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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 19 February 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBERS

The following Member made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Genevieve Victoria Kitchen, for Wellingborough.

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Damien James Egan, for Kingswood.

Member Sworn

Mr Speaker: I understand that the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) wishes to take the Oath to the King.

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:
Andrew Richard Rosindell, for Romford.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Permanent Structured Co-operation Projects

1. **Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of participating in further EU permanent structured co-operation projects. [901512]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): The Department's priority is to finalise entry into the permanent structured co-operation military mobility project before considering involvement in other projects. However, we assess that the EU's standard "third country" terms for PESCO projects involving procurement or capability development will continue to impose significant constraint on UK involvement.

Alyn Smith: I appreciate that the UK Government's attitude to PESCO is to take each project on a case-by-case basis, but may I suggest that publishing criteria for that case-by-case assessment would be useful? It is obvious to the dogs in the street that PESCO will evolve at light-speed, and the UK risks missing out on a lot of important co-operation that could be beneficial. Will the Minister publish that guidance? Otherwise, I will be tabling 68 parliamentary questions to cover each of the 68 PESCO mechanisms.

James Heappey: I note the hon. Gentleman's suggestion, and I fear that my answer will give him encouragement to table the 68 questions, because it is right that we consider each opportunity in PESCO on its merits. PESCO is a vehicle for increasing military mobility around the continent. Non-EU NATO partners support that fully, and the UK is among them, but industrial or technological co-operation will not always be in the UK's interest, or in the interest of UK industry, so it is right that we consider these things case by case.

Ukraine: Military Support

2. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What steps he has taken to increase military support for Ukraine. [901513]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): During his visit to Ukraine on 12 January, the Prime Minister signed an historic UK-Ukraine agreement on security co-operation with President Zelensky, illustrating our long-term commitment to supporting Ukraine. The Prime Minister announced that the UK will provide £2.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine in 2024-25—a £200 million increase on the previous two years—to cover rapid procurement and gifting of equipment, development of international capability coalitions, and training through Operation Interflex.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for that response. There is clearly widespread support in this House and the country for helping Ukraine to resist Russian aggression, but there are concerns, given that President Zelensky has recently identified a shortage of arms and ammunition, particularly in the light of the impasse in the US Congress. What discussions has the Minister had with his counterparts in the EU and other European nations about helping to bridge the gap in the short term, and on how we will deal with it if, in the longer term, the election of President Trump reduces NATO spending in general, and its spending on Ukraine in particular?

James Heappey: Of course, we are aware of the scepticism among Republican presidential candidates and in the US Congress about funding for Ukraine. That is why UK Ministers—the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Prime Minister and I—have been in Washington to make the case for the US continuing to support Ukraine, no matter the outcome of the election. Second-guessing the outcome of the US electoral system is probably not sensible, but notwithstanding the fantastic efforts, led by Prime Minister Kallas of Estonia, to increase the manufacturing of ammunition in particular, it is clear that European manufacturing capacity is not yet at even half the target set. That should be cause for all of us to consider how we might urgently ramp up manufacturing if the worst comes to the worst.

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

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Ukraine can win the war, and must win the war. The Minister touched on the provision of ammunition and equipment, but Ukraine also needs hundreds of thousands of trained personnel. I very much welcome the extension of Operation Interflex, and the work that we are doing, but could we not be doing far more of that with our allies to assist Ukraine?

James Heapey: My right hon. Friend is right to point to the importance of the training effort. That gives me the opportunity to reflect on this week being the 10-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Crimea, which gave rise to Operation Orbital. Since then, across Operation Orbital and Operation Interflex, 60,000 Ukrainian troops have been trained. Continuing to train them, not as individuals but increasingly as formations, is undoubtedly the key to unlocking the real potential of the Ukrainian armed forces.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We have all seen the events that have taken place in the past few days regarding the Russian offensive in Ukraine. They must act a wake-up call to all of us. This is our problem, and our fight, with the Ukrainians, to defeat Putin. We need to make sure that we step up the amount of ammunition and arms that we ship to Ukraine. We need to do that with our European partners, and we need a plan, not just for the short term but for the long term, so that we defeat Putin. What talks are the Minister and the Cabinet Secretary having with our European allies to ensure that Ukraine wins this war?

James Heapey: Such conversations happen all the time. Only last week, the Secretary of State was at the latest donor conference, followed by NATO Defence Ministers. I was in Norway a week or so earlier, having exactly those conversations with allies. As the right hon. Gentleman suggests, while traditional armaments such as artillery ammunition are important, so too, increasingly, are the novel precision weapons systems that the UK is very much at the forefront of supplying to our Ukraine friends.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is it not time that both sides of the House came together to agree on a common policy of increasing defence expenditure, so that by increasing our support for Ukraine, we can set an example to our American allies, without whose help there can be no future for peace and security in Europe?

James Heapey: My colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench know that I try not to throw gratuitous punches in the House, and I know that they are enthusiasts for military spending, but their colleague the shadow Chancellor has thus far declined to say that she would adopt anything other than the 2% target for NATO spending, which is not the same as what the Government are currently spending, or what they currently intend to increase spending to, so the suggestion made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) is timely. It would be fantastic if, in the next hour, the shadow Secretary of State were to make the same commitment as we have.

Mr Speaker: Let us try now, then. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): In the last year of the last Labour Government, we were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, a level that has not been matched in any of the subsequent 14 Tory years.

Like the Defence Secretary, the Leader of the Opposition and I were in Munich at the weekend, and the urgency of the need for more help for Ukraine ran through every discussion. Everyone was also profoundly moved

by the words of Yulia Navalnaya, speaking even after the news of her husband's death at Putin's hands. This is the brutality that the Ukrainians are fighting, and this is why UK support must not falter. We strongly back last month's UK-Ukraine security agreement, which the Defence Secretary has described as "a 100-year alliance". Will the Government take the necessary next step and provide an implementation plan for this year and future years, to ensure that Ukraine receives the help that it needs now and for tomorrow?

James Heapey: While I am grateful for the history lesson on what was spent under the last Labour Government, the commitment to match our spending in a future Government was conspicuously absent from the right hon. Gentleman's question. However, let me return to the collegiate spirit in which Defence questions are normally conducted. I absolutely agree that what the Secretary of State set out in his speech about the partnership with Ukraine requires a strategic approach, with very long horizons set for what our co-operation, both industrial and military, could look like.

John Healey: Long horizons are fine, but Ukraine needs more help now. I am concerned about the £2.5 billion for Ukraine that was announced last month and described by the Prime Minister as

"the biggest single package of defence aid to Ukraine since the war began".—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 578.]

The Minister has said much the same today. In response to a question from me last week, however, he would not rule out using that money to cover the UK's operational costs at NATO bases. Will he rule that out today? Will he confirm today that every penny and every pound of the £2.5 billion for Ukraine will go to Ukraine?

James Heapey: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman has missed something over the last two years. The £2.3 billion that the Government have provided for operations to support Ukraine has always included not just the gifting in kind that takes the headlines, but Operation Interflex and other avenues through which we support the Ukrainians. The fact is that next year's spending and that of the year after will match exactly what we did in previous years, in terms of the breadth of that contribution. It is also true that the long-term strategic alliance that the Secretary of State set out and the commitment year on year to spend more than any other European ally are not mutually exclusive; we are doing both.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On 17 February, at the Munich conference, Prime Minister Frederiksen of the Kingdom of Denmark said:

"If you ask Ukrainians, they are asking for ammunition now, artillery now. From the Danish side, we decided to donate our entire artillery."

Does the Minister not agree that allies should be a little more like Denmark when it comes to recognising the consequences of not meeting Ukraine's needs?

James Heapey: We are full of admiration for our Danish colleagues, but the reality is that the UK has provided almost its entire heavy artillery capability, in terms of AS-90s. Those that we have held on to are

those that service the battlegroup in Estonia and the very high readiness armoured battlegroup. Similarly, we have been generous with our ammunition stocks, while retaining those that we need for our very high readiness forces. More than that, we have catalysed the production of 155 mm ammunition in the UK, and even further, we have been buying up as much 152 mm and 122 mm ammunition around the world as we possibly can. The UK's contribution to the Ukrainian artillery fight is not confined to what we have in our own ammunition stockpiles; it is much, much bigger, and amounts to hundreds of thousands of rounds.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: To paraphrase a former Member, the Government's response has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Given the Czech Republic's profound donations of artillery and shells, on top of the Danish donation, as well as a commitment of over 1 million shells from the EU, I hope the Minister can come to the Dispatch Box and correct the balance. Can he advise the House on how much of this new investment, which is welcome, is in tactical armaments and artillery?

James Heapey: The overseas ammunition acquisition plan from previous years remains broadly as it was, which amounts to about 300,000 rounds bought on international markets and provided to Ukraine. The 155 mm manufacture acceleration is subject to a different funding package that the Secretary of State and his Ukrainian counterpart have been working on. It is important to note that the £200 million additional money from last year to this is focused on the provision of drones, and those tactical drones are proving to be most significant, in terms of their impact in the battle space.

Army: Size

3. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps he is taking to increase the size of the Army. [901515]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): The latest figure for the full-time strength of the Army is 73,520. The Army is continuing to work towards its "Future Soldier" structure of 73,000 regular and 30,000 reserve personnel. There are no plans to change this. The good news is that provisional figures suggest that January had the highest number of Army applications for six years.

Scott Benton: Media reports have suggested that white men have been actively discriminated against in recruitment, and that security checks may be relaxed due to promoting ethnic diversity within the Army. A number of senior military figures have purportedly warned that the pervasiveness of woke ideology being pushed on to the armed forces is a real and present threat to national security, and will give aid and comfort to the King's enemies. Will the planned review of diversity policies seek to address those concerns?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but I do not recognise the situation that he describes. We take security extremely seriously and ensure that all personnel have security clearance appropriate to their job. Checks normally require at least three years'

UK residency, but Commonwealth candidates are permitted to accrue qualifying residency while serving, although they cannot take up roles and ranks that require higher levels of vetting. This policy has been in place for several years, and it has not changed.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Figures in *The Times* last month showed that the British Army will shrink to as small as 67,000 by 2026 due to the crisis in recruitment and retention. As threats to the UK increase, will the Minister finally commit to halting the cuts that he continues to make to the Army?

Dr Murrison: The Government are sticking to 73,000 regular and 30,000 reserved personnel, as I said earlier. Those figures are in "Future Soldier", published in 2021, and they remain unchanged.

Gaza: Humanitarian Aid

4. **Jack Breerton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to assist in the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza. [901516]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): The Ministry of Defence continues to stand ready to support the effort, led by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to pursue land, air and maritime routes to deliver urgently needed humanitarian aid.

Jack Breerton: Many of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South are extremely concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and want to see much more aid getting into Gaza. It is vital for the innocent civilian population there. Will the Secretary of State update us on what more is being done to ensure additional routes, and particularly a sea route, into Gaza for humanitarian aid to innocent civilians?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I have been to the region on a number of occasions—I have visited Israel and Cyprus twice, as well as visiting Egypt and Saudi Arabia—with the specific intention of trying to resolve the problem that he describes. We have already delivered 150 tonnes of aid, but the problem is getting that aid into Gaza. Although we have persuaded the Israelis to open Kerem Shalom, we desperately need Ashdod to be opened, too. As we have discussed with the Cypriots, we could then create a humanitarian aid route from Cyprus direct to Ashdod and straight into Gaza via Kerem Shalom.

"Living in our Shoes" Report

5. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): If he will continue to issue online updates on the implementation of accepted recommendations from the "Living in our Shoes" report, published on 30 June 2020. [901517]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Families are an integral part of the armed forces community. Our commitment to them remains strong and is reinforced by the Haythornthwaite review, the defence Command Paper refresh, the families strategy, which was published

in January 2022, and my hon. Friend's excellent "Living in our Shoes" framework for delivering more family-sympathetic policies.

Andrew Selous: The families of armed forces personnel have to put up with more separation, relocation and danger to their loved ones than the families of any other public servants, and they often feel slightly disenfranchised. They might not know their Member of Parliament, and they might fear to approach them because of the impact it might have on their spouse or partner's career. Does my right hon. Friend agree it is incredibly important that the public can see the follow-through on the 86 recommendations that the Ministry of Defence accepted in full and on the 20 recommendations that it accepted in part?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be interested to hear that I have a slightly different number. My number is that 106 of his report's 110 recommendations have been accepted. Regardless of the exact figure, I entirely agree on the importance of making sure that armed forces families live in decent accommodation. When we ask armed forces personnel to fight abroad, they should live in good accommodation when they come home.

My hon. Friend is familiar with the steering group, which includes families, federations and the authors of his excellent report, and he will be pleased to hear that it meets again on 28 February.

Armed Forces Recruitment

6. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle recruitment challenges in the armed forces. [901518]

7. **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit armed forces personnel. [901521]

12. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit armed forces personnel. [901527]

19. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit armed forces personnel. [901534]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): In a challenging labour market, we continue to apply an array of measures to support recruitment and retention and to refine the armed forces' offer. These include the biggest pay rise in 20 years, flexible service and an improved accommodation offer. The Haythornthwaite review has a key part to play, and teams have been stood up across the Ministry of Defence to implement all 67 recommendations, working to establish a reward and incentivisation architecture that will attract and retain the skills we need.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for the Minister's answer, but the quality of forces accommodation is also an important factor in both recruitment and retention. Will he consider giving local commanders greater agency in getting small repairs done locally if the national contractors fail to act quickly enough?

Dr Murrison: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Heads of establishment can access an approved funding pot to address minor maintenance works, up to a maximum value of £25,000 per item, which is extremely helpful and gets away from some of the bureaucracy involved with the prime contractors.

Sarah Atherton: Seven experienced personnel are leaving for each five recruited. Despite the diversity and inclusion policies, some of which are counterproductive in my opinion, and in addition to Capita's initiatives, last year there was a net loss of 310 servicewomen. Falling retention rates are overshadowing operational effectiveness. Can the Minister outline what he is doing on retention?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and ministerial predecessor. Over the past two years, the Ministry of Defence has put servicewomen at the heart of developing and delivering a range of initiatives, from uniform policies to the provision of accessible sanitary products, mentoring, the introduction of flexible service, wraparound childcare, parental leave, and zero tolerance of unacceptable behaviour. There will be further measures in response to the Wigston review, the Gray review and my hon. Friend's report. I pay tribute to those who have been driving change, but it is far from job done.

Stephen Crabb: The armed forces, including the 14th Signal Regiment based in Pembrokeshire, continue to provide fabulous career opportunities for young people. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, now more than ever, we need to encourage Army visits to schools, and that the long campaign by nationalists in Wales to stop those visits damages social mobility and aspiration?

Dr Murrison: I share my right hon. Friend's enthusiasm entirely. The armed forces are a huge engine for social mobility. In the last year, the Army achieved over 5,000 school engagement visits across the United Kingdom, each at the school's request. The British Army is the public's Army. It is important it engages with the people it serves, despite the best efforts of some on the left and the nationalists, to whom he refers.

Mr French: The London Borough of Bexley is home to several excellent cadet and reserve units that teach vital life skills. Will the Minister update the House on progress on the cadet expansion programme and what work is being undertaken to strengthen the pathways into His Majesty's armed forces?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful for the opportunity to do so. The joint Ministry of Defence and Department for Education cadet expansion programme is progressing extremely well, with over 54,000 cadets in school cadet units. The cadet expansion programme has focused on growth in the state sector. Since its introduction in 2012, the number of cadet units in state schools has grown by over 400% to 268 schools. Some new units have also opened in independent schools, where there has been a 12% increase. I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming that transformation.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Local service personnel routinely cite issues in service accommodation as a barrier to recruitment and retention, so I was disappointed to hear that the Government have

no plans to improve the quality of the nearly 900 single-living accommodation bed spaces in my constituency at Chicksands that currently fall into the lowest grades. Will the Minister commit to revisiting that decision to ensure we do right by all service personnel serving on the base before it closes?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of service accommodation. He will be aware of the huge Government investment to improve the quality of both service-family accommodation and single-living accommodation. Our people deserve the best. It is public knowledge that they have not had the best for some considerable time, but we are committed to remedying that for his constituents.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister not wake up in the morning sometimes and want to check in on reality? We have had seven Secretaries of State for Defence since 2010 and absolute turmoil in our armed forces. Why would people join the British Army when this Government have run us down to 72,000 serving personnel? I campaigned when the number went below 100,000! The Minister should wake up and invest in the defence of our country in a troubled world.

Dr Murrison: Those are interesting reflections. I suggest the hon. Gentleman has a word with the shadow Ministers on his Front Bench, particularly the shadow Chancellor who, to date, has failed to commit to the level of spending on the defence of this country to which the Government are completely committed.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The rise of so-called “woke” culture has been infecting our society for many years and it should be unsurprising that it is now infecting our military. Does the Minister think that the rise of “woke” makes it easier or more difficult to recruit the right sort of people into our armed forces?

Dr Murrison: I completely reject the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. If he is talking about increasing the number of women in our armed forces, Lord Etherton’s review into LGBT personnel in our armed forces historically, or our ambition to make our armed forces more reflective of the society from which they are drawn and that they serve, then I am guilty as charged.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister and others will be aware that recruitment across Northern Ireland to the Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy has always been exceptional. However, the number of personnel in Territorial Army regiments is set at a figure that those regiments cannot go above. Will the Minister look at increasing the number of TA soldiers to ensure that recruitment in Northern Ireland can exceed the current numbers?

Dr Murrison: I pay tribute to the people of Northern Ireland who, as the hon. Gentleman says, have disproportionately contributed to the defence of our country. He will know that we are committed to growing our reserve forces across the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): We have 24,000 fewer troops, 4,000 fewer sailors, 200 fewer aircraft and the removal of one in five ships. The Conservatives have failed our armed forces over the past 14 years, missing their recruitment target every year since taking power in 2010 and hollowing out our military. Does the Minister honestly believe that he can look the public in the eye and claim that five more years will fix the mess that they have created, or is it time for a fresh start?

Dr Murrison: Oh, I think the hon. Gentleman knows what I am going to say in response to his question, and that is to invite him to have a conversation with the shadow Chancellor to see whether she will commit to the same level of spending on defence that this Government are committed to and, indeed, are spending right now. Will he make a spending commitment here and now in the House of Commons? If so, I am all ears.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I also suggest that it is not for the Government to be asking the questions?

Rotary Wing Enterprise

8. **Dame Caroline Dinenege** (Gosport) (Con): What plans he has for the future of the rotary wing enterprise. [901522]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): The rotary wing enterprise programme seeks to improve aircraft availability across support solutions for Apache, Chinook, Merlin and Wildcat from within existing budgets. It will do so by driving synergies between platforms, modernising support solutions and pursuing delivery-focused commercial mechanisms.

Dame Caroline Dinenege: Mr Speaker, as you know, Fleetlands in Gosport has been the home of military helicopter maintenance for more than 65 years. This highly skilled engineering work is really key to levelling up the area, providing much-needed jobs and opportunities. Does the Minister agree that the MOD’s rotary wing enterprise and new medium helicopter programme would benefit greatly from these generations of expertise and skills right there in Gosport?

James Cartlidge: I know from my recent visit that my right hon. Friend is a champion not only for defence in her constituency, but for defence jobs in particular. She is right about StandardAero Fleetlands, which is a valued actor in the maintenance of our rotary wing platforms. The rotary wing enterprise is due to enter its detailed design this year. As part of that, it will consider wider social value, including the extent to which economic prosperity is supported. But as this is a specific potential procurement, I cannot comment any further. I also cannot comment on the role of particular companies in the new medium helicopter programme, but we hope to say more on that very soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Government have delayed producing the information required for the invitation to negotiate for the new medium-lift helicopter four times since September 2022.

Can the Minister explain what has caused this 18-month delay? Given the reports last week about his Department freezing capital spending until at least the new financial year, when will the Government get their act together to get this competition under way? Can he promise that the delay will not push back the delivery date for this vital capability for our forces?

James Cartlidge: I am pleased to say two things to the hon. Lady. First, we will have the announcement on the next stage of the new medium helicopter very soon. I am also pleased to confirm that we have been clear on our spending position. To echo my right hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People and Families, if the hon. Lady wants to talk about stuff that is rumoured in the press—we do not have those sorts of capital spending controls—can she confirm whether the shadow Chancellor will honour our defence spending commitments?

AUKUS

9. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on the AUKUS partnership. [901523]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): AUKUS partners continue to make good progress on the optimal pathway to deliver conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and to develop the advanced capabilities required.

Giles Watling: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. AUKUS is a bold project that rightfully identifies the greater need for co-operation in the Pacific between our great nations. However, I do not think that it should be limited just to defence. In my own report for the 1922 foreign affairs policy committee, we found that there is not only a need, but an appetite for wider scope—the inclusion of Canada, for example. Does my right hon. Friend agree that AUKUS cannot just be about defence policy. Will we be reaping the maximum benefits for Britain by consigning this to be just a defence procurement exercise? Where is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in all of this?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to say that AUKUS can and should be a programme that extends beyond the three core nations—the UK, the US, and Australia—but that is very much a matter for pillar 2 arrangements rather than pillar 1, which the House will know is about the nuclear-powered submarine for Australia and the joint procurement. He will be pleased to hear that, in November, I was in the US signing up to a programme of pillar 2 work, which could ultimately extend to others, including Canada and New Zealand.

Royal Navy Capabilities

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Royal Navy's capabilities to engage land-based targets. [901524]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): The Royal Navy has a range of capabilities to support the engagement of land-based targets. Specific threat planning is considered for every deployment or contingency, and measures are taken to reduce or mitigate those expected threats as dictated by operational priority.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What urgency is attached to the upgrading of HMS Diamond's defence systems?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend asks an excellent question. I know that there has been a lot of interest, following the deployment in the Red sea, in what the lessons are. I can confirm that the Sea Viper capability has been at the forefront of this, being the Navy's weapon of choice in the first shooting down of an aerial threat in more than 30 years. It is a cutting-edge weapons system, and I can confirm that Sea Viper will be upgraded, to further enhance this capability against the more complex and evolving threats that we face, including the ability to intercept missiles in their terminal phase.

Defence Manufacturing: Employment

11. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in levels of employment in the defence manufacturing sector in the next 12 months. [901525]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): In 2022-23, the Ministry of Defence spent £25 billion with UK industry. The most recent estimate shows that that supported 209,000 jobs across the country, of which 47,000 were in manufacturing.

Mr Robertson: My Tewkesbury constituency contains a lot of aerospace manufacturing, particularly for the defence sectors, but those companies have long complained to me that they cannot attract enough young people, particularly to take engineering jobs. The all-party parliamentary group on aerospace, which I co-chair, has the objective of enticing young people to go into engineering or at least consider it as a career. Will the Government do anything more to persuade young people to consider taking up the engineering opportunities that are there?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. It helps that we have lots of school groups and young people in the Gallery today, it being half term. I can confirm that last year's defence Command Paper identified skills as a priority, including the shortage of engineering, digital, cyber, STEM, nuclear, and space-based skills. The defence head of profession for engineering, who also supports the Government science and engineering head of profession, has a defence youth engagement strategy that drives STEM outreach activities and the encouragement of engineering uptake in individuals aged four to 14.

Ukraine: Military Support

13. **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with international partners on future military support for Ukraine. [901528]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): Everything that I had intended to say in response to the hon. Gentleman was covered in response to the supplementaries to Question 2.

Mr Speaker: Why was it not grouped then?

Richard Foord: Lord Ismay said of NATO that it existed, among other things,

“to keep the Soviet Union out”

and “the Americans in”. The Foreign Secretary was misunderstood on a recent visit to the United States when he proposed that Congress should pass a new military aid package for Ukraine, and he was rebuffed by some Republicans in the House of Representatives. What can the Defence Secretary do to encourage the US to maintain its commitment to Ukraine and to NATO?

James Heapey: Again, we covered this earlier, but it is an important issue. The Secretary of State and I, and other Ministers from the MOD and across Government, put our shoulder to the wheel whenever we are in Washington, to impress on the US not only the importance of its continued commitment to Ukrainian security, but that Euro-Atlantic security is integral to US security. The US cannot simply look towards the Pacific; it needs to remain engaged in the Euro-Atlantic, in its own interests as well as those of NATO allies.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): On my last visit to Ukraine a couple of weeks ago, I had several meetings with Ukrainian Ministers, who voiced their frustration and concern about the delay in setting up joint operations with UK defence manufacturers. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he is doing everything possible to speed the process up to allow the Ukrainians to produce their own kit, with our help, to help win the war?

James Heapey: The Secretary of State and the Minister for Defence Procurement have both been heavily engaged in this; indeed, the Minister for Defence Procurement led a delegation to Kyiv to catalyse exactly the idea that my hon. Friend mentions.

Emissions: Armed Forces

14. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps he is taking to reduce armed forces emissions. [901529]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): The MOD has already started its decarbonisation journey in support of the UK’s net zero commitment. At the Royal International Air Tattoo last year, I was pleased to sign the defence aviation net zero charter on behalf of the MOD. Working closely with our industrial partners, we are moving to cleaner and more efficient technology. The Army is building solar farms, and has invested £14 million in battlefield electrification. The Royal Navy’s cutting-edge catalytic systems are reducing emissions of greenhouse gases in its patrol vessels by up to 97%. Finally, the RAF is pioneering the use of sustainable aviation fuel.

Wera Hobhouse: It was a pleasure to attend the Global Charge dinner last October, and to see so many members of the armed forces, from all ranks, committed to tackling the climate crisis. However, the Defence Committee has described the MOD’s current reduction targets as “insufficiently demanding” under the greening government commitments—they are the lowest across all Departments. Will the Minister ensure that the next round of CC commitments will contain more demanding

targets, not least to reflect the real ambitions and for members of the armed forces on the ground to see the devastation of climate change?

James Cartledge: I know the hon. Lady is very passionate about this issue. I have just listed the ways in which the individual services are taking steps to reduce their emissions, but we always have to balance that against our overwhelming priority as a Department, which is to support the ability of our armed forces to defend these islands.

Innovative Defence Technologies

15. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support innovative defence technologies. [901530]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): Defence is investing over £6.6 billion in advanced research and development. We are working with UK industry and academia to identify and invest in innovative technologies, ensuring that we have the capabilities we need to defeat our adversaries.

Sir Edward Leigh: The RAF has traditionally had a very poor record when it closes bases in Lincolnshire—just walking away, leaving them to go to rack and ruin—but at RAF Scampton we had wonderful schemes for innovative defence technologies, such as a spaceport. Will the Minister now work with the Home Office and me to try to release the bulk of that base so that we can get all these exciting technologies going? The MOD cannot just wash its hands of the base, now that it has been passed to the Home Office. We are supposed to have joined-up government.

James Cartledge: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. As he knows, RAF Scampton is no longer part of the defence estate, which means we do not have formal responsibility for it. What I would stress to him is that we are investing in innovation in Lincolnshire, including the significant investment into RAF Waddington associated with our Protector capability.

Trident Renewal

16. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent estimate he has made of the lifetime cost of Trident renewal. [901531]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): The Dreadnought submarine programme remains within overall budget and on track for the first of class, HMS Dreadnought, to enter service in the early 2030s. Inflation has remained higher than expected for an extended period and has had an adverse impact on the cost forecasts for the programme compared with the forecasts from a year earlier. As the programme is in its preliminary phases, it is too early to provide cost estimates for the replacement warhead programme.

Patrick Grady: I think that means the Minister does not know what the total lifetime cost of Trident replacement is going to be. Budgets in Government Departments and households alike are under immense pressure because

of rampant inflation. Why do everybody else's budgets have to be under pressure but there seems to be a blank-cheque approach to the renewal of Trident?

James Cartlidge: That is an extraordinary thing for the hon. Gentleman to say. He knows that we will shortly be publishing, before the end of the financial year, our supplementary estimate for the defence nuclear enterprise for the financial year. But as he knows, there is a cost in not having a deterrent. That is his policy: to do away with the deterrent on a unilateral basis, despite all the terrible threats we can see in the world and the nuclear sabre-rattling from Russia. His policy would be abject folly. We will invest in providing that ultimate guarantee to the people of the United Kingdom.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I know that the Minister and most of the House, leaving aside those on the Scottish National Benches, will agree that the continuous at-sea deterrent is absolutely central to the defence of the realm—there is no question about that at all. Does he agree that we must find a way of replacing Trident within budget, and that the worst possible thing that could happen to Trident would be an SNP Government in Scotland?

James Cartlidge: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend.

Topical Questions

T1. [901545] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): This year I visited the United States—the White House and Capitol Hill—to lobby on behalf of Ukraine, as discussed today; Saudi Arabia and Egypt, given the crisis in the middle east; HMS Diamond, to thank the ship's crew; and our sovereign base at Akrotiri, to thank the Typhoon pilots. Cyprus itself was also visited. Last week I was in Brussels for the NATO meeting and in Munich for the security conference. The whole House will know that defence never sleeps and will wish to join me in thanking the brave men and women who make that possible.

Greg Smith: Will my right hon. Friend update the House on progress made at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, particularly with regard to support for Ukraine?

Grant Shapps: Alongside the NATO meeting, there was the Ukraine defence contact group—a group of 52 countries, all of which support Ukraine. The big concern, of course, is ensuring that Ukraine has the things that it needs now and the planning to ensure that it can sustain the fight and push back against the enemy in 2024. That is why I have announced £200 million for drones, and why we have a 15-nation coalition for MPI—the multinational procurement initiative. At my request, we have also welcomed Australia to the international fund for Ukraine, with its commitment of 50 million Australian dollars to a fund that is now worth £900 million.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The agonies of the Palestinian people are extreme. We all want the fighting to stop now, for hostages to be returned now, for aid to be ramped up now, and a ceasefire that

lasts permanently. What is the Defence Secretary doing to help his Israeli counterpart to accept that their threatened offensive against Rafah just cannot happen?

Grant Shapps: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the seriousness of the situation. As he has just heard, I visited Israel before the new year and had those conversations directly. I believe that it is in Israel's interest, obviously in Gaza's interest, and in the world's interest to see that immediate cessation followed by a permanent ceasefire. We are doing everything we can to persuade the Israelis of that necessity and to put pressure on Hamas, who still hold hostages—if they were to release them, this thing could finish very quickly. We are also helping by ensuring that we work on plans for what happens in the north of the country and in southern Lebanon.

T4. [901548] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Carshalton and Wallington is home to more than 1,700 veterans who have provided, and continue to provide, amazing service to our great nation. What steps are we taking as a Government to provide better support for veterans in our country?

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Since 2011, the armed forces covenant and its consequential have been the absolute lynchpin of public commitment to those who have served, and they have materially improved the lived experience of the service community. The Ministry of Defence is responsible for a number of services for veterans. The Veterans Welfare Service, for example, supports around 50,000 veterans every year, and the Office for Veterans' Affairs co-ordinates across Government to advance support for veterans and their families.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The number of veterans claiming welfare benefits is rising steadily, and more than 52,000 are now in receipt of universal credit. Does the Minister find that a cause for celebration or concern?

Dr Murrison: I am a veteran, and I talk to veterans all the time, as does my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. I do not recognise the picture that the shadow Minister describes. Since 2011, we have materially improved the lived experience of our veteran community and their families, and we will continue to do so—of that, he can be absolutely sure.

T7. [901553] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): When defence contracts are awarded, a 10% to 20% weighting is given to social value, which is the benefit that the contract would have for the local and wider community. Does that community benefit apply entirely for the UK, or are overseas companies and their communities considered equally?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): That is a very good question. The distinction is between the Cabinet Office social value rules, which are applied across Government and are irrespective, and the rules that the Ministry of Defence applies to our procurement. There was discussion of the new medium helicopter

earlier, for example. When that comes out, as I hope it will soon, we will be clear that we are looking to incentivise a strong commitment to the UK industrial base.

T2. [901546] **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): The MOD recently published the findings of the inquiry into the fatal accident involving a Scimitar fighting vehicle on Salisbury plain, in which a young soldier tragically lost his life. One of my constituents was a witness to the accident, which has inevitably had a profound impact on him. The Government have said that they do not plan to make a formal response to the inquiry report, which is a harrowing read, but they have accepted all 52 recommendations. Does the Minister not think that the report requires a full and formal response from the Government, with a detailed action plan for adopting the 52 recommendations, given the seriousness of the incident and the wider implications—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, just remember that this is topical questions and I have to get other Members in.

Grant Shapps: Very simply, I read that report and, as the hon. Lady has rightly pointed out, accepted all of its findings. We do not usually take it further, but I will certainly be happy to take a look at the case she has raised.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On the subject of recruitment and retention, on 7 November the Chief of the General Staff, Patrick Sanders—arguably the best general of his generation—told the Defence Committee:

“We are taking 400 soldiers out of the field army to put them alongside recruiters, because—guess what?—it takes a soldier to recruit a soldier.”

Never was a truer word spoken. So when are we finally going to sack Capita?

Dr Murrison: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question—I knew he would get Capita in there somewhere. He will be familiar with the Engage to Recruit programme, which is currently underway and having some success in getting soldiers to recruit soldiers. That is probably why, as I touched on in my earlier answer, we are now seeing some extremely promising recruiting figures, including in January—the best figures for six years.

T3. [901547] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): So far, Israel has ignored international appeals to not indiscriminately attack civilians and not take steps that are basically razing Gaza to the ground. It now looks as though it is going to ignore international opinion about entering Rafah, so has the time not now come for us to consider not selling to Israel arms that can be used in those totally unacceptable ways?

Grant Shapps: Arms deals and export licences are dealt with in the normal way, but the hon. Member will be interested to hear that actually, not many arms sales take place in the direction of Israel at all. Off the top of my head, I think it was just £42 million last year, and that was mostly for protective equipment.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Late last year, diesel got into the water supply at the Trenchard Lines camp near Upavon in my constituency. I commend the resilience

of the families who live there, and also of the MOD, which acted very quickly to ensure that there was a temporary supply of water. Those families are still living on that temporary supply, so can the Minister assure me that attention is being given to sorting out this problem and ensuring a permanent supply of clean water?

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter—he is a champion of the defence community in his constituency, and I thank him for his early engagement on it. I understand that the local authority regulator, following the completion of rigorous testing, has confirmed that the water quality at Trenchard Lines is acceptable, and it is now safe for personnel working and living there to use the mains supply. I will double-check that and write to him, but I am grateful for his comments on the performance of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in that regard.

T5. [901551] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Today we have seen news of another serious attack by the Houthis on a commercial vessel in the gulf of Aden. Do Ministers think that more Royal Navy ships will need to be deployed to the region, given the ongoing threat to merchant shipping?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with answers I gave last week or the week before at the Dispatch Box, when I said that we will always look at what is happening in the Red sea. I have been there to meet the crews myself, and will make a judgment based on the reality on the ground. There is now also input from a conglomeration of EU countries that are coming to join Prosperity Guardian, and we welcome that input.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the debate on the Red sea on 24 January, I asked for confirmation that HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark would not only not be scrapped, but would not be mothballed. The deputy Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), with the Secretary of State for Defence alongside him, said in response that I was

“absolutely right to detect the supportive view of the Secretary of State for Defence.”—[*Official Report*, 24 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 402.]

However, a journalist was subsequently told by the Ministry of Defence that nothing had changed, so are those ships going to be mothballed or not?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend can rest easy: I have been down to visit HMS Albion since those questions, and I can confirm that one of those ships will always be being made ready to sail. He can therefore be very relieved.

T6. [901552] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Suicide rates among veterans under the age of 24 are two to four times higher than in the civilian population, but figures show that this group is less likely to be in touch with mental health services. How will the Minister ensure that young veterans can access the support they need?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question—she has been consistent in her inquiry into this matter. She will be reassured to know that across

the service community, the rate of suicide is lower than we would expect in the civilian population. There is a subset of young men within the serving population for whom there is an excess, and we are looking very closely at that. I very much commend to the hon. Lady the suicide action plan that we have published, which lays out what Defence is doing to drive down the suicide rate in our armed forces. Whichever figure it is, it is too high.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The whole House would like to see a larger Army, Navy and Air Force—there is unanimity on that point. Central to that must be not only the armed forces recruitment programme, but the Army centralised training scheme. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the pause in capital spending by the MOD, which was announced last week in the press, will not affect those two schemes, and that they will continue in as full-blooded a way as they are at the moment?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that there is no pause. The approvals are flowing.

T8. [901554] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Royal Navy carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales entered service six and seven years late respectively, with their cost rocketing to over £8,000 million—more than 20 times that of Scotland's

ferries—while being plagued with problems and a lack of aircraft. What assurances can we have that these hugely expensive carriers will provide the defence capability for which they were designed?

Grant Shapps: The whole House recognises the irony of an SNP Member talking about ships being delivered late. The whole House will want to welcome the extraordinary work done by those on HMS Prince of Wales who got the ship ready to leave not at 30 days' readiness, which is what they were ranked for, but in eight days. I would have thought that congratulating the ship's company would be the right thing to do.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State remember that the British Army used to be the biggest trainer of young men and women in the country and that we produced so many skilled people? When can he take us back to those balmy days?

Grant Shapps: Since 2014, we have been training 60,000 Ukrainian troops, proving that we know how to get troops trained. We still train extraordinary numbers. I think I am right that, on all forms of training more broadly, we are breaking some of those records. We will ensure that we have armed forces that are fit for the 21st century.

UK Economy

3.32 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the UK economy entering recession.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): High inflation remains the biggest barrier to growth, which is why halving it is still our top priority. Thanks to decisive action supported by the Government, inflation has fallen from over 11% to 4%. The Bank of England is forecasting that it will fall to around 2% by early summer, in only a matter of months, which is much faster than previously thought.

It is important to put all this in context. Just over a year ago, the Bank of England was forecasting the longest recession in 100 years. That has not happened, and the British economy has proved resilient in the face of unprecedented shocks. Forecasters, including the Bank of England and the International Monetary Fund, agree that growth will strengthen over the next few years, with the IMF forecasting that we will grow faster than Japan, Germany, France, Italy and many others, on average, over the next five years. Wages have been higher than inflation for six months in a row, unemployment remains very low, and we are backing British business by delivering the biggest business tax cut in modern British history and rewarding work by cutting taxes for working people.

These are all reasons to be positive about the economy turning a corner. If we stick to our plan, we can be confident of seeing pressures reduce for families and of achieving healthy economic growth. At the autumn statement, we unveiled 110 growth measures, including unlocking £20 billion of business investment. This includes a substantial labour market package, delivering a tax cut to national insurance for 27 million people, as well as reforming pensions and extending investment zones. The real risk to economic growth and prosperity in this country is the fact that the Labour party has no plan for growth—no plan at all. While they may pretend that they have abandoned their £28 billion pledge, they are still committed to their damaging 2030 energy policy, which, as the Leader of the Opposition has said, costs £28 billion. All of us across this House know what that means: higher taxes and lower growth with Labour.

Rachel Reeves: The Chancellor should be here explaining why Britain has fallen into recession. Will the Minister explain why he has been left to answer these questions, and where exactly the Chancellor is? The Chancellor should be accountable to MPs and to our constituents, and answer for his failure in the House. What an insult to all those people who go to work every day and experience the reality of 14 years of Conservative economic failure that he has simply failed to turn up.

