly affected by this, but for the many services that come together to help provide a response.

I want to provide absolute assurance that we are actively working through this issue. I also assure hon. Members that all Ukrainians in the UK under the Ukraine schemes will be informed of the options available to them, well in advance of their visas expiring. However, I am keen that our approach takes into account all the many and varied factors that have been talked about today. There are a lot of issues that need to be properly thought through, with proper delivery attached. There are often real complexities that need to be thought through carefully before making policy announcements, not least because I do not want there to be confusion or uncertainty. I want people to be very clear-sighted about what the future holds for all the reasons that have been articulated.

Pete Wishart: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I have a lot to get through, but I will gladly give way briefly.

Pete Wishart: The Minister is coming really close. I encourage him to take that further step and say that those who are here in one of the schemes will have the opportunity to remain in the UK if that is what they desire. Is that what he is edging towards? Can we go away from this debate and tell our constituents that the

UK Government understand and are working with them, and that they will do everything possible to ensure that they get to remain in the UK if that is what they want?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Government have to go through processes before making definitive policy announcements. However, what I can say is that we are committed to letting everybody know, at least 12 months ahead, what the future holds in terms of the arrangements for any extension of these visas. I really do appreciate the real interest in this matter. The timeliness point has been well made time and again during the debate, and there is a desire to get that certainty as early as possible both from parliamentarians and further afield. I ask colleagues to take those comments in the spirit in which they are intended. It is fair to say that there is no disagreement in the Chamber this afternoon about that need for certainty; we speak with one voice on that point.

The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) asked about the steps we have been taking on engagement. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) recently asked me to meet with Ukrainian parliamentarians to discuss this issue. I have said that I am very happy to do that, and we will facilitate that meeting as quickly as possible. My officials are in regular contact with their Ukrainian counterparts, and Ministers regularly engage with their Ukrainian counterparts, and there has long been a recognition—a real appreciation—of the role that the United Kingdom has played on so many fronts in responding to this crisis. My understanding is that remains the case.

There is undoubtedly a desire for certainty, as we have highlighted this afternoon. However, there is also a clear message that speaks to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire at the start of the debate about what the longer-term future looks like for Ukraine. All of us are clear that Ukraine will win this war, and it has our backing and support in ensuring that that endeavour comes to pass. But it is also critical for the steps we take, and the support we provide, to lead to people being able to return to Ukraine to help to rebuild their country, recognising that Ukraine needs skilled people and wants a viable society with people of all generations. We will respect those wishes as we move forward with the steps we are taking.

On education, I am proud that, under our schemes, Ukrainian children and young people have been able to benefit from our brilliant education system. Whether it be starting out in school learning English and the fundamentals of education or studying for GCSEs and A-levels, our offer has always been to ensure that Ukrainians displaced by the conflict can continue their education where possible. That is also true for Ukrainians entering higher education and studying or looking to study at university in the UK. That is why we extended higher education support and home fee status to those here under the Ukraine schemes. Student support is crucial in enabling Ukrainians to attend education to improve their skills and enhance their ability to contribute to the UK or to assist in rebuilding their home country.

However, I recognise the concern of Ukrainians who have started a university course about whether they will be able to complete it. We of course want bright and motivated students across our schools and universities

to continue their hard work focusing on their education. That is why, where a person's Ukraine scheme leave expires during their course and they are granted further leave to remain under one of the standard immigration routes, they will continue to be eligible to access student support in order to complete their studies. We would expect providers to set their fees for such students accordingly. For those whose Ukraine scheme leave expires while they are at university and are granted further leave to remain under one of the standard immigration routes, we would expect home fees to be charged for the remainder of their course. By that, I mean that the starting position for a course and the associated fee status should be applied throughout the duration in any event. However, I hear the point and refer hon. Members to my earlier remarks.

Alison Thewliss: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Pursglove: I am conscious that I have a lot to get through. If I get the chance, I will take the intervention.

On housing, this is a cross-Government effort, and colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities lead on the housing side of it. A number of points have been raised during this debate that I will gladly flag up to colleagues in DLUHC. They will perhaps be able to help to provide some additional responses to those points. We recognise that many Ukrainians here in the UK want to live independently. That is an ambition we fully support, while appreciating the difficulties some face in finding private rental accommodation. That is why we have provided tariff funding to councils and established English language support to help Ukrainians into independent living.

On homelessness, councils across the UK have been provided with £1.1 billion in tariff funding to support Ukrainians in their area. In addition, the Government have allocated a further £150 million as a top-up to the homelessness prevention grant. I can also confirm that an additional £120 million will be available across the UK next year. For those unable to find new accommodation, we have re-matching services available to help Ukrainians who have moved out of their sponsor accommodation to find a new sponsor. For obvious and important reasons, tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in all their guises remains a priority for the Government, and we are spending £2 billion over three years on that. Local councils have a responsibility to support Ukrainians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including by providing temporary accommodation where required to ensure that no family is without a roof over their head.

Stephen Kinnock: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I am afraid I have too much to get through.

I want to reflect on the important point about rebuilding Ukraine. We are under no illusions about the situation in that country, but ensuring it emerges from the conflict

with a modernised, reformed and inclusive economy, resilient to Russian threats, is as important as tanks on the frontline. Since February 2022, the UK has committed more than £4.7 billion in non-military support, including fiscal support for Ukraine's vital public services and bilateral assistance. We are also working with the private sector and international partners to create conditions in Ukraine that will drive private investment at scale in support of its reconstruction. That includes initiatives on reforms, good governance, financial markets, insurance, business expertise, infrastructure and energy. The Ukraine Recovery Conference, held in London in June 2023, was widely welcomed as a success, and engaged partners across the international community and the private sector in support of Ukraine. I am delighted that the conference announced £60 billion in support of Ukraine's recovery. Winning the peace is a long-term project that cannot wait until the end of the conflict.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke about BRPs whose end date is the end of the year. I assure her that we will contact people from March to provide additional guidance on registering for digital status to ensure they understand what they need to do and what that means in practice.

In closing—I recognise that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire needs to wind up—I reiterate my thanks to her and all other colleagues who participated in the debate. This has been a very powerful reminder of our national unity of purpose in supporting and providing sanctuary to our Ukrainian friends. We have supported 230,000 Ukrainians, but the mission is not complete, either in Ukraine or here in the UK through the sanctuary we are providing. I could not be clearer that the United Kingdom should always play a leading role in responding to such crises. The House has spoken this afternoon with one voice, and we will continue to play a leading role. Put simply, we will do what is right.

3.58 pm

Mrs Latham: I will be very brief. I thank all those who have come to this truly cross-party debate. We have all spoken with one voice. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) gave such a powerful speech about what he experienced. That is happening all over the country: many families are experiencing exactly the same thing.

I thank the Minister for his very thoughtful response. I look forward to working with him to ensure we come up with a good scheme that gives certainty to Ukrainian families and to employers and housing providers. In the end, it is important that we help to rebuild Ukraine. Ukrainians are fighting this war on behalf of all of us, so we need to support those children and mothers—it is mainly women who are over here—to the hilt. It is important that we support those children—the future of Ukraine—and help Ukrainians rebuild their country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of extending the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

Flooding

4 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of flooding.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. In 2007, Tewkesbury and many other areas of the country suffered the worst floods we can remember. Some areas that had previously never flooded were overcome by water from rivers and water running off from land. Houses and business premises were flooded. Ironically, water services were lost, as the Mythe waterworks were overcome by water. Electricity supplies were lost to many, as the Walham substation was overcome.

As a result, around 1,000 households were displaced in my constituency. People, including the elderly, the terminally ill and families, had to live in caravans. They were out of their homes for up to a year. Tewkesbury hospital had to be evacuated and, sadly, there was loss of life as a result of that flooding. King Charles—Prince Charles as he then was—and the then Duchess of Cornwall visited Priors Park to see the damage and lift spirits. In making that reference, I want to wish King Charles the very best.

That was 17 years ago and, although we have not suffered flooding to the same extent in my area, we do experience flooding on a regular basis, including a few weeks ago. In my area, that may be unavoidable to an extent, as Tewkesbury sits on the confluence of two main rivers—the Severn and the Avon—and other rivers are in the area. There is no surprise when the area floods, although the inevitability of it is no comfort to those whose homes are flooded.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate. He is right to outline the issues. He said the last time there was a massive flood was 17 years ago. In my constituency, floods that are supposed to happen every 100 years now happen every 10. Does he agree that policy and strategy must be not only for England but for the whole of the United Kingdom, when the floods are happening everywhere?

Mr Robertson: I am going to say why it is important to have both national and local strategies.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. To his point, in my part of Mid Norfolk, where the clue is in the name—it is not on the coast—we have seen in the past 10 years an extremely high rate of flooding. In 2020, 200 houses were flooded with sewage; two months ago, 100 houses in Attleborough were affected. This is getting worse and worse. It is partly climate change, yes, but also house dumping and inappropriate investment in infrastructure. Does he agree that, as well as a national strategy, we need to ensure that in such counties, where 38 agencies have responsibility, somebody has to be held to account to avoid the flooding of our constituents' houses?

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend is right, and makes a good point I will touch on. Although some flooding is occasionally inevitable, we can take action to avoid some of the worst excesses. Since 2007, a number of schemes

have been implemented in my area, at Deerhurst, Longlevens and Westbury, and some minor improvements have been made elsewhere, but we were flooded again a few weeks ago. People in Sandhurst and Tewkesbury itself suffered when their homes were flooded. People in those areas feel that more could have been done to prevent the effects of heavy rainfall.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that, in places where farmland regularly floods, there is a case for saying that farmers should be paid for storing water on behalf of the state?