Does the Minister accept that the Prime Minister's promise to grow the economy is now in tatters? Will the Minister explain why the economy is now smaller than when the current Prime Minister entered 10 Downing Street? Does the Minister accept the misery that this Government have caused homeowners with their kamikaze Budget, leaving a typical family renewing their mortgage paying an additional £240 every single month?

The Chief Secretary is also notable for her absence today, and was last seen refusing or simply failing to recognise that their target measure of debt as a share of GDP is rising, not falling. Following her rebuke this morning from the chair of the UK Statistics Authority about misleading the public, can the Minister inform the House whether the Chief Secretary will again be relying on incompetence as her best defence?

It is not good enough. The whole country knows that the economy is not working for working people under the Conservatives. It is time for change. If the Government seriously think everything is fine, why do they not take their record of failure and let the British people decide?

Bim Afolami: I thank the shadow Chancellor for her questions.

Rachel Reeves: Answer them.

Bim Afolami: I am coming to that.

The right hon. Lady started by talking about the Chancellor; as Economic Secretary, I am perfectly entitled to answer on behalf of the Department and I will do so today. The main thrust of her remarks was on growth; let me deal with that in detail.

The first point to recognise is the international context that we all find ourselves in. [*Interruption.*] It happens to be true. For example—to describe that international context—10 EU countries were in recession in 2023. In relation to forecasts, the Office for Budget Responsibility's original forecast was that there would be a contraction of 1.5% in the economy; we have significantly outperformed that. As I have said, the Bank of England forecast the longest recession in 100 years; we have significantly outperformed that. On wages, I think this is the sixth month in a row when wages have been higher than inflation, which, as I have said, we have more than halved.

On the Chief Secretary, what she was explaining is that we were and are meeting our fiscal rule, which is that debt will be falling in the fifth year of the forecast excluding the Bank of England. That is what she explained, and that is what I am reiterating for the House. [*Interruption.*]

Labour Members do not like hearing this, but they have absolutely no plan on the economy. We have been clear about our plan, and it is starting to bear fruit with wages, with cutting taxes for working people starting in January, with higher business investment as a result of our full expensing in the autumn statement. The shadow Chancellor does not have to take it from me; the Office for Budget Responsibility said that the two fiscal events in 2023—the Budget and the autumn statement—would represent the largest increase to GDP that it has ever scored. What I say to her and the House is this: our plan is working; stick with the plan and do not throw it away with the Opposition.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): It is good news that unemployment has stayed low by European standards, and the economy is still generating plenty of job vacancies. Will the Government take more steps to help more people into those jobs, so that we can get faster growth, bring down the benefit bill and boost their incomes?

Bim Afolami: The whole House knows that my right hon. Friend is somewhat of an expert on matters relating to the economy. To answer his point specifically, the national

[*Bim Afolami*]

insurance tax cut was scored at the last fiscal event—the autumn statement—as significantly increasing the number of people in work. Although I will not speculate on fiscal events, that point has been very much noted by me and the whole Treasury.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Minister spoke about resilience, but the fourth quarter contraction in the economy was the biggest quarterly fall since early 2021 at the height of the covid pandemic, so I am not sure he is quite right about resilience. He also spoke about growth, but the Government told us in November that growth is not forecast to exceed 2% in any year in the forecast period. How modest the Minister's ambitions are.

National debt is still approaching 100% of GDP—£3 trillion. The consequences of Brexit are suppressing growth, and that poses a challenge to the UK Government's fiscal targets. Although it is welcome that inflation has fallen, prices remain high. Prices are not falling; they are simply going up slightly less steeply than they were a month or two ago. It is obvious that what the economy needs is growth, and the investment to generate that growth, but given that business investment, according to the Government, is forecast down this year by 5.6%, private dwelling investment is forecast down this year by 6%, and flat at 0% next year, and general Government investment is forecast down in '25, '26, '27 and '28, where will the investment for growth come from?

Bim Afolami: I deeply respect the right hon. Gentleman, and I will take his points one by one. On resilience, the way we get resilience for ordinary people and for households is to ensure that real household incomes increase. Since 2010, they are up 12%. We are trying to increase business resilience with our full expensing regime, which is revolutionary in the advanced world. Full expensing will enable more businesses to invest and will deal with the chronic weakness of the British economy, which is weak investment. That is why we are doing that.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned growth. Growth is not as high as we would like, and that is the case across the whole of Europe and the whole of the industrialised world. That is why the Chancellor in the last fiscal event put in place 110 growth measures. We have a plan for growth over the long term, and we will deliver it. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned debt. To repeat the point I made to the shadow Chancellor, debt is falling in the fifth year of the forecast according to our fiscal rule, which excludes the Bank of England. That is not just the fiscal rule now; it has always been the fiscal rule.

The right hon. Gentleman makes the fair point that lower inflation does not mean that prices are falling. Indeed, lower inflation is a lower rate of increase. We all know that in this House. That is why bringing down inflation is so important, and the Opposition, with their plan to recklessly jack up borrowing and taxes to the extent of £28 billion, will increase inflation.

I repeat that investment has been a long-term weakness of the British economy. We are taking long-term measures to deal with it, and I hope that in the next fiscal event—the Budget—we will continue in that vein.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I thank my hon. Friend for his distinguished service as a voice of His Majesty's Government? I refer him to what the former chief economist of the Bank of England, Andrew Haldane, said today, referring to a “double blow” to the credibility of the Bank of England, which was late to put interest rates up and missed inflation, and has been slow to reduce them, hammering the economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bank of England is no longer showing itself to be competent and that its independence must be questioned?

Bim Afolami: I do not think that I will quite agree with my right hon. Friend. It is very important that we leave the Bank of England to do its work and respect its independent mandate, but that, from the Treasury, we do what we can to bring inflation down and support it in that mandate. As I said, the Labour party's plans—whether it claims to have dropped them or not—will lead to an increase in borrowing or an increase in taxes, which will significantly damage that aim.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I think the Minister is failing the audition. Labour will not take lectures from him about borrowing, which was at 67% of GDP when we left office and is now nearly 100%. He is claiming that somehow growth is happening, but we are actually in a recession, which means that there is no growth; in fact, there is negative growth. GDP per capita fell in every quarter of last year, meaning that everybody is getting worse off under his appalling stewardship of the economy. Is it not time that the junior Minister went back to his boss and told him, “It's all over. Time's up. Call the general election.”?

Bim Afolami: It is definitely above my pay grade to call elections. In relation to GDP per capita statistics, which are important—the point of them is to try to get a sense of what is happening to individuals or to individual households and families—I would say—[*Interruption.*] Let me—[*Interruption.*] I wish the shadow Chancellor would allow me to respond. Real household incomes, which are as good a measure as any to see what is happening to individuals and families in our economy, are up 12% since 2010. If we are looking at people at the bottom of the income scale, the rise in the national living wage that comes in in April will mean a rise since 2010 of about 30% in real terms for people on full-time minimum wages. Those two statistics are examples of what has happened to real people on the ground.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Minister for updating the House. Does he agree that people in Redditch and elsewhere are concerned about negative economic news—although it almost always turns out to be wrong? Most of all, does he agree that the greatest risk to my constituents in Redditch and those across the country is a Labour Government? Labour has said it can somehow magically get £28 billion of green growth benefits without paying for them. We all know that my constituents will be paying for that through extra borrowing and higher taxes.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has no responsibility for the Labour party. Let us move on.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says the Government's priority is backing British business, cutting inflation and reducing the pressure on British families. When the Government admit this measure will increase inflation, when British business is tearing its hair out at the chaos caused by not knowing what the charge will be and who will pay it—with less than 10 weeks to go—and when British consumers will find that it causes food shortages and an increase in food prices, why on earth are the Government going ahead with the Brexit border tax? Will the Minister commit here and now to cancelling it, so that we can stop this inflationary measure—yes or no?

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Lady for focusing on inflation. She is right that it is critical, and bringing it down is a focus for the Government. The House has heard her point about the European Union, but I would add that we have a clear plan for bringing down inflation, which we will continue to carry out. She has to ask those on her Front Bench why they do not have one.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): For too long, too many people in the Treasury—not my hon. Friend, who is an excellent Minister—have thought that the best way to grow the economy is to fill the country with more and more people. Will the Government recommit to insisting that anyone who comes here to work should earn the average UK earnings of around £33,000 a year? That means no shortage schemes and no exemption for care workers or the NHS, but that in those sectors we pay proper wages, we get people off benefits—too many people are on them, dragging down our economy—and we seriously cut mass legal migration; and, by the way, if there is a general election, let us give our people something to vote for.

Bim Afolami: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about migration. I completely agree that we need higher earnings for British people, not an economy where we import too many people and keep earnings down. That is why we have been focusing on raising the national living wage and ensuring that ordinary household incomes will go up as a result of this Government's policies, as I have explained. It is worth pointing out that certain things happened last year, such as people fleeing Ukraine and Hong Kong, which meant that the immigration numbers were particularly high. The broad thrust of what my right hon. Friend said is correct: we want a high-skill, high-wage economy.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I do not know whether the Minister realises quite how infuriating people find watching his Government tell them, "Everything is fine", "It is all going really well" and "There's nothing to see here", when every day they feel poorer and small businesses are closing. If the Prime Minister and the Chancellor cannot face reality, how on earth can anyone trust them to solve the economic crisis that their Government created?

Bim Afolami: Let me be clear with the hon. Lady, whom I have a huge amount of time for as a very good Member of Parliament: it is not our position that everything is okay. There has been a challenging international context: a once-in-100-years pandemic, and an energy crisis caused by Putin's war in Ukraine. This Government have done everything we possibly can to build an economy for growth, and I hope we have her support.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What distinguishes this recession is the 800 jobs that have been created every day since this Government came to power in 2010—the very antithesis of anything ever achieved by a Labour Government, who have always left unemployment higher than they found it—is it not?

Bim Afolami: It is—and I would add something else: the figures for home repossession were much higher when there was a recession under the Labour Government in 2008-09, in comparison with our record now, and unemployment now is much lower than it was then. Though we are in challenging times, the economy is turning a corner. Our record compares very favourably Labour's.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): The Chancellor said last May that he was comfortable with the prospect of a recession. Now that my constituents in Selby and Ainsty are suffering under that recession's effects, would the Minister chalk it up as a job well done?

Bim Afolami: The hon. Gentleman will do well. There is nobody on the Government Benches who welcomes adverse economic situations for anybody. That is why we are doing everything we can—straining every sinew—to grow the economy. All the measures I have laid out will continue, but they would be put at risk by those on his Front Bench being in office.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Before I came to this House, I was a director of quite a large retail group in North Norfolk. No one has made the point that in the last quarter of the year the country saw Babet, Ciaran, Debi, Elin, Fergus and Gerrit—six major storms and floods. How many were there in the previous year? Absolutely none at all. Will the Economic Secretary tell everybody that of course the economy will not function properly in the grip of storms and floods every fortnight? We are not in recession, but the more we talk it up, the more we will be.

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for that question—I would say that the loss of large retail groups in Norfolk is the House's gain. His point about the international context is serious and important. Although Labour Members do not like to hear it, facing a once-in-100-years pandemic and Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, which caused energy prices to skyrocket, will have adverse impacts on the economy. The country understands that and the House understands that; the Labour Front Bench should also understand it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This recession is a direct result of the choices that this Government have made. Years of potential growth have been missed, and the Government have failed particularly to capitalise on the green transition. Green investment will be worth £1 trillion globally by 2030, including half a million jobs in this country. When will the Government bring forward a green investment programme to match the ones in the US or in Europe?

Bim Afolami: First, our record on decarbonisation beats anywhere else in the G7, so we do not take lessons from the United States or any other country in that regard. In relation to the green investment plan by 2030,

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the hon. Lady should direct her ire at those on the Labour Front Bench for not being clear as to what their plan is. The Leader of the Opposition says—[*Interruption.*] Well, it is important because politics is a contest of ideas, as indeed it is a contest between two parties. If Labour Members believe they can spend an extra £28 billion without that having an impact on taxes and borrowing, they are trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the British people.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The past couple of years have been very difficult economically, and I certainly do not treat the state of our economy as the giggle-fest that Labour Members seem to be having today. Over the past few weeks, I have met many businesses in my constituency—large and small—and a number have told me that they feel conditions are getting better, demand is growing and orders are coming back. Constituents have also told me that they have noticed food prices dropping in our supermarkets. Does the Minister agree that the most damaging thing that could happen to our economy now would be for those on the Labour Benches to continue to talk our economy down?

Bim Afolami: My right hon. Friend is correct that things are starting to get better for many people across the country, including small businesses. We have more than halved inflation, which is now down below 4%; we think that in the coming months it will go to 2%, which is the target. Of course, once it hits that target, we hope that interest rates will also start coming down, which will make a big difference to ordinary people up and down the country.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I applaud the Minister's willingness to take on this unenviable assignment, unlike his right hon. Friends. The international context that he refers to is that Japan and the UK are the only G7 countries in recession. Inflation in the UK, which he has referred to, is the highest in the whole G7. Why is the UK economy doing so much worse than comparable economies elsewhere?

Bim Afolami: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but I would say that our economy entered difficult times at a different point in the cycle from certain other economies. To fully assess the performance of all economies, we have to wait for the end of this whole period, so I would not prejudge exactly at this stage. I simply say that the difficulties we are facing have affected every single economy, although the nature of different economies means that they are affected at different times. We are putting in place comprehensive growth measures and comprehensive measures to bring inflation down. I also note that UK interest rates are roughly middle-of-the-pack compared with other countries of comparable size. We will keep all this under review and, at the next fiscal event, will take further measures to increase our potential growth rate over the long term.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Does the Minister welcome the news that the South Yorkshire Mayor has finally recognised the economic importance of Doncaster-Sheffield Airport and is at last starting to use the powers given to him to begin the process of

getting it up and running again? Does he agree that that has taken far too long—it is years since the airport closed—and that the South Yorkshire Mayor should have used his powers years ago, rather than waiting until nine weeks before he is re-elected?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out once again what a brilliant champion he is for his constituency. I am sure his constituents have heard that comment, and that he will continue to make that point.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Lordy, lordy! It is like listening to the Red Queen in “Alice Through the Looking Glass”, who invented six impossible things before breakfast! How on earth can we have confidence in what the Minister says when the UK Statistics Authority had to tell off the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), for making false claims about tax cuts; when Evan Davis had to school her at length and she refused even to understand how wrong she was about debt falling as a percentage of GDP, when it is going up; and when the Minister himself actually said that the NHS accounts for 42% to 43% of everything the Government spend, when it is only 15%? Can he confirm one fact: these two years will see the biggest fall in living standards since records began? That is why people are going to vote the Government out, isn't it?

Bim Afolami: I have already explained the Chief Secretary's comments. In relation to my own, I was referring to current spending and not overall spending. I clarified that as well. Look, there have been difficulties for so many millions of people across the country and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I have never sought to minimise that from this position or from any other position in the House. We have faced once-in-a-hundred-years challenges. The Government have faced them and taken the right action to deal with them. The cost of living support package is worth over £100 billion, to the tune of more than £3,700 per person. We have dealt with those challenges and we have a plan now to grow the economy to grow our way out of them. I am afraid that Labour Members and the Labour Front Bench do not have that sort of plan, which is why I would not make the assumption that he makes about the election.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): The number of those who are on long-term sickness benefits in Blackpool has increased fourfold over the last few decades. That represents an enormous loss of potential, and it is also hurting economic growth and productivity. The Government's proposed reforms in this area are to be welcomed, but rather than delaying them until next year, what is preventing the Government from bringing them in this year?

Bim Afolami: I will take that point away. I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the next financial year. At the next fiscal event, the Budget, the Chancellor will bear what he has said in mind.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Fourteen years of Conservative mismanagement of the economy are having disastrous impacts on working people. For example, musicians are waiting months to be paid because HMRC is failing to process A1 forms

on time for musicians touring in Europe. The trade body LIVE—Live music, Industry Venues and Entertainment—told me that in one case 26 musicians, performers and sound engineers were not paid for more than three months after their tour to Spain, due to delays in processing A1 forms. Even worse, in response to written questions, I have been told that service standards for those forms will not be met by HMRC until at least April 2024. Does the Minister agree that those delays are totally unacceptable, particularly when our musicians are already having to cope with a challenging financial landscape, made worse now by the news of a recession?

Bim Afolami: I agree that we need to speed up the processing of A1 forms, as the hon. Lady describes. I am sure the Treasury heard that point and I will ensure my ministerial colleagues take what she says very seriously indeed.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Whatever spin the Government may put on it, forecasts show that the economy has officially entered a recession. However, people out there have been suffering grinding economic pressure for years. Average energy bills are 59% higher than they were in 2022, and more than 600,000 Welsh households are in fuel poverty. Meanwhile, the profits of energy companies such as British Gas have increased tenfold to £750 million. This is the Minister's chance to make a difference to every household. He has referred to the next fiscal event. Will he act to extend and backdate the windfall tax on energy companies that are currently profiteering from households everywhere?

Bim Afolami: The right hon. Lady is right that many people have had very challenging times over the last couple of years. Let me correct something that I previously said to the House: the increase in real household incomes since 2010 is actually 8%, while the increase in GDP per capita is 12%. I wanted to put that on the record. As for taxes, I cannot speculate about what will happen at the next fiscal event.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): According to the forecast, in five years' time debt will be higher than it is now. Is this a reasonable time to be talking about tax cuts, and does their doing so not suggest that the Government have learnt nothing from the Budget of September 2022?

Bim Afolami: I assure the hon. Gentleman that this Chancellor and this Government are very different from those in September 2022 to which he refers. As for debt, I repeat that we are keeping to our fiscal rule, which is and has always been that debt will be falling in the fifth year of the forecast—falling, once we exclude the Bank of England. That has always been our position, and it will continue to be the case.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): The Minister has made no mention of the importance to the UK Treasury of North sea oil, and indeed the danger to the Scottish economy of the closure of Grangemouth Refinery. Given that the UK Treasury received £8 billion in revenues from the North sea last year and is expected to receive £6.1 billion this year, can it not find the tens of millions—not the tens of billions that it will receive in revenue—to ensure that the HydroCracker can be restarted and the profitability of the refinery increased threefold?

Bim Afolami: I will take away the hon. Gentleman's specific point and ensure that the Treasury gets back to him, but his broader point about offshore oil and gas in the North sea is very important. It is critical that we support the oil and gas sector, not just for the tax revenues but for the livelihoods and prosperity of the United Kingdom, and this Government stand four-square behind it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): There is overwhelming evidence that the lower the economic inequalities, the higher economic growth will be. We know from the Office for National Statistics that between 2021 and 2022 the disposable incomes of the poorest fifth of households shrank by 3.4% while those of the richest fifth increased by 3.3%, and that reflected the position in the preceding 10 years. What assessment has the Minister, or the Chancellor, undertaken to estimate the impacts of these increasing inequalities on our shrinking growth?

Bim Afolami: When we are talking about people at the bottom end of the income scale, it is important to note that those on the full-time national living wage—which we will be increasing by the largest ever amount in April this year—will be 30% better off than they were in 2010.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): News that the UK is officially in recession comes as no surprise to my constituents, who have been battered by this Tory cost of living crisis. Food inflation is still double the headline rate of inflation, and that is not only affecting the price of the weekly shop but having a hugely negative effect on my local pub and hospitality sector, with many businesses on the brink. Instead of their fantasyland spinning that everything is going fine, what measures will the Government introduce to bring food inflation down?

Bim Afolami: As I have said many times this afternoon, inflation is a target for this Government: we aim to ensure that we continue to bring it down, and indeed we expect it to get to 2% in the coming months. In relation to food inflation specifically, at the last fiscal event we introduced full expensing, which will enable food manufacturers, supermarkets and others to increase their investment hugely, because it completely nets off against their tax—100% of the cost of their investment is netted off. The impact will be increased investment that will reduce their costs and reduce the cost of food in our shops. That is one of many measures that we are introducing to reduce food inflation.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Prime Minister said he was going to grow the economy and he has obviously failed: we are now in recession. In my constituency, families and small businesses are under severe pressure. Can the Minister possibly explain how he is going to address these very serious problems?

Bim Afolami: All I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that we are in a very challenging international context and we have performed better than the international forecasts. We had high inflation, which really bedevilled this economy a couple of years ago, but we have more than halved it. We have a plan to grow our way out of this, as was shown by the last fiscal event, where we

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unveiled, I think, 110 growth measures. That is our plan. The Labour Opposition do not have a plan. If this country sticks with our plan, we will grow our economy significantly over the coming months and years.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Minister keeps trying to hide behind the war in Ukraine and the impact of the pandemic, but the reality is that those are affecting every country in the world. Would he not admit that the exacerbating factor—the thing that has led most to economic decline, to massive labour shortages and to rampant inflation here in the UK—is Brexit?

Bim Afolami: No, I would not.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The economy is in recession and the consequences for the public finances are not the fault of those people infected and affected through the contaminated blood scandal, the largest treatment disaster in the NHS. I was hoping to ask the Chancellor this question, but can the Minister confirm whether money has already been ringfenced to pay compensation to those people, as set out in the final recommendations on compensation by Sir Brian Langstaff in April 2023?

Bim Afolami: I believe that the right hon. Lady asked a similar question of the Chancellor at the last Treasury questions, and the Chancellor responded by saying that he was absolutely clear about the need to compensate people in the way that she has described. He will update the House in due course and indeed update her with further details in response to her question.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The Prime Minister has failed to get growth and industry has completely lost confidence in this Government. With projects cancelled, HS2 cancelled, Building Schools for the Future cancelled, hospitals never built and an absolute failure to bring down high energy prices, it is no wonder that business investment forecasts are down. With the US and the EU incentivising investment, what is the Minister now going to do to get the investment we need in the green manufacturing industries of the future?

Bim Afolami: To increase investment we brought in full expensing at the last fiscal event, which should represent an increase over the forecast period of £14 billion of investment and deal with the chronic weakness of our economy over generations. That is what we are doing to increase investment. In relation to green investment in particular, what we are not doing is having a huge unfunded £28 billion plan—or maybe now it is not Labour's plan; maybe it is a secret plan or maybe the Labour Front Benchers have stopped their plan. We have a responsible costed plan to increase investment; the Opposition do not have one.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Let's try this again. Public sector net debt is set to rise from 89% of GDP this year to 92.8% of GDP in 2028-29, according to the most recent Office for Budget Responsibility forecast. In case the Minister does not understand, that

number is higher than today's. The Prime Minister promised to reduce debt, but it is increasing. The plan isn't working, is it?

Bim Afolami: The Prime Minister and the whole Government are committed to reducing debt as we get to the end of this economic forecast period, which is what we are doing.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister's rosy picture of the economy shows a complete lack of awareness of what is actually going on in this country. He claims that the Labour party is somehow a risk to growth, but it is his party that has taken the country into recession. That shows a complete lack of self-awareness, too. That is the nub of the matter.

We are in a recession, yet the Chancellor is nowhere to be seen. I would have thought this was important enough for him to be here to answer questions. Given that growing the economy is yet another of the Prime Minister's pledges that has not been met, who does the Minister think should carry the can for this failure: the Prime Minister or the Chancellor?

Bim Afolami: I will have to take the hon. Gentleman's criticism of my self-awareness on the chin, but his broader point is serious. He is asking whether the Government and I are light-hearted or think that everything in the economy is absolutely fantastic, but it is not. That is why we have taken the measures that we have. It is why we cut tax for working people, beginning in January. It is why we are increasing business investment. It is why we had a more than £100-billion package of cost of living support, because we know how much many ordinary people in this country are suffering. And it is why we are trying to grow our economy overall, because that will result in greater prosperity for the country and more money for our public services. The Labour party puts all that at risk.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Government are failing. An 81-year-old constituent told me that he cannot remember the economy and living standards ever being this bad. Can the Minister not see that, under his Government, Britain is worse off?

Bim Afolami: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. I will not repeat everything I just said to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), but this Government and this Treasury are sticking to our plan for growth. That is all put at risk by the Labour party.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Office for Budget Responsibility assessed Boris Johnson's trade and co-operation agreement, which sets out the trading relationship between the UK and the EU, at the beginning of last year, and it said that the TCA has reduced long-run productivity by 4%. Why does the Minister think that is?

Bim Afolami: We built on the trade and co-operation agreement through the Windsor framework, and the Opposition do not propose to change it. Indeed, the TCA is fundamental to the stability of our relationship with the European Union, and I do not think the country would benefit from unpicking it once again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for all his answers. The questions have not been easy. The Office for National Statistics has revealed that there was a 0.3% decline in GDP between October and December 2023. Given that the strength of the economy was, and still is, the subject of one of the Prime Minister's pledges, what steps is the Minister taking to reverse this decline, and to re-instil confidence in the Government's economic plans?

Bim Afolami: I have already laid out the steps that we are taking, and there is a critical need to make sure that all the regions of our country benefit from those steps. That is one of the reasons why we put so much effort and focus into investment zones over the last couple of years. We hope that these investment zones will continue to increase growth in the economy, not only at a macro level, but for people in every region of this country—particularly in Northern Ireland and the other regions that perhaps did not benefit from this country's previous growth. We are committed to strengthening that regionally.

Post Office Governance and Horizon Compensation Schemes

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about Post Office governance and the Horizon compensation schemes.

Over the weekend, several serious allegations were made against the Government, my Department and its officials by Henry Staunton, the former chair of the Post Office. The allegations are completely false, and I would like to make a statement to the House so that hon. Members and the British public know the truth about exactly what has happened. I would like to address three specific claims that Mr Staunton made in his *Sunday Times* interview—claims that are patently untrue.

First, Mr Staunton alleges that I refused to apologise to him after he learned of his dismissal from Sky News. That was not the case. In the call he referenced, I made it abundantly clear that I disapproved of the media breaking any aspect of the story. Out of respect for Henry Staunton's reputation, I went to great pains to make my concerns about his conduct private. In fact, in my interviews with the press, I repeatedly said that I refuse to carry out HR in public. That is why it is so disappointing that he has chosen to spread a series of falsehoods, provide made-up anecdotes to journalists and leak discussions held in confidence. All that merely confirms in my mind that I made the correct decision in dismissing him.

Secondly, Mr Staunton claims that I told him that “someone's got to take the rap” for the Horizon scandal, and that was the reason for his dismissal. That was not the reason at all. I dismissed him because there were serious concerns about his behaviour as chair, including those raised by other directors on the board. My Department found significant governance issues. For example, a public appointment process was under way for a new senior independent director to the Post Office board, but Mr Staunton apparently wanted to bypass it and appoint someone from the board without due process. He failed to properly consult the Post Office board on the proposal; he failed to hold the required nominations committee; and, most importantly, he failed to consult the Government, as a shareholder, which the company was required to do. I know that hon. Members will agree with me that such a cavalier approach to governance was the last thing we needed in the Post Office, given its historical failings.

I should also inform the House that while Mr Staunton was in post, a formal investigation was launched into allegations made regarding his conduct, including serious matters such as bullying. Concerns were brought to my Department's attention about Mr Staunton's willingness to co-operate with that investigation.

It is right that the British public should know the facts behind the case, and what was said in the phone call in which I dismissed Mr Staunton. Officials from my Department were on the line; the call was minuted, and a read-out was sent after it took place. Today, I am depositing a copy of that read-out in both Libraries of the House, so that hon. Members and the public can see the truth. In those minutes, personal information relating to other Post Office employees has been redacted. For all

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those reasons, an interim chair will be appointed shortly, and I will, of course, update the House when we have further details.

Finally, Mr Staunton claims that when he was first appointed as chair of the Post Office, he was told by a senior civil servant to stall on paying compensation. There is no evidence whatsoever that that is true. In fact, on becoming Post Office chair, Mr Staunton received a letter from the permanent secretary of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Sarah Munby, on 9 December 2022, welcoming him to his role and making it crystal clear that successfully reaching settlements with victims of the Post Office scandal should be one of his highest priorities. That letter is in the public domain. The words are there in black and white, and copies of the correspondence will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The reality is that my Department has done everything it can to speed up compensation payments for victims. We have already made payments totalling £160 million across all three compensation schemes. That includes our announcement last autumn of the optional £600,000 fixed-sum award for those who had been wrongfully convicted. It is the strongest refutation of those in this House who would claim that we acted only after the ITV drama, “Mr Bates vs The Post Office”, was shown. British people should know that a dedicated team of Ministers and civil servants have been working around the clock for many months to hasten the pursuit of justice, and bring swift, fair redress to all those affected.

To that end, I am pleased that all 2,417 postmasters who claimed through the original Horizon shortfall scheme have now had offers of compensation. The Post Office is dealing promptly with late applications and cases where the initial offer has not been accepted. My Department has also established the Horizon compensation unit to ensure that money gets to the right people without a moment’s delay. Last autumn, we announced an additional £150 million to the Post Office, specifically to help it meet the costs of participating in the Post Office-Horizon inquiry and delivering compensation to postmasters. In all, we have committed around £1 billion to ensure that wronged postmasters can be fully and fairly compensated, and through forthcoming legislation, we are taking unprecedented steps to quash the convictions of postmasters affected by the Horizon scandal.

In short, we are putting our money where our mouth is, and our shoulders to the wheel to ensure that justice is done. It is not fair on the victims of this scandal, which has already ruined so many lives and livelihoods, to claim, as Mr Staunton has done, that things are being dragged out a second longer than they ought to be. For Henry Staunton to suggest otherwise, for whatever personal motives, is a disgrace, and it risks damaging confidence in the compensation schemes that Ministers and civil servants are working so hard to deliver. I would hope that most people reading the interview in yesterday’s *Sunday Times* would see it for what it was: a blatant attempt to seek revenge following dismissal.

I must say that I regret the way in which these events have unfolded. We did everything that we could to manage this dismissal in a dignified way for Mr Staunton and others. However, I will not hesitate to defend myself and, more importantly, my officials, who cannot respond

directly to these baseless attacks. Right now, the Post Office’s No. 1 priority must be delivering compensation to postmasters who have not already been compensated. There were those who fell victim to a faulty IT system that the Post Office implemented, and that it turned a blind eye to when brave whistleblowers such as Alan Bates sounded the alarm. We said that the Government would leave no stone unturned in uncovering the truth behind the Horizon scandal, and in pursuing justice for the victims and their families. We are delivering on that promise, while looking for any further possible steps that we can take to ensure the full and final settlement of claims as quickly as possible.

It is right that we reflect, too, on the cultural practices at the Post Office that allowed the Horizon scandal to happen in the first place. It was a culture that let those in the highest ranks of the organisation arbitrarily dismiss the very real concerns of the sub-postmasters who are the lifeblood of their business and pillars of the local community. Although the Post Office may have failed to stand by its postmasters in the past, we are ensuring that it does everything that it can to champion them today, and to foster an environment that respects their employees and their customers. That is how we will rebuild trust and ensure that the British public can have confidence in our Post Office, now and in the future. I commend this statement to the House.

4.26 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I firmly agree that the revelations in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend could not be more serious. In particular, if true, the claim that the Post Office was instructed to deliberately go slow on compensation payments to sub-postmasters in order to push the financial liability into the next Parliament would be a further outrageous insult in a scandal that has already rocked faith in the fairness of the British state. If that is the case, it cannot be allowed to stand, and if it is not, it must be shown to be false in no uncertain terms. We have two completely contrasting accounts: one from the former chair of the Post Office, and one from the Secretary of State. Only one of them can be the truth. I hope that we are all in agreement that Parliament is the correct place for these matters to be raised and clarified. What we need now is transparency and scrutiny.

Will the Secretary of State categorically state that the Post Office was at no point told to delay compensation payments by either an official or a Minister from any Government Department, and that at no point was it suggested that a delay would be of benefit to the Treasury? Will there be a Cabinet Office investigation to ensure that no such instruction or inference was given at any point? Crucially, is the £1 billion figure for compensation, which the Secretary of State helpfully just repeated, already allocated, and sat in the accounts of the Department for Business and Trade, ready to be paid? If it is not, will compensation payments be specifically itemised in the upcoming Budget?

The Secretary of State will also understand that following the story at the weekend, victims of other scandals—especially of the contaminated blood scandal—feel that they need to ask whether they have been the victims of deliberate inaction. Will the Government provide assurances that no such obstruction has been placed on any payments of this kind? If so, can they

explain what the delay is in some cases? In the full interests of transparency, and to fully ascertain the veracity of any allegations for sub-postmasters and the general public, will she publish all relevant correspondence, and minutes of meetings between the Department, the Treasury, UK Government Investments and the Post Office during this time? Finally, when can we expect the legislation on exoneration that was promised by the Prime Minister?

I cannot stress enough that the last thing that was needed in this scandal was any further allegation of cover-up or obfuscation at the very top of Government. People's faith in Government, already damaged by scandals such as Hillsborough, Bloody Sunday and Windrush, is hanging by a thread. This miscarriage of justice has shown the devastation that can occur when institutions are allowed to operate without oversight or are shrouded in secrecy. We should all agree that that secrecy must end, and that the full sunlight of public scrutiny should be brought to bear. If everything the Secretary of State has told us today is correct, surely there will be no objection to that happening fully.

Kemi Badenoch: I welcome the tone that the shadow Front-Bench spokesman has taken. There is often a tendency for political point scoring, but I think we both agree that this is very much about the postmasters. That is why I ensured that I was at the Dispatch Box: so that people would know the truth. That is what builds trust.

The shadow Minister asked whether I would categorically state that no instruction was given to delay payments. Yes, I can. We have no evidence whatever that any official said that. If such a thing was said, it is for Mr Staunton to bring the evidence. It is very hard to refute a negative. People making wild, baseless accusations and then demanding proof that they did not happen are making mischief, in my view. As far as I have seen, all the evidence points to the fact that no one gave that instruction.

It is also important to look at whether it would even make sense to do so. There would be no benefit whatever to our delaying the compensation, which has no significant impact on revenues. It would be a mad thing even to suggest. The compensation scheme, which Mr Staunton oversaw, has been completed. My understanding is that 100% of payments have been made, so clearly no such instruction was given. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the infected blood inquiry. This is a good example of how people lose faith in the system because of misinformation. That is why I am here to correct the record.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the £1 billion allocation. We give monthly reports that show exactly what payments are being made. He also asked whether we will publish correspondence. No, we will not publish in full all correspondence between Departments, UKGI and the Post Office. That is because we set up the statutory inquiry, which will examine the important issues related to the Horizon scandal, as well as current governance arrangements. We are fully co-operating with the inquiry, but the inquiry was set up by Parliament specifically to look at that. In addition to the read-out of the true content of my telephone call with Mr Staunton, we will consider publishing correspondence between Departments and Mr Staunton in accordance with freedom of information rules, so that people will know exactly what happened, contrary to his account. The

hon. Gentleman asked about legislation. That is something that we are actively working on. I expect that we will be able to deliver on that imminently.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): When I was the postal affairs Minister, the officials in my team not only shared my drive to get the money out of the door—life-changing money for postmasters—but were energised and empowered to do so. I cannot believe for a minute that just a few months later they would be doing and thinking the polar opposite. Clearly, they cannot defend themselves in public, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that conversations about colluding to slow down the compensation did not happen? It is important that we double down and get more money out of the door as soon as possible.

Kemi Badenoch: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his fantastic work as the postal affairs Minister, and I can confirm that. My officials have looked through all the correspondence, and all the minutes of the conversations that Mr Staunton had with the Department. They found absolutely nothing, and he did not raise the matter in his call with me. If it were something that officials had said to him, surely he would have mentioned it to Ministers—either myself or the postal affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). The fact that Mr Staunton did not do so shows that it is quite likely something that he is making up.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am at a loss today: another Monday, another Post Office scandal. I have tried very hard to pull together my thoughts on the statement, what was said in *The Sunday Times*, and what was said in this place less than two weeks ago when I led a Backbench Business debate on the culture of Post Office management.

I will ask the Secretary of State a few questions. Will she place on the record whether Nick Read wrote to the Justice Secretary last month defending the convictions, saying that some postmasters were guilty? That is a serious allegation, and I would really like to have an answer.

There has been talk all morning about damaging confidence in the compensation schemes. If there is confidence in them, can the Secretary of State explain why so many leading sub-postmasters affected by the scandal were given such derisory offers, months and months late? That is just not on. The Secretary of State cannot say that Henry Staunton damaged the compensation schemes; it was down to the Government and Post Office Ltd.

Is the Secretary of State aware that Post Office Ltd still employs 40 investigators who secured convictions? I agree with what the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) said: exoneration must be hurried up and compensation must be paid sooner rather than later. I have said that every month for the last nine months.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady asks multiple questions. The first is about a letter written by Nick Read, Post Office's chief executive, to the Justice Secretary. What I

[Kemi Badenoch]

can say is that UKGI and Post Office Ltd have both vehemently denied that Nick Read was put under any pressure to write the letter she refers to.

On the risks of making a decision on blanket exoneration, the postal affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), has said repeatedly that we have been faced with a dilemma: either to accept the present problem of many people carrying the unjustified slur of conviction, or to accept that an unknown number of people who have genuinely stolen from their post offices will be exonerated and perhaps even compensated. That is the case, and it is certainly what the Government believe. What she says about people being put under pressure to write a letter is something that UKGI and Post Office Ltd have both vehemently denied.

The hon. Lady repeats Mr Staunton's allegations, but I have already given a statement saying that they are completely false. She asks about individual cases of people who have been paid. I cannot comment on individual cases, but I would like to clarify that the main scheme in place under Henry Staunton's watch was the Horizon shortfall scheme. Some 2,417 people were made offers within the original deadline. One hundred per cent have received offers, but 84% have accepted offers. I just wanted to clarify my previous comments.

On the 40 prosecutors still working for Post Office, I have had multiple people giving different bits of information. The inquiry is looking at that and will get to the bottom of it.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State review the governance of UKGI? How did it manage to preside over the Post Office with its dreadful treatment of sub-postmasters? How did UKGI allow senior Post Office managers to rack up and accumulate losses of £1,390 million, effectively bankrupting the Post Office so that it can now trade only if it has the reassurance of massive cash infusions from the Treasury on a continuing basis? Surely this body has done very badly, and we need a better answer.

Kemi Badenoch: That is one of the reasons why we have been making personnel changes in this area. It goes back to the point I was making in the statement: Post Office needs an effective chair. Until the day I had the conversation dismissing him, I never had any correspondence from Mr Staunton about difficulties that he was having with UKGI. If he was having difficulties, he should have told me, rather than give an interview to *The Sunday Times* effectively stating that he had no control over the organisation that he had been appointed to run.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State says we have to accept that Henry Staunton's accusations are completely false. The letter that Nick Read wrote to the Lord Chancellor about overturning convictions mentioned that about 300 people are possibly going to be "guilty". She has just told the House that the investment body did not instruct him to do that. Henry Staunton said he did not tell Post Office to write the letter, and the board did not know about it, so who did? For the sake of openness and transparency, she

should produce all correspondence between UKGI and Post Office. The Secretary of State has accused Henry Staunton of lying in public. The only way we can judge whether she is telling the truth is if we have all the information out there.

Can I just say to the Secretary of State, in relation to her obsession with tweeting, that although she says that people are jumping "on the bandwagon", some of us have been involved in this for many years on a cross-party basis, including through work with her colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), so that is quite insulting. What message will the Secretary of State's tone today send to sub-postmasters? I will tell her: more cover-up and obfuscation. Get the information out there and explain what is going on. Otherwise, she will not have their trust. It will just be more of the same that we have seen over many, many years.

Kemi Badenoch: I completely reject the right hon. Gentleman's assertions. This is the political point scoring that I talked about earlier, which we just need to stop. Rather than focusing on the issue, he is talking about my tweeting. Maybe he should get off Twitter and actually listen to what I am saying at the Dispatch Box. He is talking about a letter that UKGI says it did not ask Nick Read to write. The only possible answer is that Nick Read himself decided to write that letter. I did not ask him to write it, the Post Office says that it did not, and UKGI did not. These are the sorts of things I am talking about—continuing to make aspersions about Ministers. We have made the Post Office an independent body, we have an independent inquiry, and the information will come out in due course.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): There is no doubt that there was a bad culture in the Post Office for a very long time. It misled a significant number of Ministers, who, to put it gently, could have been more inquiring over the years. Has my right hon. Friend had time to reflect on the words of the non-executive members of the board representing the postmasters, who say that only days before she sacked the chairman, there was still a culture in which they were viewed as guilty and on the take? If that sacking has brought compensation to those people, who were traumatised and misled by the Post Office, and who had their lives destroyed, her decision will go down as a very welcome one.

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The comments by the members of the board who are former postmasters are very interesting. They are saying exactly what I am saying: that Henry Staunton was not doing a good job as Post Office chair. That leads me back to the point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who is more interested in attacking the Government than in looking at what even the members of the board are saying. It is important that we continue to give confidence to people that those organisations are run properly. That was the reason for the dismissal.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Having supported constituents in negotiations in relation to the historical shortfall scheme, I can tell the Secretary of State that, whatever the reason for it, the conduct of the Post Office and its agents was characterised by delay

and obstruction. That, in turn, led to the view taking hold among sub-postmasters that there was no point in making claims. Since the ITV drama aired, I have heard of several constituents making belated claims. What more are the Government doing to ensure that everybody out there who may have a claim is able to receive compensation?

Kemi Badenoch: The right hon. Gentleman's question is a good one. The fixed-sum awards show that we are taking the matter very seriously. I became Business Secretary in February last year, and my one priority was to ensure that people got their compensation as quickly as possible. I did everything that I possibly could, with the Minister with responsibility for the Post Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), whom I thank for his tireless efforts. He had been looking at the portfolio before I got the job as Business Secretary, and I knew that the work was in safe hands. We have worked together as a team, fought cross-departmentally to ensure that people got the compensation that they deserved, and brought in legislation just before December—well before the ITV drama. The cases that the right hon. Gentleman raises are important, as they show that there is still a lot of work to do, and we will continue doing it.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Given the Post Office's track record with accuracy, I am very glad that we have heard from the Secretary of State—I would rather take her assurances at the Dispatch Box than anything from a disgruntled, sacked former employee of the Post Office. Even during last week's recess, I still had constituents coming to me saying that they were affected by the Horizon scandal, so can the Secretary of State assure the people watching that the process is very quick and simple? People who still feel that they lost money during that horrendous period need to keep coming forward, because there is an easy process: they can fill in a form to make sure their voice is heard and that they get compensation.

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is quite right. I thank him for raising this issue, and also for the work he has done—as a former postmaster, he knows quite a lot about what has been going on. I reassure all of the people who have been affected by this scandal that it is something we take very seriously. When I became Business Secretary, I was absolutely horrified by the sheer scale of trauma that people had been going through. We want people to continue coming forwards; where they are not happy with the process, we will look at it again, but there is a formal process in place to ensure that all postmasters can be treated fairly, equally and equitably.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The allegations of limping towards the general election in relation to delaying compensation payments to postmasters mirror the Government's behaviour towards the infected blood scandal. They have had the final recommendations for that compensation since April 2023, with no action having been taken, so it seems to me that there is a pattern of behaviour: the Government act only when they are forced or shamed into doing so. With the infected blood scandal, we have been told repeatedly by Ministers that the Government are working at pace. What that really means is that they are limping at pace, are they not?

Kemi Badenoch: No, no, and no. It is a shame that the right hon. Lady stands up in the Chamber and says that the Government acted only when we were forced to do so, because she knows that we brought legislation to this House well before the ITV drama. She knows about the Horizon shortfall scheme, the group litigation order payments and the overturned convictions. She is trying to mix this issue up with the infected blood inquiry, knowing that I have just proved that the allegations made by Mr Staunton are completely false. I have said that minutes will be put on the record showing that this is not an issue that Labour wants to look at beyond political point scoring. I will not stand at this Dispatch Box and allow that to happen.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): At the weekend, leaks to newspapers appeared to show really poor embedded practices at the Post Office board, using language about our postmasters being “on the take” or “guilty”. What is my right hon. Friend doing to clean up the act?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is why we need effective leadership at the Post Office; and it is why I took the decision to dismiss Mr Staunton, among the other issues I have covered in this statement. We need people who care, and one of the things that worries me is that because Mr Staunton has decided to have revenge in the papers, it is going to be even harder for us to find people who will come in and do this very difficult job. I hope they will not be put off by the misinformation that has been in the papers.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for her prompt statement, and for laying out her version of events about the dismissal of Mr Staunton, the Post Office chairman. We have to accept her statements from the Dispatch Box, but I take exception to one point she made. She said that there was no evidence of stalling on compensation, but that evidence comes from the experience of my own constituents, Mr and Mrs Rudkin—their evidence to me was fundamental in unravelling this whole Post Office Horizon scandal. Susan Rudkin's criminal conviction was overturned in December 2020—she was one of the first nine. When I spoke to Mr and Mrs Rudkin only a few weeks ago, over three years after that conviction was overturned, they still had not received their compensation. If that is not evidence of stalling, what is?

Kemi Badenoch: I cannot comment on that specific case, because I do not have the details, but a fixed sum award is available should Mr and Mrs Rudkin wish to take it. There is a process and we will move as quickly as we can. I cannot speak specifically about why there has been that delay, but we are doing everything we can to get the money out to the postmasters as quickly as possible.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I have a once-proud former postmaster in my constituency, who ran the post office in Swanage. He fell foul of this scandal and was sacked, not prosecuted. His life was utterly ruined and he repaid the money that was owed. That was many years ago, but his wife is now very ill and he has still not had compensation. May I make two points? First, his lawyer tells me that the compensation scheme is taking

[Richard Drax]

too long. Secondly, may I ask the Secretary of State for an assurance that he will not be brushed off financially simply because he was not prosecuted? The lives of this man and his wife have been utterly ruined.

Kemi Badenoch: I know exactly the sort of people my hon. Friend is talking about, and it is really awful to hear about everything they have been through. I have a constituent who has talked to me about how this scandal has ruined her life. We owe it to them to do everything we can to ensure that they are fully compensated, and I can assure him that Ministers and officials are working on this every day. I know it is not always as quick as people would like, but we want to ensure that it is done properly and that there are no issues following that. I do not have the specific details of that case, but they can apply to the Horizon shortfall scheme, and if my hon. Friend brings it to the attention of the postal affairs Minister, we will look at it specifically.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Ministers have promised that the Government will bring in a new law to swiftly exonerate and compensate victims, so can the Secretary of State tell me why my constituent Chris Head has been offered only 13% of his compensation claim? How can sub-postmasters trust the Government or the Post Office to deliver full and fair compensation when they are still facing so much pushback on their compensation claims and receiving offers that go nowhere near financial restoration, let alone compensation for the injustice? Can I quickly add that the Secretary of State's suggestion that the Government would have acted in the same way had the ITV drama not been shown is thought to be completely unbelievable by most, and none more so than by the sub-postmasters themselves?

Kemi Badenoch: The fact is that when we took the legislation through the House in December, the Opposition Benches were empty. Opposition Members are the ones who decided to take a more keen interest after the drama; we have been working flat out. I do not have the specific details of her constituent's case, as she knows, but I will continue to repeat what I have said, which is that where people have not received compensation, we can look at that. There is a process, and there is also an independent panel they can appeal to, but the vast majority of people who have been getting offers are taking them.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Too often, quango bosses are rewarded for failure and can walk away with big payouts, and it would be a disgrace for the man who has done so little to get compensation for postmasters to get any himself. Can the Secretary of State confirm that she will block any such payments?

Kemi Badenoch: There will be no payments to Henry Staunton.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think the public squabble at the weekend further undermines people's confidence in what is going to happen and in the Government's assurances about compensating the people affected by the Post Office scandal. I tend to believe the view of the Secretary of State, simply because

the record of Post Office officials trying to cover up, pass the buck and cause confusion is on the record, and we know what they are doing. However, the fact remains that there are still people who have not had any offer of compensation, there is still £1 billion that has not been spent in compensation, and there are still people whose cases have not even been considered. Is not the best way of answering Henry Staunton for the Government to get on with the job and ensure that compensation is paid quickly, and for people to get the compensation they deserve?

Kemi Badenoch: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right. As I said earlier, 64% of people have received compensation, and we want to get that to 100% as quickly as possible. However, we want to ensure that people get the right amount and are compensated fairly, and that is why we have the process, including a point of appeal if they are unhappy with the offer.

The point the right hon. Gentleman made right at the beginning of his question is correct. The points made in the newspapers do undermine the work that we are doing. It was very disappointing to read those statements. It was also disappointing because I had done everything I could to try and keep this out of the news and do it behind closed doors, properly. I made sure when I gave public statements that I said I would not do HR in public. When I found out that it had been leaked to Sky News, I even called Sky News and asked—one of my assistants asked—for that not to be put out in the public domain before I had had a chance to speak to Henry Staunton. I did the same with the *Daily Mail*, which thankfully did listen. We also need the media to help us in this and not publish false allegations.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I am absolutely staggered that the Labour party now seems to be coming out in support of the disgraced Post Office management team—the same management team that oversaw the wrongful imprisonment of postmasters across the country, with hundreds of convictions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when push comes to shove, that lot over there would take the side of the grifters, not the grafters?

Kemi Badenoch: As my hon. Friend says, the Post Office leadership oversaw wrongful convictions. That is one of the reasons why we have had multiple changes, and this is just the latest to ensure that we get the right leadership in place. [Interruption.] I know that some Opposition Members are dealing with this properly, but we can see from the heckling that many of them came here thinking that they could score political points, and I am not allowing that to happen.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Many Members are of course angry and impatient about trying to get compensation and exoneration for all of the postmasters as soon as possible. If we are all honest, we as a whole Parliament should have been much more impatient much earlier. There are some rare exceptions to that, including my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who spoke earlier, and obviously Members on the Government side of the House as well. May I just clarify something about the process of Mr Staunton's dismissal? As I understand it, he found out about it from Sky News. I think the Secretary of State just added a piece of information, which is that

she then rang Sky News, before ringing him I think, to try and get them to stop running it. So she knew that this had already been leaked to Sky News, presumably from somebody in her Department. What investigation did she go through to find out who leaked it, and is that person still in post, because otherwise one might just worry that it might have been she herself who leaked it?

Kemi Badenoch: I knew that someone would ask that question. I in fact have evidence to show that I asked Sky News not to run the story. Of course I did not leak it—because if I had, that would have created legal risk if Mr Staunton had found out on the news before I had had a chance to speak to him. We have no idea how Sky News found out the information—several thousand people work in the Department for Business and Trade, and many more work at the Post Office and UK Government Investments. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is heckling, but the point I am making is that leaks are incredibly damaging and harmful; they create legal risk for the Department. I did not do so; I made multiple efforts with at least two media outlets to make sure that they did not create problems for Mr Staunton, and it is one of the reasons why it was very disappointing to see what he did in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): To be honest, I am afraid I do not think that the Business Secretary and her statement have helped us to get closer to the truth in this situation; it is a question of the Secretary of State's version of events and the former chairman's version of events. For clarity, and to try to draw a line under this and get to the truth, is the Secretary of State willing to refer herself to the ethics adviser?

Kemi Badenoch: I think that is a ridiculous assertion, and from someone who clearly did not listen to the statement. The difference between what I am saying and what Mr Staunton is saying is that I have officials who will back me up, I have members of the Post Office board who will back me up, and I have newspaper and media outlets that know that I tried to stop the story. The fact is that the hon. Lady just wants to believe Mr Staunton's allegations because that helps Labour politically, but they are not true. They need to listen to the truth and stop hoping for lies; that is not what our job is in this House.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If Henry Staunton is guilty of what the Secretary of State has accused him, it beggars belief that he was appointed only two years ago by this Government. May I ask her about Post Office investigations? I have yet another constituent who has come forward who was forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement by the Post Office and who has not been fully compensated for what they lost when they lost their business. Is it acceptable for the Post Office still to be involved with investigations, given how discredited those are? How can the victims of this scandal have any confidence whatever in the process that the Post Office is involved with?

Kemi Badenoch: The way we have been dealing with this issue at the Dispatch Box, the work that the inquiry has carried out and our commitment to look at individual cases and ensure that the process is working out properly is how the postmasters will have confidence in the system.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): In recent weeks, I have met with a number of constituents who are former sub-postmasters and who have explained the terrible impact that this scandal has had on their lives. Although they were not convicted by the Post Office, they had to pay large sums of money for shortfalls that frankly did not exist. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government's expectation is that those people will be compensated not only for the money they paid, but the financial and personal harm that this scandal caused in their lives?

Kemi Badenoch: That is definitely what we are trying to do. No one should be in a worse position than they were in before the scandal happened. Where we can provide additional compensation, we will be able to do so, and that is what the process is set up to do.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us will be concerned about the Department that oversees employment rights being one where thousands of people know that somebody is about to be sacked before they do. We would agree with the Secretary of State that the process is about giving the public confidence that when wrongs come to light, they will be righted. The challenge she faces is that the track record of recent decades is not good. It is not just about the Horizon scandal, but the nuclear veterans, Windrush, the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, the infected blood scandal and Grenfell. Time and again, it is the compensation schemes that become the story and a source of injustice. Rather than taking to Twitter, would it not be the right rejoinder for her to become the first Secretary of State to say, "We should put the management of compensation schemes involving Government out to an independent body so that everyone can have confidence"? I am sure she would find support from Opposition Members for that.

Kemi Badenoch: First, I have not said that thousands of people knew that Henry Staunton was being sacked; I said that there are thousands of people who work in the Department, and it could have been anybody who put that out there. It is important that we stick to what has been said on the record. The hon. Lady mentions that these scandals go over decades, and I remind her that the Horizon scandal started under a Labour Government; it is this Government who are beginning to fix it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On the shortcomings of the Horizon scheme, I raise with the Secretary of State the case of my constituent Mr Pennington, a sub-postmaster for 20 years, who went through 10 years of financial distress paying back shortfall amounts generated by errors in the Horizon system. The poorly designed Horizon scheme has paid back only part of the shortfalls of possibly £100,000—and only a paltry £1,500 for 10 years of financial stress and worry. I wrote to the postal affairs Minister four weeks ago and have not had a response. When will the shortcomings of the Horizon scheme be reviewed, so that sub-postmasters such as Mr Pennington receive full—not part—compensation for all those years of distress?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady is right to raise that matter. We are aware of the problem. We are working with the advisory board to see how we can fix it and

[Kemi Badenoch]

ensure that people get proper compensation. I have just been told by the postal affairs Minister that the letter she is expecting should be with her shortly.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. She will be aware that many post office branches have closed in recent years, including the Clapham Common post office in my constituency, which is due to close on 6 March. In her statement, she said:

“Right now, the Post Office’s No. 1 priority must be delivering compensation to postmasters”.

Does she agree that millions of pounds spent on the Post Office trying to pay innocent sub-postmasters would have been better spent on ensuring that we keep our vital post offices up and down the country?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her tireless work campaigning to save Clapham post office; I know she has had many meetings with the postal affairs Minister. We should be able both to keep post offices open and to compensate.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): As this is a genuine national scandal, the exoneration of sub-postmasters with criminal convictions requires that they be treated equally, with a shared speedy and common approach, across the UK. Both I and the recently reappointed Justice Minister in Northern Ireland have written to Ministers asking for Northern Ireland to be included in the forthcoming legislation. However, I understand that the Government are currently not minded to do that with the devolved Administrations. Will the Secretary of State confirm that Northern Ireland will be part of that legislation, which I hope will be brought forward soon?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will know that Stormont is now up and running, and that we will be having conversations with devolved Governments on

the best way to resolve this. We do not have an answer now, but we are aware of the issue and are working on it.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The reports on the weekend were extremely alarming, given how sub-postmasters have been treated in recent years. On the obvious question, can the Secretary of State give any assurance or guarantee that the compensation will be paid and taken forward before the general election is called? That surely is what sub-postmasters would ask for, and it is the least that they deserve.

Kemi Badenoch: That is absolutely the right thing to do. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, because it gives me another opportunity to restate that the very idea that compensation would be delayed until after the election is complete nonsense. It does not even make political sense. We want to ensure that people get their money as quickly as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her positive answers. Across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, hundreds of postmasters and postmistresses are still awaiting compensation for these wrongdoings. While it is understood that this is a sensitive subject for many, will she provide an update on the expected timescale for compensation of everyone who is entitled across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? The fact of the matter is, some people have waited two years, three years and longer, and it really cannot go on.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman is right: it cannot go on. I want to see everyone get their money as quickly as possible. By the end of this year, everybody should have received it. That is certainly what I am working towards.

Death of Alexei Navalny

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): With permission, I would like to update the House on the death of Alexei Navalny. I am sure that I speak for the whole House in sending our deepest condolences to Mr Navalny's family, friends and supporters. We are appalled at the news of his death.

Mr Navalny dedicated his life, with great bravery, to exposing corruption. He called for free and fair politics and held the Kremlin to account. He was an inspiration to millions, and many Russians felt that he gave them a voice. The Russian authorities saw him as a threat. President Putin feared even to speak his name. Putin's Russia imprisoned him on fabricated charges, poisoned him and sent him to an Arctic penal colony. Mr Navalny was a man of huge courage and iron will. Even from his remote prison cell, he persisted in advocating for the rights of the Russian people.

No one should doubt the dreadful nature of the Russian system. Years of mistreatment at the hands of the state had a serious effect on Mr Navalny's health. His death must be investigated fully and transparently. The Russian authorities must urgently confirm the location of Mr Navalny's body to his family and allow them access to it.

On Friday, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office summoned the Russian ambassador to express our outrage at Mr Navalny's death. We made it clear that we hold the Russian authorities fully responsible. As the Foreign Secretary said over the weekend, those responsible must be "held to account". I assure the House that we are working at pace to explore all options.

As a mark of respect, the Foreign Secretary and his G7 counterparts began their meeting on Saturday with a minute's silence in honour of Mr Navalny. Our ambassador in Moscow laid flowers at the memorial to victims of political repression on Saturday. The ideals for which Mr Navalny stood and died will live forever.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

5.9 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This weekend, my right hon. Friends the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary attended the Munich Security Conference and heard Yulia Navalnaya, Alex Navalny's wife, speaking with remarkable courage and conviction in a moment of utter personal grief. I share the Minister's comments, and I am sure that the whole House will join us in sending our deepest condolences to her and her family.

The death of Alexei Navalny was shocking yet cruelly predictable. Let us be crystal clear: one person above all others bears the overwhelming responsibility for his death and should be held accountable. Alexei Navalny is yet another victim of the oppressive system that Putin has built, of which he was such a potent critic. He was not a saint but he fought relentlessly, optimistically and with good humour against the corruption and kleptocracy of modern Russia. The last few years of his life were a

profile of courage. After an assassination attempt with a chemical weapon, there would have been no shame at all in seeking a quiet life. Instead, he chose to return not just to the fray but to Russia. He knew exactly what he would face, but Alexei Navalny believed relentlessly and indefatigably in a different Russia that could be, in his words, not only free but happy. He once wrote from prison:

"Everything will be all right. And, even if it isn't, we'll have the consolation of having lived honest lives."

Alexei Navalny's courage, his campaign against corruption and his dream of a democratic Russia will live on in those brave Russians who continue to speak up. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an illegal act of aggression. Navalny called it a stupid war built on lies. It has been devastating for Ukraine, but also for Russia, which edges further into darkness, propaganda and paranoia. Alexei Navalny challenged not just Russian autocracy and kleptocracy but past western hypocrisy and enablement. His campaign was about not just Moscow but London. We must deliver the changes that he campaigned for.

The reality is that we have still much further to go, and it is therefore disappointing that the Minister has shown up with nothing new to say in response to last week's appalling news. Will the Government review further sanctions on Russia, including an assessment of the full Navalny list? Will the Minister launch a new effort to target those networks responsible for facilitating and enabling international corruption?

There has been little or no action against breaches of new Russian sanctions brought in since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, so will he strengthen not just our sanctions regime but how those sanctions are enforced? Will he support calls to establish an international anti-corruption court? Will he turn rhetoric on frozen Russian state assets into tangible action? When will the Government get on with it? It is a source of shame that under successive Tory Governments, Britain became the money laundering capital of the world. Our tributes to Alexei Navalny must be more than just rhetorical and include tangible action at home to clean up the financial crime fuelling autocrats abroad.

Finally, I want to ask the Minister about Vladimir Kara-Murza. I have met his brave wife and mother and heard directly from them. Vladimir is another brave and vocal opponent of Putin, languishing in prison for his beliefs. He is also a British citizen. We know what Putin is capable of. What is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's current assessment of his welfare, and what steps are being taken to support him and his family?

The tragic death of Alexei Navalny has reverberated across the world. It must serve as a reminder of Putin's menace and underscore our responsibility to oppose him in Ukraine, on the world stage and here in London. I hope that the Minister can provide the House with some assurance that today's statement will be accompanied with commensurate, bold and urgent action.

Leo Docherty: We will act. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his response. I endorse everything that he said about the heroically brave Mrs Navalnaya. Those in this House who watched her video early this morning will have been extremely moved by her fortitude and courage at this difficult time. He used the word

[*Leo Docherty*]

“courage” with regard to Mr Navalny, which was absolutely appropriate. Those of us who watched the footage of Mr Navalny returning to Russia subsequent to the Novichok attack were humbled by his audacity and his bravery. His hope for a free and happy Russia must remain in the hearts of the many Russians who, despite extraordinary press censorship and repression, deserve to have the opportunity to live up to that promise.

It would be premature for me to comment on the prospect of future sanctions in addition to those that have already been put in place with regard to Mr Navalny’s poisoning, but I can assure the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and the House that we are working at pace and looking at all options in that regard. Of course, we will continue our active diplomatic work to crack down on the networks of corruption surrounding the Russian state and its kleptocracy. Sanctions evasion is a particularly important component of that and is something that our diplomatic teams around the world, in concert with our allies, are focused on.

The hon. Gentleman asked a relevant question about seizing versus freezing assets. We continue to work with G7 allies to look at all legal routes to ensure that frozen assets might be used to help the reconstruction effort by those who deserve them. We will keep the House updated as and when we make progress on that. We do seek to act in that regard, and that is how we can honour Mr Navalny’s memory and his legacy—by acting, not just making rhetorical statements.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza. Through our ambassador in Moscow, we continue to make representations inquiring after his health and wellbeing and seeking consular access to him. I can confirm that the Foreign Secretary remains in contact with Mrs Kara-Murza and continues to support the family.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Alexei Navalny was murdered. It is important that we in this House call it out for what it was, because that is what he deserves. Following his murder, I was also in Munich, where I heard his wife, Yulia, ask for us to stand by her. That is what we must now do. The US threatened more than a year ago that there would be significant repercussions if Navalny was murdered; Biden must now deliver on that threat, or we will see more lives taken, such as that of Vladimir Kara-Murza. I reiterate the calls for the seizing of central bank assets. That has been done before: the UN Security Council froze and seized Iraqi assets. We have a precedent; there is no reason for us to find new legislation or other ways to do so. Beyond that, we need to pursue a special tribunal on the crime of aggression. Will we consider also sanctioning Russia’s Deposit Insurance Agency? Finally, to hit the heart of Putin’s economy, will we urge the US to release more oil and therefore drive down prices?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend speaks with authority, and I am grateful for her reflections on her meeting in Munich. She is right to use the word “murder”. We seek

to hold the Russian state and leadership to account. Of course, I cannot comment on the American position, but on our policy with regard to Russian state assets, we will continue to look at the appropriate legal path to ensure that that which is frozen might be utilised to bring benefit to those affected by this outrageous and illegal war in Ukraine.

On accountability, a special tribunal is one of the things we are considering, together with our Ukrainian allies and Sir Howard Morrison. There has been a large degree of institutional work together with the Ukrainians and the G7 on that. We will continue to work to find the best mechanism possible that might sit alongside the International Criminal Court. Of course, the ICC has already indicted Putin, and that indictment for crimes relating to trafficking children had an impact on his travel plans. Sometimes the cogs of justice can turn slowly, but they do turn surely.

My hon. Friend made a good point about the insurance agency, which I cannot comment on now. She also asked about the flows of oil; again, I cannot comment on that. We do have a laser-like focus on the economic impact of our sanctions in the round. The House should have confidence that the economic impact of our actions—taken as part of the G7 response and wider international actions on sanctions—on Putin’s ability to fund his war has been very significant: to the tune of billions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): We are, all of us, appalled at this murder and the timing of it. It was designed to send a message and it needs a serious response. I am grateful for sight of the statement, as far as it goes. I think the Minister would acknowledge that it does not go very far, so I would press for further action. The Minister will be aware that the EU Foreign Affairs Council is meeting in Brussels as we speak. It is looking at a range of measures. Can he assure us that the UK will be part of those efforts, in particular with regard to the implementation of Magnitsky sanctions? I am looking not for an announcement now, but to ensure we are co-ordinated with that. I reiterate my own calls for the sequestration of the Russian assets that have been seized. This death—this murder—was designed to send a message. A serious message must be the response to it; if there is one, it will have SNP support.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful, as ever, to the SNP spokesperson for his tone and his support. Of course, it would be premature for me to comment. By convention, we never comment on sanctions from the Dispatch Box, but of course we are looking at pace at all options in response to this outrageous event. In that context, we will continue to liaise with US and EU allies—that is a matter of course. The hon. Gentleman asked a good question about sequestration. Again, I cannot comment, other than to say that we continue to look at the most viable legal route to bring about that good.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell the House what advantages remain in maintaining diplomatic relations with this murderous and barbarous regime?

Leo Docherty: The benefit is to deliver messages of condemnation and outrage, and to continue to advocate for consular access for those held by the Russian regime.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I want to turn to the economic impact of the sanctions, which the Minister alluded to. A loophole in our sanctions regime means that countries such as China and India import Russian crude oil, process it and then sell it into the UK as refined oil. In 2023, we imported 5.2 million barrels of this oil. That means that we sent something like £141 million in tax revenue to the Kremlin's war chest. Britain is also the biggest insurer of Russian oil moved by sea, most of which is sold at prices well above the price cap—again, violating sanctions. Does the Minister agree that tough words are no substitute for tough actions, especially after the shocking murder of the heroic Alexei Navalny? Will he agree to report back to Parliament before Easter with proposals to stop the sanctions-busting?

Leo Docherty: We should have confidence that the economic impact of sanctions has been very significant. Putin has been denied hundreds of billions of dollars because of the collective action of the G7 nations. Is it perfect? No, it is not. Are we looking at ways of making it more effective? Yes, we are. Will we keep the House updated? Of course.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Yulia Navalnaya's speech at the Munich security conference changed the tone of that entire summit. She called for the west to act. Does the Minister agree with me that Alexei Navalny's death underlines Putin's determination to emulate Stalin in quashing free speech in Russia and extending Russia's influence beyond its borders? When we speak of sanctions, might we also consider pressing the Americans to expedite the \$60 billion that Ukraine needs? One way we can honour Navalny's life is by making sure Ukraine wins and Russia loses. To that extent, can I also suggest that while diplomatic back channels need to remain open, maybe it is time to dismiss the Russian ambassador?

Leo Docherty: We will continue to lead by example in terms of our provision of lethal aid and humanitarian aid, and we hope and expect that our closest allies will do the same. The impact of our provision has been very, very significant. My right hon. Friend made a good point about Putin's leadership. What this event actually shows is the fact that Putin is fearful: fearful of those, like Mr Navalny, who have the courage to challenge him and speak truth to power. That is the most potent action in the face of a cruel, repressive tyrannical regime like Mr Putin's, which ultimately is quite brittle.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): At the end of February last year, Alexei Navalny clarified his position on Crimea. He talked about how the borders of Ukraine and Russia were internationally recognised, and had been defined in 1991. Does the Minister agree that while it is not our place to choose the Governments of Russia, we long for a time when Russia will be governed by a Government who respect sovereignty and territorial integrity?

Leo Docherty: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, and there is no inevitability about the Russian people being ruled by a tyrannical latter-day Tsar. Mr Navalny

knew that, and his messages and brilliantly produced and humorous videos were watched by millions of people in Russia because many millions of Russian people seek that alternative.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is clear that domestically the Putin regime is a criminal racket, and that internationally it has brought war against Ukraine and threatens many others. What discussions are the UK Government having, and what diplomatic efforts are they making, with other NATO members that do not pay the minimum 2% of GDP towards our common defence?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend has asked a very good question, and we continue to make that point to our NATO allies in a full-throated way. As he knows, NATO is a growing organisation with a growing potency and capability, but collectively we must and will put our money where our mouth is.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I declare an interest, in that I was the director of the British Council in St Petersburg from 2005 until 2008. I am also honoured to call Vladimir Kara-Murza my friend. I met him shortly before he insisted on flying back to Russia although many of us urged him not to. It is a measure of the man that he did that—and, indeed, we are talking about somebody who the Russian authorities have tried to poison twice. With heroism similar to that of Navalny, Kara-Murza has stood up against the mafia state that is represented by Vladimir Putin.

It was good to hear the Minister say that our ambassador in Moscow is doing his best to gain access to Kara-Murza, but may I press him on the issue of Kara-Murza's medical condition? He is weakened by the two attempts to poison him, and we are desperately worried that he may well be on the list in terms of what the Kremlin may be wanting to do next. His medical health is of the utmost importance, so can the Minister please say what steps are being taken specifically to ensure that it is being looked after?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman knows from his own experience the system that we are dealing with. The direct answer to his question is that we continue to make representations at the very highest level to the senior membership, or leadership, of the Russian state, saying that we expect Mr Kara-Murza's health to be attended to, that we expect him to receive medical care, and that we expect no threat to be made to his life. That message is carried by our ambassador directly to Russian Government Ministers, and, in addition, UK Ministers including the Foreign Secretary continue to engage with Mrs Kara-Murza to offer the family full support.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the murder of Alexei Navalny, following the earlier murder of Boris Nemtsov, shows the absolute refusal of Putin to tolerate any kind of genuine democratic opposition? Will the Government therefore give absolutely no credibility or recognition to the sham pretence that the co-called presidential election taking place next month in Russia will undoubtedly be?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend speaks on the basis of knowledge, and he is entirely right about the sham election that will take place on 12 March. The murders

[*Leo Docherty*]

of which he has spoken do show a terrible pattern, but as I said earlier, we should not feel that repressive government is an inevitability in Russia. The Russian people have a hope that there can be a different Government, and that is why Mr Navalny's message was received so well.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): All those who care about democracy and free speech should condemn the murder of Alexei Navalny, but one of the most meaningful things the United Kingdom Government could do to honour his memory is to take steps to deal effectively with the dirty Russian money being laundered in this country, particularly as being made through nefarious means by allies of Putin. What are the Government going to do to deal more effectively with the dirty Russian money being laundered in the United Kingdom?

Leo Docherty: The House should have confidence and should be proud of the fact that we have sanctioned more than 1,900 individuals and entities. There is no space or place for dirty Russian money in the United Kingdom.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I just want to reinforce the point about Vladimir Kara-Murza. He is a British citizen, and he is now the most high-profile political prisoner in Russia. In my conversations with the Minister and his officials, when I have talked about prisoner swaps, which I was doing at the behest of the Navalny team, it was made quite clear that doing that encourages state hostage taking. I accept that argument, difficult thought it is, but unfortunately it comes at a price. In my conversations with Evgenia Kara-Murza, she is adamant that she now wants everything possible done to get Vladimir out, despite the fact that he went back of his own accord, because his health is in a fragile condition, and if Putin can kill Navalny, he can kill Kara-Murza. There is some criticism that the Government have not done everything possible in the past. Will the Minister reassure me that every option and every conceivable course of action to get Kara-Murza out—potentially including negotiated swaps with Russian spies in Sweden or wherever—will be looked at? Otherwise, he will be next.

Leo Docherty: As my hon. Friend said, we do not and would not countenance a policy of prisoner swaps, but of course we continue to make every effort to support Mrs Kara-Murza and to seek the release of Vladimir.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Holding political prisoners is not a sign of strength; it is a sign of weakness, and Mr Navalny's murder should be rightly condemned. However, right now in the UK the journalist Julian Assange is in Belmarsh prison for blowing the whistle on atrocities in Iraq. Does the Minister agree that it is important for the UK Government to measure themselves against the same standards if they are going to criticise others? [*Interruption.*]

Leo Docherty: I think the hon. Gentleman can sense that the House knows there is no equivalence.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): In 2020, Alexei Navalny was treated in hospital in Berlin, having been poisoned in Russia with a toxin subsequently identified

as Novichok, also used in the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018. Given the use of the same toxin in such similar circumstances, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is overwhelmingly likely that agents of the Russian state were responsible for the attempted murder of Navalny in 2020 and that the current protestations by the Russian state that it was not responsible for his death last week are entirely risible? How are the Government ensuring that those who are responsible are brought to book and tried before a court?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend is correct. That is why we demand a full and transparent investigation, because those individuals involved must be held to account.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The whole House should be worried about developments such as those at the weekend with the murder of Navalny because the Russian state, now run by a bunch of criminals, seems arrogant enough to assassinate opposition people outside its own boundaries, invade nations, threaten other nations and now suppress democracy in its own country. It is disappointing that the Minister is saying today only that he will look at all the options. Will he come to this House very soon with a list of additional sanctions that we can impose on the regime and with ideas about how we can isolate it diplomatically?

Leo Docherty: We are working at pace on working up all options, but I can confirm that as and when action is taken, we will keep this House informed. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that work is under way at pace.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): This appalling murder is not really about the prison guards. It is about who gave the order, and that can only be Putin. Does the Minister agree that we need to intensify the sanctions against him personally and against his regime, and that we need to pursue all measures to hold him to account for this murder?

Leo Docherty: I agree. Apart from anything else, it is a matter of justice and international law. The cogs turn slowly, but we should have confidence that they do turn.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The gruesome treatment and appalling murder of Alexei Navalny are a stark reminder, if one were needed, of the evils of Putin's regime. Time and again, we have asked what progress the Government are making on overcoming the legal concerns about repurposing frozen Russian assets to support the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine, as countries like Canada and Estonia are already doing. Yet again, we have had an empty response this afternoon. Will the Minister now prioritise this issue and come back to the House as soon as possible with a real plan for how the UK can use those assets to help Ukraine?

Leo Docherty: We are working at pace. It is urgently important and, of course, we will keep the House updated.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It takes an extraordinary person to go back to a country where he knows he will be imprisoned, tortured and then murdered. All our thoughts are with Alexei Navalny's wife, and our best wishes go to her.

The best way to commemorate Alexei Navalny's tragic death is to ensure that Ukraine does not fall. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that he is straining every diplomatic sinew to ensure that our allies, both in NATO and the EU, give Ukraine what it needs to keep these Russian thugs at bay and to regain its country?

Leo Docherty: I entirely endorse my hon. Friend's comments about Mr Navalny's courage, and about the sense of hope that he gave to people in Russia because of that courage.

My hon. Friend asks about Ukraine. Of course, we seek to lead by example by increasing our contribution of both lethal aid and humanitarian support. Our collective response through NATO shows that Putin was quite wrong if he thought he could walk into Ukraine and conquer the entire country.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let us call this what it is: state-sponsored terror by Putin and his regime. We know that Putin and his regime attempted to murder Navalny three years ago with the same Novichok that was used against Sergei Skripal in the streets of the United Kingdom. The difference between today's response and the response we saw from the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), is that we took action immediately—not just us but our allies in Europe and North America—by expelling Russian diplomats.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) mentioned Magnitsky sanctions, and we need to act now. Putin needs to get the message that we will stand up to Russian terror. Why is Russia participating in this week's G20 summit? We need to send a very clear message to Putin, and the only message this international thug will understand is that we will take the swiftest action against him.

Leo Docherty: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's sentiment, and we are acting. Sanctions have deprived Putin of billions of dollars of revenue to fund his war machine. We would never comment prematurely from the Dispatch Box about future sanctions, but we will continue to do everything we can to ensure that he is deprived of the ability to wage his illegal and evil war.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I strongly support what Members have said about the Minister needing to come back in, say, a week's time to tell us more about what action can be taken.

The Minister spoke about working with the opposition to Putin. When I went out with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy some years ago to try to find allies that we could work with, it was incredibly depressing how few we found in organised political parties. I also went out for the Pussy Riot trial, and I felt the strength of feeling, but they are clearly not people we could work with on that level. What can we do? Navalny and Nemtsov are gone. Who can we work with to try to support the people who oppose Putin?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady is right, and she makes a good point. Putin's tyrannical regime leaves absolutely no civic or political space for any kind of freedom of expression or political engagement, no matter how moderate. What we can do is ensure that Russian people

have more access to the truth and to better information, which is why a lot of our energy goes into working against Russian disinformation across the region.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The House and the whole country are easily and instinctively united in condemnation of this latest evidence of Vladimir Putin's brutality, but is the Minister not a little uncomfortable that he makes his statement on the same day that his colleagues in the Home Office have announced restrictions on visa access for those from Ukraine fleeing the war against Russia? Does he not understand that we diminish the effect of our outrage unless we are seen to be doing absolutely everything, at home and abroad, to support our Ukrainian allies?

Leo Docherty: I know from my own constituency, as all Members will know, that our collective response, whether from the Government, local government or at an individual level, has been consistently generous and open hearted.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I express my condolences to Alexei Navalny's friends and family, and to the Russian people as a whole. What has happened to Navalny is an indictment on any freedom-loving people, as I believe the majority of Russians to be. As colleagues have said, we are keen to understand the effectiveness of the sanctions and I hope the Minister will come back to the House about that, because currently Putin seems to be able to do what he wants with impunity. In the powerful documentary about him, one of Navalny's last statements was that it only takes good people to do nothing for people like Putin to survive. We must make sure that does not happen.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady puts her finger on the good point that Navalny essentially gave people hope. That is why his message will resonate and why, despite his murder, he leaves a powerful legacy, which will continue to inspire the Russian people.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The murder of Alexei Navalny reminds us of the scale of the threat from Russia, not least to Ukraine—it is, of course, the second anniversary of the Russian invasion this week. Following the earlier question about the changes to the Ukraine family scheme, how can those changes be justified given the ongoing threat to Ukrainian families? The announcement was sneaked out today and comes into immediate effect this afternoon. How can that be justified given that there are Ukrainian families who want to be reunited with relatives in the UK?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman will know he should address that question to the Home Office. He mentioned the second anniversary of the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Earlier today, I had a good meeting with the Ukrainian chargé d'affaires at which we looked at images of the Ukrainian Red Cross delivering aid in some of the worst afflicted cities in Ukraine. Each Member of the House will choose how to remember and commemorate the second anniversary, but I am grateful to him for raising it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I express my condolences to the friends and family of Alexei Navalny, but can the Minister explain why we

[Andrew Bridgen]

can have a statement on the untimely death of one foreign national but we cannot have a statement on the ongoing excess deaths of 100,000 of our own citizens, many of whom have died suddenly? [Interruption.] Is it because this death fits the Government's narrative, but the death of our own citizens does not? Or is it a parody of Stalin, whereby one death is a tragedy but 100,000 deaths is merely a statistic?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman has answered his own question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. My thoughts are with the family, wife, children and friends of Alexei Navalny at this difficult time. The fear of the disappeared will resonate with some citizens in Northern Ireland, where so many families have not been able to lay their loved ones to rest. That is apparent in news stories today about Navalny's mother trying to get access to her son. Does the Minister agree that all efforts must be made to ensure Navalny's body is returned to the family so that they can understand, have a full investigation and lay their loved one to rest?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman is right. Our ambassador has today made a representation directly to the Russian Government to release Mr Navalny's body back to the family. We will keep making representations until that takes place.