Mr Robertson: Yes. My right hon. Friend has anticipated a point that I am about to make, so I thank him for that intervention.

As I said, schemes have been put in place and grants have been made available to people who have been flooded—homeowners, businesses and farmers—and that is welcome, as is the further compensation that some people can claim. Claiming tends to be a rather cumbersome exercise, however, with professional help required to access it.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury on securing this important debate. Flood victims across the country have been affected by Storm Henk, but none more so than people in Frome in my constituency. So far, they have been unable to access some of the property flood resilience repair grants, or to floodproof their homes and businesses. Does he agree that the Government must urgently provide access to that scheme so that constituents such as mine can make their properties more resilient against floods?

Mr Robertson: I entirely agree. That is a very good point. Making it available is one thing; enabling people to access it is something else. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Robertson: By all means.

Rachael Maskell: I am very grateful to the hon. Member; he is making an excellent speech. I want to quickly refer to businesses in my constituency, many of which have not been able to trade for around four months because of the need to dry out after the flooding. Does he agree that, where businesses are affected, there should be an immediate suspension of all the business rates that they are due to pay? Does he also agree that we need clarity around the Bellwin scheme to make sure that it is not based on the number of businesses that flood but is for every single business that floods?

Mr Robertson: Absolutely. That is right. Business rates are one of those strange things; businesses pay without having made a profit. It is an unusual tax, so I certainly think that a lot of thought should be given to that. I also agree that businesses have to be looked at individually, as households should be looked at individually.

When flooding looks likely, many people who are registered are warned about the problems that are coming, so that they can make preparations, if possible. One of the actions they can take is to place sandbags around

their properties. Sandbags are usually available from the local council, but sometimes there is an inadequate supply; the bags might not be filled with sand when people pick them up, so people have to effectively construct their own protective sandbags. The problem with that is that time is of the essence, and not everybody has the capability to do that—old people and vulnerable people, for example, are unable to do that for themselves—so they require help.

Unfortunately, many of those who have been flooded feel somewhat left on their own to fight against nature. They do not feel that everything that could be done has been done; they understand that they live in flood-risk areas, but they would like to receive a little more help. Of course, the Government and the Environment Agency have plans in place to help, and while macro-strategies are fine and necessary, micromanagement is sometimes needed so that households do not feel left out or ignored. We have the Environment Agency, the borough councils, the county councils and various other organisations that have been referred to, but perhaps we need a clearer steer on who is responsible for what.

I mentioned that there is a certain inevitability that flooding will take place in some areas, but in my area, it is felt that we make things much worse through excessive building. As I said, Tewkesbury town sits at the confluence of two rivers, and other rivers are nearby, so the water table is quite often very high, which makes flooding more likely. The more fields that are there for the water to rest on, the less likely it is that homes and business will be flooded. Conversely, when those fields are built on, the water has fewer places to go and to rest. In other words, fields are prevented from doing their job by being built on, yet I am informed that Tewkesbury Borough Council—in an area that floods so badly—is the fastest growing area of England outside London for development. In fact, in recent years, my constituency has had four times the constituency average for house building. That is not 10% or 15% as much; it is four times as much. While I am pleased to see businesses expanding and more people coming to live in the area, and while I recognise the need for housing, I wonder whether we can cope with all that growth in one area. Flooding around the town of Tewkesbury, and at Sandhurst, Longford and other areas, would tend to suggest that the problem has been made worse by the building that has taken place.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is referring to exactly the situation in my constituency, where there has been a very high level of new build over recent years, so we have seen increasing flooding. In particular, a constituent of mine who lives adjacent to a new build seems unable to prove exactly why he is suffering that flooding, and yet this new build has occurred. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely critical that a local authority, particularly one that has granted permission for that new build, should have clearer responsibilities as the lead local flood authority to help constituents in that distressing situation to resolve the problem?

Mr Robertson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am very glad she made that point—there certainly should be that responsibility for the infrastructure. Building is sometimes allowed on appeal, which makes it even worse; where is the line of responsibility then? The Environment Agency has responsibility for drawing up maps and

identifying flood plains, but that system is not working and has not worked for a long time, mainly because the system does not take water displacement into account. In other words, it is not just about whether the new houses that are being built flood, but whether building on those fields will cause other properties to flood. As well as deploying property flood resilience measures, which we should, there should be a detailed consideration of whether sustainable urban drainage systems, for example, work, and if they do, at what threshold they should become mandatory for developers.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. He quite rightly talked about responsibility being a focal point. In relation to flood defence work and preparation in Havant, we benefit from the work of Coastal Partners, which is a regional body supported by local councils and funded by the Environment Agency, among others. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Minister and the Government to continue their support for bodies such as Coastal Partners, because they provide a regional focus for flood defence and protection work?

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point that ties in with what everybody is saying. The fact that there have been so many interventions shows what an important subject this is.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is very appropriate that this debate is led by my distinguished neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), whose constituency has consistently suffered worst in every major flood for some time. He is making a strong case for responsibility for flooding, and of course he and I know that the protections since 2007—the Mythe waterways, the Walham substation and the Horsbere Brook flooding programme, all of which are in his constituency but on the edge of mine—have made a huge difference.

Does my hon. Friend agree that there are some improvements on Alney Island, which is in my constituency but close to his, that the flooding Minister and the Environment Agency agreed to, particularly fixing leaks in the flood wall and extending its height? Does he also agree that the environment Minister here today, who helped to create the Severn partnership some years ago with my hon. Friend and me, could encourage the flooding Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), to meet all of the 40 or so MPs of the Severn partnership as soon as possible to consider the creation of a new reservoir in the Welsh hills?

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes several good points. I am sure that the Minister has heard that and we can take up those issues. This issue is not going to go away. If anything, it is going to get more prevalent. Above all, we need to rethink how we identify areas that constitute not just flood plain but flood risk, with particular reference not only to the proposed new properties but to existing ones. In those areas, we should avoid any further development.

We then come to the problem of water management. At the end of 2022, some people in my area had their Christmas completely ruined by failures in the drainage systems, which resulted in raw sewage re-entering their houses. Not only were their houses damaged by these events, but people had to move out of their homes while they

[Mr Robertson]

were being repaired over the Christmas period. In some cases, pumping stations had failed and homeowners had to pay the price of that failure.

We need to have a clear policy in place with regard to new buildings. Should they be able to tap into existing drainage systems, or should there be a threshold beyond which they need to ensure that extra drainage capacity is in place before building commences? That is a point that I raised with the then Prime Minister in 2021-22. It is not just about large-scale developments; sometimes building an extra house here or there can, over time, cause problems for others in the area. Making sure that watercourses are clear obviously helps to reduce the risk of flooding. Councils have a responsibility to ensure that riparian owners carry out the correct amount of work, but this is not always the case.

That takes us to the question of river dredging—an issue that I raised in the main Chamber recently, when my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley said that he would look into the matter. I understand that dredging has taken place in the Somerset levels and has been a success. I do not intend to pretend that I am an expert on dredging—I am not at all—but it seems logical that if a river can contain more water without bursting its banks, surely that has to be helpful in avoiding flooding.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that it is really important that the Department—I am grateful that the Environment Minister is in her place—understands that rivers' principal function is to drain water to the sea, and that our ditches' and watercourses' principal function is to do that? At times in Norfolk, it is beginning to feel as though the environmental agencies are more concerned with keeping them full of mud and plants than making sure that they fulfil their primary purpose, leaving constituents—farmers and people with sewage in their houses—to pay the price. We need to remember that drainage is about drainage, first and foremost.

Mr Robertson: Absolutely. That is why rivers run to the sea. It is a very good point.

One of the arguments made against dredging—I am afraid it is on the Government's website—is that clearing one part of a river just pushes the water downstream, but the logical conclusion to that argument would be to say that we should never place flood defences anywhere, which we are obviously not going to say. Rather, it is one good reason that we need both national and local approaches to the problem. For example, looking at the River Severn as a whole, we might come to the conclusion that the whole river needs dredging so that the water can be moved out to the sea as quickly as possible, as my hon. Friend suggests. I know that dredging is controversial, but we need to have a conversation about its benefits, and a proper analysis carried out by the Government and the Environment Agency.

Of course, it is not just buildings that flood at times of heavy rainfall, but roads. In the recent floods, three of the four main roads that serve the town of Tewkesbury were closed, leaving just one to cope with the traffic. Further down the A38, towards Gloucester, the road was closed, causing further inconvenience to motorists and bus passengers. These roads have been closed a

number of times in the past, so it is no surprise that they were closed again. Perhaps the only surprise is that little or nothing has been done to protect the roads, so we need to consider what further steps we can take to avoid road closures in the future.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman has made some excellent points. In my constituency, which, like his, floods frequently, people are cut off for days on end. Even when their houses are dry, they are unable to get about, do their business or get to work. People walk across fields in the middle of the night to find their cars. Does he agree that having a plan from the council to make sure that people can move around safely when there is flooding is so important for resilience?

Mr Robertson: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a very good point. It is important that we are able to do that, for all sorts of reasons.

Farms also flood. Although there is compensation for farmers for non-insured damage, perhaps we could, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) said, consider expanding the schemes to encourage farmers to do more to help contain the water on their land in order to avoid flooding causing damage to others. That could be part of the environmental land management scheme, which they are currently being encouraged to take up.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Member for giving way again. He has already mentioned that Somerset is home to a large number of wetlands and, indeed, the levels. That can help communities affected by floods, by creating temporary storage areas that slow the flow of floodwater. Does he agree that we should be supporting the engineering of those types of management defences to help aid communities and boost flood resilience?