Antisemitism in the UK

5.45 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): With permission, I will make a statement on antisemitism in the United Kingdom.

Last week, the Community Security Trust published its latest report on antisemitic incidents. It made for deeply disturbing reading. It showed that there were 4,103 instances of anti-Jewish racist hatred recorded across the UK in 2023. That is the highest annual total ever reported to the Community Security Trust. It is a 147% rise from the 1,662 antisemitic incidents the previous year, and 81% higher than the previous yearly record of 2,261 incidents, reported in 2021. Most shockingly, more than two thirds of the incidents reported last year occurred on or after 7 October, when Hamas perpetrated its barbaric terrorist attack on Israel. The report also indicates that antisemitism began spiking before Israel's military response had begun: the week immediately following 7 October saw 416 antisemitic incidents reported to the CST, which is higher than any subsequent week.

The CST's findings, which tally with increases in offending reported by the police, are nothing short of a disgrace and an outrage. Examples highlighted in the report are shocking and reprehensible. I urge all Members to read the report because it shines a light on the scale and character of this disgraceful problem. The only reasonable conclusion to draw is that members of Britain's Jewish community are suffering a level of hatred and abuse which is frankly shameful.

There is no excuse for the behaviour outlined in the CST report or seen in some of the shocking incidents that have occurred recently. The situation in the middle east does not and will never give anyone the right to harass or intimidate others. I repeat, no one ever has that right. This Government will not stand for antisemitism of any kind. It is important to note that the police have comprehensive powers to deal with abhorrent conduct of this nature. For example, in the case of public order offences, where there is proof of racial or religious hostility on the part of the offender, offenders will be charged with racially or religiously aggravated versions of those offences, which will result in an uplift to their sentence. Furthermore, inciting racial hatred is an offence under the Public Order Act 1986, and anyone engaged in that appalling behaviour should expect to be arrested. Whenever and wherever criminality involving antisemitism occurs, this Government expect the police to investigate the incident fully and work with the Crown Prosecution Service to bring the perpetrators to justice.

We have been clear both before and since the 7 October attacks that we will do whatever it takes to keep Britain's Jewish community safe. We have taken strong steps to confront the poison of antisemitism head on. We have increased funding to bolster security at Jewish schools, synagogues and other sites. A total of £36 million will be made available for these crucial protective measures across 2023-24 and the following financial year.

The Community Security Trust is an essential partner in our efforts to keep the Jewish community safe, and I pay tribute to it for the brilliant work that it does. The Home Office meets regularly with CST staff and co-operates closely with them. We keep dialogue open constantly, and both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister

have regular meetings with them. None the less, it should sadden us that these kind of precautions are necessary in the UK, in 2024. The work of organisations such as the CST is more important than ever, and we must remain vigilant. That includes sending the message loud and clear from this House—I hope from the whole House—that any instances of criminal behaviour will be identified, and those responsible caught and punished.

We are working closely with the police to ensure that hate crime and expressions of support for terrorist organisations are met with the full force of the law. The idea that anyone could celebrate or valorise Hamas for the appalling terrorist atrocities that it perpetrated on 7 October is beyond comprehension. It goes completely against the values of this country. Last month, we proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organisation that actively promotes and encourages terrorism and is responsible for spreading antisemitism. Hamas itself, of course, is already a proscribed organisation. Anyone who belongs to, or invites or expresses support for, a proscribed organisation is committing an offence. The penalties upon conviction are a maximum term of 14 years in prison and/or an unlimited fine.

The right to protest is of course a fundamental part of our democracy, but that right cannot be exercised in a way that intimidates others or invokes fear in them. It is totally unacceptable for a small minority to incite hatred and commit crimes. The police have powers to deal with that, and we expect them to act. Where further powers are needed, we will not hesitate to act, which is why we recently announced a new package of measures to crack down on dangerous disorder—in particular, that committed at protests.

The CST's findings on incidents within the sphere of higher education were especially disturbing. No one should be subject to antisemitic abuse while at university. Every effort must be taken to prevent hatred from flourishing in schools, universities and colleges. That is why we announced a further £7 million of funding to help to tackle antisemitism in education.

We are equally unwavering in our stance towards hatred and abuse directed at British Muslims. The Government have been in regular contact with representatives of the Muslim community, and we are aware of an increased number of reports of anti-Muslim hatred as well. That is of course unacceptable, and we have made additional funding available for protective security measures at mosques and Muslim faith schools.

Last month, we marked Holocaust Memorial Day. Just as we remember the horrors of the past, we must remain alert to present-day dangers. Antisemitism is an ancient hatred, which has reared its ugly head in the most abhorrent and evil ways throughout history. The CST's findings show that we have much more to do if we are to rid our society of this poison, but the Government will never stop trying. We will never give up on this fight. It matters too much. Of course, that extends to ensuring that Members of Parliament are protected from acts of similar hatred, which some have suffered. I am thinking particularly of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who is in the Chamber, whose office suffered a terrible arson attack just a few weeks ago.

To the antisemites, we say this: "You will not win. You will be shown up for the despicable racists you are." To our Jewish friends and colleagues, I say this: "We stand

with you. We understand your fears and we share your pain. We will protect you—today, tomorrow and always." I commend this statement to the House.

5.53 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, and advance sight of it. The appalling and intolerable rise in antisemitism in Britain in recent months, as set out in the report of the Community Security Trust last week, is a stain on our society. We must never relent in our work to root it out—something that I know the whole House will want to affirm.

The more than 4,000 incidents in 2023 alone are an urgent reminder of the responsibility that we all have to stamp out the scourge of antisemitism wherever it is found. I join the Minister in thanking the CST for the remarkable and tireless work that it does each day, alongside the police, to keep our Jewish community safe. Having supported and worked with it over many years, I know the incredible forensic work that it does in monitoring antisemitism, and the physical protection that it provides for Jewish schools, synagogues and other community events. We owe it our thanks.

We welcome and support the Government's commitment of additional funding for the CST. The incidents that it reports include a violent, abusive attack on a Jewish man on his way home from synagogue, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, and a 200% increase in antisemitic incidents at universities. Just 10 days ago, a Jewish student residence in Leeds, Hillel House, was vandalised with antisemitic graffiti. For the years they are studying, universities are students' homes. No one should ever feel unsafe in their home, or wherever they are. Everybody has the right to live in freedom from fear.

The CST's report also found the number of online incidents of antisemitism rising by 257%—an ancient hatred being resuscitated through modern means, to proliferate and promote extremism. I agree with the Minister that it is unconscionable that one of the steepest surges in antisemitism came in the week following Hamas's barbaric terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October—the deadliest day for Jews since the holocaust—with individuals in this country celebrating those scenes of unimaginable horror. There must be zero tolerance for the glorification of proscribed terrorist groups on Britain's streets. We support the proscribing of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and ensuring that those who commit antisemitic hate crimes always face the full force of the law.

In the weeks following 7 October, I met the CST together with Tell MAMA, which monitors Islamophobia and has also identified a huge increase in Islamophobic incidents and hate. They were united in their call for an end to hatred and prejudice, to antisemitism, and to Islamophobia. We must never allow the terrible events and conflicts in the middle east, which cause deep distress across our communities, to lead to increased tension, hatred, prejudice, abuse or crimes in our communities at home. I welcome the points that the Minister made about ensuring that extremist incidents on marches are also addressed with the full force of the law, but I press him to go further in a few key areas.

First, the counter-extremism strategy is now eight years out of date. There are reports that the work has been delayed again. When will the Government come forward

[Yvette Cooper]

with an updated strategy? The Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the Government's own experts have warned that there is a gap in the law around hateful extremism that is allowing toxic antisemitic views and conspiracy theories to be spread, and making it harder to police them. I have asked this of Ministers before: will the Minister update us on what action is being taken?

Will the Government also urgently look again at the decision that Ministers took around a year ago to downgrade the reporting of non-crime hate incidents, particularly around Islamophobia and antisemitism, to ensure that those who engage in vile and vitriolic religious hatred can always be properly monitored and identified by the police?

Finally, I ask particularly about online antisemitism, which has increased. We have seen a huge increase on X, formerly Twitter, at the same time as some of its monitoring and standards have been downgraded. Have the Government raised that directly with Elon Musk and X? I urge them to do so, and to set out how the Online Harms Bill will address that, because there are real concerns that it will not go far enough to address the changes.

We stand ready to work with the Government on this. Those on both sides of the House will want us to stand together with Jewish communities across the country, in solidarity against hatred, prejudice and antisemitism in all its forms. All of us must stand together and say that antisemitism must never have any place in the United Kingdom.

Chris Philp: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for her comments and questions. She asked about protests. I agree that it is completely unacceptable for people to seek to intimidate others, to incite racial hatred or to glorify terrorism. In fact, it is illegal. The police have made 600 arrests at protests since 7 October, and we in Government are urging the police to use all their powers to ensure that hatred is not incited in the course of the marches that have happened.

The shadow Home Secretary rightly asked about online safety, where a great deal of hatred is fomented. We are engaging with online platforms on a regular basis; I think the Home Secretary is due to travel to California next week to discuss these issues, among others. From memory, schedule 7 to the Online Safety Act 2023 contains a list of priority offences, one of which is inciting hatred. When that part of the Act comes into force, large social media platforms will be under an obligation to take proactive steps in advance, not retrospective steps after the event, in order to prevent priority offences from taking place. That will include hate crime of the kind she mentioned.

The right hon. Lady asked about non-crime hate incidents. The changes to the guidance were designed to ensure that minor spats between neighbours, or expressions of essentially legitimate political views, do not end up wasting police time by getting recorded. Where things do not meet the criminal threshold but might be useful in pursuing a criminal investigation later, they will still be recorded. To be clear, inciting racial hatred is a criminal offence under sections 17 and 18 of the Public Order Act 1986; causing harassment, alarm and distress

through threatening and abusive language, or causing fear of violence, is an offence under sections 4, 4A and 5 of that Act; and there are various other criminal offences as well. Those things meet the criminal threshold and are therefore not affected by any change to non-crime hate incident recording rules in any event.

Updating the law and the approach to extremism is kept under continual review. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities spends a great deal of time considering the question of extremism. In relation to criminal law, just a week or two ago we announced various changes for which we intend to legislate via Government amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill when it comes back to the House on Report in a few weeks' time. Those measures will tighten up a number of areas relating to protest, including removing the "reasonable and lawful excuse" defence to various public order offences, making it easier for the police to have a blanket prohibition on face coverings, which are often menacing but also make it difficult to identify people committing criminal offences at protests. We will make it an offence to climb on key war memorials, which is grossly disrespectful, and introduce other measures as well. We keep things under continual review, so if further changes to the law are needed, the right hon. Lady can be assured that we will make them.

It is this Government's view that antisemitism is a scourge that must be fought online, on the streets, through the law and through the courts. I am sure the whole House will be united in that fight.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his hard work and genuine commitment to seriously tackling this issue, and I was pleased to work with him and CST last year. The reality is that the Jewish community has been demonised and targeted, is scared and has been let down by the authorities. The Jewish community needs its champions and friends to speak in its defence without fear or favour. Lord Ian Austin, who sits in the other place, is one such courageous advocate who has campaigned for decades against antisemitism and Islamism. Does my right hon. Friend share my deep concern about organisations such as Midland Heart, which has suspended Lord Austin as its chair merely for his speaking against Islamism, terrorism and antisemitism?

Chris Philp: Let me first pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend for her work during her time as Home Secretary. We worked closely together, and I can tell the House that the Jewish community had no stronger advocate in the Government on these issues, particularly during the events of the autumn. I agree with what she said about Lord Austin. I have read the tweets that he sent, and it strikes me that there is nothing unreasonable about them. He was criticising Islamism, which is a form of extremism. That is obviously not the same as the Muslim community more widely, as everybody knows. I do not think that the actions proposed by Midland Heart are in the slightest bit reasonable. I join my right hon. Friend the DLUHC Secretary in urging Midland Heart to urgently reconsider what it has done. Lord Austin is a tireless campaigner against racism, was a great servant of this House when he was here, and does not deserve the treatment he has recently received.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The sharp rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia in the UK is extremely concerning, and the SNP extends our heartfelt sympathies to victims of antisemitism and all forms of hate crime.

In today's statement, I see references to "funding to bolster security", "caught and punished", "the full force of the law", and "a maximum of 14 years in prison and/or an unlimited fine", none of which I disagree with in any way, shape or form. We need to implement the law robustly. However, I am a bit concerned that there is only one line in the statement that talks about education. It says that £7 million of funding will be delivered "in education", but I would like it to say "through education", because surely we can eradicate antisemitism through education. Through incarceration, it becomes a lot harder.

Part of Scotland's strength is our diversity. We value Scotland's Jewish communities and other faith and belief communities. We recognise the important role that they play in making Scotland a safer, stronger and more inclusive society in which everyone can live in peace and work to realise their potential. In June 2017, the Scottish Government formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. Formally adopting the IHRA definition demonstrates the Scottish Government's determination that there should be no place in Scotland for any form of antisemitism or religious hatred that makes our communities feel insecure or threatened in their daily lives.

The Scottish Government's recently published hate crime strategy sets out their strategic priorities for tackling hate crime, including antisemitism. It was informed by the communities with lived experiences of hate crime. It makes a number of commitments, including ensuring improved support for victims, improving data and evidence, and developing effective approaches to preventing hate crime. If I have one ask of the Minister, it is to reconsider how much money we are putting into educating people, so that we can all eradicate this heinous crime.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman asks about education. I made it clear in my earlier remarks that, in the autumn statement on 22 November, the Government announced a further £7 million of funding to help tackle antisemitism in education and ensure that support is in place for schools and colleges. In addition to that—since he asks about education—on 5 November the Department for Education announced a five-point plan to protect Jewish students on university campuses, which included a call for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred, asking vice-chancellors to act decisively against staff and students involved in antisemitism, and meeting the Office for Students, the independent regulator, to find out what more it can do to make it clear that antisemitism and racial hatred incited on campuses should be referred to the police, and to explore an antisemitism charter in higher education. I accept the point that education at school and universities is important, but that is an area where the Department for Education is taking a lot of action in England. I would certainly urge the devolved Administrations in Wales and Scotland to do the same.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Vicious campaigns of antisemitism are occurring in many universities in this country. Jewish students have visited me to tell me about it, and some of the accounts are bone chilling. The failure of the Metropolitan police to deal with some of the fascist-style racists in the London marches has been a historic disgrace that has unleashed more attacks. The aggressive hounding by protesters of MPs, especially Labour MPs out campaigning and a Conservative colleague at his home, is a real threat to the democratic process.

I am concerned about reports of a magistrates court judge liking an antisemitic post on social media, having passed an extremely lenient sentence on protesters convicted of terrorism offences. This judge apparently trains junior members of the judiciary and is involved in judicial appointments of other judges. Should that not result in a full, deep investigation, with a past docket of cases being checked for bias and a potential suspension, pending the interim report?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question. Ministers are very clear that where behaviour on marches crosses the criminal threshold—inciting racial hatred, causing fear of harassment, alarm and distress, terrorism offences or glorifying proscribed organisations—we expect the police to take robust action and to make arrests. They have made about 600 arrests so far. In fact, some brave police officers were injured in the course of trying to make an arrest in London on Saturday.

I echo and strongly endorse my right hon. and learned Friend's point about Members of Parliament. No Member of Parliament, as a democratically elected representative of the people, should be subject to harassment or intimidation. As he said, some Labour MPs have been, which is completely unacceptable. We have seen the incident at the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), which was completely unacceptable—in that case, I believe arrests have been made. And, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) suffered a terrible incident at his home address just a few days ago. All that is unacceptable and illegal, and I expect the police not only to protect MPs, but to identify and arrest the culprits afterwards.

In relation to the judge, the judiciary is of course independent. Matters of judicial conduct are subject to investigation by the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office. From the account of the incident that I have heard, and which my right hon. and learned Friend gave, that is the kind of thing that I would expect the JCIO to investigate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the Home Affairs Committee has been carrying out an inquiry into the policing of protests. We have been particularly appalled to hear evidence of the huge increase in incidents of antisemitism perpetrated in the wake of the 7 October terrorist attacks. The CST has recorded that 43% of antisemitism incidents last year explicitly referenced the Israel-Palestine 7 October attacks and the conflict in Gaza. Attacks on

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

Jewish and Muslim communities here in Britain in response to overseas conflicts are never acceptable. What more can be done to stop the exploitation of such overseas conflicts and the effect that it has on community cohesion in this country?

Chris Philp: The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee asks a very good question. It disturbs me deeply, as I am sure it does many Members, to see conflict occurring elsewhere in the world playing out on our own streets and leading to tension, to put it politely, and to a lot more—often hatred—being incited domestically. As I said, there is no excuse whatsoever for the events in the middle east, in Gaza, to lead to antisemitic hatred on the streets of the United Kingdom. That is completely unacceptable, and I am disturbed to see people engaging in that kind of behaviour.

Across the House, we as political leaders need to make it clear to our communities that that behaviour is not acceptable and not consistent with British values, and that our laws will be rigorously and robustly enforced. We have values here of tolerance and mutual respect; we abhor terrorism, violence and intimidation. I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I say that we do not want to see that anywhere on our streets, and no one—no matter how strongly they feel about what is happening in Gaza—should behave in a way that is intimidating or incites racial hatred. If we all, across this House, speak unanimously with one voice on that topic, it will be heard by all communities in this country.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): When British Jews woke up on 7 October to the pogroms and the associated rapes, butchery of children and hostage-taking, we expected sympathy from people on the streets of Britain. Instead, we have seen people attacked for speaking Hebrew, Jewish businesses attacked, Jews assaulted, and hate marches on our streets. As we saw again this weekend, the fellow holding the sign to remind marchers that Hamas are a terrorist organisation was the one who was dragged off and had his collar felt by the police, while people continue to march through the streets with cries for jihad and intifadas and in support of the Houthis.

What everyone says in this place is all fine, but the reality is that the demonisation of the world's only Jewish state is playing out in the demonisation of Jews in this country. In our universities, the embedding of antizionism—in and of itself pure Jew hate in many cases—is being wrought on Jewish students. So although the measures that have been outlined are fine, there is a deeper problem in our society: Jews do not feel safe in this country. More must be done to tackle the real root cause of Jew hate.

Chris Philp: I was as appalled as my hon. Friend when some people—a small but none the less significant minority—reacted to what happened on 7 October with a deeply disturbing jubilation. That is sick, it is unacceptable and, depending on how it is expressed, it is frankly illegal, because encouraging acts of terrorism or acts by a proscribed organisation, which Hamas are, is a criminal offence. As I have said, there is no excuse whatsoever for that kind of behaviour. I was as sickened as he was, and as I am sure the whole House was, to see that some

people—some of our fellow citizens—reacted to what happened on 7 October with apparent jubilation instead of with horror and sympathy.

In relation to the police response, 600 arrests have been made at the various protests that have followed 7 October. We have repeatedly met police—I have lost count of the number of meetings that we have had in the past three or four months—to urge them to use the full extent of the law and to show zero tolerance to people who break the law and incite racial hatred. As I say, 600 arrests have been made.

In relation to individual incidents, there is sometimes more to them than meets the eye, but I will ask for an account of the incident that my hon. Friend referred to. He is absolutely right to say that no member of the Jewish community, whether on the streets of central London, at university or at school, should suffer fear and intimidation. The truth is that, in the past few months in particular, they have suffered fear and intimidation, and that is unacceptable. We expect the police to use the full force of the law to stop that, and I know that the House will speak with one voice in condemning it unreservedly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the attack on the constituency office of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), was an utterly unacceptable attack on democracy? It is a matter of great sadness that this Parliament will lose a fantastic MP because of the intimidation associated with his being prepared to stand up for his Jewish constituents and for Israel.

Chris Philp: I am pleased to report to the House that arrests have been made in relation to the appalling attack on the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green, and I understand that the perpetrators are currently on remand in prison. It is a tragedy that someone with his exemplary track record of public service feels that he is unable to stand for Parliament again, partly as a result of the intimidation that he has suffered, particularly the arson attack on his office. As I am sure Members from across the House will acknowledge, he has been a fearless advocate on behalf of his many Jewish constituents. It is a loss to them and to Parliament that he will not contest the next election. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that no other Members end up feeling that way. I do not want—I am sure that none of us does—to live in a country where democratically elected representatives feel any form of fear or intimidation. That is not how democracy works. In this country, we settle matters at the ballot box, not through intimidation tactics or violence on the streets. That is a principle that each and every one of us must defend to our last breath.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do apologise; I called two Members from the Government Benches, so I will now call two from the Opposition Benches.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I welcome the strong statements made by the Minister and the shadow Home Secretary. I hope that, in tackling the deep-seated antisemitism to which the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) referred, we can work in a united way across the House, and not seek to make cheap political points on any individual cases.

We have had attacks on Jews in theatres in London; we have had attacks on Jews in campuses, particularly in Leeds and Birmingham, as other hon. Members have said; and, as the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) said, a judge has failed to penalise three people for glorifying terrorism in London. People in all sorts of sectors, locations and areas across our country are worried that antisemitism is spreading. The Government's response needs to be co-ordinated. When will a new hate crime action plan be published? The last one, despite consultation in the interim, was published five years ago.

Chris Philp: I share the right hon. Lady's horror at the various events highlighted in the Community Security Trust's report, including an incident at a theatre where a Jewish man was essentially hounded out—a disgraceful and despicable act that has no place in a civilised society such as ours. She mentioned the case that the former Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis), raised. I spoke to the current Attorney General earlier today, and I understand that the Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing that case as well; it deeply concerns me, as I know it concerns the right hon. Lady.

Our strategy in relation to extremism is something that the Communities Secretary continues to consider, but the approach the Government have taken is one of action, rather than words. For example, we have legislated via the Online Safety Act, which contains some very strong measures, as I said to the shadow Home Secretary a few minutes ago. When I was technology Minister, she and I discussed at some length the measures needed in that Act to combat hate—measures based, in fact, on some of the terrible experiences of antisemitism that the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) has herself suffered. I have talked about the increased funding for the Community Security Trust, the Department for Education's plan in universities and schools, and the extra money for the Holocaust Educational Trust, so the Government are taking action rather than simply expending more words. However, as I said, this is an issue that the Communities Secretary is extremely alive to.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Sadly, we have seen a trebling of antisemitic incidents on university campuses between 2022 and 2023: the CST recorded 67 incidents on campuses in the month following the horrendous attacks of 7 October, compared with just 12 in the same period the previous year, and we have heard from other right hon. and hon. Members about the terrible reports of antisemitic graffiti and harassment of Jewish students coming out of Leeds and Birmingham universities earlier this month. That is why my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I very much welcomed the £7 million to tackle antisemitism in schools and universities that the Government announced in November, which the Minister has referred to. However, since then, we have had no update on how many applications have been made to that fund and how the money has been allocated. When will we get an update on some of the many actions the Minister has outlined, and particularly on how that £7 million has been allocated so far?

Chris Philp: I would be very happy to come back to the hon. Lady and other Members with an update on that question. It is an evolving situation, but I echo her

comments. It is particularly concerning when universities—the training grounds for the next generation—appear to have been hijacked in some places by antisemites: when Jewish students are being intimidated and harassed and Jewish societies have their meetings picketed, with people standing outside shouting abuse and worse. That is completely unacceptable, and we should all support the Department for Education's work in this area and call on university vice-chancellors to show absolutely zero tolerance for that kind of behaviour—to stamp on it hard wherever they find it.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and join him in paying tribute to the work of the Community Security Trust. Today, however, the most senior Liberal Democrat councillor in Harrogate and Knaresborough has been exposed for tweeting horrendous antisemitic comments for the past five weeks. She had hundreds of followers, including many senior local Liberal Democrats; she tweeted over 500 times on the subject, and those tweets were read over 10,000 times, so it beggars belief that no Liberal Democrat knew what she was saying. They must have known, but in the five weeks she has been tweeting, they did nothing until it was exposed in the media today.

In our politics, we have seen antisemitism in meetings; we have seen it online; we have seen it in Rochdale; and now we have seen it in Harrogate. Does my right hon. Friend agree that political leaders—indeed, everyone in every political party—must act immediately if they encounter antisemitism in their midst, not wait to see whether anyone notices?

Chris Philp: Yes. My hon. Friend is quite right: it is incumbent on political leaders, from whom many other members of the community take their lead, to act immediately, not just when antisemitism gets exposed in the media or when pressure builds, and not because it is convenient but because it is right. Whether it is the example in Harrogate that my hon. Friend gave or, indeed, the recent example in Rochdale, acting immediately from principle is what counts, not just reacting to public pressure a few days later.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Jewish people in my Greater Manchester constituency have had to endure a 163% increase in antisemitic hate crime, as detailed in the CST's annual incidents report. Some of that is blatant targeting of Jews; in other cases, it is much more sinister, targeting Zionists. When we see a banner saying “Zionists not welcome”, we know what it means: “Jews not welcome”. Let us call it out for what it is: anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

The Jewish community in my Bury South constituency have benefited from the Government's additional £3 million to increase the already extensive security provisions. I thank the Government again for that temporary funding, but would they be prepared to continue that funding, and—given the extensive threats to the Jewish community—consider making it permanent?

Chris Philp: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Very often, anti-Zionism is nothing more than anti-Jewish sentiment; it is antisemitism, and we should call it out where it happens, as he has quite rightly done.

[Chris Philp]

The extra money for the Community Security Trust will apply in the current financial year; it will be a £3 million increase to £18 million in total. It will also apply next year, in financial year 2024-25, and it will be kept under review thereafter.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): As one of the two Members of Parliament for the Metropolitan Borough of Bury, I support exactly what my colleague, the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), has said. It is important not to cheapen this debate, and we do not want to do so, but how political parties deal with antisemitism within their ranks is crucial and sends an important signal to the country about how this Parliament treats the issue. Does my right hon. Friend share, therefore, my genuine disappointment about the weak, flip-flopping and changing position of the Labour leader, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), concerning the remarks of Labour's now ex-candidate for the Rochdale by-election? Martin Forde KC, who compiled a report for the Labour party on bullying, sexism and racism within its ranks, has described those remarks as "clearly antisemitic".

Chris Philp: As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) a few minutes ago, it is incumbent on political leaders—particularly those who aspire to the highest office in the land—to act quickly and from principle. I am disappointed that after the comments of Labour's former Rochdale candidate became public, it took a number of days for the Leader of the Opposition to act. I would suggest that he reflects soberly on that; I am disappointed that it took so long, and on reflection, he is probably disappointed with himself as well. It might be useful if he said so publicly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The figures from the CST are absolutely horrific. Antisemitism is absolutely unacceptable; hate crime, including Islamophobia, is absolutely unacceptable; but does the Minister think there is sufficient capacity within the police to investigate the full range of issues that are being raised? What is the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in preventing the discrimination that can contribute to this hate?

Chris Philp: I think there is enough resource in policing. As I may have said once or twice before, we have record police officer numbers—a total of 149,500 or so was reached in March last year—so we do have sufficient resources. The police are prioritising this issue, and of course, they can work with the EHRC to take criminal action where the EHRC identifies examples of antisemitism.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Following the battle of Cable Street against Mosley's blackshirts, the Public Order Act 1936 introduced measures that severely restricted the ability of Nazi-type movements to march in predominantly Jewish areas. Is the Minister satisfied that the police of today are sufficiently aware of the powers they have to stop marches taking routes that go through areas that are predominantly associated with a threatened community?

Chris Philp: Yes, I am, and the police do it. For example, on Saturday, a convoy was planned from the north of England to north London, many parts of which have Jewish communities. The police stopped that convoy because they were concerned that it would inflame tensions and that the convoy would engage in intimidatory behaviour.

Under sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986, the police also have powers to place conditions on both processions and assemblies where they feel they will lead to disorder, and they use those conditions; in fact, they used them at the weekend. The marchers originally planned to go right up to the Israeli embassy in Kensington, but conditions were imposed to prevent their getting within undue proximity of that embassy. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who is sitting next to me on the Front Bench, made direct representations to the police on behalf of her constituents, raising concerns about the marchers' plans. The police have those powers, and have used them more than once, as recently as this weekend.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the largest Jewish school in Europe—JFS—is in my constituency, and I want to thank the CST for its vigilance and service on behalf of all the students and their families. Sadly, only last month a student was physically attacked by a group of youths outside the school, and those youths goaded the student about the situation in Palestine. Would the Minister agree that nothing can justify such an attack on an innocent schoolchild, and does he accept that, whatever one believes about the actions of the Israeli Government, racism and anti-Jewish hatred must not be allowed to hide behind any political mask?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. The events in Gaza, or indeed anywhere else in the world, provide no basis, reason or excuse at all to inflict racist abuse on citizens in this country. There is no justification whatsoever for antisemitic attacks on Jewish people in this country because of what is happening elsewhere in the world. What happened to that boy outside the Jewish free school, JFS, in his constituency and what has happened—sadly, tragically—to thousands of members of the Jewish community in recent months is totally unacceptable and totally without excuse, and the police should act to make arrests where that happens.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I pay tribute to the Community Security Trust, which is based in the Hendon constituency, for the work it does—not only the full-time staff, but the volunteers. Sadly, the number of offences we have seen does not surprise me. The continued protests on the streets of London are simply normalising antisemitism in the United Kingdom, but what bothers me the most are offences on university campuses; and more and more of my constituents are telling me that their children will not be going to university as a result. Some 245 universities have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, but others continue to refuse to do so. Does the Minister agree that there is no logical reason why any vice-chancellor would not do so?

Chris Philp: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work of the Community Security Trust, as well as to Mark Gardner—its chief executive—and all its staff

and volunteers, and the people who fundraise for it. The trust's work has never been more important than it is now.

I agree with what my hon. Friend has said about universities. I can see no reason at all why every vice-chancellor and every university should not adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and I call on them today to do so. There is no excuse whatsoever for failing to act. I endorse and echo the five-point plan set out by the Department for Education to get this issue on campuses tackled. It is deeply disturbing, and I want to see vice-chancellors and other university leaders do a lot more to stamp out the scourge of antisemitism, which is all too present on our country's campuses.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): This weekend, my heart broke to see some 20 officers and multiple police vans stationed outside my synagogue, and that this was deemed necessary for our protection. The conflict in the middle east is being used to radicalise people against British Jews online, in our schools and universities, and on our streets. Additional security funding is welcome, as is the funding for education settings, but what financial support and resource will be provided to local authorities for projects working across our faith and community settings at a local grassroots level to bring communities together, rather than allow them to be driven further apart?

Chris Philp: The hon. Member is right to say that grassroots work is needed. The £7 million I referred to earlier is part of that, and organisations such as the CST, which the Government substantially fund or provide with quite a lot of money—£18 million a year—do good work in this area as well. I echo her sentiment and that of others: there is no excuse, no reason and no possible justification for targeting Jewish people in this country, and the full force of the law must come down on anyone who does so.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I cannot have been the only one, the weekend before last, to have watched with a mixture of horror and incredulity as several Labour Front Benchers were sent out to justify retaining their Rochdale candidate, only for their leader to reverse his position 48 hours later based on the comments at a meeting and to praise himself for his decisive action. Then they had to suspend their candidate for Hyndburn for comments at the same meeting. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is serious about having changed his party, as he repeatedly claims, does my right hon. Friend agree that he should publish a full list of the attendees of that meeting and a full transcript of what was said by whom, so that voters in the north-west can know who they are voting for and what they actually believe?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right; I agree with what he has said. The Labour leader—the Leader of the Opposition—should publish a full list of who was at that meeting and a full transcript to show that he is serious about tackling antisemitism, and I call on him now to do that. He should have reacted much sooner. It should not have taken 48 hours to suspend a candidate who had said obviously antisemitic things. I am deeply disappointed by that inexcusable 48-hour delay, but he now has a chance to make at least partial amends by publishing that list and transcript.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the comments today from the Government in clamping down on the astonishing and worrying spike we have seen in antisemitic incidents since 7 October. Antisemitism is vile and disgusting, and it infects every area of society—including, sadly, politics—and where we see it, we need to root it out and remove people from the process. To that end, I have written to the Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), asking if we can have a cross-party discussion about how we deal with the problem in politics—because we cannot pretend that it does not exist; it does. I wrote to her in November and again last week, so can the Minister please take forward that suggestion, and see if the Minister for Women and Equalities will convene a cross-party discussion on the issue?

Chris Philp: Of course, there are many all-party parliamentary groups and other cross-party groups taking an active interest in this area, and I am sure that the Home Affairs Committee will consider it as well. I think I am going to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch) at some point later this evening, so I will happily remind her about the hon. Lady's letter.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House and making this important statement. Does he agree that even more alarming than the sheer number of antisemitic incidents now being reported on a daily basis is creeping tolerance across so much of our national life and so many of our institutions—universities are just one example—of an acceptable level of antisemitism, so long as it is dressed up in a bit of Israel hatred? Does he agree that that is what we need to be focusing on tackling, because at the moment, as the CST report demonstrates, this country is moving in a very serious and dark direction?

Chris Philp: Yes, I agree completely with my right hon. Friend. We need to show zero tolerance to all forms of antisemitism. It is incumbent on everybody—particularly Members of Parliament, but everyone in civil society, including university vice-chancellors, teachers and lecturers, as well as people in the workplace—and every single member of our society has an obligation to call out antisemitism when they see it, and indeed any racism when they see it; unless people are willing to do that, there is a danger that it creeps in, as my right hon. Friend has just said. I think it starts with Members of Parliament calling it out in their own constituencies, and doing so publicly. That is what zero tolerance means: never turning a blind eye, never turning the other cheek, and never crossing the road and passing by on the other side. It means always calling out antisemitism and racism wherever we see it. That is an extremely important message.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): As has already been said, the CST report includes shocking figures about the rise in antisemitism in university settings. The Union of Jewish Students has warned repeatedly about a climate of fear for Jewish students on campus, and the incidents in recent weeks will only have deepened that fear. Can the Minister say a little more about what he and his Government colleagues will do, working with our universities, to ensure that Jewish students can feel safe and secure during their time studying?

Chris Philp: As we have discussed already, Members across the House are particularly concerned about what is happening on university campuses. As I have said a couple of times, the Department for Education has a five-point plan, which it set out just a few weeks ago and which includes withdrawing visas from international students who are inciting racial hatred. Anyone who is not a British citizen who incites racial hatred or commits criminal offences in this area should be removed from the United Kingdom. People who come to this country need to respect our laws, and our citizens and their rights and dignity, and people who are not British citizens should be removed either under the Immigration Act 1971 or section 32 of the UK Borders Act 2007 if they incite racial hatred; I know the immigration Ministers will take action there.

We want vice-chancellors to do more and have written to them asking them to do so. We have had meetings with the Office for Students—the regulator—to make sure it is doing more to clean up what is happening on campuses; we are doing more to make sure that criminal referrals—from universities to the police—are made when antisemitism happens; and, as I have said, I think and the Department for Education thinks that every single university should sign up to the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend know that synagogues in the west end of London are being targeted by these so-called protesters, and that this has happened not only once or twice but now on multiple occasions—to the extent that they are even looking to see what time the services finish so that old people, the young, parents and so forth are being terrorised? This is not supporting Palestine; this is antisemitism—this is attacking Jewish people. I hope my right hon. Friend will call in the commissioner and sort it out.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. Gathering outside a synagogue with the purpose of intimidating people coming out is completely unacceptable. That is not protest; it is deliberate intimidation, and it has no place on our streets whatsoever. The police have substantial powers to act in this area; I will not recite all the various sections and Acts, but the police have numerous powers to act. We have regular meetings with policing leaders—one is coming up in just a few days—and I will certainly be raising this point. If my hon. Friend could send me a couple of examples, I would be very happy to raise them with the Metropolitan police in the coming days.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement, for his robust answers and for his strength of purpose in supporting Jewish people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; he is very clearly doing that. Have discussions taken place with the devolved Administrations, in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, regarding a support fund for those who feel unsafe in their current homes and need help to move to a safe place, bearing in mind that we are now in a scenario where Jewish families are staying indoors—afraid to go out unless it is essential—due to so-called peace protesters who are making our streets feel unsafe for a section of our community?

Chris Philp: There is nothing peaceful about deliberately intimidating Jewish people going to synagogues, as we discussed just a moment ago, and I would be happy to look into the question of the funding available for devolved Administrations to do work in this area.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The shocking rise in antisemitic attacks reported by the CST is bad enough, but the trouble is that that was last year and the escalation has continued into this year. People in London suffer the hate marches literally every Saturday—with banned organisations displaying their flags, placards that are clearly antisemitic and vile slogans uttered—and after those so-called peaceful protests disperse, some protestors go and intimidate people in the restaurants, bars and theatres throughout London, so much so now that my Jewish constituents are afraid to go into central London on a Saturday for fear of what they will suffer. There is a solution to this, and that is that anyone who is breaking the law should be arrested by the police. We did that in 2011, when there were the problems of the riots. Those people should be arrested, put through courts—overnight if necessary—with clear police evidence, and then jailed for their crimes. It is not acceptable that such intimidation can take place on our streets, when our people feel unsafe.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right; members of the Jewish community do feel intimidated going into central London, particularly when the marches are happening, and that is not right and is not acceptable. No one should feel that intimidation when simply coming into the centre of our capital city. He is quite right in what he says about applying the law. There are numerous relevant laws. He mentioned displaying banners of proscribed organisations such as Hamas and now Hizb ut-Tahrir. Displaying those flags and emblems is a criminal offence and we expect the police to make arrests. Inciting racial hatred is a criminal offence. Causing someone to suffer harassment, alarm or intimidation through threatening or abusive language is a criminal offence. Causing someone to fear violence is a criminal offence. We expect the police to apply those laws not sometimes but always. They have made 600 arrests so far already, and we are meeting them on a highly regular basis, including later this week, to make sure that those laws continue to be robustly applied, not just sometimes but always, for all of the reasons my hon. Friend has just eloquently laid out.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Let us be clear: antisemitism, like other forms of racism, has no place in the UK or elsewhere and the perpetrators of antisemitism should face the full force of the law. Does the Minister agree that, because an accusation of antisemitism is so serious, it must not be made either lightly or casually? We must have cool heads and not label groups or communities as antisemitic, because that merely causes more division and more problems. We have to be very careful how we use this word if we want to maintain the public's trust that people are not being falsely accused of antisemitism.