Mr Robertson: That is certainly is what we should do. I ask the hon. Member's forgiveness for not going into her point in more detail, as I will have to wind up in just a minute.

In closing, I will say clearly and loudly that Tewkesbury is well and truly open for business. We are pleased to welcome visitors, but we need to take steps that will help to prevent people's homes flooding in future and roads being closed. I have outlined a few thoughts and suggestions, and I hope the Minister and the Government will take them seriously and consider ways in which they can be implemented.

4.20 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for calling such an important debate. My constituency of Tamworth has a long history of flooding, but Storm Henk was the third most serious incident in the area. Tamworth has 8.8 km of linear flood defences made up of walls, embankments and other structures, such as outfalls and penstocks. As it stands, 3 km of those defences are from the 1960s and require improvement as they do not meet the design standard of today.

The Environment Agency estimates that 2,205 residential properties in the area are at risk, as well as a significant number of non-residential properties, like the Ventura

retail park. I spoke with the Environment Agency about flood defences and the fact that there is a need for increased funding. It is currently putting together a business case, and I hope that areas such as mine, which are at higher risk and which may get worse due to climate change, are given their due consideration and the protections they need. We need to protect homes and businesses in our constituencies with short, mid and long-term preparations for flooding.

Next month, I will host a flooding summit with key stakeholders to review the ways that organisations currently work together and respond to flooding incidents, and to collaboratively explore what lessons we have learned, plans for better protection against future incidents and the practical solutions that can be put in place now. On a broader level, Labour has laid out plans for a flood resilience taskforce to improve joined-up thinking and communication. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government have similar plans to look at ways in which community groups, local residents and businesses can link up with those larger authorities and those with responsibilities, such as the Environment Agency, to collaboratively work together at a local and national level, and outline how we can respond in order to live with flooding and learn how to deal with it better in the future?

4.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for securing the debate. Given this is a short debate, the number of interventions truly demonstrates how important the matter is; so many hon. Members are standing up for their constituents. I was the flooding Minister and worked closely with almost everyone in this room to make sure that we are developing a nation that is resilient to this ever-changing demand because of our climate. I am no longer the floods Minister; that is the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), who I am standing in for during this debate—I will certainly pass on some messages to him.

I clearly sympathise with anyone who has ever been flooded, going back 17 years in the Tewkesbury area. Coming from Somerset, I am well-versed in flooding, and the angst and hardship it can cause. As a number of hon. Members have touched on, we are seeing more extreme weather. We have had a whole succession of storms, with Storm Babet, Storm Ciarán and Storm Henk since October, bringing into focus the fact that about 4,400 or so properties were flooded. But we must remember that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out, almost a quarter of a million properties were protected in those areas that sadly saw flooding. That is the intention behind what the Government are doing with their floods policy.

We have a very strong policy statement to make this nation more resilient, with 40 actions and five ambitious policies stemming from that. Indeed, we have doubled the flooding budget from that of the first tranche to £5.2 billion in this six-year spending round—and that covers coastal erosion as well.

George Freeman: In Norfolk certainly, the internal drainage boards are the most expert bodies at handling drainage. Could I make the gentle suggestion that we pay for them through some of the Environment Agency's substantial funding, rather than through council surcharges, which are very stretched?

Rebecca Pow: The drainage boards play a very important role in all of this. They play an important role in many cases, including the provision of nature-based solutions and regulating water levels, as was touched on earlier.

We have allocated a whole raft of funds to help. We announced the frequently flooded allowance, which I really pushed as the floods Minister. That has enabled a whole range of projects that previously did not qualify for floods funding to get off the ground. Because of that fund, we have finally seen spades in the ground in Toronto Close—in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who sent me a picture just yesterday—and a whole range of other colleagues have got projects off the ground.

We have got our natural flood management programme running, because that is another way of managing the water, as well as the £200 million coastal innovation fund. We also have specific pathway projects, one of which is working in the Severn area, to look at more adaptive ways of coping with flooding in the future, which touch on many areas mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury.

I hope everyone is aware that we have listened to the issues relating to flooded farmland; we have had comments about Yorkshire in particular. On 4 January, new actions were introduced under the environmental land management scheme, particularly with regard to grassland management and arable land management for flood resilience, as well as water storage on farms—with decent payments. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury to have a look at that, because we have been listening to our farmers.

We have also listened regarding the issue of sustainable urban drainage, which has been one of my pet subjects since I have been in Parliament. Getting that switched on is in our plan for water, and we are working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to speed up and switch on schedule 3; again, my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury touched on that, and it is so important for regulating water in our housing developments.

Sir Greg Knight: Have the Government have reached a conclusion on the effectiveness of dredging the River Parrett?

Rebecca Pow: As I come from Somerset, I know that that has been a much-debated issue since the big floods in 2014. A whole range of management processes have helped to control the flooding in Somerset, and recently we have weathered the storms really well compared with the past. Dredging is only one small part of the answer; the rest involves regulating the water, getting the farmers to clear the ditches—which they can do by law—and slowing the flow on the much wider areas. All those measures are part of how we regulate the water.

Lots of our funds have now been switched on to help people who have recently suffered flooding, and Tewkesbury is included in some of the areas benefiting from Government

[Rebecca Pow]

support—as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury understands. Our property flood resilience measures have helped to insulate 90 properties in his area, and I urge other hon. Members to look at where they could be helpful.

The flood recovery framework has been triggered, and lots of areas are eligible for that support as a result of the recent storms, including in Gloucestershire and areas around the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury. The business recovery grant has been triggered, as has the whole flood recovery framework, which includes discounts for business.

I have had to speed up, but my message is that this Government take flooding really seriously. We have been very creative in listening to people, and with regard to those adaptive pathways, including that Severn valley partnership. I will pass on the message to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley, asking him to meet with all the hard-working MPs up and down the Severn valley to make sure we have got the system right. We have made really good progress up and down the Severn and the River Avon, but that is not to say that there is not more to do, because we are facing climate change.

Question put and agreed to.

Nursery Provision: South-west England

4.30 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered nursery provision in the South West.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. Every parent in the south-west should be able to access affordable nursery provision for their children, but childcare bills have rocketed to eye-watering levels, all during a cost of living crisis. Some families cannot even access childcare in the first place, as more and more nurseries in the south-west buckle under financial pressures because of a shortage of available staff. There are some marvellous childcare providers in Plymouth and across the west country; I want to thank all those who work in the sector.

Despite the promises and Government rhetoric around childcare, the gap between those promises and the reality is growing bigger. My worry is that the rhetoric hides a really dangerous situation for our nurseries. Spiralling costs and a retention and recruitment crisis mean fewer places, more expensive places and a deepening crisis. All that is inflamed by the geography of the south-west, the challenges of attracting new workers to the far south-west, especially down the peninsula, the rural nature of many of our communities, the higher than average levels of deprivation and a worsening housing crisis, which means that childcare workers often cannot afford to live in the communities where they are needed most.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am listening carefully to all the causes that the hon. Gentleman has cited for the difficulty that childcare providers have in recruiting staff in his region. Not all of them apply to my constituency in Cheshire, but providers are finding some of the same problems. The community needs such provision, yet it cannot be fulfilled because the sector cannot recruit.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention. We have a concern that is not party political: it is simply about Members of Parliament reflecting the reality that in their constituencies there is a shortage of available staff. That means that there are not enough places in nurseries, so families who want to take up Ministers' offer of free childcare places are unable to do so. That is the nub of the problem. Nationwide, there are communities experiencing very similar problems.

Fiona Bruce: It is not only nurseries. Before and after-school clubs are experiencing exactly the same recruitment challenge.

Luke Pollard: I agree. It is a real problem with delivering on the promises that politicians have made. Setting an expectation that parents will be able to access a certain amount of free childcare, as well as wraparound school provision, is a worthy aim to shoot for. The problem is that the delivery is not working in the way it ought to. With big changes only a few weeks away, there is a real concern that promises and delivery are getting further and further apart.

In the south-west, because of our geography, the situation is harder. In the west country, it is harder to recruit every single type of professional—from nuclear

engineers to social workers, from teachers to sewage workers. Unbelievably, it is harder because of our geography. Our geography—the beaches, the moorlands, the countryside—is what makes the south-west beautiful, but the rurality, the coastal communities and the distance often work against us when it comes to recruiting the people we need, especially those who work on the frontline, often in roles that are not paid as well as they should be, when we have high prices that make it hard for people to live there.

Last summer, I raised the issue in the House with the Education Secretary and subsequently secured a meeting with her to warn about the childcare crisis in the west country. I brought with me Cheryl Hadland—the owner of Tops Day Nurseries, one of Plymouth's largest childcare providers—to explain the financial strain that nurseries are under. I have visited many Tops nursery sites across Plymouth, as well as lots of other providers. I have seen the importance and value of play-based learning and have spoken to the brilliant staff and to parents.

Nurseries are a lifeline service. They are a catalyst for parents to return to work and a great start for young children, who learn through play, interact with other children and learn social skills, which are even more important when we look at some of the consequences of covid. Since my meeting with the Education Secretary, yet another nursery in Plymouth has been forced to close, leaving 100 families without childcare, and others tell me that they are on the brink.