Chris Philp: No one today in this House, on either side, has labelled any group collectively as antisemitic. This is about individuals and their behaviour, and where individuals harass or intimidate members of the Jewish

community, where they engage in antisemitism and where anyone engages in racism, we will call it out, and where it is illegal, the police will make arrests and prosecute it. This is about individual acts, which all of us I hope collectively condemn. No one is tarring an entire community at all; no one has done that on either side. This is about calling out, tackling and where appropriate prosecuting individual acts of antisemitism. They have sadly become only too frequent in recent months, and the whole House should unite in standing against that.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): There is a growing and deeply unpleasant trend of personalising protests. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has been subjected to that recently, as have other Members of the House. Just to raise his particular case, 80 or so protesters were screaming right outside his door, with a police car between them and his house, for over two hours. The police did nothing. I personally think that is wrong, and that the police need to get a grip and start arresting these people for being intimidating. That is all it was: intimidation. It was not a lawful protest in my view. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that the police are not doing enough to crack down on such appalling behaviour?

Chris Philp: What happened to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) at his house was completely unacceptable. It was intimidation; it was an attempt, I would suggest, to coerce a Member of Parliament and inhibit him from doing his democratically elected duty. I am sure everyone in the House would unreservedly condemn the behaviour of that mob outside my right hon. Friend's house.

Various legal powers are relevant, including section 42 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, which gives the police the power to direct people outside a person's house to move if they are behaving in a way that causes harassment, alarm or distress. That would clearly have applied in this case. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Security, who is in his place, and I wrote to chief constables on precisely that point on 16 February, just a few days ago, raising concerns and calling for robust action. I believe we are having a discussion on that topic in just a few days' time. Members of Parliament at their home addresses, constituency offices and surgeries need to be protected because they are doing their democratic duty. Where people seek to intimidate them, the police need to take extremely strong action, because aggression against Members of Parliament is an act of aggression against democracy itself and in my view that makes it particularly serious.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I welcome everything my right hon. Friend has set out today and that the Government are trying to tighten the law where

necessary, but evidence suggests it is not yet working. Every week we see protests and people marching through London with placards with antisemitic, conspiratorial tropes—the same things we saw in October, November, December and January. We know that antisemitism is still running rife on university campuses, in schools and in our communities. I urge my right hon. Friend to look not just at how we deal with prosecutions and crime, but at how we tackle the root causes and how we get into our schools, educate people and try to rid society of this evil scourge once and for all.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right. Where the law is broken, whether that is inciting racial hatred, intimidation or harassment, the police must act and make arrests, and they have arrested 600 people already. That is necessary as a law enforcement response, but he is right that we need to tackle the ideology at source. We need to make sure that schools are teaching young people the right thing and explaining what British values of tolerance actually mean. The Department for Education is doing work in that area, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who is in the Chamber. We need to make clear to every member of our society that antisemitism and anti-Jewish racist hatred have no place in these islands of ours. We must eradicate it wherever we find it.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): This report from the Community Security Trust is deeply troubling and depressing, as I think in some respects are aspects of our politics. There is the fact that today a well respected Member of this place is leaving because of anti-Jewish hatred. At the same time, we have a by-election that has effectively become a competition for who can be the biggest antisemite. That is deeply chilling. Does the Minister agree that it is incumbent on all political leaders and all political parties to show moral strength, stand up for what is right, take on hatred and not allow any element of their party to be captured by hatred, whatever the short-term electoral or political temptation?

Chris Philp: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Political leaders in particular have a special responsibility to act quickly, to act decisively, and to act not when it is expedient but when it is right. I was disappointed, as I have said, that the Leader of the Opposition took 48 hours or longer to act in the case of the Rochdale candidate. There is no excuse for that sort of delay. We all have an obligation to do the right thing and to do it quickly, whatever the circumstances.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank those on the Government Front Bench and the Opposition for their attention to a very serious issue.

Points of Order

6.52 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, in the past hour or so, the charity Campaign Against Antisemitism has reported that a member of the public sent off a birth certificate application to the Home Office for his six-month-old baby girl and today the certificate was returned ripped, with the word “Israel” as the place of birth scribbled out. The Home Office is responsible for the security of the Jewish community, and the pointers are that this would have been done by a Home Office employee. How can I alert the Secretary of State for the Home Department and the permanent secretary to this appalling incident?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): First, the right hon. and learned Member will appreciate that that is not a point of order for the Chair. However, if he has something he wishes to raise directly with the Home Office, he should most certainly do so. He has already placed his case on the record in the presence of the Home Secretary.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would be grateful if you could advise those of us in this House who wish to pay tribute to the amazing Saxby-born Tony Roe, who is the BBC’s east midlands political editor. He has looked after our local democracies and our communities for more than 40 years, and this is his last week. We from the east midlands are very grateful to him for all he has done in serving local democracy and our communities. I would be grateful to know how you, Mr Deputy Speaker, can help me to make sure that is well known.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The hon. Lady will be fully aware that that is also not a point of order for the Chair, but it might just be the subject of an early-day motion. I leave that to her judgment.

BILL PRESENTED

FAMILY VISAS (MINIMUM INCOME)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Alistair Carmichael presented a Bill to prohibit any increase in the minimum income requirement for family visas; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 165).

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

6.54 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The first duty of Government is to keep our citizens safe. The United Kingdom faces an enduring threat from terrorists, hostile actors and organised criminal groups, and that threat is evolving and becoming more sophisticated. It is not enough for us to keep pace with those who would do us harm; we must endeavour to get and then stay ahead of them. The investigatory powers are the legal powers available to law enforcement, the intelligence services, MI5, the Secret Intelligence Service, GCHQ and other public authorities where appropriate to obtain communications and data about communications.

The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 provides a clear legal framework for the use of those powers, combining world-leading safeguards and oversight with giving agencies the tools they need to protect us. There is a double lock for the most sensitive IPA powers, meaning that an independent judicial commissioner must approve a decision by the Secretary of State to issue a warrant under the IPA. The use of any of these powers must be assessed as necessary and proportionate, with strong independent oversight by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. The Investigatory Powers Tribunal provides a robust mechanism for providing redress in respect of any unlawful use of those powers.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Home Secretary will be as aware as I am that very occasionally those in charge of our intelligence and security services do not act in the best traditions of this country in their offices, and I am thinking of cases such as Belhaj and Boudchar. Where people have been the victim of mistreatment—as a consequence of UK complicity with foreign powers, for example—should there not be a right for those people to have access to the information about that?

James Cleverly: I listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s point. I am not sure it is directly relevant to this matter, but I take on board the points that he makes. He will forgive me if I do not address them directly at this point; I want to consider them properly.

The IPA is sound legislation, but the nature of these threats has evolved since 2016, and we are confronted by greater global instability and technological advances, and they demand that we act. Terrorists, child abusers, organised criminals and malign actors from hostile states have exploited technological advances. Our job is to ensure that the UK’s investigatory powers framework remains fit for purpose. The changes that this Bill proposes were informed by the independent review of the IPA published by Lord Anderson of Ipswich in June 2023. The Bill received cross-party and Cross-Bench support as it passed through the other place. Every Government amendment was accepted, and I thank the members of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament for the productive way they engaged with and helped to shape the Bill.

In particular, we have agreed to tighten the drafting of clauses 22 and 23 in line with amendments proposed by the Intelligence and Security Committee. Those changes put beyond doubt that the Prime Minister may delegate warrants for the purposes of obtaining communications of parliamentarians in two, and only two, exceptional circumstances: the personal incapacity of the Prime Minister and a lack of access to secure communications. There is also a limit of five Secretaries of State to whom this responsibility could be delegated in those circumstances. Further to that, in respect of new part 7A, parliamentary scrutiny will be enhanced through a statutory requirement for the Secretary of State annually to inform the Intelligence and Security Committee about the new regime for bulk personal datasets.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the ISC's scrutiny of these matters. He will understand the concern about widening the number of people who can play the role previously played exclusively by the Prime Minister. I understand the reasons for that, but has he considered limiting that to those Secretaries of State who have warranting powers?

James Cleverly: We looked at that. There is a balance to be struck, and actually the bulk of those Secretaries of State to whom the function could be delegated in those two exceptional circumstances do have warranting powers—I think the Secretary of State for Defence is the only one who does not. My right hon. Friend's point is a fair one, but the scope of the Bill is not much greater than that.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): As a member of the ISC, I welcome the Government's acceptance of our recommendation. However, I would like to understand why they are not accepting our other, simple proposal: that when a delegation takes place, the Prime Minister would be informed about that afterwards.

James Cleverly: I think it is inconceivable that the Prime Minister of the day would not be informed of the use of a delegated authority.

Mr Jones: It is not about the Prime Minister not being informed about the delegation; it is about the Prime Minister looking at the case afterwards—they would not be second-guessing it, obviously, because it would already have been agreed. We suggested that, as a matter of course, the Prime Minister should be informed afterwards of the contents of that warrant. For some reason, the Government are resisting that. I cannot understand why.

James Cleverly: I understood the point that the right hon. Gentleman was making—perhaps my answer was not clear—but I suggest that it is inconceivable that the Prime Minister would not routinely be informed of the exercise of this power. Ultimately, that is a level of granularity that would add complexity to the Bill without utility. But, as I have said, through the passage of the Bill thus far, we have listened carefully to the Committee's suggestions, and although we may not always agree, I can reassure him, other members of the Committee and Members of the House that we will continue to act in listening mode in relation to the Committee's suggestions.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On that point, will the Home Secretary give way?

James Cleverly: I will, but I do want to make some progress.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way. He mentioned listening to scrutiny by the ISC. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has issued a call for written evidence on the Bill, and as he will know from the human rights memorandum, the Bill raises important human rights issues relating to the rights to privacy and to freedom of expression, and possibly the right to an effective remedy. Will he therefore undertake to look closely at any correspondence that the Joint Committee might send him when we have completed our scrutiny of the Bill?

James Cleverly: I reassure the hon. and learned Lady that we will do exactly that.

I turn to the measures in the Bill. We are creating a new regime for bulk personal datasets that have low or no expectation of privacy: for example, certain datasets that are widely publicly or commercially available. Bulk personal datasets are an essential tool to support our intelligence services in identifying fragments of intelligence within a large quantum of data, in order to disrupt threats such as terrorism and hostile state actors. The Bill seeks to create a new statutory oversight regime for how the intelligence services access and examine bulk personal datasets held by third parties. It will place that oversight on a statutory footing, increasing the transparency of the regime. The regime will be subject to strong safeguards, including the double lock.

We are also making changes to the notices regime that will help the UK anticipate and address the risk to public safety of companies rolling out technology that precludes lawful access to data. We want to work with those companies to achieve common goals, but we must have the tools available when collaboration falls short.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I know that the Home Secretary wants to make progress, but I am grateful for the opportunity to comment.

These reforms to the IPA are necessary to upgrade our world-class regime and ensure that our frameworks are kept up to date with evolving threats and, importantly, technology. We know that the terrorists, the serious organised criminals, the fraudsters and the online paedophiles all take advantage of the dark web and encrypted spaces: to plan their terror, to carry out their fraudulent activity and to cause devastating harm to innocent people such as children, in the field of online paedophilia. Does he share my concern and indeed frustration with companies such as Meta and Apple? The former has chosen to roll out end-to-end encryption without safeguards and the latter has rolled out advanced data protection, which will allow these bad actors to go dark, which will severely disable agencies and law enforcement from identifying them and taking action, and will enable—indeed it will facilitate—some of the worst atrocities that our brave men and women in law-enforcement agencies deal with every day.

James Cleverly: My right hon. and learned Friend—and immediate predecessor—makes incredibly important points. Digital technology and online technology have been a liberator in so many ways, but, sadly, as has been the

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case with technology throughout time, it has also been used by those who would do people harm. Indeed, she mentioned in particular the harm done to children. We take that incredibly seriously. We value the important role of investigatory powers and will continue to work with technology companies—both those well established at the moment and those of the future—to maintain the balance between privacy and security, as we have always done, and ensure that these technology platforms do not provide a hiding place for terrorists, for serious criminals and those people taking part in child sexual exploitation.

The three types of notices under the existing IPA are data retention notices, technical capability notices and national security notices. Those notices must be both necessary and proportionate, and they are of course subject to the double lock. The Bill does not introduce any new powers for the acquisition of data. The changes are about ensuring that the system is up to date and remains robust. The Bill will create a notification notice allowing the Secretary of State to place specific companies under an obligation to inform him or her of proposed changes to their telecommunications services or systems that could have an impact on lawful access. This is not a blanket obligation, and it will be used only where necessary and proportionate, and then only on a case-by-case basis.

The notice does not give the Secretary of State any powers to veto or intervene in the roll-out of a product or services. It is intended to ensure that there is sufficient time for appropriate consideration of the operational impact of the proposed changes, and potentially for discussions with the company in question about them. The public, rightly, would want their representatives to know in advance if companies were proposing to do something that would put public safety at risk, and responsible companies will work with Governments to avoid endangering people, who are of course also their customers.

The Bill will also amend the IPA to require the company to ensure that existing lawful access is maintained. That means the company cannot legally take any action that would negatively affect the level of lawful access for our operational partners during the review period. In the other place, the Government tabled an amendment to allow a timeline for review of a notice to be specified in regulations. We also gave the judicial commissioner further powers for managing the review process. Taken together, they ensure that companies are clear on the length of time that a review can take, which reduces uncertainty for their business as well as providing greater clarity for the review process. In the other place, my noble colleague Lord Sharpe of Epsom also committed to a full public consultation before amending the existing regulations on the review of notices, and laying new regulations relating to the notification notices.

The Bill also clarifies the definition of a telecommunications operator, to make it clear that companies with complex corporate structures that provide or control telecommunications services and systems in the UK fall within the remit of the IPA. These changes do not directly relate to any particular technology, including end-to-end encryption, but are designed to ensure that companies are not able to unilaterally make design changes that compromise exceptional lawful access.

The Bill makes changes to the powers of public authorities to acquire communications data. Section 11 of the IPA made it an offence for a relevant person in a relevant public authority to knowingly or recklessly obtain communications data from a telecoms operator or a postal operator without lawful authority. The Bill will set out examples of the acquisition routes that amount to lawful authority outside the IPA, giving greater clarity to public authorities that they are not inadvertently committing an offence. Further targeted amendments will ensure that public sector organisations are not unintentionally prevented or discouraged from sharing data. Further changes will allow bodies with regulatory functions to acquire communications data.

The Bill also creates a new condition for the use of internet connection records—ICRs—by the intelligence services and the National Crime Agency. The IPA currently requires certain thresholds to be met on the known element of an investigation, such as exactly when a website has been accessed. That limits the ability of operational partners to use the ICRs to detect previously unknown criminals, terrorists or state threat actors who are acting online. The proposed measure will allow greater detection of high-impact offenders by removing the requirement to unequivocally know a specific time or times of access and service in use, and instead will allow these factors to be specified within the application.

Mr Jones: I understand the use of the measure for the security services, but the Bill broadens the scope of how many people could be dragged into it. There is no judicial oversight of the Security Service or whoever is using it. The Bill states that the measure is for national security and economic wellbeing—that is a catch-all for quite a lot of things. Although the intent is right, there need to be some safeguards to prevent innocent people being dragged into that potentially broad measure.

James Cleverly: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. Innocent people's data is often acquired in dataset capture, and it is always deleted. Economic wellbeing merely reflects the language that is used in other parts, for consistency across our various strands of work.

Mr Jones: I thought we were here today to scrutinise the Bill. It should not be a chore for the Home Secretary to be asked questions. The definition of wellbeing could be quite broad. I understand the meaning of national security, as I think he does, and the House, but wellbeing could have quite a broad definition and I am not convinced that I have seen what it is. I am not sure that consistency with other legislation is a great argument for including it in this Bill.

James Cleverly: The simple truth of the matter is that I disagree. In legislation of this nature, maintaining consistency of language with previous relevant legislation, including the Intelligence Services Act 1994, is incredibly important to clarity of intent. I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has given thought to this, and we do not disregard his point, but we have thought through the importance of consistency of language, which is why we have maintained it.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): A general listener to our proceedings might worry that the new powers could be used for fishing expeditions, rather than the very specific

powers that they replace. Could the Home Secretary give some words of reassurance from the Dispatch Box that the broadening of bulk data collection without specific dates will not be used for fishing expeditions, which might affect the privacy of ordinary citizens who have done nothing wrong?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but the powers could be applied to any bulk dataset collection, of which she knows there are many across Government. Provisions are in place to ensure that innocent people's data is not held but deleted, and that our security services and other organisations that will utilise these powers always do so carefully and cautiously. There are relevant safeguards in place, as I have made reference to—the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and the tribunal—if there is wrongdoing. The proposals are put forward for a very specific reason. The Government have given thought to mission creep and broader expansion, and we feel that this is a modest extension that will give significantly greater protection to the British people.

Mr Jones: As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) just said, we need to give confidence to the public that what we are rightly doing to protect ourselves has that level of security in it. There is no judicial oversight of internet connection records. If we are to give these powers to the Security Service—which I approve of—we should be able to say to the public that they are proportionate and that there is an independent process to ensure that they cannot be abused. Surely, judicial oversight throughout should be important.

James Cleverly: The right hon. Gentleman specifically spoke about judicial oversight, but there is oversight—

Mr Jones: There isn't.

James Cleverly: There is oversight by the Secretary of State through the warrant process, and oversight of the whole process by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. Through the Committee on which the right hon. Gentleman sits, there is oversight of the Secretary of State's function.

Mr Jones: I agree, and I support that oversight, even though this Government have not made our job on the ISC easy. Unless I am missing something, there is no judicial oversight of internet connection records in the Bill. If we want to give people confidence, that backstop of judicial oversight should be important.

James Cleverly: As I said, I noticed that the right hon. Gentleman specifically said that there is no judicial oversight—

Mr Jones: There isn't.

James Cleverly: I am not disagreeing, but there is oversight. The Committee on which the right hon. Gentleman sits is part of that oversight process.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Home Secretary has just touched on the importance of the oversight role of the ISC, particularly in relation to these additional provisions. I wonder whether he remembers the passing of the National Security Act 2023. During the final stages

of that important piece of legislation, the Government tabled an amendment in lieu promising that they would progress a review of the memorandum of understanding within six months of the Act coming into force to ensure there was an updated and robust relationship between the ISC and the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, the ISC having been unable to secure a meeting with the Prime Minister since 2014, remarkably. Given the nature of the ISC's important role in these provisions, I wonder whether the Home Secretary could update us on that review.

James Cleverly: That is not an element of this Bill. On a commitment for the Prime Minister to meet with the Committee, I will look at the details.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

James Cleverly: I want to make progress to ensure that everyone who wishes to speak in this debate is able to do so, but I will give way to the right hon. Lady.

Yvette Cooper: On that point, will the Home Secretary encourage the Prime Minister to go before the Intelligence and Security Committee at the soonest opportunity? My understanding is that that has not happened for 10 years.

James Cleverly: I cannot make a commitment on the Prime Minister's behalf. Members of the Committee will know that I appeared before the Committee in my previous role, and I think it is important that Government do make themselves available for this scrutiny. As I say, it would be inappropriate for me to demand of the Prime Minister attendance anywhere, but I will pass on the right hon. Lady's point.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I will assist the Home Secretary with a little context. When I was a ranking member of the Intelligence and Security Committee between 2010 and 2015, it was a matter of routine that the Committee went to see the Prime Minister once a year, usually in the Cabinet Room. That stopped in 2014. Successive Prime Ministers have failed to reinstate it, although it must be said that the shortest-lived of them did offer to meet with the Committee, but sadly ceased to be Prime Minister before that became possible.

James Cleverly: The lengths that some people will go to to avoid Committee scrutiny. I am trying to remember where I was; it has been such a long time since I looked down the page of this speech. All such applications must be necessary and proportionate and subject to independent authorisation or inspection.

The Bill will also strengthen safeguards for journalistic material within the Investigatory Powers Act's bulk equipment interference regime, aligning it with changes to the bulk interception regime that are under way to ensure compliance with obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998. Prior judicial authorisation will be needed before material obtained through bulk equipment interference can be selected for examination using criteria where the purpose is to identify, or is highly likely to identify, confidential journalistic material or confirm a source of journalistic material. Prior judicial approval is also necessary before such material may be retained

[James Cleverly]

for purposes other than its destruction. The other measures in part 5 of the Bill will ensure that the resilience and protections of the regime are maintained and enhanced.

The Bill will also make improvements to support the Investigatory Powers Commissioner in effectively carrying out their role, ensuring that the world-leading oversight regime remains resilient, including powers to enable the IPC to appoint deputies, delegate some of their functions to judicial commissioners and the newly created deputies, and put certain functions on a statutory basis. The Bill will ensure there is a clearer statutory basis for reporting errors to the IPC.

Joanna Cherry: I sense that the Home Secretary is coming to the end of his speech. We have mentioned parliamentarians and journalists, but I want to talk about another important group: trade unions. Some people fear that the Bill will open the door even further than its parent Bill on the surveillance of trade unions. Does the Home Secretary agree that there should be no place for the surveillance of trade unions in a democracy? If so, will he consider amendments to the Bill to ensure that that does not happen, including a redraft of clause 5?

James Cleverly: I take the point that the hon. and learned Lady puts forward. There are a number of organisations not explicitly mentioned in the Bill where that argument could be made, and I am not sure it would necessarily be useful or right to list them all, but I will take on board the point she makes in good faith—genuinely.

The Bill will bring the Investigatory Powers Act up to date with the modern age, provide greater clarity, make the system more resilient and retain the world-leading safeguards of civil liberties and commercial integrity. Above all, the Bill will mean that the men and women who work so incredibly hard to keep us safe, often without recognition, have the tools they need to do so in the modern era. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson.

6.26 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe—to defend our national security and defend our citizens against terrorism, extremism and serious crime. Labour always stands ready to work cross-party on national security to keep our country safe. It is why we are supporting this Bill today, why we will work with the Government to get the details right, and why we look forward to pursuing some of these issues in further detail in Committee. We recognise the important work that the Intelligence and Security Committee has done on this and that Lord Anderson has done in reviewing these areas; I pay tribute to his work, and to his previous work as independent reviewer. We also recognise the detailed considerations that have already taken place in the House of Lords.

It is vital that our intelligence and law enforcement agencies have the powers and capabilities they need to pursue terrorists and dangerous criminals, such as child abusers, and to keep the public safe. I pay tribute to the

work of the intelligence and security agencies and to our counter-terror police for the immense work that they do. We are all indebted to them for their tireless and, by necessity, often hidden work to protect our country and defend our democracy and our freedoms from those who would seek to do us harm.

It is significant in the context of the Bill that the work of those agencies is about not just protecting our security, but defending our democracy. That is why it is so important that the powers they possess operate within a clear and strong legal framework with proper oversight and robust safeguards to prevent abuse or misuse. It is why the agencies themselves support having a strong legal framework in place. It is how we ensure there is consent and support for the essential work that they do. It is why this framework has to both protect privacy and protect us against serious threats, and why it has to defend both security and liberty—in a democracy, those go hand in hand. Strong powers always need to be accompanied by strong oversight and strong safeguards. That is why it is important we get the detail right. Just as we worked in a constructive cross-party manner on previous investigatory powers legislation and on the National Security Act, we will continue to do so on this legislation.

The reality that we all face is that threats to our national security are now more complex than ever: fast-changing challenges from home-grown extremism and radicalisation; a steep rise in state-sponsored threats from hostile foreign actors; the exponential growth in new technologies; the proliferation of serious crimes; and national security threats such as child abuse being perpetrated and spread online, putting young children and young people at terrible risk.

Within that rapidly evolving landscape, we obviously cannot allow our security services to be outpaced. We must ensure that the interception powers that our security services and police have to fight crime are updated to cope with rapid technological changes and changing threats. We must also ensure that the safeguards and oversight keep pace with changing powers, so that we continue to ensure, as is embedded in the legislation, that all measures are appropriate and proportionate when action is taken. That is why we rightly have, in the existing Investigatory Powers Act 2016, measures such as the double lock on some provisions relating to judicial commissioners' approval and oversight; those, too, need to be updated in response to changing technology.

The Bill is necessary because technology is moving so fast. We now see serious crimes such as: child abusers using new and very different methods to share vile images of sexual assaults on children; extremists and terrorists using different and changing internet forums and encrypted messaging to find new ways to radicalise and organise; and serious and organised criminals using new applications to launder money and drugs, and to facilitate organised immigration crime that can put lives at risk. Clearly, that means the legislation needs to be updated. That is why we recognise the need for measures and the main provisions in the Bill—for example, on bulk datasets. We recognise the need for the Government to make changes to the existing framework, because agencies that are working at pace to intercept threats should not have to go through the same lengthy processes to use datasets that are widely available to the public and other commercial organisations.

In the other place, Members debated the importance of getting the threshold right and how the phrase “low or no expectation of privacy” should be interpreted. Those discussions will rightly continue in Committee. We will also continue to seek further clarification on the interaction of these reforms with some of the measures in the Data Protection Act 2018.

On internet connection records, the Bill reflects some of the recommendations made by Lord Anderson. This is a sensitive area and, rightly, there is a high test for important agencies to meet to access vital records, but there are also particular concerns around child abusers and terrorists being able to use new forums and communication channels where there should be the further ability to pursue action and intelligence leads. We recognise the importance of the issue, but also of ensuring that we get it right and frame the detail in the right way to ensure that we can protect vulnerable young people and children.

Ministers are right to ensure that Government Departments are not inadvertently prevented from the kinds of normal and routine legitimate exchanges of basic information by inadvertent coverage of previous legislation, and to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. We agree it is important that there are processes to ensure that security and intelligence agencies can anticipate technological changes that are coming down the track from major telecommunications companies and major commercial organisations that might potentially make their work more difficult or inadvertently put national security at risk. Rather than have everyone simply try to play catch-up in retrospect, including with criminals and terrorists who may exploit those changes, it is sensible to have in place in advance a process for constructive dialogue between companies and intelligence agencies to mitigate any adverse consequences for tackling serious crimes, such as child sexual exploitation. I hope Ministers will look at how far they can ensure that regulations to govern changes to the notices regime are properly consulted on, scrutinised and therefore set at the appropriate level, and that they continue to engage with technology companies on how they should be implemented.

We welcome the additional safeguards and the introduction of stronger oversight, including as a result of the discussions in the other place—for example, ensuring that more of the commissioners’ functions are put on a statutory footing; ensuring there is proper oversight of the use of third-party bulk personal datasets by intelligence services; and including additional protections, through Government amendment 45 in the other place, relating to confidential journalistic material and sources. We hope that that issue will be looked at further in Committee.

In the context of what the oversight arrangements should be, I ask the Government to look again at the role of the Intelligence and Security Committee. As a former member of the ISC—although that was now more than two decades ago—I can testify to the importance of the Committee and the seriousness with which all its members take their work. The Committee provides a level of oversight and scrutiny that cannot be provided in the normal way by other parliamentary Select Committees, due to the nature of the secret work our intelligence agencies need to do. It also performs an important role for Government. There should be the reassurance for Ministers that the work of the intelligence and security

agencies is being appropriately scrutinised. The Government therefore need to look again at updating the memorandum of understanding for the ISC to ensure that it, too, can fit with the evolving landscape under the changes that are taking place, and to make sure that its remit can do so as well.

I will press the Home Secretary again on this issue. I understand that he cannot answer for Prime Ministers in a simple way, but I press him to take back to the Prime Minister the importance of recognising the serious role played by the ISC. It is not simply about the role of the Foreign Secretary or the Home Secretary; it is also about the role of the Prime Minister. There are powers that only a Prime Minister has and has to execute, as is reflected in the Bill. Therefore, recognition from the Prime Minister of the role of the ISC is important.

Finally, there is the complicated issue that Lord Anderson raised regarding the circumstances in which the Prime Minister’s unique powers can be delegated in the context of intercept warrants targeted at Members of relevant legislatures. There was a detailed discussion. Those warrants are rightly subject to a triple lock process which requires the authorisation of the Prime Minister. We recognise that the experience of covid and the hospitalisation of the then Prime Minister in 2020 gave rise to questions about what should happen in such circumstances and making sure there are proper procedures in place to ensure that there is no national security gap. Members in the other place were right to press for a tightening of those arrangements. That raises wider issues that the Bill cannot address: around what happens if there is a conflict of interest for a Prime Minister or circumstances in which a Prime Minister is accused of being careless on issues around national security. I do not think that that can be addressed by the Bill or perhaps by any legislation, but it is a salutary reminder to us all about the importance of Prime Ministers taking immensely seriously their responsibilities towards our national security and always behaving in a way that means that that can never be in doubt.

This should be a cross-party issue—a matter on which we all work together. I know that Members who are present this evening and have great expertise in this area will want to raise further questions about the detailed application of the Bill, and I hope that those will be considered in the same spirit that we saw in the House of Lords. Often in this place, the Government simply maintain their position and the detailed amendments are tabled in the Lords, but I hope that on this issue we will see the same spirit of cross-party discussion that we saw in the other place.

This is about ensuring that there is proper oversight and there are proper safeguards, but it is also, vitally, about defending our national security at a time of rapidly changing technology, when we all have grave concerns about the potential for terrorists, extremists and serious criminals to exploit that new technology to do us harm. We must all be vigilant, and ensure that the intelligence and security agencies are supported so that they can do the work we need them to do, on our behalf, to keep our country safe.

7.40 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): Let me say first of all that I am in favour of the Bill, which I think constitutes a sensible updating of the

[*Sir Jeremy Wright*]

intelligence community's powers in the ways that the Home Secretary and, indeed, the shadow Home Secretary have described. I am also in favour of the principle, mentioned by the shadow Home Secretary, that greater powers for the intelligence agencies should come with greater oversight of those powers.

I know that my colleagues in the Intelligence and Security Committee will want to focus on certain areas covered by the Bill. I want to focus my remarks on internet connection records, which are, of course, important pieces of intelligence. We are talking here about which internet sites were accessed and when, not about precisely what was viewed or what activity was carried out, but none the less this data can be of significant intelligence value. The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 allows for the obtaining of internet connection records data in certain circumstances. The circumstances on which I want to concentrate are those in which an intelligence agency is focused on the use of a particular internet service at a particular time and is keen to know the identity of the person or persons who have been using it at that time. This is covered by section 62 of the Act, which gives authority for an intelligence agency to obtain that information. The Bill seeks to broaden an agency's power to act in those circumstances.

The law currently requires the agency to know specifically which service has been used, and specifically at which time it was used. Clause 15 seeks to extend that to allow the collection of ICR data to identify individuals using "one or more" specified internet services "in a specified period". What that means, at least as the Bill is currently drafted, is that there is no apparent limit on the number of internet services that can be specified or on the length of the specified period, so the clause could allow an intelligence agency to collect ICR data on a large number of different internet services, and over a long period. That would inevitably involve data on the activities of a potentially large number of people, whereas the current law permits only examination of a specific service at a specific time, which carries much less risk of other wholly innocent and uninvolved individuals being caught in the net.

I do not suggest—and neither, I think, does the Intelligence and Security Committee—that the intelligence agencies do not need these wider powers. We do say, however, that this is a significant widening of their powers, and that it should therefore come with additional scrutiny from a judicial commissioner. I think we can deduce, not just from the debate in the other place, but from what the Home Secretary has said in this House and what other Ministers have said at other times, that the Government essentially has two arguments in response to that. The first is that this new power is not intrusive enough to merit extra oversight, as ICR data relating to those not subject to agency interest is not retained, and the second is that the power being proposed is no more intrusive than current powers to collect internet connection data.

On the first of those arguments, the fact that data is not retained does not mean that it is not intrusive to collect it. Many of our constituents would be concerned about their internet activity being scrutinised, even if no action were taken thereafter—and we should bear in mind that the Bill's language does not limit that scrutiny

to sites visited which are inherently suspicious. Even everyday online activity may be of interest in the case of individuals of concern, but this provision would mean that the everyday online activity of many who are not of concern will also be examined. That, we say, makes the provision worthy of additional oversight.

The second argument the Government might advance is that this is no more intrusive than current powers. That, I think, is true in terms of the depth of the intrusion—it is still the "when" and "where" of internet activity rather than the "what" that we are talking about—but it is not true in terms of its breadth. Many more people will be caught by it, and that is a significant and material increase in intrusion for the population at large. We therefore believe that the Government should think again, not about whether intelligence agencies should have these wider powers, but about whether there should be the involvement of external scrutiny to ensure that they are used properly.

There is only one other matter that I want to touch on briefly, and it has been mentioned already: the grounds on which powers such as these can be used. There are, essentially, three. First, they can be used in the interests of national security, and I have no argument with that. Secondly, they can be used in urgent cases to combat some forms of criminality. Thirdly, they can be used in the interests of the economic wellbeing of the UK, in so far as those interests are also relevant to national security. As the House knows, the last of those has long been controversial as an appropriate ground for action—and, of course, the more intrusive the powers that can be used with that justification, the more controversial it is. I think it fair to say that the ISC is concerned about its use in that regard, and I am sure the House will want to consider, as the Bill proceeds, whether its application to these powers and more generally is still appropriate.

7.47 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Let me start with two thank yous. First, let me put on record my party's gratitude to the intelligence services and law enforcement organisations that work so incredibly hard to keep all our citizens safe in the face of constantly changing and developing threats. Secondly, I thank all those who took part in the reviews of the 2016 Act that have informed the Bill. However, as Lord Anderson said in his own review, they should be a starting point for parliamentary scrutiny and debate rather than a finishing point.

Although any opportunity to revisit and improve the 2016 Act would generally be welcome, my party has serious concerns about certain provisions in this amendment Bill. In short, while it is constantly presented as "updating", and as protecting and making efficient pre-existing powers, we fear that the reality is a very significant expansion of what are, we must remember, already extraordinarily wide powers by international standards. There are significant privacy and human rights risks, and the danger of increasingly widespread suspicionless surveillance. We fear that we may be handing invasive powers to intelligence and law enforcement agencies not because the powers are necessary or essential to their work but because they are convenient, and that is not striking the right balance.

All this is consistent with the very detailed and principled privacy and human rights concerns that my party raised in relation to the 2016 Act itself—particularly in the speeches made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who is here to take part in the debate again today. As will be the case today, we did not oppose the Second Reading of that Bill, but in the absence of important amendments, or concessions and reassurances—again, as with the 2016 legislation—we keep open the option to oppose the current Bill at a later stage.

Today I will focus on concerns relating to bulk personal datasets, and on notices relating to changes in telecommunication services. I will also briefly flag up our concerns about internet connection records and changes to the offence of unlawfully obtaining communications data. My party also believes that this Bill provides an opportunity to revisit the whole issue of snooping on parliamentarians, if we are bold enough to take it.

I shall turn first to bulk personal datasets and part 7 of the 2016 Act. In short, we struggle to see that the proposed changes have been shown to be necessary. We fear that they will instead create even larger gaps in the oversight regime in relation to these capabilities. A whole host of concerns arises in relation to the provisions of clause 2 and the concept of data in relation to which there can be

“low or no reasonable expectation of privacy”.

Bluntly, I struggle to see how a decision maker is supposed to assess people’s reasonable expectations of privacy, and when we say “people” we can be talking about hundreds or thousands of people or potentially several million people. Within that group of individuals there will be many varying attitudes to further privacy, and the data related to individuals could vary hugely from the mundane to the deeply personal. It may be that there is supposed to be some type of “reasonable person” test applied, but is that reasonable person black, gay, Jewish or indeed a trade unionist? How are potentially very different subjective attitudes to be accounted for? These might seem like odd questions, but the experience in the United States of America, where a similar test is involved, proves that these questions are very real indeed. Is it a general question of privacy in relation to the data or a more specific question of expectations of the use of that data by intelligence services? What precisely is low expectation? This seems to be an impossible assessment to undertake in any realistic or meaningful sense.

Joanna Cherry: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments earlier. As usual, he is making a very forensic speech. On this issue of a reasonable expectation of privacy, does he agree that clause 2 and clause 11(3) seem to be based on a legal misunderstanding that people lose their right to privacy when they happen to share certain information with someone else? He will be as aware as I am that that runs contrary to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and that, by contrast, the Court has actually said that privacy includes “the right to establish and develop relationships with other human beings”.

Does he agree that it is important to ensure that this Bill is commensurate with our obligations under the European convention on human rights?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. and learned Friend will not be surprised to hear that I completely agree with her.

In fact, that brings me to the next point I want to raise in relation to clause 2. As well as putting in place what I struggle to see as being a reasonably operated assessment, the clause raises concerns in relation to consistency with data protection legislation and with human rights obligations. The factors to be taken into account when undertaking that really difficult assessment do not even expressly include the sensitivity of the data in question, which surely should be central to any question of processing. That is an inconsistency with existing data protection principles and laws, and I agree that the compatibility of such provisions with our human rights obligations is also surely highly dubious. Just because someone has shared personal data does not mean that they automatically lose their right to further protection around how that data is shared and processed, especially when it is sensitive personal data, as my hon. and learned Friend has just said.

The role of judicial commissioners in this area is even further diluted, reduced to reviewing by judicial review standards whether datasets do indeed relate to data where there can be low or no expectation of privacy. Frankly, that is not a safeguard at all. At the very least, their role needs to be strengthened when the Bill is considered in Committee. We also need to seek assurances around how the Bill will impact on the reporting of the retention and use of bulk personal datasets. If large numbers are retained under category authorisations, we may not know how many datasets are actually being gathered.

Let me turn to various aspects of part 4, on notices. Again there are some controversial provisions, particularly in clause 21 and the requirement on selected telecommunications operators to inform the Secretary of State if they propose to make changes to their products or services that would negatively affect existing lawful access capabilities. That seems like an extraordinarily broad power, without anything remotely appropriate in terms of oversight and limitations. These powers are going to make the UK a real outlier. Essentially, the Secretary of State will be empowered to say to tech companies, “You are not allowed to improve your products without consulting us, so that we can still break in to access the data that we need and when we want it”. Despite what the Secretary of State says, taken together with other changes to review processes, such powers could easily be used to significantly delay, or de facto veto, updates to security, rendering everybody’s data more vulnerable to hacking by third-party actors.

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): That is simply incorrect, and I know that the hon. Gentleman would not wish to continue down a road that he knows to be incorrect. Let me just be very clear: this is a continuation of a power that was granted in 2016. The notice does not extend that power; it merely enables a conversation to begin with companies before any action is taken, to maintain an existing standard and not in fact to change it.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful for that clarification from the Minister, and we will of course engage further in this debate in Committee.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

These concerns have been raised not just by me but by significant tech companies; this is not something that has come to me simply through perusing the Bill. The key question remains: why is there to be no proper oversight of these notices and notice powers by independent advance authorisation? Why is there not even the double lock that applies to other notices that can be served on communications providers under that Act? Surely that scrutiny should be carried out in advance. There are also lots of question marks around the expanded claims of international jurisdiction. How will potential conflicts of law be resolved, especially if a company subject to one of these notices that is contrary to its domestic laws cannot even say anything about it because it is bound to secrecy by this legislation? What are the prospects of other Governments copying what our Government are doing and seeking to replicate such provisions, and what would the impact of that be on UK companies?

Turning to internet connection records, the starting point is that we should remember that no other European Union or Five Eyes country permits the requiring of ICR generation or retention in relation to its own residents, so this was a hugely controversial development in the 2016 Act. As we have heard, ICRs can reveal huge amounts of deeply sensitive information about a person. For now, secret services can seek ICRs only when certain facts that are already known, such as the identity of a person connecting or the time and use of the connection, so that the retention is at least targeted in some way.

The risk in this Bill is that reasonable suspicion will no longer precede targeted surveillance. Instead, the Bill would seek to use ICRs for the discovery of new targets, which is a really significant jump and development. I can genuinely understand some of the reasons being offered for this change, and I am not unsympathetic to the case being made, but if these powers are not carefully circumscribed, they risk creating a big step towards mass surveillance and fishing exercises. We need to ask whether there are less invasive alternatives and whether these powers are therefore really necessary. Alternatively, we need to look again at the oversight mechanisms for the use of these powers.

We also have concerns about the Bill's proposals in relation to the offence created by the 2016 Act, where relevant persons in a relevant public body knowingly or recklessly obtain communications data from a telecoms or postal operator without lawful authority. This Bill seeks to set out examples of what would amount to lawful authority, which is a laudable aim. However, there are real questions about whether some of the examples in clause 12 are not in fact redefining the concept of lawful authority. In particular, the assertion that there would be lawful authority simply because "the communications data had been published before the relevant person obtained it"

is controversial. That is particularly so when

"published" means make available to the public or a section of the public (whether or not on a commercial basis)."

As I said in relation to bulk personal datasets, limited publication is not authority for intrusive surveillance. Could a simple private message not amount to publication of comms data? The implications of this definition of lawful authority need very careful scrutiny indeed.

Finally, on the interception and hacking of parliamentarians, making provision for circumstances where the Prime Minister is unavailable to play his part in a triple lock seems sensible, but the fact that the issue of snooping on MPs and others is being revisited should trigger us all to rethink the whole scheme. Our role of representing our constituents, interrogating legislation and holding the Government to account should not be interfered with lightly. We should take the chance to consider post-surveillance notification of MPs who have been spied upon, by judicial commissioners, once investigations are completed. As matters stand at the moment, redress is almost impossible to obtain. We should also require that the investigatory power commissioners be informed every time these powers are used, so that there is transparency about how often this is happening. All other options should be on the table as well.

I started by thanking intelligence and law enforcement authorities and I am happy to do so again in closing, but our respect for them does not mean we should ever consider writing blank cheques or handing them whatever powers they ask for. They are not perfect. From time to time they exceed their powers and certain individuals abuse their lawful capabilities. The powers that they seek through this Bill are extremely invasive and broad in scope. There is a real danger that key provisions of the Bill will go beyond what is necessary and get the balance with privacy and human rights wrong. These provisions will need serious scrutiny and revision in Committee, and that is what we in the SNP will seek to secure.

7.59 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Hegel said, "What is reasonable is real, and what is real is reasonable." In facing the very real threats that pervade, it is certainly reasonable that we equip those missioned to keep us safe with the powers they need to do so. That is partly about putting in place a legislative framework that allows them to counter those threats, for we know what will happen otherwise. We sit in this Chamber graced by the coats of arms of our former colleagues Jo Cox and David Amess. We in this place know what it means when those missioned to keep us safe are unable to do so.

On that basis, I was proud and pleased to take the original Investigatory Powers Bill through this House—some veterans of its passage are in the Chamber tonight—and, in doing so, we were conscious of the need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, providing the powers and equipping the police and the security services with the necessary mechanisms to do their job and, on the other hand, retaining both the privacy of individuals and putting in place the necessary safeguards mentioned by the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

That balance was at the heart of our considerations then. I am conscious that I said in that debate:

"It is important to understand that privacy is at the very core of the Bill... The protection of private interests and the protection of the public are at the heart of all we seek to do".—[*Official Report, Investigatory Powers Public Bill Committee*, 12 April 2016; c. 90.]

That remains so, but it is also important to recognise that we always anticipated that the legislative arena was bound to require a dynamic approach, of the kind we are discussing this evening, and that we would need to

update the legislation to deal with the changing character of the threats I described. It comes as no surprise that the Government have introduced legislation to do just that, to add to what is already on the statute book and to make it more appropriate.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Gentleman and I often crossed swords during the passage of the 2016 Act, but we have since reached a point of rapprochement on discovering our mutual passion for the importance of freedom of expression. From what he is saying this evening, I think we can also agree on the importance of privacy. Of course, that comes from the right to a private and family life under article 8 of the European convention on human rights. Does he agree that it is unfortunate, given this Bill's huge implications for our constituents' privacy, that the Government have decided not to conduct a privacy impact assessment? Surely such an assessment is vital, and it is perhaps something upon which he and I can again, rather unusually, agree.

Sir John Hayes: Our agreements are becoming rather less unusual. I do not know whether that gives the hon. and learned Lady any pleasure, or whether it causes her pain. None the less, she is right that, when we consider such legislation, it is important that it is scrutinised to an even greater degree than we would normally expect in this place.

The 2016 Act was considered by three Committees of this House. It was subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses of Parliament and, indeed, the bulk powers, which have been mentioned, were subject to an independent review by David Anderson, who has since been elevated to become Lord Anderson.

The hon. and learned Lady is right that the need for scrutiny is profound, particularly when we equip organisations with extensive authority to invade private space. Of course, we will not know much of what they do. Many of the individuals involved in the security services and the police, and the work they do, are rightly unknown to all but a few, so it is all the more important that, in giving them such authority, we behave in the way that the hon. and learned Lady describes—I am now adding to the small, two-person coalition formed between us.

It is right that the legislation is updated to make it fit for purpose. The ISC, of which I am also proud to be a member, has been told of the need for urgent, targeted and necessary changes. When we consider this Bill, we should test whether its provisions are indeed urgent, targeted and necessary. I am not absolutely convinced that all we see before us passes that test, and I will say a little more about that when I come to clause 14 and its associated schedule.

There is more expertise in the Chamber tonight than I could possibly imagine but, by way of background for the wider audience, I will say a word about what the 2016 Act does and why this Bill therefore matters. The Act provides the law-enforcement and security services with the vital powers they need to keep us safe, and it does so in a way that is clear and transparent.

When we passed the Act into law, we ensured that the safeguard mechanisms were radically overhauled. The innovative double lock that we put in place was, at the time, unprecedented. As the shadow Home Secretary said, it does two things: it provides the necessary protection

that she describes, but it also gives the security services confidence that what they are doing is not only authorised but thoroughly checked. It is also good for Ministers to know that the process has judicial oversight as well as political oversight.

There have been a number of changes since the Act was passed, both in the job done by the security and intelligence services and the police and in the reason they have to do that job, for the people who seek to do us harm are dynamic, too; they change what they do, and technology has also changed. All of that explains why this Bill is, in broad terms, welcome and necessary.

But the powers I describe are not given solely to the people I mentioned. They are also given to a number of other public bodies. This was debated at great length when the 2016 Act was considered in this place. These public bodies—ranging from local authorities to the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and all kinds of others—have proper legal functions. I am not debating that, but they are not quite of a kind with the security services and the police. To grant these bodies such intrusive powers was always controversial and, to put it mildly, was bound to give rise to some scepticism.

When Parliament considered the Act, we deliberated on that provision in great detail and took a very considered and cautious decision to restrict the use of the power, which we considered to be intrusive. As a result, the public bodies that I have described, including the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and local authorities, are required to take further procedural steps in order to compel the disclosure of communications data from telecommunications operators. They must obtain either an authorisation under the current IPA, a court order or other judicial authorisation, or regulatory powers in relation to telecommunications or postal operators, or they must obtain the communications data as secondary data as part of a valid interception or equipment interference warrant. So their ability to take advantage of the powers within the existing Act is both limited, particular and subject to those safeguards. The Bill before us seeks to remove that requirement for those further procedural steps in relation to a wide range of public regulatory authorities.

Worse still—I hope the Minister will correct this in his summation—we have yet to learn which those bodies are, as we have not seen a list of the authorities. I hope we will get that list, if not tonight—as it is a big ask for the Minister to read them all out in his 10-minute summation, I hope he will write to the House, and put a copy of the letter in the Library, explaining which bodies will enjoy those powers.

The Government's argument for removing the restrictions I have set out is that a broader array of communications now fall into the category of communications data—the definition of communications data has broadened—and that a wider number of organisations now constitute telecommunications operators. As a result, it is said that the current restrictions prevent some regulatory authorities from acquiring the information necessary to carry out their statutory responsibilities. The problem with that argument is that unless we know what those regulatory functions are and unless we understand which bodies are involved in the supervisory functions, it is hard to know whether the changes before the House can be legitimised. I have no doubt that will be explored in

[*Sir John Hayes*]

Committee—I would be amazed if it is not—but it would be helpful if the Minister could be ahead of that further consideration and clarify which specific bodies will fall into this category.

As I said, the issue was highly scrutinised when we last debated these matters. At that time, the powers were tied to national security and serious crime circumstances only, to avoid impinging on the very privacy mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (*Joanna Cherry*). For that reason too, Parliament granted the powers to a limited range of organisations. We should not brush that aside lightly. Colleagues will be aware of various reports of the intrusive use of investigatory powers by local authorities and other public bodies. The House would not be content to introduce sweeping powers for an unknown and potentially unlimited number of public bodies, when a previous Parliament decided that was too intrusive. I would like the Minister to satisfy the House about the necessity of the change, to specify to whom the change will apply, and to reassure us that there is no weakening of the core connection between the privacy of the individual and the necessary powers available to do what is legally right.

As I said earlier, in broad terms the Bill is welcome. It is important to understand that we need to update the legal framework in which those missioned to keep us safe operate, but the Bill can be improved during its scrutiny. I simply point out that when we debated the Act in its original form, we recognised that through scrutiny that Bill could be improved. As we continue consideration of this important measure, I hope that this Minister—one of my successors as Security Minister—will recognise the same.

8.14 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (*Wallasey*) (*Lab*): In common with all the speakers who have made their contributions thus far on Second Reading of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, I will not say that I oppose the Bill or that these powers should not exist or be updated in this rapidly developing area of technology. As others have observed, the rapidly evolving technology is creating threats about which we could not have dreamed when the original Act was introduced after an ISC report on privacy and security in 2015. Although the issues are evolving, some things stay the same, namely that in a democracy it is important that the security services and all the agencies, whether they relate to police or security, can be held to account by the democratic structures that are created to make our democracy real.

I emphasise a point that has not been stressed by others: we are living through an era during which authoritarian governments across the world are beginning to challenge the openness of democratic structures and test whether those who live in a democracy have the political will to maintain their democracy, keep it vibrant and protect it from threats. Against that background of being challenged—we do not have to look much further than Europe and the borders of Ukraine to see how some of those challenges are beginning to develop—we are being asked whether we rate the health and strength of our democracy enough to protect it. We are also being asked, which is the nature of this debate, to justify

the powers we are giving to the security and police services to our constituents and those citizens of our country who wish to see their democracy protected, as well as having a proper balance between democratic oversight safety and the powers we give our security services to do their jobs.

As others have mentioned, there is a balance between the effectiveness and speed of those powers and the safeguards that this Parliament puts in place in order to ensure that there is proper oversight and use of them. We have heard how that balance and safeguarding has been developed in law. We are looking now at amendments to the existing law in order to update and modernise those powers to make them more effective, efficient and easier to use, and to ensure protecting our security, be it from criminality, terrorism, paedophilia or state actors who wish to our country harm, is balanced correctly with safeguards, openness and transparency oversight. Then we can protect our society and values, while respecting the privacy of every individual citizen who enjoys the freedom of living in our democracy.

The Bill seeks an expansion in investigatory powers and some of those powers available to agencies to deal with the evolution of this area. Our job, not only in the debate tonight, but in the scrutiny of this Bill in Committee, is to test and ask the appropriate questions about whether the right balance has been struck by Ministers and the relevant agencies in the extra powers that they want to introduce. As the newest member of the ISC, I believe that, as the investigatory powers evolve, it is also important that the powers of the Intelligence and Security Committee to do its job in these new areas are properly developed and resourced. I shall just leave that on the record. It is not a surprise to those who have read the Lords debates that this is an issue.

I draw attention to an area of the Bill where amendments were agreed in the Lords: what is known as the triple lock, rather than the double lock. That is the mechanism that protects the communications of Members of this Parliament and other relevant legislatures from being arbitrarily intercepted by agencies for no reason. In fact, it is part of the protection that one would expect in a robust democracy for those people who are elected to represent their constituents. They have a reasonable expectation, I think, to be allowed to go about their business without being subjected to that kind of intrusive power, unless there is an extremely good reason for it. Members will know that the underlying principle is that the communications of Members of this Parliament and other relevant legislators should be intercepted and read only where it is absolutely essential to do so—in the most serious of circumstances. In the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which this Bill will change, Parliament recognised that that was an issue by adding a third layer of safeguards to the approval process for warrants for targeted interception and targeted examination of communications. Those warrants are issued only by a Secretary of State and reviewed by a judicial commissioner, which is the double lock, but they are also approved by the Prime Minister personally. As my right hon. Friend said from the Dispatch Box, there is an issue if the Prime Minister is unavailable to do that. It is important that there is not a gap in security protection, which would happen if the Prime Minister is unable to be the third part of that triple lock.

Nobody disagrees with the idea that that process should be made more robust, but there is also an issue about how wide the power to issue that final approval—currently, that final approval rests only with the Prime Minister—should go. There were debates about that when the Bill went through its stages in the other place. The question of balance is how the new Bill deals with ensuring that the triple lock is robust while not creating a lacuna should the Prime Minister be indisposed and unable to issue warrants without that power going too wide. The ISC supports the intention behind this, which is to provide resilience around the current arrangements. It is important that the Prime Minister is the person who approves these things, but this may affect the operations of the intelligence agencies when they are seeking a targeted interference or a time-sensitive warrant. None the less, there was agreement that, in truly exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate for a Secretary of State to temporarily deputise for the Prime Minister. The Committee considered that it was important that decisions in this area should be delegated only in the most exceptional circumstances, and delegated only to a limited number of Secretaries of State who are already responsible for authorising relevant warrants. We want the Prime Minister to retain sight of all warrants relating to Members of a relevant legislature. Most of that was agreed in the other place, although there is an issue about whether the relevant Secretaries of State—there can be up to five of those—are ones that already issue warrants.

Mr Jones: I was a little taken aback that the Home Secretary just assumed that, once these had been agreed by a substitute, they would automatically be reviewed by the Prime Minister. Clearly, that is a big assumption. Does my hon. Friend not think that it would be better if we put it in the Bill that the Prime Minister had full oversight of this warrant?

Dame Angela Eagle: Clearly, putting such things in the Bill is often an important safeguard. Certainly, I do not understand why the delegation of these powers should not be limited to Secretaries of State who also issue warrants. I do not quite understand why there is an obsession with five Secretaries of State. We could have four and still have robust oversight.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that the Wilson doctrine is still in operation? This came about in the '60s and '70s when Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister of the day, gave an undertaking to this House that the mail of Members of Parliament would not be routinely tapped; it would happen only in exceptional circumstances. All this triple lock is doing is putting that doctrine on to a statutory footing.

Dame Angela Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Obviously, the Wilson doctrine is in the previous Investigatory Powers Act. However, given what happened with the incapacity of the Prime Minister during the covid pandemic, we are seeking to tweak it. It seems sensible to do so, but we need to tweak it in a way that is as narrow as possible to ensure that there is no lacuna in protection.

I wonder why this idea of five Secretaries of State is so important. I also wonder why we cannot restrict the Secretaries of State who could operate in place of the

Prime Minister in this very particular circumstance to those Secretaries of State who also issue warrants, and why that cannot be on the face of the Bill. I hope that, in his response, the Minister might have some contribution to make about why the Government are sticking on this particular issue, given that everyone understands how important it is to have resilience. But the resilience that the ISC is seeking is slightly stricter than that which the Government seem to wish to grant. It would be helpful for Committee stage if the Minister explained why that is.

It is important that our discussions on particular bits of the Bill, which we will have in Committee, are seen in the context of a widespread acknowledgement that we need to ensure that the investigatory powers to which the Bill relates are updated, and continue to evolve, to make them relevant, and efficient and effective to use. At the same time, any expansion in investigatory powers must have particular safeguards and oversight in a democratic country, so that we can assure our constituents that it is being done in the interests of preserving our democracy and ensuring that we can protect the population from growing and ever-evolving threats, be they of terrorism, state actors or crime, and that their human rights and rights to privacy are still appropriately protected with proper oversight, which of course the ISC is an important part of.

8.29 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). As she mentioned, she is the newest member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, but that has not prevented her, as we have seen this evening, from already making a valuable contribution to our work. As Chairman of the ISC, I will set out the Committee's view of the Bill as a whole, based on the engagement that we have had with the intelligence community, and with the Government more broadly, on the legislation. In doing so, I pay particular tribute to our member in the other place, the noble Lord West of Spithead, who has already clearly set out our Committee's position there, and had success, in at least one respect, in obtaining an improvement to the Bill. In looking at the Bill as a whole, I will also touch on one other specific matter in addition to those that my colleagues have tackled individually.

As right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House will be aware, the original Investigatory Powers Act was introduced as a result of the Intelligence and Security Committee's 2015 report on privacy and security. The report recommended the creation of a new Act to set out clearly: the intrusive powers that are available to intelligence agencies; the purposes for which they may be used; and the authorisations and, crucially, the oversight that should be required. There have, however, been a number of developments since the Act was introduced. As the Home Secretary said in opening the debate, we now face a different threat picture, with greater danger from state actors, a significant rise in internet-enabled crime, and an ever-accelerating pace of technological change.

The ISC has therefore made time to consider and scrutinise the case for change put forward by the intelligence agencies and the Government, and to take classified evidence on the Bill. I can tell the House that, broadly, the Committee welcomes the Bill as a means of addressing those developments that have the potential to undermine

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

the ability of the intelligence agencies to detect threats and protect our country. However, as we have heard, there are several areas in which the Committee considers that the Bill goes too far. In particular, it does not yet provide the safeguards and oversight that are so essential when it comes to secretive actions that have the potential to intrude on a great many people.

The Bill seeks an expansion of the investigatory powers available to various public bodies. The Committee is in agreement that, at least in the case of the intelligence services, that is justified, but we are still sceptical—this was eloquently presented in more detail by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who took the original legislation through when he was Security Minister—of the broad way in which some powers have been restored to an unknown number of as yet unidentified public bodies through clause 14. Any increase in investigatory powers ought to—indeed, must—be accompanied by a concomitant increase in oversight. That is a very basic principle that Parliament has always expected to be followed. By oversight, I do not just mean parliamentary oversight as exercised by my Committee, but robust ministerial, judicial and regulatory oversight too. During the passage of the Bill, Members of the Intelligence and Security Committee will seek to ensure the inclusion of necessary safeguards and sufficient detail on those safeguards.

The Bill deals with a number of technical areas, where it is right that the necessary guidance is provided in codes of practice. However, matters that deal with procedural safeguards or external oversight must be on the face of the Bill to ensure that they are adhered to and cannot be changed or watered down without Parliament being consulted.

I am sorry to say that in recent years the Government have been reluctant to ensure that democratic oversight keeps pace with intelligence powers, particularly where it is related to the remit and resources of the ISC, which have been increasingly undermined in a way that I believe Parliament never intended. It is therefore imperative that Parliament ensures that the safeguards and scrutiny provided by the ISC and other external oversight bodies, such as the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, are clearly set out and cannot be discarded on a political whim. That means putting them in the legislation itself. Fine words in a code of practice are, I am afraid, not worth the paper they are written on; the statute must include everything that is needed to provide Parliament and the public with the necessary assurance that investigatory powers are tightly drawn and robustly scrutinised.

The Committee therefore expects the Government to take this opportunity to bolster the effective oversight that they keep saying they value. Actions speak louder than words, as is often said, so I look forward to hearing the Minister's assurances in his response to our interventions. I hope that he will be able to find a solution both to the individual aspects of the Bill that continue to be raised, and to our overarching concern about the diminution of parliamentary powers in respect of national security.

I would like to highlight one particular issue, which concerns my colleagues on the ISC and myself, relating to the oversight requirements for the retention and

examination of bulk personal datasets. The Bill will insert new section 226DA into the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 to require each intelligence service to provide the Secretary of State with an annual report detailing the individual bulk personal datasets that they retained and examined under either a “category authorisation” or an “individual authorisation” during the period in question.

In the upper House, Lord West, on behalf of the Committee, tabled an amendment that was designed to ensure that there is independent parliamentary and judicial scrutiny, too—I emphasise that—of this information, rather than just political oversight. The amendment would have achieved that by providing that the annual report that the Government propose be sent to the Secretary of State should also be sent both to the ISC and the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. One would think that that was a pretty reasonable request. Such a measure would rectify the current gap in parliamentary oversight of these authorisations and complement the commissioner's existing powers of inspection to provide oversight at all levels.

Unfortunately, the Government did not accept the amendment. However, they did at least acknowledge that the gap existed and that some level of parliamentary oversight of the new regime was needed. The Government therefore introduced their own amendment, which, rather than providing the ISC with the same report that they are providing to the Secretary of State, places an additional duty on the Secretary of State to provide a separate report to the ISC. Notably, even this secondary report would not be provided to IPCO. That Government amendment is now proposed new section 226DB.

Although we are reassured that the Committee's strength of feeling, which was matched by the feeling of noble Lords in the upper House, has been recognised by the Government, what concerns the Committee is why the Government have chosen to craft a separate amendment requiring a separate report to be drawn up.

There are three key differences of which the House will wish to be aware between the proposals of the Committee and those of the Government. The first is that the Government's proposal will actually create more work for the intelligence community because, instead of simply sending the existing annual report to the ISC, it will have to produce an additional report. That seems entirely at odds with the Government's general approach to the Bill. The Minister in the upper House was keen to emphasise the need to minimise the burden on the agencies when it came to other elements in the Bill, so it is most peculiar that the Government are deliberately choosing to increase the burden unnecessarily.

The second difference is that the Government proposal excludes the Investigatory Powers Commissioner completely, and it is not clear why. Oversight by the commissioner should be regarded as essential, because that is what it is.

The third and most important difference is that the Government amendment is less specific on the information to be provided to the Intelligence and Security Committee, and does not include individual authorisations within its scope, only category authorisations. It therefore does not provide the same level of assurance to Parliament and the public that the ISC will be fully sighted on the operation of this new regime. It is that final point that is

causing us most concern. I therefore seek assurance from the Minister that the Government proposal will not limit the information received by the ISC to category authorisations, and that all the information contained in the report to the Minister will be contained in the report to the ISC, unless it is material that falls strictly within the definition of current operations at the time at which the report is provided, which we accept is the one thing that we do not generally see. That definition should be strictly as set out in the Justice and Security Act 2013. Any excisions beyond that would undermine what we presume is the intent to provide assurance to Parliament and the public that the regime has robust democratic oversight.

Finally, I simply reiterate the key point: the Bill seeks an expansion in the investigatory powers available to the intelligence services. Although that expansion may be justified, any increase in investigatory powers must be accompanied by a concomitant increase in oversight, and the Government have not yet fulfilled that requirement.

8.42 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Let me start by thanking our security services. I think I am now the longest-serving member of the ISC, and it is a privilege to work with them and scrutinise their work, as our Committee does. They do not get a great deal of publicity—for the right reasons—but when they do, it is sometimes not factual by any stretch of the imagination. They do an invaluable job, and in protecting our democracy, the threat that they face—that we all face—is changing, so the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 needs revising.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said, the important point is that any new powers that we give the security services to act on our behalf should come with an equally balanced level of scrutiny and oversight. I see the scrutiny of our security as like a three-legged stool, with the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, and the ISC. Well, actually, I would say that it is more like a two-and-a-half-legged stool, because the Home Secretary has done what most Ministers do; they say how wonderful the ISC is, how much they value our work, and that they want us fully involved—in passing this legislation, for example—but since 2017, when I first sat on the ISC, there has been a marked increase in lip service paid to it, as I think we see again in the Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, we have not met the Prime Minister for 10 years—any of them; I think we had one who offered to come in the dying days of her Administration. We have taken evidence from the security services on the Bill, and I have to say that they are not the problem: it is the Government who are the problem all the time. That was the case with the National Security and Investment Act 2021. Frankly, it is an uphill struggle to get things changed in this Bill—changes that would not only improve the Bill, but make sense. One has just been highlighted by the Chairman of the ISC, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis).

On occasions, it is a bit like going round in circles. I will give an example. We have actually made one little advance in the other place, in terms of acceptance of the changes to do with the triple lock. Now, though, the

sensible thing we are asking for—that it should be in the Bill that the Prime Minister should actually see those warrants—is being resisted as though it would somehow stop the world. I am sorry, but I do not think it would. I think the Government believe that they have to be seen to be resisting any changes. I like the Minister, but the passage of the National Security and Investment Act was a pretty dark day for the Government's relationship with the ISC, because we had to fight tooth and nail to try to get anything changed in that Bill.

Tom Tugendhat: I was not in the Government then.

Mr Jones: I think the Minister was, actually. I think he picked up the tail end of that Bill.

The ISC has looked at this issue in detail. We have taken evidence from the heads of the security services, and we want to be supportive of change, but we also want that important role of scrutiny and ensuring the public are protected from the occasions when things might go wrong. The other thing that struck me today is that, although the Home Secretary can read a good speech, I am not sure he had a great grasp of some of the detail of the Bill. All I ask of the Minister is to please take on board some of the things we are saying, so that we can make progress in Committee. They are not radical things that are going to upturn the Bill; they are things that will improve it. I suspect that in certain parts of the Government there is a hatred of the ISC, and the belief that we have to be resisted at all costs. That will lead to a poorer Bill, because the amendments we will be tabling would actually improve the Bill. Lord West also did a great job in the other place.

I now turn to clause 2 of the Bill, which introduces the bulk personal data regime. There is a worrying gap: oversight of what are deemed low or no privacy datasets added to category authorisations. At the moment, the system does not work, because things like the electoral register have to get special permission. That is silly, frankly, but we need to ensure that these provisions are scrutinised.

New part 7A of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, introduced by clause 2, provides for a light-touch regime for the retention and examination of bulk personal datasets by the intelligence services where the subject of that data is deemed to have low or no reasonable expectation of privacy. As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, people are increasingly giving their personal data with little thought to how it is going to be used—not just by the intelligence services, but for commercial purposes. That needs looking at.

Approval of such a dataset will be sought either under a category authorisation, which encompasses a number of individual datasets that have a similar content and may be used for a similar purpose, or by individual authorisation, which covers a single dataset that does not fall neatly into a category authorisation or is subject to a complicating factor. For a category authorisation, a judicial commissioner will approve the overall description of the category authorisation before it can be used. A judicial commissioner will approve renewal of the authorisation after 12 months, and the relevant Secretary of State will receive retrospective annual reports on the use of category and individual authorisations.

[*Mr Kevan Jones*]

However, as the Bill is currently drafted, this oversight is all retrospective. The problem is that what is missing is real-time or even near real-time oversight of changes. Under the present regime, once a category authorisation has been approved, the intelligence services have the ability to add individual datasets to that authorisation through internal processes alone. They examine the dataset without being subject to any political or judicial oversight, and they would be able to use those datasets for potentially a year without anybody being any the wiser.

We do not question why the security services need these powers, but there is potential for mission creep without any oversight of what is being authorised. We are not saying that these powers are not required; they are required. What we are really being asked to do is rely on the good faith of the intelligence services to use the powers in a certain way. I do not think that is strong enough, and no legislation should be solely dependent on good will. We also have to guard against—there are such occasions—situations when mistakes happen or people use powers for purposes that are not in the public interest.

It is important that we fill this 12-month gap, and the ISC thinks that the easiest and simplest way to change this process would be for the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to be notified when an individual bulk personal dataset is added by an agency to an existing authorisation. I understand that Lord Anderson of Ipswich, in his review of 2023, recommended a similar proposal. The argument from the Government—it is similar to what they have used throughout this Bill, as the Committee Chairman has remarked—is that that will be onerous in adding to the work of the intelligence services. Well, it would not, because it would simply mean sending a one-line email to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner containing the name and description of the bulk personal dataset as soon as reasonably practicable.

The decision would be approved internally and then sent to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, so it is not actually asking for approval. It is just making sure that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner is aware of what is being added, and that the individuals taking such a decision realise that they must inform the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. That would obviously allow the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to look at trends in what is happening. Clearly, after the 12 months, they could look back, but they could also intervene if they thought something was not in touch.

An argument the Government use quite often about this Bill is that it is to have a light-touch approach, and I think this suggestion is for a light-touch approach. I do not know what is onerous about the security services sending an email to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. I think it would ensure the oversight that is needed. Real-time oversight is what we are suggesting, and I do not think it would add to the administration of the security services, but it would lead to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner at least having some visibility on another layer at which decisions are taken.

The proposal would be a very simple thing to do, and I do not understand why the Government are resisting it. I suggest they are resisting it for the many reasons they have resisted some of the other sensible things we have put forward: just because they want to do that.

I do not know how we go forward with the relationship between this present Government and the ISC. Dragging information out of them screaming and kicking is taking a long time, even though we have a legal duty to get information, and the critical point now is the starvation of resources from the Committee which is creating real problems in the way that it can operate.

I hope that things change and that when we table amendments we will not get the usual response that amendments to this type of legislation should only be done in the Lords. Are we here to cause trouble for the security services? No, we are not; we want to ensure we do our job, which is set out in statute, to supervise the security services and improve the powers, but to ensure that the public have the recognised safeguards we should expect in a democracy such as ours.

8.55 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Unlike most Members present, I am not an expert on security. We in this House often have to be generalists. We are here to participate in debates, to understand legislation and to raise concerns where we see them. Like all Members who have spoken before me, I would like to put on the record my deep gratitude to our security services; I regard them with the highest respect. We all regard them with the highest respect and within that there is a slight danger: we respect them and admire their work so much that we are almost always going to grant them what they want. That is a danger, because our duty is to scrutinise what people want and, as the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has just said, not to create trouble but to raise questions of concern. I know these questions of concern will be well received by the Minister on the Front Bench, who thinks deeply about these matters and is also a good friend of mine.

I will be brief because we are coming to the end of the evening, but I want to look at clause 15 and internet connection records. The general rule of investigation is that suspicion precedes surveillance, so if there is good reason to believe that someone is up to mischief, we can start to look at them more closely; we can conduct surveillance to see if our concerns are factually based. The problem with the recommendation in clause 15 is that it allows for target discovery as opposed to target development. If I have got this wrong, I am happy to take an intervention, but what target discovery means to this layman of security matters is possibly going on fishing expeditions—just looking out there to see what is going on and processing enough data on enough people. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said, people who are perfectly innocently going about their business will get caught up in this data-processing machine just to make sure they are not up to anything nefarious, dangerous or unpleasant. That causes me some concern.

I do want bad people to be caught—I benefit from the capture of bad people; my constituents benefit from the capture of bad people—but surveillance always needs to be proportionate and risk-based, as the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said in her speech. Freedom is important. One of the most ridiculous constructs in the English language is “Nothing to hide, nothing to fear”, because if people saying that genuinely believed it, they would not have any curtains in their home.

The truth is that we like to think that we have private space in which to operate and go about our legitimate business without the state taking a view that we are up to mischief or might be up to mischief. I know that point was touched on in previous speeches. I think the Chairman of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who is also a good friend, touched on it. Sometimes it is difficult to keep up with experts, but he made it clear that the Committee has concerns about these new powers.

I said I would speak briefly, so I will just close on this point. There are people in this country who like to protest and, frankly, often get in the way of other people, but what they are doing is not illegal. I would hate to think that people within those organisations might end up having their internet records checked out, just to make sure that they were being good citizens. I remember that during the debates on covid-19 perfectly respectable, hugely respected scientists and respected Members of this House were raising concerns about Government policy on lockdowns. I am not saying that the security services were keeping tabs on their interventions, but we know from subject access requests that people in Government were keeping tabs on these people, as if what they were doing was against the interests of the state. That is why I raise my concerns about the clause. I hope the Government will bring forward amendments, but if they do not, I hope they will not be too offended if I perhaps bring forward some amendments on Report.

9.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank all right hon. and hon Members for their contributions. This is a complex issue, and that is clear from the level of scrutiny and debate we have seen thus far. The Bill seeks to find a balance—the shadow Home Secretary referred to that very word, “balance”—between necessary investigatory powers and not having a Big Brother, nanny state.

I thank, as others have done, the security forces and those involved in the intelligence sector for all that they do, their work and their commitment and dedication to the job, which have made all our lives safer. Many in this House—I know a few, anyway—could say that they owe their lives to them, and I would be one of them. I thank them very much for all they have done.

I am keen to see work on international terrorism. I was talking to my friend, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), about how international terrorism works. The Real IRA has contacts in the middle east and eastern Europe. It has contacts where all evil organisations come together, because their ultimate intention is to create havoc and murder innocent people. This Bill is important, because it can address terrorism in Northern Ireland and its contacts with international terrorism. I hope and pray that the work will be successful. As someone who has lived through years of terrorism, I am well used to curtailed freedoms, with checkpoints and stop and search. I have understood the necessity for that and have been thankful for those protections. Let me be clear: I have no issue whatever with this Bill in principle, but I have some questions for the Minister.

Various constituents have contacted me to express concerns, and I want to put those on record, ever mindful of supporting the Government on this issue as

measures come forward. I will take a few moments to seek some clarification. First, a concern has been outlined to me about having a notification requirement to require operators to inform the Secretary of State if they propose to make changes to their products or services, and I am sure that other Members have received that briefing. Open Rights Group states:

“While this objective may appear to be reasonable, it would allow the Home Office to prevent secure services from launching in the UK, even where they are rolled out elsewhere. This provision would allow the Home Office to place itself in a position of power over the provider as soon as it hears about the possibility of data being less accessible than it is currently. This situation would take place without reference to an independent authority to assess the rationale or proportionality. Such a move might not be proportionate, for instance, if the security technology had already been introduced safely and with demonstrable benefits to users in other parts of the world.

Open Rights Group is concerned that these powers could deny people the access to technological developments upon which people’s free expression and right to privacy rely. For example, major tech providers such as Apple have stated that they would pull certain services from the UK rather than compromise their security if this power was used to prevent them from rolling out security updates.”

I gently ask the Minister to be clear about why the presumption should not be made in the manner I outlined and what discussions have taken place to ensure that providers such as Apple can work securely in the UK. The right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) referred to the dark web and all the things that can happen in it. It is really important that the dark web is taken care of in this legislation.

Also highlighted to me were end-to-end encryption issues and the inability of service providers to see service users’ content in their apps and systems. I am not a technical whizz kid; I am the very opposite. I am of that old generation who can just about do text messages on their phone and turn on Zoom meetings, but if something goes wrong, I am lost. When it comes to technology, I am not au fait with it, but I do know this. I understand the need for people with no question mark above them whatsoever to know that their messages are private and that the Government are not storing information—that could be accessed by others—on them for no reason. It is important that that never happens.

Data breaches affected staff in my office when my accounts in the House were hacked in the last fortnight. We let the security people know, and I understand that it is not unusual for it to happen, but when it does and people’s content is accessed, it is important that such breaches are taken care of. We have also had the breach of data on police officers in Northern Ireland. Those are both testament to the fact that breaches occur. Therefore, only what is essential should ever be gathered and stored. Reference was made to the need to have robust monitoring and regulation. If that had been in place, the Police Service of Northern Ireland data breaches, which I think disadvantaged more than 3,500 people, would never have happened.

While I cannot browse and shop online—I have no interest in doing so—watch TV programmes online or do any of those other things, I do believe that there is a need for privacy. My concern is that the Bill is encroaching too far on those whom the Government have no reason to hold data on. I ask the Minister again to make it clear why any online search history should be stored. These are gentle questions—they are not meant to be

[*Jim Shannon*]

intrusive or aggressive—but it is important that I put these matters on the record on behalf of the constituents who have contacted me.

I highlight the concerns of my constituent that the Bill's proposed measures are poised to

“profoundly impact political dissidents and opposition figures residing in the UK. Refugees, political exiles and human rights advocates who have sought refuge in the UK deserve the assurance of digital safety and security.”

I seek that assurance for those who have fled offensive and oppressive regimes and sought refuge in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I would further appreciate an insight into how we can ensure that there is freedom to express opposition, yet not see harmful rhetoric. That balance is clearly difficult to reach. I seek the necessary clarification that we have struck that balance. I very much look forward to hearing from the Minister, because I believe that his response will encapsulate the questions we have asked and give us the answers that we desire.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We come now to the wind-ups.

9.8 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill is a technical but important piece of legislation that, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary said in her opening remarks, we support. We support the Bill, which updates aspects of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, because it is imperative that legal frameworks are updated to ensure that our security and law enforcement services keep up with changes to communications technology in an increasingly challenging and complex landscape of threats to our safety and our national security.

At the outset, let me pay tribute to the exceptional men and women who serve in our law enforcement and security services, often in the shadows and without recognition, to keep our country safe. We owe them all a deep debt of gratitude. I also thank officials at the Home Office, who have provided very helpful briefings on the Bill to the shadow Home Office team. I hope that the Minister will join me in paying tribute to our noble colleagues in the other place, especially Lord Anderson, Lord Sharpe, Lord Coaker, Lord Ponsonby and Lord West, among many others. They have already done a lot of the intellectual heavy lifting, digging into the technical details of the Bill to improve it ahead of its Second Reading today. Those contributions are most welcome, but the Bill still needs to be scrutinised in more depth to probe any remaining ambiguity and ensure that safeguards are strengthened. I will say a little more about that later.

As the shadow Home Secretary said, the Opposition will work in the national interest with the Government on national security because, as legislators, we all have a duty to ensure that the law is one step ahead of those who seek to harm us. As lawmakers, we have a duty to ensure that when technical Bills are before us on matters relating to national security, we scrutinise them carefully and get into the detail. Members on both sides of the House have fulfilled that important duty with a number of thoughtful and considered contributions in this debate,

including the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who spoke, as always, with great authority and made important points about oversight and the interests of economic wellbeing. I am certain that we will return to those in Committee.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), a former Security Minister, helpfully reflected on his experience of taking the original legislation through the House back in 2016, and made some important points about the role of public bodies. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), the newest member of the ISC, made an important point about the context in which we are having this debate, with authoritarian regimes around the world constantly seeking to test the will of democracies. She also made an important point about the balance between safeguarding our security and oversight and transparency.

The chair of the ISC, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), spoke with his long-standing experience of these matters, and expressed clearly the view of the Committee. He made a number of important points, including about the safeguards that he will seek to include in the Bill. I am sure that we will return to that. He also made the important point about any increase in powers coming with an increase in oversight—a point reiterated by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who I think is the longest serving member of the ISC. He spoke about the two-and-a-half legged stool, made a number of important points and provided a constructive challenge to Government. I hope that he will work with us, the other Committee members and the Minister in Committee to make some improvements to the Bill.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) made a typically carefully considered speech. For someone who claimed not to be an expert, he made a number of important points, not least about surveillance needing to be proportionate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reflected, as he often does, on his own experiences of dealing with terrorism in Northern Ireland, and rightly paid tribute to all those who served to keep our country safe.

I will now turn to aspects of the Bill that could be improved. The measures outlined in the Bill continue to provide our law enforcement and security services with some of the most powerful measures that our state has at its disposal to keep us safe, intercepting private communications and retaining information where necessary. With those strong powers there must also be strong, robust safeguards, to guarantee their appropriate and proportionate use.