The closure of nurseries especially impacts poorer communities. Time is running out for nurseries in those communities. Plymouth is not alone in that respect; this is a problem felt across the south-west and, as we have heard, across the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman, who is absolutely right that Plymouth is not alone in this. I will make the case for Strangford, if I can. The average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is now £10,036 a year, an increase of 14% on 2021. Day nursery costs are more expensive: they average £229 per week and are increasing faster than inflation. With the Northern Ireland Assembly returned, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Minister, as a matter of urgency, should undertake discussions with the Education Minister back home to tackle these costs to support the development of children and ease the pressure on families? Quite simply, we cannot go on. If nothing is done, we lose it all.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention; I have the same concerns for people in Plymouth and the south-west that he has for his constituents. There are structural issues that mean that nurseries share the same concerns no matter what postcode they are in. Across the United Kingdom, it is important that those structural issues are addressed. The best way of doing so is through collaboration, first to identify the issue and then to work out what the solutions could be. I hope the Minister has heard the matter that the hon. Gentleman raised and will respond to it.

Nursery providers face a perfect storm, with rising bills, free childcare funding that does not meet the cost of providing childcare, and a drive for parents to return to work to pay bills in the middle of a cost of living crisis. All the while, nurseries are experiencing a shortage

of trained staff, who, with the qualifications and skills that we require of them, can often earn more elsewhere. That is simply an unsustainable position for our nurseries.

I want the Government to act urgently before any more nurseries in the south-west close and before any more children lose their places at nursery. That is why I secured this debate: to put the issue in the public domain and to ask the Minister for more action from his Department to deliver for parents who are desperately short of nursery provision.

During the cost of living crisis, the cost of childcare is hitting families in the south-west hard. It now costs a staggering £15,000 a year on average for a child under two to receive full-time nursery care in Britain, according to analysis by the children's charity Coram. In fact, parents in Britain spend among the highest proportion of their income on childcare in the OECD.

For some parents, childcare is simply unaffordable. Others have been forced to cut down their work hours because an extra day's childcare is costing them more than an extra day's wage. How can that be right? One mother, Shelley, told me that she can only afford to put her two-year-old in childcare part-time, which means that she can only work part-time and she is falling behind on her bills as a result. The Women's Budget Group network says that 1.7 million women in England would do more paid work if they had better childcare. Finding the economic growth for which we are so desperate in this country comes from better childcare. Childcare is often most expensive for those who need flexible provision, like Tracey, a nurse at University Hospitals Plymouth who got in touch with me.

All the while, families in the south-west are having to contend with rising costs of energy and food, as well as a housing crisis. This matters, because when parents cannot afford childcare, there is a greater strain on their family. It hits children who do not have access to outdoor space at home and prevents a level playing field for children starting school. The Sutton Trust says that the lowest-income children are 11 months behind their peers by the time they start primary school. They do not have a fair start.

We cannot make childcare more affordable unless nurseries are financially viable, but nurseries in the south-west, not least in Plymouth, are struggling to stay afloat. A staggering 886 childcare providers in the south-west had to close in the last year alone. That is a sign not of a market working well, but of market failure. What that means for each family is disruption, worry and probably the extra cost of securing their child a place if they can find other provision. The Roundabout Nursery in Cattedown in Plymouth has just announced that it will shut its doors for good at the end of March, leaving more than 100 families without childcare. I know it did everything it could to stay open, like nurseries across the board facing the same challenges.

This is one of the issues that genuinely keeps me awake at night. The system is not working, and there is no recognition that it is failing. My inbox has been flooded with messages from worried parents who are rightly concerned about finding childcare elsewhere. That area of Plymouth has already suffered other closures. St Jude's Church Pre-School closed in the face of the same financial pressures that closed the Roundabout Nursery. Staggeringly, parents tell me that they cannot find a place anywhere in the city.

[*Luke Pollard*]

The closure of provision in rural communities can leave parents without childcare options altogether. Melanie, who lives in the rural south-west, writes:

“There is a two-year waiting list for my local nursery. They are so full they won’t even take names on that list.”

How did we end up in this mess?

Nurseries face not only spiralling costs, but a retention and recruitment crisis. Dr Simon Opher in Stroud has been working with a good local playgroup in Uley that has been forced to close because there are no qualified staff in the area to employ. In Filton and Bradley Stoke, Claire Hazelgrove has been in touch with a local mum called Kate. She did everything right. She knew she would be going back to work, so she got a nursery place sorted early on, and everything was set. That was until she heard, just five weeks before her son was due to go to the nursery, that his start date had been pushed back by four months because of a lack of staff. That is an issue right across the south-west.

Again, I stress that it is not the fault of the staff who work in our nurseries. I have never met a more dedicated, warm and generous group of people. They care passionately about the children they care for. The system is not delivering on the objectives Ministers are setting it, so nurseries are facing real struggles to survive.

Another headache for nurseries is that the Government do not provide enough financial support for the free—Government-funded—childcare. The Early Years Alliance says that it is “financial suicide” for nurseries to sign up to provide more free childcare places. Some nurseries in the south-west are now reportedly asking parents for voluntary donations to cover the shortfall in Government funding for free places, and sometimes that donation is compulsory.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. He is making a really strong speech. Yesterday, I spoke to Sue Place, the chief executive officer of the Balsam Centre in Wincanton, which runs Conkers Community Nursery. She has seven infants with special educational needs in her care, but one-to-one funding for just one place. She told me that

“we end up subsidising the state because the Government relies on nurseries to meet these additional costs”.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need more ringfenced funding for education, health and care plans for very young children to avoid nurseries being forced to hike their prices to survive, putting them out of reach for many hard-working families?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for that intervention. The hon. Member raises a really important issue, which I think all Members across the House will be familiar with. One group of children for whom nursery provision is most essential are those with special educational needs and disabilities, but parents with SEND children often struggle the most to access childcare. According to a BBC report from January, only one in five councils has sufficient childcare available for children with SEND, and one third expect fewer SEND places to be available after the Government’s proposed childcare roll-out than before it. That is not right, and it shows that the roll-out is having a perverse, unintended consequence. I genuinely

do not believe that the Minister wants to cut the number of SEND places in nursery provision, but that is the effect that the roll-out is having on some nurseries.

We need to ensure that the message is sent out loud and clear that a child with SEND should have the support to fulfil their full potential. That means not only support in nursery but support in primary and secondary school to ensure that they can be properly assessed for their needs and properly provided for. If the consequence of the changes the Government are rolling out is that fewer SEND children will get the support they need, we are failing more SEND children and failing the families of more SEND children. The consequences of that will be felt not just for the next few years or in the next spending review period, but for the child’s entire lifetime. That is something we should reflect on to see whether this policy is working, because I do not think it is working for parents of SEND children, in particular.

One concern I have is about an inequality in the effect on parents with different income levels. Those who can afford to pay are often in a more favoured position than those who cannot. I do not believe that that was the intention of the Minister or his predecessor when this was originally rolled out, but that is the consequence—effectively baking in an inequality because Government-funded childcare does not cover the cost of the place. That means compulsory top-ups—no matter whether they are framed as voluntary or as being for a certain product—that parents have to pay to secure the place. That means that parents need to have the money to pay for their nursery—pay for that top-up—and that is not right. It means that the very people we should be encouraging back to work, who would benefit most by being back in employment, are struggling most to access the childcare to deliver that opportunity for them and their families.

Nurseries have been left with huge uncertainty because of the extended free childcare roll-out. Bambinos childcare in Plymouth has told me that the funding rates for the new scheme, launching in April, have not yet been released, leaving it with no ability to plan its staffing requirements or speak to parents. One area I would like the Minister to look at is how he can provide certainty for the sector. We know that there is a feeling of vulnerability and of uncertainty and worry, not just from parents but from the people who run the nurseries, who cannot plan their workforce or train people to offer the right provision, because they do not know how much money will be coming in. That uncertainty is really crippling when it comes to having a vibrant and successful sector.

Before I conclude, may I ask the Minister four questions? I would be grateful if, in his response, he could set out what he is doing to stop nurseries closing in the south-west. Are there levels of intervention that his Department can be making to support nurseries in the south-west? Can he guarantee that the Government will deliver on their free childcare promise for every child in the south-west? I note that the Education Secretary rowed back on that promise in the media this week. I would be grateful if this Minister could provide some clarity on what is actually being delivered, because nurseries need certainty as to what is coming in only a few weeks’ time. Can the Minister set out what he and his Department are doing to reduce the eye-watering cost of childcare for families? Finally, what steps is he taking to tackle

the lack of provision in some areas—especially the poorest areas in our region—where nurseries are struggling to survive?

A good local nursery is a lifeline service for families in the south-west, but just as with access to a GP or to an NHS dentist, it is harder for the poorest in our communities to find a good, local, affordable nursery. I know that this is at odds with the language that the Minister uses, but I am raising the issue again today because the people I represent are experiencing real challenges in accessing the help the Minister is claiming to offer. It is not enough to say that free childcare is available if it is not actually available and if, when parents access it, the viability of the nursery is put in doubt. We know that childcare will be an election issue because the system we have is not working well enough, especially for parents on low incomes and those who cannot afford to pay for top-ups.

I genuinely look forward to this debate and hon. Members' contributions. I know that this concern is shared by not just Labour MPs, and I hope to hear from Conservative MPs as well. I also know that the particular geography of the south-west makes things harder and compounds some of the structural problems that have been experienced nationwide. I hope the Minister will look at our geography to see what support he can offer nurseries in the south-west, in particular.

4.50 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who represents my birthplace and is, therefore, a fellow Janner, on securing this debate. It is appropriate for the two of us to be speaking today, following on from the joint visit we made last year with the Education Secretary and Cheryl Hadland to raise some of the issues being experienced, not just by Tops Nursery—there are five of its nurseries in Plymouth and one in Torquay, in my patch—but more generally in the nursery sector. We then did a double act for BBC “Spotlight” afterwards, so it is good to reprise that role today.

This is a timely debate, when we look at the changes coming forward in childcare and at some of those that have taken place over the past year. As we know, there are currently three childcare entitlements: the 15 hours universal entitlement for all three and four-year-olds, the 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds and the extended 30 hours entitlement for three and four-year-olds of eligible working parents. Within the next two months, the 30 hours entitlement will be extended in stages to children aged nine months to three years. We are seeing a big increase in what will be expected and what will need to be provided physically in our communities. Parents are obviously looking forward to those entitlements being available, but that means that good-quality nurseries need to be ready and able to deliver them.

I am aware of how the funding is provided to local authorities. People might think of my constituency of Torbay as a retirement area, where the focus is more likely to be on those over a certain age—I sometimes reference the fact that 9% of the population in one of my wards is aged 86 or over. However, when one digs into the figures, we also have some of the areas of

highest deprivation, and that particularly falls on many working families in parts of our community. People probably would not realise that the Paignton parish is one of the most deprived in the Exeter diocese, because it does not include the areas of retirement in Torbay.

That presents some interesting challenges, particularly when we are talking about recruitment. If many people in the population are aged over 80, they are unlikely to be looking for work in childcare. They are more likely to be retired and looking for care for themselves than providing care elsewhere. That means that, for the size of population, the pool of working-age people in the urban area of Torbay will be slightly smaller than it might be if we had, for example, Plymouth's age demographics.

As has rightly been highlighted, there are challenges in terms of housing and what makes a pool of workers available. When I had one of my old briefs, people would suggest that having a visa would be a great solution. Well, if we do not sort out housing issues and pay and reward issues and there is no transport—all the things that go with someone being able to sustain a job in early years education—even that visa is not going to provide a magic solution.

That is not to say that there is not good provision in Torbay. There are some long-standing nurseries that offer excellent provision to local people, sometimes in quite challenging circumstances. Sometimes, they very much rely on the fact that they are based in a community-motivated building. For example, Preston Community Preschool is based in Preston Baptist Church, and is able to benefit from the fact that the landlord is clearly not a commercial one and is very community-minded. The long-standing manager there, Susan Gibbons, and her deputy, Terena Cottell, have worked hard for many years to keep that facility going. They certainly do not take the type of rewards that you might expect people with their skills and experience to take, and last year they picked up issues around the funding amount.

There is good provision, but it will be interesting to hear the Minister's thoughts on how we make sure that provision—and a choice of provision—is available. As some of us have found, we say that parents can choose where they would like to send their children to primary school, but when they move into an area, they realise that they are pretty much being told, “Here is the school with a vacancy in your year group”—and that is that, particularly if their child is entering primary school above reception or entering secondary school above year 7. When we are looking at nursery provision, how do we make sure that parents will generally have a choice? That innately requires some flexibility in the system—not planning that if, for example, 7,000 places are needed, 7,000 places will be provided, but ensuring that there will be some scope. It would be interesting to hear the thinking around ensuring that there is some capacity to allow parents to choose the right nursery provision for their child, in the way that they would want to choose the right primary or secondary school provision.

Torbay is not the lowest funded area, partly due to some of our demographics but, again, there is some funding disparity. It would be interesting to hear some thoughts about how that could be lessened to address some of the costs we have talking about of trying to recruit and retain staff. The nursery sector in Torbay

[Kevin Foster]

will be competing with sectors such as hospitality for school leavers and people who are looking to start training. I am always particularly interested in what link-ups we have with local colleges. One of my local colleges, South Devon College, is effectively becoming the sixth-form provision for one of the local schools. That is great, and if it works well, it will give people, particularly those from difficult backgrounds, some really good opportunities, potentially with an academy trust, to start at nursery school and be supported all the way through primary and secondary school. After that, they would flow naturally straight into college to get qualifications and then straight into fulfilling and rewarding jobs and opportunities and, crucially, into well-paid careers. That is a great thing. It is about how we make sure that people see this as a new opportunity not just for the pupils and children who will be cared for, but for those who will look to work in this sector.

The debate is therefore very welcome—and welcome in the light of the fact that we need to look at nursery capacities because of the massive extension of eligibility for parents. We should have in the back of our minds the reason for this challenge, which is that many more parents will be able to access childcare following the reforms that the Government are making and the changes that have already been and are due to be implemented.

To sum up, I want the Minister to cover some specific points. What steps are the Government taking to assess the capacity of provision in local areas and regions to meet the expected demand from April, alongside the assessment of capacity nationally? It would be easy to draw a graph showing the number of places and eligible children across England. Clearly, a nursery space in Plymouth will not be of much use to a family in Torbay, and a nursery space in Torbay will not be of much use to a family in Plymouth, so what work is being done particularly at local authority level to identify that capacity is there?

How are the Government working to ensure choice of provision? How do they see family hubs such as those in Torquay and Paignton supporting parents during the roll-out of this provision? In particular, how will the Minister work to achieve consistency of funding?

The changes to childcare entitlements will make a big difference to many children and families in our constituencies, potentially helping the early years development of many thousands of children and setting them up to have the best course and the best start in life. It is just about making sure that that promise is delivered, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reassurances about how he will make that happen.

4.59 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on his expert introduction to the debate. He has covered many points, but it is always good to reiterate them. The debate gives me the opportunity to thank all the childcare providers, the early years providers and the nurseries in Bath. They are doing a fabulous job. We have already heard today how very important it is for a child's, and, later, a grown-up's, life that we get early years right. I add my voice to what has already been said, but it cannot be said often enough.

Nurseries are not just somewhere for children to go while their parents work—they are a child's first education. The first 1,001 days are the most important for children's development. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for childhood trauma, and we talk again and again about how important early years development is and how the brain starts to develop. Therefore, a safe, fun early educational environment is one of the most important things we can give to a person. Early years spaces allow children to grow and have fun in safe and supportive environments. Getting this right gives children the greatest chance of reaching their full potential in later life.

Early years settings also provide long-term benefits for our economy, as we have heard. They remove barriers to employment and training, particularly for women, and close the attainment gap between children from low-income families and their more advantaged peers. Research shows that 40% of the gap in attainment outcomes is evident by the age of five. But the sector is in crisis. The UK has one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world, and costs continue to rise. We need childcare that is properly funded and genuinely free—not cross-financed by those who can afford to pay the fees or top-ups, because that in itself leads to massive inequalities. Yet the Government have failed to invest in it properly, and the cracks are showing.

My constituency of Bath saw two nursery closures last year alone. That left parents scrambling for alternatives. It is already incredibly difficult to get spaces. Some nurseries do not have spaces until September 2025. One early years practitioner told me that parents have already asked for a space to be saved for 2025 for a child who has not even been born, although they hope a child will be born by then. It is not a sustainable situation. Current levels of funding do not cover the full range of costs faced by nurseries, which include rent and staff salaries, so nurseries are continuing to cross-finance the free childcare spaces that the Government provide.

Even before the pandemic, the early years sector struggled to meet the gap between what the Government pay to cover free hours and their overheads. Fees have soared as a result, and nurseries struggle to continue to pay good wages. Another reason for closures, which is absolutely linked to that, is staff shortages. Another important point is to ensure that people looking at careers see early education as a proper career that is properly paid throughout their professional life. Nursery staff are paid professionals, but are often not treated as others in the education sector are. That is in spite of their role supporting children's early development and their close relationships with parents and carers. It is an incredibly important relationship. I say that from my own experience 30 years ago. The nursery that my children attended in Liverpool was absolutely wonderful and has set them up for life. I will say that again and again. In fact, I will name-check it here: Monkton nursery in Liverpool, which is still going and still under the same family. However, I know that even they are struggling with all the increasing costs.

The work involves long hours and poor pay, and providers are struggling to find and recruit qualified candidates. To go back to my constituency, one provider in Bath said:

"All these things are linked. If we were funded properly we could pay our staff decent wages, and then they wouldn't need to leave...and we wouldn't have a recruitment crisis."

Nursery provision is an equalities issue. It is disproportionately mothers who are forced to choose between caring for their child and their careers. That is an issue I have raised time and again, particularly when I was the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on equalities. It is an equalities matter. In the end, it is mostly the mothers, who then do not go back to work and cannot get on with their careers. That is a very important point that we should not forget. It affects their career trajectory, their confidence and their long-term earning potential.

At the same time, the achievement gap between the richer and poorer, which can best be tackled in early years, is rising. Just one in five families who earn less than £20,000 will have access to the planned expansion of funded places for one and two-year-olds, compared with 80% of households whose incomes are over £45,000. Funding given to early years settings to support disadvantaged children in their cohort is a quarter of the amount given as pupil premium funding to primary schools. That has come at a time when more than a quarter of parents have had to use credit cards and to borrow money and get into debt to afford increasing childcare costs. Nobody should be pushed into poverty for deciding to start a family.

Relaxing staff-to-child ratios is not the answer to any of those problems; nurseries have told me that many times. Many nurseries are worried about decreasing the child-to-staff ratio. The Government have decided to cut corners at the expense of children, rather than properly funding providers. Doing that will not bring down costs. Most nurseries, especially purpose-built nurseries, have been built to accommodate a ratio of 1:4. One nursery can still only take eight children and would need to have two members of staff. If the Government paid providers for the costs that they actually face, they would not need to consider compromising children's safety in that way.

We need a fast, decisive response to secure the future of the nursery sector. Early years settings and their staff are vital parts of our national infrastructure. Many parents dread their nursery being the next that is forced to close.

I will mention a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) raised, which is that, for us, it is very important to have proper provision for SEND children. I would like to hear a response to that. The Government must provide comprehensive support, starting with raising the rates paid to providers.