When the Minister responds, I would be grateful if he provided further assurances that the notices regime will be kept under constant review. Such assurances are important as the power to access telecommunications data through bulk personal datasets unlocks an individual's digital footprints of their online activity. For those of a certain age—I do not have anybody in particular in mind—investigatory powers can conjure images of wiretapping telephone lines, and, for those of a very certain age, even steaming open letters. However, the modern reality is that the huge amounts of data produced every second could be sifted through and used by law enforcement and crime agencies when there is a lawful basis to do so. The Bill must therefore clearly establish a precedent of proportionality, such as further defining what is meant

by low or no reasonable expectation of privacy, in clause 2, in relation to certain bulk personal datasets. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how the Government intend to do that.

The UK's use of investigatory powers should be clearly understood by our international partners. Vast amounts of telecommunications data, such as WhatsApps, are now stored in servers across many jurisdictions by multinational companies with sometimes complex corporate structures. I understand that Meta, for example, has stringent measures to protect those servers from cyber-attacks, preventing WhatsApp messages from being interfered with or accidentally deleted. If only the same stringent measures existed for some Members on the Government Benches—and the SNP Benches, for that matter.

Moving swiftly on, a warrant to intercept messages between two UK nationals in the UK could be stored on a server in another jurisdiction, leading to potential conflicts of law arising from clause 17, which would strengthen extraterritorial enforcement of retention notices. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister said something about the feedback the Home Office has had from international partners about potential conflicts of law that could arise from clause 17, and what actions have been taken to avoid potential conflicts. Can the Minister also say what recent feedback the Home Office has received from companies providing messaging services in the UK that use servers storing communications data in other countries?

Ensuring the utmost clarity in the measures outlined in the Bill must also include where they are applied in the most exceptional circumstances, such as when the Prime Minister cannot make a decision to sign off an interception warrant. The shadow Home Secretary rightly mentioned the importance of Prime Ministers treating these matters with the utmost seriousness. This was also discussed and debated in detail when the Bill was progressing through the other place, with the term “unable” being used if a Prime Minister cannot make a decision, compared with other terms such as “unavailable”. I expect the Minister will be relieved that I do not plan to spend too much time on this, but that is not to underplay its importance. The debate between noble colleagues on whether “unable” or “unavailable” was the most appropriate term may in part have been generated by the activities of two former senior figures in Government, neither of whom is still a serving Member of Parliament. For the benefit of the House, I will just say that one of them might have been a Foreign Secretary who became Prime Minister, and the other might have been a Prime Minister who became Foreign Secretary.

The Prime Minister plays a crucial role in making decisions on national security. May I remind the Minister, as other hon. Members have sought to do during this debate, that since 2014, successive Prime Ministers have failed to meet with the Intelligence and Security Committee? As we all know, the ISC is a senior Committee of Parliament that provides absolutely vital oversight on these crucial matters. We heard from the Chair, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who made some important points. Can I again ask the Minister why he thinks no Prime Ministers have made themselves available to the Committee for a decade now?

Furthermore, recent updates to the IPA 2016 after the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United*

Kingdom provide further safeguards to protect sensitive information relating to freedom of expression, such as journalistic material, from the usual interception and retention regimes. Other elements of freedom of expression should have similar safeguards. Does the Minister think there should be similar exemptions in the Bill for communications relating to the vital work of trade unions? That was a point also made by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

To conclude, this is an important Bill that demands strong and careful scrutiny. Our personal liberties and our national security depend on it. It is in the national interest to get the legislation right: to make sure it is both appropriate and proportionate in its scope. It must also be effective in maintaining the current powers our law enforcement and security services already have to disrupt and defeat criminals and malign actors who seek to harm us and undermine our way of life. On the Labour Benches, we will work with the Government as much as we possibly can in the national interest to get it right. I look forward to working with the Minister and other colleagues on that important endeavour as the Bill progresses through the House.

9.20 pm

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): I thank hon. and right hon. Members from across the House for their contributions not just today, but throughout the many different stages of the Bill. I pay huge tribute to the Members of the other place who have contributed enormously, in particular Lord Anderson, who has been an exceptional asset to the passage of the Bill and the condition it is in, and Lord West who, as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, not only shepherded some extremely important amendments into the Bill, but was kind enough to say that it was the first time in 14 years that he had ever had an amendment accepted by the Government. I am delighted to say that it was to this Bill. It was because we are so committed to working with all parts of both Houses and with the ISC that we got so much through in the other place. *[Interruption.]* That said, many comments will no doubt be raised in this House. I can assure hon. Members, especially the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), that I will approach all suggestions in the way that I have done to date. Where we may not agree—it may not be that he is right, or that I am right—it will be for good reason and I will set out my reasons in the appropriate way.

The Bill is about one fundamental thing: the security of the British people. We rightly heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) about the nature of freedom, but the truth is that freedom without security is impossible. It is a chimera. The Bill is about ensuring that the British people have the security to enable that freedom. That is an absolutely vital responsibility not just of this Government, but of this House and the other place. I am grateful for the work that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) have put in to ensure the co-operative, bipartisan and open approach to the Bill, as is merited by the work of our fantastic intelligence services to provide security for our whole country.

[Tom Tugendhat]

As the British public would expect, we keep our approach to national security under constant review. Where we identify the need for change or improvement, we will not hesitate to act. That is why we have brought forward the Bill, which acts on the findings of the Home Secretary's report and Lord Anderson's independent review into the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. Hon. and right hon. Members will not need me to rehearse the arguments, but we have seen an extraordinary, rapid evolution in the nature of the threats since the 2016 Act: Russia's threat to the whole of Europe and not just to Ukraine; the violence that Iran is trying to bring not just in the middle east but even on to our own shores; and the way technology has enabled hostile states not only to steal our technology but to introduce intelligence-gathering platforms into our country through the guise of car sales.

We have seen a change in the way technology works and a change in the nature of the threats, and we must keep up to date with those changes. That is why this work is so important. It is essential that the United Kingdom's investigatory powers framework remains fit for purpose to help our intelligence agencies detect and stop some of the most serious threats posed to the UK and its citizens, including threats from terrorism, state threats, and child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Because these are exceptional powers, Members have rightly pointed out that they require appropriate, robust and, in this case, world-leading safeguards, and that is what we have sought to set out. The changes in the Bill are relatively narrow in scope, but unless we make them now, the ability of our agencies to tackle evolving threats will be increasingly constrained in the face of global instability, technological advances and state hostility, so now is the time to act.

Let me now deal with some of the points that have been raised. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) raised a rather interesting point about the changes to "lawful authority" in clause 12 in respect of published data. The purpose of new subsection (3A) is for material that has already been published not to require additional authority for its disclosure by a telecommunications operator to a relevant public authority. The definition of "publish" and reference to "a section of the public" would not include private messages unless they had been made public in some other way—just as our sitting room could not be considered a public place unless we opened it up to the public. It would be our choice, and nothing to do with the nature of the building.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who has made important contributions through her chairmanship of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, raised questions about the transparency safeguards in the 2016 Act. Those extremely robust safeguards are centred on considerations relating to intrusion into privacy, and that will remain the case in the Bill. They include a requirement for investigatory powers to be used in a "necessary and proportionate" way, with independent oversight by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and redress through the Investigatory Powers Tribunal.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) contributed in his usual robust fashion to the debate—and, I should add,

to the session that I was fortunate enough to have with the Intelligence and Security Committee, in which he was enormously helpful in assisting me with some changes to the Bill. He spoke about the five individuals who could be designated by the Prime Minister, and asked why we had not referred specifically to "those with warranting powers". It is possible that a Minister with warranting powers who had that experience would then be moved to another Department, or indeed that the machinery of government change would alter the nature of the oversight. While we felt that it was right to limit the number to as few as possible, we also felt that it was right to have a relevant selection, which is why we left the number at five—after some very good consultation with the ISC, for which I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis).

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend has been immensely generous both in giving way and in his earlier comments about my role. Will he briefly deal with the issue of the other bodies with the regulatory function who can compel the release of communications data? As he will remember, the point I made was that the existing law obliges them to take further procedural steps before they do so. Why is that no longer deemed appropriate?

Tom Tugendhat: As my right hon. Friend will know, several powers in the earlier Bill—the one that he took through the House—were indeed overseen in various different ways. The Bill does not seek to undermine any of that oversight; what it seeks to do is clarify, in certain areas, where it is necessary. My right hon. Friend has highlighted individual agencies or bodies, and I should be happy to write to him to ensure he is aware of exactly where that is being covered.

The right hon. Member for North Durham spoke about prior judicial authorisation for ICRs. The purpose of the Bill is to try to streamline operations for the intelligence services in areas where the risk is of, as we are calling it, low or no expectation of privacy. He will have seen in the Bill what the expectation means, including areas where information has already been readily made public. I accept his commentary and I would be happy to enter into further conversations with him, but the reason we are not currently going down that route is simply that the existing law, the IPA 2016, allows the collection of bulk data with prior authorisation. This is intended to speed the process up. If we put in the measures he is referring to, we would effectively remain in the same place that we are now. That would make it harder for the volume of data that is now coming to be considered by the intelligence agencies. That is why we have made the provision for a subsequent approval rather than a prior approval. He is right to say that it involves a maximum of a year, although I think it unlikely that it would go to that maximum. That will be in cases where this is low or no expectation of privacy—after it has already been agreed by a judge to be in the correct category. I think the right hon. Gentleman might be looking at this through the other end of the telescope.

Mr Kevan Jones: What the Minister has to realise is that the big concern from the public—although let's be honest, the public are not looking at the detail of this—is that somehow the security services will be getting access to huge amounts of bulk data and just having a

free run at it. All that I and the Committee are suggesting is that an email should be sent when there are changes to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. That would be a simple thing. It would not be onerous, and it would reinforce the point that there was at least some potential oversight of the process.

Tom Tugendhat: I think we may be conflating different aspects of the Bill. I do believe that this already has oversight.

Let me answer the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, which touches on a similar area. Where people have the right to and expectation of privacy and freedom, this provision does not remove that right. What it does is allow the intelligence agencies to use bulk data to target an individual at a particular point, and the excess collected information will not be able to be used for targeting an individual without the warrant process that would be expected for any initial search. In that sense, this is not undermining anybody's privacy; it is allowing for the fact that information is now largely in bulk format. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central was talking about steaming open envelopes. It is impossible to steam open a single envelope today; one has to steam open thousands because that is how data comes. Without an amendment such as that set out in the Bill, we would simply be interrupting the work of the intelligence services to the degree that it would hold them back and make the process harder, but I would be happy to take this up with my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne later if he wishes.

I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who was here earlier and made an interesting point about the various ways in which the memorandum of understanding should be looked at through the National Security Act 2023. Friends of mine will know my thoughts on that and know that I gave the Conservative party the chance to allow me to change that 10-year absence, but the Conservative party chose somebody else to make that decision so I have sadly lost the ability to have that influence.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) made a typically insightful speech and typically sensible comments on the ways in which we must consider how the authorisation must not be used to mount general surveillance. Condition D will be used only when an applicant makes a clear and compelling case, based on tangible, reliable intelligence leads, information and analysis, that the resulting data will identify parties involved in a relevant serious crime or national security-related specified operation or investigation. The applicant must explain any anticipated collateral intrusion, and how this will be managed to ensure that the application is necessary and proportionate to the outcomes of the investigation.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I accept what my right hon. Friend says but, in the context I described, the case is being made to someone else within the intelligence agency. There are, of course, two types of authorisation—D1 and D2—and we are worried about D2, under which the application is made from inside the intelligence agency to inside the intelligence agency. That does not present the sort of external scrutiny that we suggest is necessary.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. and learned Friend is right, but he also knows that IPCO has retrospective oversight of these areas. Where it comes under a category allocation through “low or no”, there is an automatic review period within a year. Although he is correct that the application is made within the service, it is within the service subject to a pre-agreed condition and with follow-up oversight, so as to enable that speedy response.

Sir Julian Lewis: On a different but not unrelated point, the Minister will recall that I referred to the annual report given to the Secretary of State detailing the individual bulk personal datasets that had been retained and examined. There is no extra work involved in letting the ISC and IPCO see that report. The only possible justifiable exclusion would be something that, at the time of the report, was still current. Is there any reason at all why IPCO and the ISC should not be sent that report, rather than a severely watered-down version?

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend answers his own question. The reason for the difference is the currency element.

Sir Julian Lewis: In that case, we can reach agreement if the Minister would like to give us an assurance that the only difference between the two reports will be the exclusion of matters that are current at the time of drawing up the report, but I suspect that there will be many other differences between the two reports.

Tom Tugendhat: I will be very happy to talk to my right hon. Friend about that to make sure that he is satisfied. It is important that we make sure that the reports that go to the House—through the ISC, because of the nature of the reports—are relevant and allow appropriate scrutiny. I think we can all agree with that.

I have covered the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, so I will turn to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made an extremely important point: that his constituents, like any other citizens of the United Kingdom, should expect the right to privacy. He also made a compelling point about the need for security, and I think the Bill strikes that balance extremely carefully. He is right to say that people will be concerned, and he is not alone. I am also concerned that we maintain the right to privacy within our legislative framework, which is why we checked very carefully that the Bill is fully compliant with the ECHR right to a private life. It is also why we looked at the various exceptions.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned the notices regime, and he is right that we will keep it under review. We maintain a regular conversation with companies that have an interest in this area, and he is right to say that there is an overseas element. I merely point out that it is the role of this House to legislate for the security of the British people and, in particular, for the safety of our children and families. Such security is not something we can outsource to tech firms on the west coast. We sometimes have a responsibility to pass extraterritorial laws—as he knows very well, we have done that in the past—so although this measure adds to that ability, it is not detrimental because it asks people to maintain their current position before making any changes and to talk to us during that period. There is no

[Tom Tugendhat]

requirement to break any policies, change products or introduce new products; it is merely to maintain the status quo, so that we have the same ability to keep the British people safe until we have had a conversation about how that status quo should change.

Finally, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central raised a question about trades unions. He is right that there are many different professions where protected characteristics could come into play, including lawyers, doctors and psychiatrists, and where any such intrusive power should be used with exceptional caution. I would just say that, due to the nature of this place and Parliaments around the United Kingdom, the position of parliamentarian is particular, which is why it is set out specifically and separately in the Bill. That does not mean that any attitude against any other individual should be used cavalierly. It is not a question of the role or the post the person holds, but their rights as a British citizen. Those rights should be absolutely guarded from intrusion or aggression by the state without exceptionally good reason. This amendment, which the hon. Gentleman is kindly supporting, sets out that balance between British citizens' right to privacy and their right to security. With that, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

INVESTIGATORY POWERS (AMENDMENT) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)), That the following provisions shall apply to the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee. Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 12 March 2024.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Mark Fletcher.)*

Question agreed to.

INVESTIGATORY POWERS (AMENDMENT) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or a government department, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Mark Fletcher.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft East Midlands Combined County Authority Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2023, be approved.—*(Mark Fletcher.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Limits and Thresholds, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veterans Relief) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—*(Mark Fletcher.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Blackpool's Waterloo Road and Bond Street region

9.42 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Following my recent Adjournment debate on this issue, I rise to present a petition signed by over 500 Blackpool residents calling for the need for regeneration in the Bond Street, Waterloo Road and Revoe areas of Blackpool.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Blackpool South,

Declares that the Government and Blackpool Council should consider the need for regeneration funding to be provided for the area surrounding Waterloo Road and Bond Street in Blackpool.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that residents and business are adequately supported through relevant regeneration funds, and to ensure the Government works with Blackpool Council to ensure comprehensive plans to develop plans are prepared in conjunction with local stakeholders.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Infrastructure Procurement

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Alan Brown, I wish to forewarn everybody that whoever is on their feet at 10 pm will have to resume their seat while the Adjournment motion is moved again by the Whip.

9.43 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought you were forewarning Members in this Chamber that they would have to listen to me.

Clearly, infrastructure investment and procurement is a critical Government function. Done correctly, it gives us improved transport connectivity, new housing, vital services such as water and sewerage, telecoms and the correct energy infrastructure needed to keep the lights on. Infrastructure investment can deliver regeneration, additional inward investment, construction jobs and long-term jobs. But done poorly, we pay more, face interminable delays and have less money to invest in other projects.

I intend to cover a few of the projects that UK Governments have had responsibility for and failed to deliver properly, and illustrate just how much that has cost the taxpayer. First, I should probably address a possible elephant in the room. Mr Deputy Speaker, you may well have heard that the Scottish Government have had issues over the delivery of two new ferries. This story seems to have been in the news every single day in Scotland. There are clear lessons to be learned, and I shall return to them.

Without being flippant, let me explain to the House that the ferries are currently expected to cost £300 million—three times the original contractual agreement. Mr Deputy Speaker, let me put this in cards parlance: I will give you the £200 million ferry overspend, then I will raise you the £45 billion on the HS2 phase 1 overspend, the £30 billion overspend on Hinkley Point C, the £10 billion overspend in the Shared Services network replacement, a very modest £3 billion overspend in Crossrail, and a couple of billion extra spent on the Great Western electrification project. Therefore, very quickly, we have a £90 billion overspend before we even get to the black hole that is Ministry of Defence procurement, whose current procurement plan has a £17 billion shortfall—or, in other words, a £17 billion overspend. Some £15 billion was spent on unusable personal protective equipment over two years. We have well over £100 billion of overspend in infrastructure projects without even digging too deeply. That is before we consider the £37 billion spent on the track and trace system.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman makes some very good points and has opened his speech well by mentioning transport connectivity. I am sure that he is aware that the tiny Faroe Islands have opened a 10.7 km tunnel which connects the island of Sandoy with the main island, at a price of around £90 million to £100 million. Given the sorts of costs that he has cited, for the price of the first phase of HS2 the Faroese could build a tunnel from the

Faroe Islands to South Africa. Is there not something particularly wrong with UK procurement? Perhaps that might lie in the Treasury Green Book. He has shown that such waste of money is not getting us anywhere at all.

Alan Brown: I agree with the hon. Member wholeheartedly. The Faroese have to be commended for the work that they have done on transport connectivity. There are certainly some lessons that Transport Scotland can learn from that. Perhaps we need to be bolder going forward in terms of what transport connectivity looks like in Scotland.

I shall briefly return to the ferries. It is quite clear from what I have outlined that there has been well over £100 billion in overspend across a few UK projects. The overspend on the ferries in Scotland suddenly becomes loose change down the back of the couch in comparison. Indeed, the overspend in capital costs of the ferries is equivalent to the money given to PPE Medpro, for which Baroness Mone received a healthy £20 million dividend. Indeed, it was the UK Government who awarded a ferry contract to a company with no ferries for £33 million. That puts a lot of things in perspective.

The reality is that the ferries in Scotland are a microcosm of the failures of so many UK Government major programmes. In Scotland, there was the political intervention to rightly save commercial non-military shipbuilding on the Clyde. However, the actual procurement process seems to have been too rushed. It was inadequately specified by Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited and then all the numerous changes to design increased the costs. That is what happens time and again in major infrastructure projects. We really must look at some of those in more detail, study what went wrong and see what needs to change going forward.

Let us start with HS2. The original business case and proposals were for it to extend to Scotland to help with a modal shift away from flying. This was to improve business productivity, which was based on assumptions that getting to London quicker limited down time, without considering the fact that many people now work on the move anyway.

Through time, the argument was then advanced that HS2 was needed to free up capacity on existing lines, particularly the west coast main line, thereby creating more capacity for both passenger and freight services. That principle is fine, and getting more freight delivered by train is good for decarbonisation, but what the different arguments and analysis mean is that there was never an established rationale for the key outcomes for HS2. That has made it easier, as part of the inherent north-south bias of a London Government, to make phase 1 of the project the London to Birmingham link, and to make that the most important aspect.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): My hon. Friend touches on HS2. I know that he will speak about many more projects, but this is a gusting £100 billion project that was designed to connect the whole length of Great Britain. We knew that we were getting nothing out of it in Scotland. Manchester is disappointed, because it thought that it was getting something out of it. Birmingham was the best connected city to London anyway; it now has another railway line, but one that does not quite make it to London. My constituents in Angus will be

[Dave Doogan]

footing £92 million of the £100 billion. We could do with a link to Laurencekirk. We could do with fixing the erosion on the Montrose Links. We could do with getting better flood defences in Brechin. We do not know where that money will come from, but we still have to fund £92 million of HS2. Does my hon. Friend think that that is right?

Alan Brown: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It is almost like, when we look back historically, the oil and gas revenues paid for HS1 and the channel tunnel, but at the time we were assured that there would be a spur up the east coast and a spur up the west coast of high-speed rail. Now, all these decades later, we still do not have the promised spine, but as he rightly says London and Birmingham are getting better connectivity, even though there is some ambiguity about where the line will terminate in London.

We were told not to worry, and that the Birmingham upgrades would still mean much quicker journey times from Scotland to London. We were assured several times that trains will run from London to Scotland on day one of HS2 services, even though they will be going from Birmingham. Sure, trains to Edinburgh and Glasgow will run, but they are intended to run as one service stopping and decoupling at Carstairs. That is just deemed a minor inconvenience for those of us travelling to and from Scotland.

When HS2 looked at the purchase of rolling stock, the key decision was made that they had to be the quickest high-speed trains. That means that when that rolling stock accesses the existing tracks on the west coast main line, the trains will go slower than existing Avanti west coast services. Not only will we not get high-speed rail to Scotland, we will get a poorer service from the new high-speed rail once it is running on the west coast main line. How can that be a logical proposal for the most expensive infrastructure project ever undertaken by a UK Government?

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a point about the slow speeds. This is not news. A report that had a foreword by Philip Hammond, who was the Transport Secretary at the time—13 and a half years ago—suggested that the rolling stock could indeed decrease speeds, stating that “journey times between North West England and Scotland could be potentially longer than at present”,

resulting in longer journey times between Scotland and London. Just a few weeks ago, we heard evidence in the Transport Committee that that is still the case, with times increasing by between five and 25 minutes. Does my hon. Friend not think that it is absolutely absurd that we have ended up with a gold-plated commuter line between Birmingham and London and slower journey times for the rest of us north of Manchester, and that that sums up Westminster’s attitude to transport infrastructure spending since time immemorial?

Alan Brown: I wholeheartedly agree. I go back to my opening remarks about HS2: the whole premise of it going to Scotland was to encourage people not to fly and to get the train. Now the competition is going the other way; they will be incentivised to fly because the journey times will be longer. It is absolutely crazy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) touched on the fact that the costs of HS2 spiralled to over £100 billion. What happened then? The eastern leg was removed. Next to go was the Golborne link, removing the link to the west coast main line and trains running to Scotland. Then the northern spur to Manchester was removed. HS2 does not know whether to terminate at Old Oak Common or Euston, despite upgrades already commencing at Euston Station. Clearly, there is no overall strategic thinking other than a continual form of panicked cost control.

Unfortunately, HS2 is a monument to a poorly developed concept of not knowing what the key strategic objectives would be, unrealistic budgets, politicians meddling in route alignment and increasing the amount of tunnelling, politician panic as costs increase, continual stop-start reviews all costing money, over-specification, unrealistic risk allocation, and clearly not enough up-front design and site investigation work or proper planning with regard to project delivery and discussions with contractors. But hey, as we have heard, passengers from Birmingham might now be able to get to London 20 minutes quicker than they can at present, which is not a bad outcome overall for a £66 billion project that does nothing strategically outside the midlands. That leg was originally estimated to cost £20 billion, so there has been a £46 billion project overspend.

There is another major infrastructure project that is very similar in its overspend, delays and costs spiralling out of control: Hinkley Point C nuclear power station. It is a testament to political determination and aspirations over the reality of nuclear power. It was estimated to cost £18 billion, including contingency, in 2016, when the UK Government gave the go-ahead after a review. Just a couple weeks ago, however, EDF estimated that it would cost £46 billion in today’s prices. By last week, it had already increased to £48 billion. That is a mere £30 billion overspend on what was already the world’s most expensive power station. Instead of generating power in 2025, it will now be as late as 2031. As costs have continued to spiral, the Government’s attitude is, “It’s okay, the risk lies entirely with EDF,” which is completely head-in-the-sand stuff. China General Nuclear, one of the partners in the project, has already reached its cap on the amount of capital it will put into the project, so clearly EDF is having to fund a lot more borrowing. It beggars belief that the Government claim not to be speaking to EDF about this issue, especially when chief executive Luc Rémont stated last week:

“We’re confident we can find a pathway with British authorities on Hinkley Point C and Sizewell.”

In other words, there will be another taxpayer bailout.

One lesson that the UK Government appear to have learned is that a contracts for difference model is not the best way to deliver a nuclear project, but they are now diving head first into the regulated asset base model, which transfers risk from the contractor to the billpayer. That is what the Government want to do for Sizewell C, despite the evidence of failure of the RAB model for a project in South Carolina, in the United States, where ratepayers continue to pay higher rates for a nuclear power station that was actually abandoned during construction. How will the UK Government make sure that this does not happen at Sizewell?

Dave Doogan: Is my hon. Friend concerned, as I am, that the UK Government—specifically, the Treasury—seem not to have any concern for nuclear overspends? When it comes to nuclear, regardless of whether it is civil or military, there is no shortage of UK Government funding, yet all across GB there are plans for massive pylon lines going through communities. The pylon lines could be offshored but have to be done at the lowest possible cost, which means overhead lines. There is no parity between nuclear and anything else. Everything else is bargain-basement, Treasury Green Book “let’s screw the contractor down to the very lowest price”, except for nuclear.

Alan Brown: Again—no surprise—I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It is classic “penny wise, pound foolish” all the time, particularly when it comes to nuclear. The Government are kidding themselves about nuclear, because they still estimate that Sizewell C will cost only £20 billion. We already know that Hinkley, which is the model for Sizewell C, is costing nearly £50 billion, so why pretend that it will cost only £20 billion? They are setting their stall out wrongly and have a blinkered approach that suggests we somehow need nuclear, when clearly we do not actually need it. What they should be investing in is renewable energy, storage systems and, as my hon. Friend says, much better grid infrastructure as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward. Does he agree that there seems to be a disparity between those who live in towns and those who live in rural areas, where costs are, more often than not, much larger? Does he feel that it is time for the Government to have a centralised access point for infrastructure material, as a way of ensuring that each council area and constituency can access the same material for the same cost and begin to build what is broken in the way that it should be done in each area?

Alan Brown: That is a fair point. There is always a rural premium, and people living in rural areas suffer disproportionately when it comes to infrastructure, upgrades, energy efficiency and heating their homes. I have long argued, particularly in relation to the roll-out of energy efficiency schemes such as ECO4, that the Government really need to consider a rural programme. Otherwise, all that happens is that urban homes get upgraded and—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Alan Brown: You did warn me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I still got caught out.

Back to my favourite topic: nuclear and nuclear overspends. I have highlighted the failures of big nuclear projects, as well as the Government’s blinkered approach to nuclear. They need to reconsider the proposals for so-called small modular reactors. First, they are not small, and no proven design is operational anywhere in the world, but it seems that the British exceptionalism that the Government believe in means that Britain will somehow lead the way in all sorts of nuclear power generation.

Just recently, the Environmental Audit Committee has posed serious questions about that to the UK Government. Let us look at the evidence and the facts before us. NuScale, which was supposed to lead the way for SMRs, has already abandoned its proposed SMR in Utah after costs ballooned to more than £7 billion. But the Government, true to form, believe that they will be able to deliver SMRs for about £2 billion a go. That defies all logic and inevitably means yet more future infrastructure delays and overspend.

Compared with nuclear and HS2, the overspend on Crossrail was relatively modest, at just £3 billion. However, Crossrail was another example of bad news being buried until it could no longer be hidden. Years of delay suddenly emerged right at the end when the project was supposed to be at the stage of commissioning new trains. Those delays should have been highlighted much earlier. We need a culture in which delays and potential overspends are flagged up early enough to allow informed decisions to be made about the projects and to enable an understanding of what needs to be addressed in the budgets and programmes.

Another project that should generate regular headlines is the shared services network. That is the new communications network for the emergency services in Great Britain, so its delivery is presumably critical. According to a written answer I received, the original cost of the project was going to be just £1.6 billion, and the old system, Airwave, was intended to be shut down by 2026. Now the shutdown date is not known as procurement is ongoing, and the total expenditure is estimated to be £11.3 billion, so on the face of it, the cost of the project is up tenfold—nearly £10 billion over—yet it flies under the radar, for want of a pun. It is astonishing.

On a positive note of successful infrastructure delivery, it is worth highlighting that the Scottish Government have delivered the longest stretch of new railway since Victorian times with the reopening of the Borders railway in 2015. That is a real success story—one that the Tories said would never happen. Is it ever praised or used by the Tories as a good example? No. Instead, their immediate messaging is about the need to extend the railway further, an aspiration that the Scottish Government share. It seems to me that, at some point, politicians must be gracious about successful projects, and take learning from them for other projects.

Equally, on rail electrification, Scotland has always had a clear and steady programme, unlike the continual chopping and changing of programmes in England. It generates contractor expertise and a steady supply chain, and contractors are confident that there will be a future pipeline of work. The cost of delivering electrification in Scotland is £2 million per km, compared with £3 million per km in England, so the UK Government’s procurement rate is 50% higher than that of the Scottish Government.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Member is making a fascinating point. Allied to that point is the fact that when it comes to transport, the UK Government make decisions for England and there are Barnett consequential for Scotland and Northern Ireland, but when Scotland needs something, there are never Barnett consequentials running the other way. We have to hope that the UK Government are overspending or inefficient in their spending so that we in Scotland have money to do

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

something; there is never a point where the magic money tree is shaken for Scotland and then the Barnett consequential comes to England.

Alan Brown: The hon. Member is absolutely right. A proper budget-setting process should mean looking at needs, and then deciding what funding is required to suit those needs and what the aspirations are. Instead, at every Budget, we are supposed to doff our cap and be grateful that increased spend in England gives some crumbs to Scotland. That is not proper planning. Again, an independent country that had proper borrowing powers would be able to plan strategically for the future, instead of this haphazard measure that is reliant on the Barnett formula.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I see the Minister laughing on the Government Front Bench, but the serious point is that Portugal's spending does not depend on what Spain is doing, or vice versa. It spends what it needs, and it does not need the magic money tree shaken in the country next door before it gets what it needs—it does it itself.

Alan Brown: I absolutely agree. It goes back to the fact that an independent country making its own decisions would plan strategically and be able to borrow money accordingly. Quite often, borrowing for infrastructure leads to the kind of circular reinvestment in job creation that is a win-win.

If we look at roads, we see that it was the SNP that finally delivered a continuous motorway between Edinburgh and Glasgow. The M74 and the M80 have been completed, as has the Queensferry crossing. Yes, if we listen to the headlines, the A9 has clearly been delayed: a much more realistic programme for the A9 should have been developed before now, and Transport Scotland should also have heeded industry concerns about its bespoke contract models making it difficult for contractors to bid. However, the reality is that the SNP Government have delivered on a limited budget, and while the Tories demand more and more, they are also content with the capital allocation being cut over the next two years.

Dave Doogan: I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned the A9. Under the Scotland Office, prior to devolution, it came to an abrupt halt at Luncarty, with sporadic dual carriageway between there and Inverness. Like the Borders railway, when the SNP said that we were going to dual it, the Tory Opposition in the Scottish Parliament—having done nothing about it themselves—immediately insisted that we were not doing it quick enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is that there is such a lack of capital infrastructure investment across these islands that, when it comes to major projects such as the dualling of the A9, it is so difficult to mobilise the expertise, skills, contractors, and plant and machinery? There just is not the culture of investment in the United Kingdom that other European nations demonstrate.

Alan Brown: Absolutely. I have long said that when oil was discovered in the north-east of Scotland and the Port of Nigg was developed as a strategic port, any normal country would then have invested in the infrastructure in between. That is when the A9 should have been

dualled—when the oil and gas revenues were piling in, and we were using the north-east of Scotland to facilitate that. There should have been a motorway built to Aberdeen, the oil capital of Europe, but the UK Government did not think of upgrading the road or train network to Aberdeen. It is utterly bonkers.

That “bonkers” brings me to the fact that the UK Government are now supposed to be delivering a levelling-up agenda. As we have just heard, that agenda has certainly bypassed Scotland for long enough, but it is another example of political aspirations and a desire to be seen throwing some money about, instead of actually having a coherent strategy based on needs. The UK Government's levelling-up strategies have imposed strict spending timetables and budget caps that do not allow for inflation, meaning that councils that have been allocated money now have to come up with additional money themselves or cut back on those so-called levelling-up projects, which kind of defeats the purpose of allocating money for those projects.

When we look at projects in the round, it is also critical that the correct funding mechanisms are in place. Labour gave us the private finance initiative model, which proved to be a boon for hedge funds but a complete rip-off for the taxpayer. Again, the SNP Scottish Government learned the lessons from that model and implemented the non-profit distributing public-private partnership model, limiting profits and allowing much greater expenditure on capital projects while not tying hands with revenue budgets.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Member mentioned a vital point about levelling up. I was on a call today with a colleague on my council, Na h-Eileanan Siar, who said that under European structural funds, it was getting roughly £3.5 million a year, and under the levelling-up money—when it comes—it will be £2.25 million a year, so it is actually levelling down in comparison with what happened before Brexit.

Alan Brown: Absolutely. I do not need to tell anybody from the highlands and islands here that so much European money was actually used for transport upgrades for roads and causeways. Again, that was reliant on European money, because it simply was not coming north from Westminster.

To touch briefly on defence procurement, we have the ongoing shambles with Ajax, with a £5.5 billion fixed price contract for approximately 600 armoured vehicles to be delivered by 2025. So far, £4 billion has been paid out, out of that £5.5 billion, for just 44 vehicles delivered, and testing is still ongoing after they were originally deemed undriveable due to the excessive vibration. On defence, we also have the farce of the carriers procurement, and the Trident replacement is sucking the life out of the rest of the defence programme. There are really so many lessons that the UK Government need to learn, and they do not seem to be doing so.

On improvements in infrastructure assessment delivery, I do welcome the setting up of the National Infrastructure Commission and the national needs assessment process. Again, however, the Government do not necessarily seem to listen, especially given what the National Infrastructure Commission has said about nuclear deployment, which the Government just do not listen to at all. The creation of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority does seem to have been welcomed by businesses.

Gavin Newlands: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way one last time. When it comes to transport infrastructure, he will be aware from his previous role as the SNP transport spokesperson that Scotland has an overarching transport strategy. In fact, we are on to transport strategy 2, and we have the strategic transport projects review 2, which supports the delivery of that strategy. In England, there is no such overarching transport infrastructure strategy whatsoever. We have heard evidence in the Transport Committee recently that the Government should put that in place, because that avoids all the problems we are now seeing within this procurement. It is just a complete muddle and a mess, because there is no overarching strategy at all.

Alan Brown: Absolutely. An overarching strategy again goes back to linking needs and outcomes, and to identifying budgets. It also sends a clear signal to investors and contractors of what is in the pipeline of work, and people can actually gear up and plan ahead accordingly. One other thing about Scotland is having, through all this work, a strategic transport development plan, and then the Tories calling for the UK Government in Westminster to bypass that for a pet project, which again completely undermines our strategic thinking.

All these projects I have spoken about show that risk needs to be correctly allocated. The lessons learned means that sufficient up-front design work needs to be undertaken. We need early contractor involvement and a clear pipeline of projects. These are all matters that the construction industry has actually been calling for for years. We also need politicians to take responsibility, where required, and for politicians to understand that undue interference and the chopping and changing of projects mean an increase in costs and programme delays.

Somehow in today's political world, we do need to have cross-party working as much as possible. One thing is for sure: we cannot continue to have flagship projects that are handled as badly as HS2, Hinkley and the rest. It is quite clear that some politicians down here really do need to look in before they look out when it comes to infrastructure delivery and talking about that.

10.13 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a very great pleasure to be given the opportunity to speak in this Adjournment debate on infrastructure procurement this evening.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and SNP Members—and the many scores of hon. Friends behind me—will be delighted to hear that the Government recently published the national infrastructure and construction pipeline, reflecting our commitment to economic growth and productivity. Over the next decade, the pipeline estimates a planned and projected £700 billion to £775 billion overall investment in infrastructure projects across the country. This is going to provide great certainty to industry, and it makes clear the need to invest in new skills and new talent to the sector.

The new Procurement Act 2023, which I had the pleasure of taking through this House, will create a simpler and more transparent system that delivers better value for money and reduces costs for business and the

public sectors, and learns the lessons of recent years. Specifically, in the infrastructure procurement space, the construction playbook sets out how contracting authorities can now ensure that this ambitious programme of public investment is delivered in a way that maximises value for money. The playbook provides guidance and best practice on a range of topics including early supply chain involvement, risk, effective contracting, modern methods of construction, bid evaluation, and creating successful relationships with our supplier base. One in every £3 of public money—some £300 billion a year—is spent on public procurement. By improving the way public procurement is regulated, the Government will save the taxpayer money and drive benefits across every region of our country.

Following the UK's exit from the EU, we have seized the opportunity to develop and implement a new procurement regime in a way that simply was not possible while we were members of the EU. The Act helps deliver the Prime Minister's promise to grow the economy by creating a simpler and more transparent system that will deliver better value for money and reduce costs to businesses and the public sector. Crucially, it will provide new opportunities to small and medium-sized enterprises to get a bigger share of that £300 billion a year prize, a great achievement.

Alan Brown: What procurement processes are the Government doing now that they were not able to do when they were part of the EU and what difference is that making?

Alex Burghart: I am extremely sorry that the hon. Gentleman missed every single stage of the Procurement Act 2023. We have created a brand-new regime in consultation with businesses of all sizes, who absolutely welcomed the decisions that we have made that will reduce bureaucracy and make it easier, removing the hurdles to small and medium-sized enterprises. That is why when we did our consultation it was very warmly welcomed, because people could see it would reduce the costs of entering procurement and reduce the barriers to those businesses getting a share of that public money. I have to say it was welcomed on both sides of the House, by both—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) can refer back to *Hansard* in his own time, but, having explained how it improves—

Dave Doogan: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Burghart: I am still answering the previous intervention so the hon. Gentleman will have to wait. *[Interruption.]* I have got all night; I have had my supper and I can talk about this. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun would like us to rehearse everything we went through in the Procurement Act; if he wants to go back and look at it, he will discover that the Act makes it possible for—*[Interruption.]* The Act makes it possible for—

Gavin Newlands: You have already said that.

Alex Burghart: That is because I have been interrupted many times, but I am happy to repeat the first clause of my sentence over and over again until the good gentlemen are ready to put a sock in it, but if they are not, I am not

[Alex Burghart]

hungry and I am not tired and I am happy to fill up column inch after column inch of *Hansard* with this rubbish.

If the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun wants to go back and look at the debates that we had in Committee and on Report he will understand that it is possible for both contracting authorities and suppliers to work through pipelines and framework arrangements that make it easier for suppliers to see what business is coming forward and make it easier for them to prepare, with the result that the conversations that he alluded to between contracting authorities and suppliers happen earlier and contracts are more appropriate and less likely to break down. That is one reason why the legislation we brought through the House was so widely welcomed by businesses and by contracting authorities.