5.7 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this important debate and on all the work he does to advocate for children and families in his constituency. I was delighted to visit Plymouth in November to meet care leavers and those who support them. It was absolutely clear the important role my hon. Friend plays as a strong voice for his constituency.

I am grateful to all the hon. Members who spoke in the debate. Many highlighted the problems experienced in the south-west, but many of those problems are common across the whole country. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport spoke about the problems with recruiting staff, which were also recognised by the hon. Member for Congleton

(Fiona Bruce) and other hon. Members. My hon. Friend also spoke about the rising bills that providers face; funding that does not meet the costs of delivering the provision under the entitlement; the increasing number of families looking to go back to work or to extend their hours; and low pay in the sector.

Hon. Members, including my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), mentioned the extreme challenges faced by parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, including the additional and often hidden costs that parents are forced to pay as a consequence of a broken funding model.

Hon. Members also mentioned providers' inability to plan when the funding rates are not published in a timely manner. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned issues with the recruitment of staff in his constituency, and the hon. Member for Bath mentioned the unique opportunity, during those crucial early years, to intervene positively and influence the rest of a child's life with high quality early education and childcare.

Children's earliest years are crucial to their development and life chances, and many of the factors that contribute to the education attainment gap are already present by the time children start school. Early years education should be focused on ensuring that families have the early support they need to give their children the best start in life, and we should deliver affordable childcare to enable parents to work. I pay tribute to everyone who works in early years education and childcare. They are a skilled and dedicated workforce, who all too often are under-recognised and underpaid for their work. They fall victim to the current hours-based model of childcare funding, which is fundamentally not working for providers or families. For families, it is inaccessible and complex. It does not reflect the reality of their lives and working patterns, nor does it deliver affordability. At the same time, 4,800 providers were forced to close their doors last year due to rising costs, so the current model is not working for them either.

Parents have seen rising costs year on year and growing childcare deserts, where they cannot access the childcare they need. There are now two children for every Ofsted-registered childcare place in England, creating a barrier to parents, particularly women, taking on employment. Both women of childbearing age and women who are grandparents are leaving the workforce because they are being priced out as a consequence of the cost of childcare. As we have mentioned, it is parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities who find it the hardest of all to find childcare places.

The Government have delivered a triple whammy: the most expensive childcare in Europe, an unviable financial model for providers and significant childcare deserts. It is a colossal failure for both families and the skilled professionals who work in early years education. It is clear from speaking to many different people who work in the sector that the policies that the Government have introduced in response to the crisis will not fix the problems. Additional funding is really welcome, but pumping it into a system that is already broken will not deliver the change that families need.

Childcare providers have made it clear that, as things stand, they cannot deliver the expanded entitlement. A survey of 800 providers by the Early Years Alliance found that only 20% of providers that currently offer

[Helen Hayes]

places to two-year-olds plan to deliver additional places under the expanded entitlement. Another 33% said that they were unsure whether they would deliver any places at all under the new scheme. That is because the expansion was a pledge without a plan to expand the workforce in order to deliver the increased entitlement in a sector already struggling to recruit and retain staff. There is no plan for premises, for which there are rightly strict requirements in the early years sector.

It leaves parents likely to face problems in accessing the places that the Government have promised them. Even the Secretary of State admits that there are problems, although sometimes it is difficult to work out what she thinks. She is unwilling to commit to a guarantee that parents will be able to access the places that they have been promised by the Government from April, so I hope the Minister will at least admit that the Government's plans are in chaos. It is families who will be let down as a result.

Childcare must be about more than just minding children while their parents work; it should be able to provide every child with a high quality early years education. A Labour Government will be driven by our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage, including by boosting child development, with 500,000 more children hitting the early learning goals by 2030. Labour is determined that childcare should offer more flexibility, better availability, and high standards for children and families. We will draw on best practice internationally to drive an ambitious and coherent programme of reform, with higher standards in early education, better availability, stronger regulation of providers' financial sustainability and a clear strategy for the childcare workforce. We have commissioned the former Ofsted chief inspector, Sir David Bell, to undertake a full review of the early years sector and help to develop the detail of our early years plan.

A Labour Government will work with the early years sector to build capacity. We will also work with the sector to ensure that there is a plan for the early years workforce that offers more opportunities through high quality training and recognition for the skilled work of early years practitioners. We recognise that childcare does not end when children start school. We will deliver fully funded breakfast clubs in every primary school to help parents work, provide opportunities for children to play, learn and socialise at the start of the school day, and ensure that every child can access a healthy, nutritious breakfast and start the school day ready to learn.

The most expensive childcare in Europe; childcare providers closing their doors; childcare deserts across the country—that is the Government's record. That is the experience for communities in the south-west, and it is true for communities across England. This Government have always regarded children as an afterthought and, in doing so, they have failed children and their families. After 13 years, their sticking-plaster solutions will not fix things now. A Labour Government will deliver a childcare system that works for children and their families from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school. We put children at the heart of our programme of Government from 1997 to 2010, and we will do so again.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing a debate on this important subject at this important time. This Government are rolling out the largest childcare expansion in England's history. By September 2025, we will be providing working parents with 30 hours of free childcare a week, from when their child is nine months old until they start school. By 2027-28, we will be spending in excess of £8 billion every year on free hours and early education, double the amount that we are currently spending.

Let me be clear at the outset that we are confident in the strength of the childcare market in the south-west, and I will explain why. I will start with funding rates, because that has been a strong theme in this debate. We regularly survey a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 childcare providers to gain detailed insights into how they run their provision and the costs they are facing. We also regularly survey over 6,000 parents to understand their use of childcare. We are working closely with local authorities, including all those in the south-west, to support them to deliver the early years expansion from April, when parents will be able to get the first 15 hours for their two-year-olds.

We regularly engage with every single local authority, and we have provided an additional £12 million this year to help them to meet the costs associated with this expansion. We have also appointed a local delivery partner that provides expert advice and support to help LAs with their childcare sufficiency duties. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked about support for local authorities. That partner, Hemsalls, physically goes to every local authority any time they are concerned about not having the number of places. It is Hemsalls' job to work with them, as it has done in the past, to ensure that they have the places they need.

The 2024-25 Government hourly funding rates for all early years entitlements were announced on 29 November. That was slightly later than originally planned because we wanted to incorporate the Government's near 10% increase in the national living wage and provide additional funding to be able to incorporate that. We are in close contact with local authorities, and we do recognise the need to confirm the rates as early as possible. It has been the case that local authorities could do this until 31 March, and we have been pushing them to ensure that they do it as early as possible. Almost all have now committed to do so this month, rather than next month. As of 31 January, almost 50 had already published their final funding rates. Where they have not, they have usually provided indicative rates that then need confirmation, sometimes from school forums or their cabinet, depending on the local authority. We are confident that all providers will at least know their indicative local rates over the next couple of weeks.

I also announced on Friday that, to stop this happening again—because I have nothing but sympathy for providers waiting on their rates from local authorities—we will take further steps and introduce a window, likely to be a maximum of eight weeks, within which local authorities will have to confirm their rates once we have announced them. It is our intention for local authorities to have

eight weeks from whenever we announce the rates, and we are working with them on exactly what is required to enable them to do that.

It is the case, however, that we have given significant increases in the rates paid. To take Plymouth, the three and four-year-old rate has increased in the last couple of years from £4.95 to £5.65; the two-year-old rate has gone from £5.57 to £8.08; and for under twos, £11 will be the new rate. Those are significant increases in the rates paid and compare well with what many parents pay for provision privately.

The estimated number of registered childcare places in the south-west specifically increased by 3% between 2022 and 2023, from 128,782 to 132,981. That compares with a 1% increase in registered places across England as a whole, which we were pleased with, but it is even better that the south-west stands at 3%. The south-west also has a higher take-up rate of the entitlements compared with the national average. As of January 2023, take-up of our disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement was 78% in the south-west compared with 74% nationally. Take-up of the universal entitlement for three and four-year-olds was 95% in the south-west, compared with 94% nationally. Provision is high quality as well, because as of 31 December, 97% of early years-registered providers in the south-west region had a “good” or “outstanding” rating. That is in line with national averages, but the south-west had a slightly higher percentage of outstanding settings, at 15% compared with 14%. That is all good news.

Turning to recruitment, we need to grow the workforce as we roll this out over the next 18 months, so that we have the required places. That is why we phased the implementation of the new entitlements to make sure that providers could develop the capacity they needed. In the spring Budget, we announced an additional £288 million for 2024-25 and £204 million for 2023-24 to fund the new early years and childcare entitlements. That is in addition to the £400 million we announced in November, in part to incorporate the new increase in the national living wage.

There have been some suggestions of difficulties in achieving sufficient places nationally. Our annual survey of childcare and early years providers showed that the total number of paid staff in England increased by 4% between 2022 and 2023. We also had a 15,100 increase in places. Those positive figures are lost in a lot of the stories I see and a lot of the speeches I have heard today. I do not underestimate the challenges of the roll-out, but we feel confident in it, because we are pulling every lever we can and are already seeing positive progress on those headline figures.

To support the sector to recruit, on Friday we launched a new national campaign, “Do something BIG. Work with small children”. The campaign shines a light on the great careers available in the sector and recognises the lifelong impact that childcare professionals have on children during their most formative years. It will run across TV, cinema, social media, online, radio and billboard advertising. There is also a new website to help people find out more about gaining qualifications, search for existing vacancies and consider the different types of roles available. Part of the campaign also involves the piloting of financial incentives. In 20 local authorities, eligible joiners and returners can receive a tax and national insurance-free payment of up to £1,000 shortly after they take up their post.

On retention, we all know it is important not just to recruit but to retain staff. As well as significant uplifts to the rates and the increase in funding to meet the national living wage increase, we are working closely with providers to ensure meaningful career development and professional support for people in the sector. As I have said, I am open to any ideas that providers have about what we can do, in addition to what we have done to the early years foundation stage and so on, to make it easier for them to hire and keep the staff they need.

A number of Members raised important points about children with special educational needs. Just this morning I met with Dingley’s Promise again, which does great work in that area. We are working closely with local authorities to make sure there are places for children with SEND. We increased the early years pupil premium to the equivalent of £388 per eligible child per year to support better outcomes for disadvantaged children. Funding for the disability access fund, which is an additional payment to help to make reasonable adjustments within the provision to support eligible children with a disability, is increasing to £910 per eligible child per year.

There are around 60,000 different providers in the early years sector, largely made up of private, voluntary and independent organisations, which set their own rates of pay. We are providing additional funding to help with entitlements, giving more opportunities to increase staff pay and ensuring a phased implementation to allow the market to develop the capacity it needs. In October, we announced a series of changes to the early years foundation stage to make it easier for providers, based on things they told us they would like to see.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was right that it is important to look at this by local authority, not by region, and that is exactly what we are doing. He is right that we want to have a choice of provision. There are interesting things going on in the early years market. For example, there has been at least a 20-year decline in the number of childminders, based on the choices that parents are making and so on. He is absolutely right that different parents want different things. In our recruitment strategy, we are trying a range of different things. We have early years bootcamps to support apprenticeships. We will hold a consultation on what more we can do to get more childminders into the sector, and we already have a childminder grant scheme to support parents to have choice wherever possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay asked about family hubs. I have been to family hubs that have nurseries within them. It is the central aim of family hubs to provide whatever services families need. That will include advising people on their childcare options. If there are any points I have not covered, I will write to my hon. Friend or other Members.

I want to leave the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport a couple of minutes to wind up, so I will conclude. I thank him for securing this important debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay alluded to, the Government are delivering the latest and largest expansion of childcare. Once completed, it will help families with one of the biggest cost pressures they are facing today, saving working families up to £6,500 a year and helping an estimated 1.5 million people to

[David Johnston]

increase the number of hours they work. I look forward to working with Members present to deliver this transformative expansion.

5.28 pm

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to all Members who have spoken in the debate. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and I double-act on this issue, because it matters cross-party. The hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) have also contributed to the debate. I am also grateful to the Minister and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

This is a genuine concern, and it is only getting worse. I am grateful to the Minister for setting out all the methods and initiatives he is rolling out, and I am interested to see if any of the 20 pilots that he has announced are in the west country—perhaps he could write to me with that information. But the gap between the lived experience of many providers in the south-west and what the Minister has set out is quite stark. The route to finding a solution matters. It is something I wish

him well on, because I want a solution that happens almost immediately, given the crisis that people are facing, not one that matters only after a general election.

I encourage the Minister to listen to the experiences of the providers, who are genuinely saying, notwithstanding the words he has said, that they are facing collapse and cannot afford the provision he is saying they offer. That will have a consequence for parents who are looking for childcare to deliver a better life for their families. Where we are united is in wanting everyone to have a good start in life. Where we differ is in our understanding of where this issue is today, so I encourage him to continue to listen. He would be welcome to come to Plymouth and see what the challenges are in the west country. I look forward to continuing to make the case for all our nurseries and that all our children deserve a good start in life.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered nursery provision in the South West.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 6 February 2024

CABINET OFFICE

Digital Economy Act 2017: Debt and Fraud Powers Statutory Review

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I am pleased to announce that the report of the review of the Digital Economy Act (DEA) 2017 Debt and Fraud Powers is to be laid before (i) Parliament, (ii) the Scottish Parliament, (iii) the Welsh Parliament, and (iv) the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Debt and Fraud Powers, as contained in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 respectively, allow specified public authorities to disclose information for the purpose of managing and reducing debt owed to a public authority or to the Crown and combating fraud against the public sector.

These powers must be reviewed as soon as reasonably practicable three years following their coming into force in 2018, for the purpose of deciding whether they should be retained, amended or repealed. As part of this review I am required to publish and arrange for the laying of a report on the review before (i) Parliament, (ii) the Scottish Parliament, (iii) the Welsh Parliament, and (iv) the Northern Ireland Assembly. The report is to be published on www.gov.uk.

The report highlights significant progress that public bodies have made in reducing debt and combating fraud. Since September 2018, data sharing using the DEA has saved the public purse a minimum of £137 million in combating fraud and recovering debt, with £132 million having been fully audited and checked for veracity for fraud and £5 million in recovered debt. The powers have been used by 17 Departments and Executive Agencies and 70 local authorities, resulting in over 100 data sharing pilots that are registered on www.gov.uk. This review shows the effectiveness of this legislation, and how it can lead to strong, measurable outcomes.

There is of course more to be done which is why, based on the evidence provided in this report, I am pleased to announce that I will be retaining the powers in their current form.

[HCWS243]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Children and Young People Cancer Taskforce

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): With World Cancer Day this week, I want to take this opportunity to affirm to the House this Government's commitment to delivering the best cancer services for everyone across England.

I am pleased to inform the House that I am launching a Children and Young People Cancer Taskforce dedicated to tackling those cancers that affect our children and young people. This is part of our commitment to delivering world-leading cancer services—and our mission to save lives.

Although children's and young people's cancers make up a small proportion of overall cancer diagnoses, cancers are one of the biggest causes of death in children and young people. While survival is improving, with childhood cancer survival rates in the UK having more than doubled since the 1970s, more invasive cancers have lower survival rates, and the long-term impacts of cancer and of treatment can cause challenges for decades.

In this House we have heard about the devastating impact cancer has on children and young people, and the life-changing impact on their families. I express my gratitude to the families who, despite unimaginable grief, have shared their stories with both Houses, campaigning in the hope that no more families will have to suffer. I commend all the hon. Members who have shone a light on these stories and I welcome their support for this new initiative.

This taskforce represents an opportunity to take dedicated action working across organisations to unify and drive progress. It offers us the chance to meaningfully change how we detect, treat and care for children and young people with cancer.

Through this taskforce, I will be inviting experts to discuss how to improve treatment, detection and research into children's and young people's cancers. I am delighted to announce that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) has been appointed as chair of the taskforce, given her campaigning on childhood cancer, her reputation as an exceptional parliamentarian, and her knowledge, experience and dedication.

Areas of focus for the taskforce will include:

Genomic testing and treatment—to ensure all children get timely access to high quality personalised treatments.

Detection and diagnosis—to ensure earlier diagnosis to give children and young people the best chance to beat cancer.

Research and innovation—to explore children's access to clinical trials, gain greater access to data, target our research funding, and encourage consideration of innovative solutions.

It is important to recognise the excellent work already under way in children's and young people's cancers. Rather than seeking to replicate this work, the taskforce is intended to be a unifying force, identifying various projects under way across organisations: including health, science, research, charity and international sectors. It will forge connections, strengthen collaboration, and drive progress in tackling children's and young people's cancers.

Following a period of planning and engagement, the taskforce will meet from springtime onwards. Its work will feed into, and align with, the major conditions strategy. I will update the House on its progress in due course.

I will of course keep the House updated on wider progress on cancer. We are improving cancer survival and earlier diagnosis, in part thanks to innovations like lung health checks targeting those at greatest risk of developing lung cancer, with checks mostly carried out in supermarket car parks and other community spaces—reaching those who might not normally come forward. We are also supporting initiatives such as Prostate Cancer UK's TRANSFORM trial, announced on International Men's Day, which aims to address some of the inequalities that exist in prostate cancer diagnosis today, and aims to save thousands of men each year.

With this new taskforce, and these ongoing innovations and initiatives, I can assure the House we are taking every step in our mission to improve cancer outcomes.

[HCWS246]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Uddin Inquiry: Terms of Reference

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): On 9 November 2023, the Government announced the establishment of a statutory inquiry, to investigate the death of Mr Jalal Uddin in Rochdale, greater Manchester.

A copy of the terms of reference for the inquiry was placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

An inaccuracy has since been identified in the terms of reference and, in line with the Inquiries Act 2005, the chair of the inquiry, His Honour Edward Thomas Henry Teague KC, Chief Coroner of England and Wales, has been consulted about amending the terms of reference to correct the inaccuracy.

The amendment does not materially affect the operation or the remit of the inquiry.

In order to comply with section 6(3) of the Inquiries Act 2005, I will place a copy of the amended terms of reference in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS245]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

AI Regulation White Paper: Consultation Response

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): Today, the Government are publishing our response to the consultation on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Regulation White Paper: “A pro-innovation approach to AI regulation”.

The world is on the cusp of an extraordinary new era driven by advances in AI, which presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the British people to revolutionise our economy and transform public services for the better and to deliver real, tangible, long-term results for our country. The UK AI market is predicted to grow to over \$1 trillion (USD) by 2035—unlocking everything from new skills and jobs to once unimaginable lifesaving treatments for cruel diseases like cancer and dementia. That is why I have made it my ambition for the UK to become the international standard bearer for the safe development and deployment of AI.

We have been working hard to make that ambition a reality, and our plan is working. Last year, we hosted the world’s first AI safety summit, bringing industry, academia and civil society together with 28 leading AI nations and the EU to agree the Bletchley declaration, thereby establishing a shared understanding of the opportunities and risks posed by frontier AI.

We were also the first Government in the world to formally publish our assessment of the capabilities and risks presented by advanced AI; and to bring together a powerful consortium of experts into our AI Safety Institute, committed to advancing AI safety in the public interest.

With the publication of our AI Regulation White Paper in March, we set out our initial steps to develop a pro-innovation AI regulatory framework. Instead of designing a complex new regulatory system from scratch, the White Paper proposed five key principles for existing UK regulators to follow and a central function to ensure the regime is coherent and streamlined and to identify regulatory gaps or confusing overlaps. Our approach must be agile so it can respond to the unprecedented speed of development, while also remaining robust enough in each sector to address the key concerns around potential societal harms, misuse risks and autonomy risk.

This common sense, pragmatic approach has been welcomed and endorsed both by the companies at the frontier of AI development and leading AI safety experts. Google DeepMind, Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic all supported the UK’s approach, as did Britain’s budding AI start-up scene, and many leading voices in academia and civil society such as the Centre for Long-Term Resilience and the Centre for the Governance of AI.

Next steps on establishing the rules for governing AI

Since we published the White Paper, we have moved quickly to implement the regulatory framework. We are pleased that a number of regulators have already taken steps in line with our framework such as the Information Commissioner’s Office, the Office for Nuclear Regulation and the Competition and Markets Authority.

We have taken steps to establish the central function to drive coherence in our regulatory approach across Government, starting by recruiting a new multidisciplinary team to conduct cross-sector assessment and monitoring to guard against existing and emerging risks in AI.

Further to this, we are strengthening the team working on AI within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology across the newly established AI policy directorate and the AI Safety Institute. In recognition of the fact that AI has become central to the wider work of DSIT and Government, we will no longer maintain the branding of a separate “Office for AI”. Similarly, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI) is changing its name to the Responsible Technology Adoption Unit to more accurately reflect its mission. The name highlights the directorate’s role in developing tools and techniques that enable responsible adoption of AI in the private and public sectors, in support of DSIT’s central mission.

In September we also announced the AI and digital hub—a pilot scheme for a brand-new advisory service run by expert regulators in the Digital Regulation Co-operation Forum. It will be laser-focused on helping companies get to grips with AI regulations so they can spend less time form-filling and more time getting their cutting-edge products from the lab on to the market and into British people’s lives.

Building on the feedback from the consultation, we are now focused on ensuring that regulators are prepared to face the new challenges and opportunities that AI can bring to their domains. This consultation response presents a plan to do just that. It sets out how we are building the right institutions and expertise to ensure that our regulation of AI keeps pace with the most pressing risks and can unlock the transformative benefits these technologies can offer.

To drive forward our plans to make Britain the safest and most innovative place to develop and deploy AI in the world, the consultation response announces over £100 million to support AI innovation and regulation. This includes a £10 million package to boost regulators' AI capabilities, helping them develop practical tools to build the foundations of their AI expertise and ability to address risks in their domain.

We are also announcing a new commitment by UK Research and Innovation that future investments in AI research will be leveraged to support regulator skills and expertise. Further to this, we are announcing a nearly £90 million boost for AI research, including £80 million through the launch of nine new research hubs across the UK and a £9 million partnership with the US on responsible AI as part of our international science partnership fund. These hubs are based in locations across the country and will enable AI to evolve and tackle complex problems across applications, from healthcare treatments to power-efficient electronics.

In addition, we are announcing £2 million of Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding to support research that will help to define responsible AI across sectors such as education, policing and creative industries.

In the coming months, we will formalise our regulator co-ordination activities by establishing a steering committee with Government representatives and key regulators. We will also be conducting targeted consultations on our cross-sectoral risk register and monitoring and evaluation framework from spring to make sure our approach is evidence-based and effective.

We are also taking steps to improve the transparency of this work, which is key to building public trust. To this end, we are also calling on regulators to publicly set out their approaches to AI in their domains by April 2024 to increase industry confidence and ensure the UK public can see how we are addressing the potential risks and benefits of AI across the economy.

Adapting to the challenges posed by highly capable general-purpose AI systems

The challenges posed by AI technologies will ultimately require legislative action across jurisdictions, once understanding of risk has matured. However, legislating too soon could stifle innovation, place undue burdens on businesses, and shackle us from being able to fully realise the enormous benefits AI technologies can bring. Furthermore, our principles-based approach has the benefit of being agile and adaptable, allowing us to keep pace with this fast-moving technology.

That is why we established the AI Safety Institute (AISI) to conduct safety evaluations on advanced AI systems, drive foundational safety research, and lead a global coalition of AI safety initiatives. These insights will ensure the UK responds effectively and proportionately to potential frontier risks.

Beyond this, the AISI has built a partnership network of over 20 leading organisations, allowing AISI to act as a hub, galvanising safety work in companies and academia; Professor Yoshua Bengio, as chair, is leading the UK's international scientific report on advanced AI safety, which brings together 30 countries, including the EU and UN; and the AISI is continuing its regular engagement with leading AI companies that signed up to the Bletchley declaration.

In the consultation response, we build on our pro-innovation framework and pro-safety actions by setting out our early thinking on future targeted, binding requirements on the developers of highly capable general-purpose AI systems. The consultation response also sets out the key questions and considerations we will be exploring with experts and international partners as we continue to develop our approach to the regulation of the most advanced AI systems.

Driving the global conversation on AI governance

Building on the historic agreements reached at the AI safety summit, today we also set out our broader plans regarding how the UK will continue to drive the global debate on the governance of AI.

Beyond our work through the AI Safety Institute, this includes taking a leading role in multilateral AI initiatives such as the G7, OECD and the UN, and deepening bilateral relationships building on the success of agreements with the US, Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore.

This response paper is another step forward for the UK's ambitions to lead in the safe development and deployment of AI. The full text of the White Paper consultation response can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS247]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment: Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band Review 2024/25

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): Automatic enrolment (AE) into workplace pensions has been a great success to date. Since 2012 over 11 million people have been enrolled into a pension and over 2.3 million employers have met their automatic enrolment duties. Since the introduction of AE, total annual pension saving by eligible employees has increased by nearly £29 billion in real terms. The Government remain committed to building on this achievement and to transforming retirement prospects for millions of workers.

The main focus of this year's annual review of the AE earnings trigger and lower and upper earnings limits of the qualifying earnings band (the AE thresholds) has been to ensure the continued stability of the policy in light of prevailing economic factors. We want to ensure that our approach continues to enable individuals, for whom it makes economic sense, to save towards their pensions while ensuring affordability for employers and taxpayers. The review has concluded that all AE thresholds for 2024-25 will be maintained at their 2023-24 levels. This is consistent with our ambitions to build a stronger, more inclusive savings culture that enables people to have greater financial security in retirement.

The 2024-25 annual thresholds

The automatic enrolment earnings trigger will remain at £10,000.

The lower earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £6,240.

The upper earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £50,270.

The alternative quality requirement triennial review

In accordance with the statutory timetable, we have also conducted a review of the regulations that introduced the alternative quality requirements for pension schemes being used for automatic enrolment into workplace pensions.

This review concluded that the alternative quality requirements for UK defined-benefit schemes set out in regulations, made under section 23A(1) of the Pensions Act 2008, should continue to remain in place without changes at this time.

The review also concluded that the tests set out in section 28(2A) of the Pensions Act 2008 continue to be satisfied.

The analysis supporting the thresholds review and the Government response to the call for evidence for the alternative quality requirements reviews will be published and copies placed in the Library of the House. They will both be available on the www.gov.uk website, following publication.

[HCWS244]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 6 February 2024

DEFENCE

Situation in the Red Sea

The following extracts are from the Oral Statement on the Situation in the Red Sea on 5 February 2024.

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the action was successful, and rightly pointed out that what we are seeing is rather more sporadic: the attacks, including on HMS Diamond and on merchant shipping, have continued, but in a much more ad hoc fashion. It is perhaps relevant that there has been no attack using multiple different weapons at the same time, which we saw, for example, on 11 January. The degrading will have had some impact on that.

[Official Report, 5 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 24.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps).

An error has identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey).

The correct information should have been:

Grant Shapps: It is perhaps relevant that there has been no attack using multiple different weapons at the same time, which we saw, for example, on **9 January**.

Grant Shapps: Although it is clear that the Houthi attacks have not ended, as the shadow Defence Secretary said, there does appear to have been a difference in the cadence. The mass attacks that we saw on 11 January, for example, have not been repeated, partly because the Houthis' ability has been degraded.

[Official Report, 5 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 36.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps).

An error has identified in my response to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

The correct information should have been:

WALES

Energy Mix

The following is an extract from Wales Office questions on 31 January 2024.

Jo Stevens: The Minister boasts about the transition board, but that only exists because of the Government's failure to protect jobs and vital industries. Each year, Port Talbot provides enough virgin steel to deliver the UK's 2030 wind targets by itself. Can she tell the House where that steel will come from when her Government's intervention shuts the blast furnaces early? Will it come from India? If so, we will be surrendering our ability to create jobs, investment and cheaper bills here in Britain.

Fay Jones: Mr Speaker, it will not surprise you to learn that I completely disagree with the hon. Lady's assessment. I would point out that this Government have provided the transition board with £80 million. We have not seen any **of the £20 million that the Welsh Labour Government have promised**, but indications so far are that moving away from steelmaking would not have a direct impact on national security.

[Official Report, 31 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 849.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on the question on Energy Mix. The correct information should have been:

Fay Jones: Mr Speaker, it will not surprise you to learn that I completely disagree with the hon. Lady's assessment. I would point out that this Government have provided the transition board with £80 million. We have not seen any **funding from the Welsh Labour Government**, but indications so far are that moving away from steelmaking would not have a direct impact on national security.

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