I am very pleased to say that we are making great progress towards introducing this new regime in October. We have a huge plan of learning and development that will be going on across the country. We have a new digital online platform for procurement which is being built and which is eagerly anticipated. We are also constructing the new national security unit for procurement, which will make sure that it is much harder for hostile actors to enter sensitive parts of our supply chain. It is a really great achievement.

In addition to this fantastic new legislation that was brought in following wide-ranging public consultation and stakeholder engagement, we have brought forward legislative proposals to establish the new regime. These measures and the training we will roll out to support them will deliver greater value for the public purse not just in infrastructure, with huge road and rail construction projects, but across public procurement from IT software by the NHS to services by local councils.

Dave Doogan: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Burghart: In a moment.

On value for money, the Procurement Act 2023 provides greater flexibility to contracting authorities to design efficient, commercial and market-focused competitions, and removes overly prescriptive rules contained in the existing regulations in a way that simply could not have been done while we were in the EU. The 2023 Act also embeds transparency throughout the commercial lifecycle, and we will ensure that the spending of taxpayers' money can be properly scrutinised. With more consistent commercial data, we will see increased competition, collaboration and accountability.

The 2023 Act confirms that value for money remains paramount during contracting, while also encouraging buyers to take account of relevant wider social and

environmental considerations that the supplier may bring. That goes alongside the construction playbook, which is one of four sector-specific commercial playbooks produced by the Government and designed to improve how we assess, procure and manage Government contracts to maximise value for money and deliver better outcomes. Those playbooks are systematically changing how we approach risk, sustainability and innovation across portfolios, projects and programmes, with the goal of creating productive, profitable, sustainable and resilient sectors.

The construction sector faces unique challenges, and the Government are committed to updating the construction playbook annually in collaboration with Departments, arm's length bodies and, critically, industry. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority also applies oversight, scrutiny and support to the most important major projects being delivered by Government. As well as tracking performance data on projects on the Government's major projects portfolio, it provides independent gateway assurance reviews, expert advice and support on the project delivery, commercial, financial and sector-specific aspects of major projects.

The IPA's standards, tools and training for the Government's projects help ensure that projects are set up for success, including delivering to cost. The IPA's expert advice, cost estimation guidance, transforming infrastructure programme and the development of the benchmarking hub are already helping to reduce the costs of projects.

You would think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that hon. Gentlemen on the Opposition Benches who profess to care about procurement, value for money and timeliness would be chomping at the bit to be involved in this work. Alas, no. When the moment came, when they were given the opportunity to sign up to the new procurement regime that delivers all those things, what did they do? They slunk away. They snuck back to their dark corners. They were frit of change and frit of opportunity. Instead, they stuck with the old ways—the bad ways that have led previous Governments into failure. They did not want success; they wanted to stick with failure. That is to the loss of the Scottish people. The good people of Northern Ireland joined our regime. The great people of Wales did the same, and the poor small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland will be deprived of access to our brand-new regime. That is why we know that the hon. Gentlemen do not take this issue seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There we go. Just for the record, I have not eaten and I am tired.

Question put and agreed to.

10.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 19 February 2024

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

Animal Testing

4.30 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 633591 and 645885 relating to animal testing and non-animal research methods.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I would like to introduce two petitions dealing with legislation on animal testing and the promotion of non-animal research methods. I stress that we are here once again—this is becoming an annual debate. That demonstrates the strength of feeling of our constituents and of people across the UK, a nation of animal lovers, that these procedures and processes really must start being brought to an end.

I will start by reading the prayers of the petitions. The first, e-petition 633591, advocates for the ending of animal toxicity tests and the prioritisation of non-animal methods, or NAMs. The petition was started by Maria and closed in September 2023 with 109,378 signatures, including 233 from my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. It argues that NAMs are

“more predictive of human biology, more economically advantageous,” and prevent animal suffering. E-petition 645885 calls for the banning of the use of dogs for testing and research, citing their cognitive abilities and emotional range. The petition was started by singer-songwriter and actor Will Young, who I am delighted to see in the Public Gallery today. As of now, it has over 30,000 signatures, including 35 from Carshalton and Wallington.

Let me begin with a bit of background information. Animal testing is covered by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which was amended in 2012 to include cephalopods as protected animals. Regulated procedures include acts that may cause pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm to animals. Animal testing is often cited by some in the industry as being necessary for various purposes, including drug development, veterinary medicines, and chemical or environmental safety testing. However, we have already made movements away from it, for example in the 1998 ban on testing of beauty products and cosmetics, and in a recent written answer, the Government confirmed that there are no laws mandating its use. Nevertheless, we are still in a very challenging situation, and these practices continue.

I want to reiterate some of the data that we spoke about last year. In 2021, over 3 million scientific procedures were conducted on animals. If that number were not bad enough, that was actually an increase on previous years—an increase in the use of dogs by 3%, of cats by 6%, of horses by 29% and of monkeys by 17%. We can only speculate why the number increased, but that certainly does not tie in with the messages we hear that the use of NAMs is on the up and the use of animals on the down.

The issue is not just that these procedures are happening to animals, but the awful conditions that animals are often kept in while waiting for procedures to be done to them. A recent report from the Animals in Science Regulation Unit described “deeply troubling” animal welfare standards in British laboratories between 2019 and 2021. I am sure that many of us will have received emails containing pictures and videos of some of those procedures. I have seen some pretty awful things that are happening to animals here in the UK, despite the industry telling us that it upholds the highest possible animal welfare standards. Failings include a non-human primate dying after becoming trapped behind a restraint device; 112 rats being crushed alive when they were moved in error to a compactor; and numerous incidents of animals being left without water or food.

As I said, the UK purports to be a nation of animal lovers, and I truly believe that it is, but we need to ensure that we update our laws to truly reflect that fact. I acknowledge that efforts are being made to promote NAMs—including cell cultures, human tissues, computer modelling and volunteer studies—and that organisations are trying to invest in and improve the use of NAMs to reduce reliance on animal testing. However, I want to pay particular attention to the second of the two petitions that we are debating, which relates specifically to dogs.

Dogs are most commonly used in secondary species testing. That is where a test on an animal, normally a mouse or rat, has already been conducted but some researchers go on to conduct a secondary test on a different species, and dogs are commonly cited as animals used for that. However, the industry itself says that that is almost completely unnecessary now. Companies such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca have stood up at global health forums and said, “We don’t want to do secondary species testing any more. Please help us find the road map to get us out of the need to do this.”

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene; he is making a passionate speech on such an important matter. My constituency is Ynys Môn, and we are an island of animal lovers—animals ranging from dolphins and red squirrels to sheep and cattle and our feline and canine friends—so it is no surprise that many of my constituents actively campaign for the rights of animals and support reducing the use of animals in scientific experiments. They and I would like to know what steps the Government are taking to support the pharmaceutical industry in the development and use of non-animal testing models.

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention; I think that more than 100 of her constituents signed this petition too. I hope that the Minister heard her request—indeed, I am sure that it is an ask of all of us in the Chamber today. What is being done, and what more can be done, to try to encourage people out of using animals and into using non-animal methods?

I want to pick up again the point about animal welfare. Many people will cite the regulations that are in place in the UK for animals in experiment environments. However, this statistic might shed some light on why welfare standards are so low. As of 2021, there were only an estimated 23 full-time equivalent inspectors in the United Kingdom. That is 23 inspectors trying to look at 3 million different procedures. The fact that so

[*Elliot Colburn*]

much self-reporting is going on in the industry and there are so few inspectors leads, again, to the argument that non-animal methods are a much better use of money and bring with them higher ethical and moral standards.

I want to go through some of the proposed solutions before I hand over to some of my colleagues. PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—has proposed a solution known as the research modernisation deal, or RMD, which offers a strategy to eliminate the use of animals in biomedical research, regulatory testing and education. It prioritises non-animal methods, conducts critical reviews to assess the necessity of animal use, and reallocates funds to non-animal methods. This is aimed specifically at making the UK once again a leader in innovative, ethical scientific practices. Furthermore, we have seen advances in technology such as in vitro and in silico tests, and innovative technologies such as organs on chips, which offer higher levels of protection and prediction accuracy.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) *rose*—

Elliot Colburn: That is one of the things I want to stress, but before I do so, I will give way to the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes the really important point that non-animal methods can be much more accurate than using animals in these experiments. Does he agree that companies such as Lush, which came to Parliament before Christmas to advocate for those methods, have shown the way in which, through science, we can do better?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. This is something that we cannot stress enough in this debate: it has been proven in the data time and again that non-animal methods are highly accurate, and much more accurate when it comes to predicting human responses than animal testing is. In fact, animal testing has such low levels of success when it comes to measuring how a drug or something else might affect a human that we would not accept that in any other form of business. When the levels of prediction are so poor, why are we still accepting it? It does not make any sense—not when we have alternatives that can offer much greater clarity about to how humans will react to products and drugs.

However, there are challenges standing in the way, and one of them remains funding for NAMs. Pfizer and AstraZeneca have said that they do not want to do things such as secondary species testing, but regulatory guidelines often expect new drugs to be tested on animals and there is a lack of consensus on possible transition timelines. There is also push-back from the industry, which is resistant to change. However, in advance of this debate I spoke to many scientists and industry leads who said they are crying out for change and want to be at the forefront of non-animal methods. We need to give them the tools to do so and look at the way we fund research.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. He is standing up for all the animals that do not have a voice in the industry and speaking for those

across the UK who want to support them. Several organisations contacted me and talked about the need for change. They said that we must look after animals—particularly beagle pups—post testing where possible, but they pointed out that the industry has been very resistant to engaging with rehoming centres, even when the beagle pups have not undergone lethal testing. Surely we can do better. Whenever an animal can have a life in a loving home afterwards, we must make that happen.

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I hope the Minister heard that.

Commercial breeding—in particular, of beagles—is hard for this country to accept. The data shows that a lot of such testing, if not all of it, is unnecessary because the accuracy of the tests is so low. Given that secondary species tests on dogs seem so unnecessary, why are we still allowing them to happen?

Since the debate last year, there has been some welcome news internationally: Canada, Australia and countries within the European Union have come up with road maps for ending animal testing. It is critical that we ask the Government to consider how we do that. We need a strategy and a road map to work with the industry, campaign groups, charities, other organisations and the people who are in the Public Gallery today, to move us away from the use of animals and towards non-animal methods as the default standard. I appreciate that some countries have found it difficult to come up with precise timelines because of disagreements within the sector, but that does not mean we should not try. That is the key thing to take away from this debate.

There are things that we can do in the immediate and interim terms, one of which is to look at animal welfare standards. Twenty-three people looking at 3 million procedures simply is not enough. We also need an immediate review of the necessity of secondary species testing. Whatever happens next, it is imperative that we prioritise the development and adoption of non-animal research methods. The fact the number of scientific procedures conducted on animals went up in 2021—we actually stopped collecting data after that point, so we are not entirely sure how many we are doing, which I think is a mistake—demonstrates that there is not enough impetus behind the agenda of moving towards non-animal methods.

I ask the Government to invest in and fund NAMs properly by reallocating existing funds and promoting collaboration. They have an incredible ability to bring together the industry, researchers, advocacy groups, campaigners and others to create a road map and a strategy so we can truly say that the UK does not need to use animal testing methods any more. We can stop the use of animals and hold ourselves up to an incredibly high international standard as a nation of animal lovers.

4.44 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (*Elliot Colburn*) on leading the debate in such a detailed, passionate and knowledgeable way.

My constituents, like all others, are passionate about animals, and many have contacted me to oppose their use in laboratory testing. It is upsetting for all those

who love animals to learn that, in laboratories across the country, so many animals—including dogs, which we often describe as our best friends—are subjected to awful experiments under the guise of the public good.

It is often said that the UK is a nation of animal lovers, and I think that that is absolutely true. The UK was the first country to instigate animal protection laws, in 1822, and the first to set up an animal welfare charity, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Public opinion is clear, and nearly 100 of my constituents have signed the petition to end the use of animals for toxicity tests and to prioritise non-animal methods, or NAMs. There is enough evidence now that non-animal methods can be more accurate, more cost-effective and quicker than traditional animal models.

Although researchers are already required to use non-animal methods wherever possible, concerns have been raised that the process of checking whether NAMs have been used is not rigorous enough. Cruelty Free International has found cases of animal testing being used despite non-animal alternatives being available. It is therefore disappointing that the Government's response to these petitions is that there will be no change in the law. Although we should all welcome the fact that we have improved our animal welfare laws over the years, we should not be complacent. At a time when new alternatives and non-animal methods are being developed, we should embrace this opportunity for leadership and to make regulations more stringent.

I am sure we all want to minimise the use of animals in scientific experimentation and the cosmetic industry as much as possible, including by funding research into alternatives. We have already heard about Lush and its very successful reception at the end of last year. There are enough companies that are really promoting the use of alternative methods, so we should really listen to industry on this issue.

We know that animal testing can be unreliable and unpredictable and that it causes unnecessary suffering. Humans differ considerably from animals, so the use of animals often leads to poor results. The regulatory requirement that animals be used before human trials is more than 70 years old. Reviewing that, and removing the needless suffering of animals, will finally bring scientific research into the 21st century.

Of course, there are also methods of digital testing, so we really have moved a long way since the law was last revised. A growing number of human-relevant methods are already being developed. Those are made up of innovative technologies that are helping to deliver better results for humans. Despite that, there is a continued misconception that animal testing provides a gold standard for the regulatory approval of a product.

An expert advisory taskforce could play an important role in exploring animal-free innovation. We should also review all animal procedures to remove duplicative and wasteful methods and to prevent the retesting on animals of any material, chemical, food or drug currently in use. Retesting should be conducted using only non-animal methods or existing human data.

The Government have responded to the petition to ban any testing on dogs by saying that welfare standards are already high and that testing would still continue in other countries. Those are valid responses, yet I think that we can do better and provide even more leadership

to other countries. That other countries continue to use dogs is not a good reason as to why we should do so in this country.

Although we should be proud that the UK has some of the highest welfare standards in the world, we must build on our robust record and lead by example. To achieve that, greater funding is required to support the development of new technologies and new, innovative testing methods. Sadly, Government funding for such methods currently represents less than 1% of total UK biomedical research. We can do better, and I would particularly like to hear from the Minister on this point. We know that increased research funding often pays back multiple times to the economy—we have had a debate on research funding in this Chamber before—so investment makes good sense.

There is no excuse for animal cruelty, and we must do all we can to ensure that the humane treatment of animals is upheld everywhere. The moral and scientific case for tighter regulation of laboratory testing is clear. It is time that the Government listened to increasing numbers of scientists and voters.

4.49 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): This is an incredibly important debate, which has been brought about by these two petitions. In 1986, this country introduced the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act. At the time, it was seen as world-leading and as the gold standard, with its three Rs principles: to replace animal testing wherever possible; to reduce animal testing where it was not possible to replace it; and to refine it to reduce suffering where it occurred. However, it is increasingly clear that a review of the legislation is now needed and that we need to make further legislative improvements. We have always been ahead of the United States on animal welfare issues, but this is one area where, arguably, we have now fallen behind them. Until recently, the US required animal testing for certain product authorisations, but it has now brought forward legislation to modern its statute and make it explicit that there is no need for animal testing for any of those products.

In the UK, we have a degree of ambiguity. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency does not explicitly require animal testing, but there is a degree of ambiguity because it is equally cautious about saying that there should not be animal testing. I will come on to that later.

In debates such as this we should always give credit where credit is due, and it is important to note that the Government effectively banned the use of animal testing in the development of cosmetics in 2023, or at least made it clear that there would be no new licences for such activities. That followed the huge progress made by companies such as Unilever and others to phase out the need for animal testing on their products. However, the greatest concern for me is that despite exponential growth in non-animal methods and huge leaps in that technology over 20 years—with the development, for instance, of organ-on-chip technology and bioprinting—the number of animals used in animal tests remains stubbornly high, at around 4 million per year, principally mice.

The 1986 Act is deficient in some minor but quite obvious ways. When it was originally drafted, it simply covered invertebrates, which was consistent with the

[George Eustice]

animal welfare legislation we had at the time. In 2012, the coalition Government decided to add cephalopods to the legislation—for those not familiar with that terminology, it essentially means species from the octopus family—but they did not add decapods. As the Minister will know, the recent Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 now recognises both cephalopods and decapods as being sentient species. At the very least, therefore, we should bring the 1986 Act into line with our current animal welfare legislation, which would require the addition of decapods as protected species.

My more important concern is that if the three Rs had been applied correctly, given the exponential growth in technology that we have seen in the last 20 years, we would have expected to see a correlation and a sharp reduction in the number of animals being used, as the replacement principle was applied. Instead, over the last 20 years the number has really drifted along sideways. I appreciate that it has dipped at times, but it is telling that in the first year of lockdown, when the number of animals being tested fell quite significantly, it was said that it had fallen to the lowest level since 2004. That is quite damning in itself, because if an anomaly year, when the amount of testing was at an all-time low, meant that the level had still got back only to the level it was at in 2004, that suggests that something is going wrong and that the application of the three Rs is not having the effect originally intended by the 1986 Act.

I am afraid that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that what started out in 1986 as a robust regime—perhaps the most robust regime in the world—has probably drifted and coalesced into a rather unsatisfactory system of self-regulation. We have to ask ourselves why those three Rs principles are not being effectively applied. Ultimately, I think it is because everybody defers to process but no one really takes proper ownership. We have ended up with cultural attitudes around the use of animals in scientific procedures that masquerade as science, when actually the science does not require those animals to be used in such numbers at all.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have always thought that one of the problems—as a former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will have insight into this—is that animal welfare sits with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs but the Home Office is in charge of licensing. Usually it is in the hands of a Minister who has 101 other things on their plate, and it is a small part of their brief. Today, we have the team from the Science Department here, and I hope they are looking at the more progressive view. Is the problem that there is no one Minister who can take ownership of the issue?

George Eustice: That is part of the problem. I am sure that the Minister has a busy diary, and there is an argument that the issue falls partly on the Science Department and partly on the Home Office. At the moment, the unit that processes the licences sits in the Home Office but, as I will say later, there is a strong case for a machinery of government change that relieves the Home Office of that burden, which it is not really qualified to carry out, and transfers it to a Department

such as DEFRA, where there are vets and where the legislation can be treated, rightly, as a piece of animal welfare legislation, rather than a piece of scientific licensing.

I want to explain why we have this problem. Three types of licence are needed to carry out these scientific procedures. An individual has to have a licence, and there is a licence on the establishment, which is fairly uncontroversial. The difficulty comes with the project licences. Universities and research institutions have internal animal welfare and ethics boards, which assess applications before they go to the Home Office. But how hard do they challenge requests from academics working in their institutions? Perhaps they occasionally ask a few questions and challenge a bit, but it appears that they, effectively, defer to the judgment of the academics who put in the requests, and the academics then agree. The ethics board agrees to the application, which is then submitted to the Home Office.

Let us bear in mind that the team in the Home Office have to process around 4,000 project licences a year. They are overworked and stretched. They will see that an ethics board, with professors and people with “Dr” in front of their names, has assessed that the project is necessary. They will defer to the scientific knowledge of those boards—and perhaps wrongly so. Although scientists are qualified to give good technical analysis, they are not, by and large, qualified to make good decisions, least of all when it comes to decisions relating to policies underpinned by laws made in this House. Only the civil service, backed up by Ministers, can make those kinds of decisions.

I suspect that there is, in the Home Office, a large degree of deference, which is possibly misplaced, to those animal welfare and ethics boards. That is why the Home Office almost never refuses a licence. I understand that, in response to parliamentary questions on this issue, Home Office Ministers will say, “You cannot really judge the fact that we have not refused a licence as evidence that we are not applying ourselves with voracity to this task, because we will often question things and send applications back for further consideration.” I completely understand that, and it is a fair point, but we have over 4,000 project applications a year. Are we really saying that the Home Office might not judge it appropriate to refuse even one in order to create some boundaries and parameters and to inject some vigour and rigour into the system?

A further cultural problem stems from the MHRA, which regulates medicinal and pharmaceutical products in the UK. Although it has confirmed that it does not require animal testing, and that it is open to individual companies and research establishments to decide what type of research they need, a perception exists within industry and academia that experiments carried out using live animals have greater credibility and acceptability. A clear statement from the MHRA that it is not neutral or indifferent, but will take a dim view of products brought before it that have used animal experiments when they might not have been necessary, would sharpen the process and focus minds as to the need for using animal experiments.

How can we get to a position in which the three Rs are being applied as the original Act intended? One of the petitions calls for more funding for non-animal methods. In the UK, we are blessed with some of the world’s best researchers in this area. The Blizzard Institute at Queen

Mary University of London, which I visited a few months ago, hosts an animal replacement centre of excellence. It is doing some extraordinary work on organ-on-chip and bioprinting. In dermatological research in particular, there is now no doubt that such non-animal methods are far superior to using live animals.

I have a probing proposal for the Minister. As a way to raise money, sharpen the incentives in the current system and get the three Rs enforced, I propose that we consider applying a levy on the use of each individual animal in testing, as part of the project licence. In some ways, it feels quite incongruous to have to put a monetary value on the life of a mouse to get people to take it seriously, but if researchers are not taking the intrinsic value of that mouse's life as seriously as they should, let us consider some other incentives that might reinforce the original three Rs. Let us consider applying a project licence levy of £100 or £200 for each mouse used, and see whether that focuses minds on the animal welfare and ethics committees. Let us see if it makes them think twice before saying that they need 100 mice for something when they could do it with less. We should consider something like that. The other advantage of a levy is that we could ringfence all its proceeds and put them directly into research on non-animal methods. That is my suggestion to the Minister.

I was a Minister myself for nine years, and I know that it is very easy for people to call for more money for things, but it is not straightforward to be the Minister who has to go to the Treasury and say, "By the way, we'd like just a little bit more money for this one thing that is quite important." Traditionally, 20 years ago, the Treasury did not like levies and saw them as a hypothecated tax, but we are in different territory post the financial crisis and the many other problems since then. I am sure that if the Minister went to the Treasury and said that he was going to apply a levy of £200 per mouse used in experiments, the faces in the Treasury would light up. They would see the potential to do something useful with that.

Finally, where should responsibility reside for the 1986 Act and the policy under it? I know that that discussion is ongoing within the Government. My view is that the Home Office is a very busy Department and has a huge amount to contend with, and it is very unlikely that its Ministers would be able to give this issue the attention that it deserves. The right thing would be to make a machinery-of-government change transferring full responsibility for animal testing, the 1986 Act and the regulatory regime under it to DEFRA, which has the vets, the scientists and people who would approach this issue as an animal welfare issue. Equally, it has people who understand the importance of science. As our vets have proven on multiple occasions, they are not squeamish about these matters: they will take difficult decisions if need be. Most importantly of all, if the policy were within DEFRA, veterinary science could challenge medical science. Often, we find in veterinary science a better understanding of vaccinations, epidemiology and medicines, with a body of technical expertise that can challenge the medical expertise sitting in other Departments. That is why I think that such a machinery-of-government change should take place.

I hope that the Minister will look favourably on some of those suggestions. I appreciate that it is very unlikely that he could bring forward a levy that might sharpen

the implementation of the three Rs between now and the general election, but all parties will be able to think about these issues as they draft their manifestos for the general election ahead.

5.5 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): As always, Dame Caroline, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on his excellent introduction to this debate, which set out all the issues in his usual informed style.

I have spoken about animal welfare on many occasions in Parliament. It has consistently remained at the forefront of the issues that my constituents write to me about. I am honoured to represent them in this debate. I have always maintained that we are a nation of animal lovers; I believe that the nearly 110,000 signatures that e-petition 633591 gained is proof of that, along with the 31,000 that e-petition 645885 has so far gathered.

In 2022, 2.76 million scientific procedures involving live animals were carried out in Great Britain. Of those, 55% were for experimental purposes; creating and breeding genetically altered animals accounted for the other 45%. A smidgen of good news is that between 2021 and 2022, there was a 10% decrease in the number of procedures, which reached the lowest numbers since 2002, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) pointed out. Although 4,122 procedures were used on dogs, that was a 2% decrease on 2021. The problem is that there are still too many of these experiments taking place.

In a recent YouGov poll, nearly three quarters of respondents were opposed to the testing of both ingredients and completed cosmetics on animals. This included 58% of people "strongly" opposed to both types of testing. While some 47% of people think that testing individual ingredients from medicines on animals is acceptable when there is no non-animal alternative, 30% think that it is not acceptable.

As somebody who has campaigned on these issues for a long time, I naturally fall into the majority view on animal testing with respect to cosmetics; I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth for his work on the issue as Secretary of State. When it comes to medicines, however, I tend to melt into a mess of complexity. Sometimes, personal experiences and those of our constituents can muddy a binary view on this issue. I have absolutely no doubt that the success of my breast cancer treatment is down to past experiments that have taken place on animals. It is hard to remove that from the equation.

At the excellent meeting I had with Animal Free Research UK, I was keen to explain my quandary. In the process of doing so, it was good not only to hear of the work being done on human-specific technologies at hubs such as the University of Exeter's, but to learn of the work that the Association of Medical Research Charities is doing to improve transparency around animal research and animal welfare. It is worth noting that many of the AMRC's members make it very clear that they support research involving animals only where there is no alternative. Given that cancer survival rates have doubled in the past 40 years, the scientific community ought to be thanked for its painstaking research and

[Tracey Crouch]

analysis. We know that sometimes this involves studying the biology of a disease in a whole body, and not just on individual cells or tissues. However, even those of us who are beneficiaries of that research want to know that good animal welfare practices have been employed and that the use of that research has been clinically justifiable.

How long can we keep doing animal testing when technology and NAMs are advancing so quickly? I would argue that if this country is to become a science superpower, we should lead by example and rapidly accelerate the use of animal-free research with a long-term ambition of zero animal experiments. We need the road map that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington outlined. Bold action needs to start today if the UK is to keep pace with global action to support human-specific technologies. The US Congress has now passed the Food and Drug Administration Modernisation Act, facilitating the use of non-animal methods for drug testing, while the European Commission has committed to developing a road map for ultimately phasing out animal tests.

Animal Free Research UK and others have made some short and medium-term recommendations, which are reasonable asks. They note that the forthcoming Budget could be an opportunity to launch an ambitious funding call to develop human-specific technologies and attract private investment. They suggest providing dedicated transition grants to leverage the potential of human-specific tech and provide tax relief for companies that are working on these innovations. They also suggest establishing a non-animal science innovation hub, which I am sure would be really attractive to the next generation of scientists, whose animal welfare and environmental conscience seems so naturally embedded.

For what it is worth, I agree with the point that colleagues have made about ministerial responsibility and the challenges that it brings. However, I am pleased that we have a Science Minister who cares about these matters. Ending animal experiments can only lead to positive change in research methods. The Government have introduced a great deal of legislation on animal sentience and animal welfare in recent years, for which my constituents and I are truly grateful. Allowing the continued use of animal testing only undermines the achievements of that legislation. I hope that the House will join us today in upholding the Government's commitment to animal welfare by supporting these excellent petitions and looking at how we can continue to reduce the use of animals in research so that one day it is not necessary at all.

5.11 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for opening the debate so comprehensively, as he has done with other such debates. I am delighted to participate in this debate on animal testing and non-animal research methods, arising from e-petitions that have attracted more than 140,000 signatures between them. The petitions call for an end to the use of animals for toxicity tests, the prioritisation of non-animal methods in research, and a ban on the use of dogs for testing and research purposes.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) is not alone in receiving a lot of emails about animal welfare. I certainly receive more emails about animal welfare than about any other issue, which is quite remarkable when we consider the issues that we see on the news every day, but which shows the level of concern, commitment and affection that our constituents across the UK have for animal welfare.

We have debated many times the principle of using animals in research—and here we are again. It is frustrating, but those of us who believe that testing on animals must end must keep debating it and making the case until we see an end to these horrific and unnecessary practices. As we have heard, it has long been accepted that animals are sentient beings that are able to have physical and emotional experiences. We know that the public wish overwhelmingly to see an end to animal testing, because it is cruel, causes suffering and, more importantly, is unnecessary, yet 2.7 million procedures involving animals took place across the UK in 2022. That number is very high. Experimental procedures are decreasing, but the reality is that even where alternative non-animal research methods are available, animals are being used for experiments. Of all the distressing aspects, that is perhaps the most difficult for anybody to justify.

We know that animal tests are taking place in the UK and Europe where there are accepted, validated alternatives. Over three quarters of adults living in Scotland—76%—believe that alternatives to animal tests should be a funding priority in the UK for science and innovation. A majority of Scots—62%—want deadlines for phasing out animal tests. When it comes to specific species, more than two thirds of Scots think that it is unacceptable to use dogs, cats and monkeys in such experiments. Undoubtedly, and despite huge public opposition, the UK is one of the top users of primates and dogs in experiments in Europe, but it seems that a culture change is needed. That is what we must keep pressing for.

According to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, most drug testing on dogs sees them repeatedly force-fed or forced to inhale substances over prolonged periods to measure the effects of repeated exposure on their major organs. In some factory farms, female dogs are forced to spend their entire lives as puppy-producing machines, allegedly churning out between 1,600 and 2,000 offspring for medical testing each year.

The well-known campaigning group Camp Beagle, some of whose members may be here today, has led calls for the UK Government to ban toxicity testing on beagles of products such as household bleach, cleaning products and weed killers. I am sure we all welcome the fact, mentioned by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, that Canada recently banned the use of animals for regulatory toxicity tests, but we need to see the same happen here in the UK.

The public are appalled to learn that, in the name of animal testing, dogs are kept in overcrowded cages, forced to inhale toxins with funnels strapped to their snouts and undergo immense pain and suffering until they die or are killed. Legally, they can be poisoned with toxic chemicals, shot, irradiated, gassed, blown up, stabbed, drowned, burned, starved, subject to electric shocks, deprived of sleep and infected with diseases, and have their bones broken and limbs amputated. Yet, recent developments in evolutionary and developmental biology and genetics have significantly increased our understanding

of why animals have no predictive value for human responses to drugs or the pathophysiology of human disease. Indeed, over 92% of drugs that show promise in animal tests fail to translate into safe and effective medicines for humans.

Cruelty Free International research shows that the UK is in the top 10 of animal-testing countries—that is, it is one of the top 10 users of dogs and monkeys in experiments in the world. That is quite something. In the face of such unnecessary cruelty and suffering, we must again call for rigorous public scientific hearings to reduce the unnecessary harm caused by animal experiments, ban this immoral and unjustifiable practice, and pursue alternatives instead.

There is a need for greater transparency in the animal research industry, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford said. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington talked about challenges of funding new approach methodologies, but it is worth remembering that when the UK—as I assume it will—updates its legislation in this area, industry will adapt, just as it will in Canada and in others taking a leading approach. One thing we know with confidence about scientists and researchers is that they are able to innovate; it is their very reason for existence.

It is long past time that the UK updated animal welfare legislation to reflect the ethical and humane rights of animals and to improve animal welfare standards domestically, as so many of us want. It is also past time that we worked internationally to better animal welfare standards globally. New approach methodologies do not use animals and so avoid the inherent cruelty and the problem of animal-human species differences. They use advanced in vitro and in silico technologies to model diseases, test treatments and investigate biological processes in humans. That should be the scientific focus instead of outdated, unreliable animal experiments.

The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act was important because it enshrined the rights of sentient animals, but it did not go far enough. It did not recognise the rights of sentient animals undergoing scientific testing and in Ministry of Defence military experiments. That glaring omission must be corrected. We in the SNP condemned that omission at the time and on Report tabled two amendments to correct it, but the Government voted them down.

The European Union is moving away from cruel experiments on animals and is using cutting-edge replacements, as evidenced by the European Parliament's vote in favour of developing an action plan to phase animals out of EU science and regulation. It is vital that the UK Government support a new regulatory environment that enables a transition to new approach methodologies.

In 2020, 77 scientists and academics from Animal Free Research UK signed an open letter to the Government and medical agencies calling for a clear timetable for regulatory change to enable the development of medicines without the use of animal testing, and indicating that investment in human-relevant science is a golden opportunity to revitalise medical research, save money, create wealth and improve public health. Last month, leading scientists in human-specific technologies wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer asking him to consider providing Government support to unlock the potential of future-focused technologies in the upcoming spring Budget; specifically, they recommend tax relief

for companies developing and using these cutting-edge technologies, a bold funding call to industry and academia, and transition grants to facilitate a shift away from animal use.

While the Government appear content to let the status quo continue, sentient animals continue to endure horrific and unnecessary suffering, and our constituents continue to be horrified as they look on, helpless, at a Government who are simply not listening to them. Swathes of the respected scientific community and renowned academics also feel that they are not being listened to. It is past time that this unenlightened and unnecessary torturing and testing on our fellow creatures ended, and I hope that the Minister will act without delay. I and many other MPs have been and will continue to be a voice for the voiceless and a voice for common sense. I hope that the Minister's response today will show that he is ready to add his voice to this growing chorus, which also will benefit science and public health.

5.21 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline.

I acknowledge the strength of public feeling about animal testing. Together, the petitions that we are debating today received more than 140,000 signatures, including 114 in Newcastle upon Tyne Central. I thank everyone who signed the petitions for bringing these important issues to be debated in Parliament once again. The petitioners are calling for an end to the use of dogs in testing and research in the UK, an end to the use of animals in toxicity testing, and the prioritisation of non-animal methods, which are key issues.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on his expert introduction to the debate, and all those who have made speeches or intervened. All the contributions have been very well informed and thoughtful.

As the Opposition spokesperson in the debate, I state clearly and emphasise that the Labour party believes that the unnecessary suffering of defenceless animals is unequivocally wrong. The Labour party was founded to support the rights of working people, and I believe strongly that human rights and animal rights are intrinsically linked. Those who are cruel to animals or ignore their rights often do the same to humans, so recognising and standing up for the rights of animals is an important part of Labour's record. From the Hunting Act 2004, which banned the cruel practice of hunting with dogs, to the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which put in place strong domestic protections for pets, livestock and wild animals, we have used the power of Government to protect animals. We introduced the offence of causing unnecessary suffering, mutilation and animal fighting, and we banned the testing of cosmetic products on animals in 1998. The last Labour Government had a record to be proud of and, if we are privileged to form the next Government, we will build on that legacy.

The British people expect nothing less because, as Members have pointed out, we are a nation of animal lovers. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, the RSPCA was founded in 1824—60 years before the founding of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. I do not think that reflects a hierarchy of concern, but it does reflect the extent to

[Chi Onwurah]

which we are concerned about the welfare of animals, and it is no wonder. Animals improve the welfare of humans in many ways, ranging from providing companionship and improving mental health, to facilitating rescues during natural disasters. Animals serve as the best companions, offering emotional support and reducing feelings of loneliness. Domesticated animals can help people to recover from severe illnesses, and they help us in speech therapy, occupational therapy and further physical rehabilitation.

On Thursday, I visited St Paul's CofE Primary School in Elswick, Newcastle. I asked them what they wanted from Parliament, and top of the list was an end to food poverty and a support dog. Animal welfare and the love of animals are at the heart of British society and culture. As the shadow Minister for science, research and innovation, my priority is to enable the best possible science in this country, which will deliver the best possible outcomes for people across the UK, people across the world and, I believe, animals as well.

Since the introduction of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, animal testing practices have improved. The three Rs—replacement, reduction and refinement—have already been mentioned, and they remain worthy principles. As the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) emphasised, however, many people are rightly distressed and concerned by the scale and, at times, severity of animal testing. Over 1.5 million experimental procedures involving animals were carried out in 2022; 4% of those were assessed as non-recovery—that is to say, the animal died—and almost 4% again were classed as severe.

There are real reasons to foresee a better future. We are in the midst of a scientific and technological revolution that is transforming the economy, society and the conduct of science itself. Non-animal or new approach methods—NAMs—for scientific research are developing at great pace, enabled by advances in artificial intelligence and engineering biology. It is true that there are currently limits to the efficacy of NAMs, but that is becoming less true with each passing year and, as has been pointed out during the debate, there are clear limits to the efficacy of animal testing. Cell cultures, advanced modelling and donor tissues are already helping to reduce the use of animals in testing. In cosmetics, we have seen great success in using NAMs to predict skin sensitisation. A 2018 study found that they were even better than the once-standard mouse test.

One of the petitions calls for an end to the use of dogs in testing. Dogs currently cannot be used in testing if any other species could be used, but in 2022 4,122 dogs were experimented on. I thank the 31,350 people who signed the petition, including 18 of my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne Central. The other petition calls for an end to toxicity testing in favour of NAMs, and I thank the 109,378 people, including 96 of my constituents, who signed it. The two petitions naturally overlap. For example, beagles are used for toxicity testing; they are injected, fed poisonous chemicals and asphyxiated in their numbers. It is impossible not to feel for these animals.

At the same time, we must recognise that advocates of that type of testing will argue that it is necessary to save human lives, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) highlighted so powerfully.

Tracey Crouch: For the record, I do not advocate or support any testing on dogs, particularly in the manner that the hon. Lady described. My point was that some past research on animals has enabled a great many positive outcomes for cancer patients, such as myself.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I was not implying support for a specific type of testing, but making a general point: some have argued in the past that animal testing has been necessary to save human lives, and groups such as Understanding Animal Research argue that currently. Understanding Animal Research also gives the example of Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a lethal childhood disease, as a condition where canine models are effective.

Science and innovation can show the way out of this moral maze. To take the example of testing on dogs, NC3Rs, the UK's National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, has established a project to develop a virtual second species—a virtual dog—using historical data. On toxicity testing, the UK-based company XCellR8 has developed the AcutoX test as a humane alternative to the LD50 test, which involves giving increasing doses of toxic substances to groups of animals until 50% of them are killed.

Just this month, Newcells Biotech, a spinout from Newcastle University based in my constituency, raised over £2 million from the North East Fund for its models of the retina, kidney and lung, which are used in drug development and which reduce reliance on animal testing. The chief executive officer, Dr Mike Nicholds, told me:

“Over the last 10 years, advances in stem cell biology, 3-D bioprinting and high-content analytical methods such as transcriptomics have revolutionised our ability to build laboratory mimics of human tissues that can reduce the use of animals in the early stages of drug discovery. Pioneered in academia, these approaches are now established in mainstream biotech and importantly the regulators have moved to increasingly accept these non-animal models as reliable. Innovations such as retinal organoids, produced by Newcells Biotech, are being used globally to support the development of drugs that cure blindness, demonstrating the power of these new alternatives.”

He went on to say:

“While the prospect of fully replacing animal testing is likely to be at least a decade away, that prospect is no longer beyond the horizon and certainly significant reductions in animal testing will be driven through innovation and awareness within this timescale.”

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Although these technologies are developing year on year, they have been around for some time. She said 10 years, and some would say that some of them have been around for closer to 20 years. Why does she think we have not seen a corresponding fall in the number of animal tests to date? Does she believe that the current project licensing regime is rigorous enough?

Chi Onwurah: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I thank him for it. In his speech, he talked about some of the challenges around the existing regime. We have seen a huge growth in science, and in biotech specifically, which may, unfortunately, have led to increases in animal testing. But it is also true that the regulatory regime needs to reflect the advances in technology, and I will go on to talk about that.

As well as chips and organoids, we have techniques such as proteogenomics, single-cell sequencing and access to human cell types that we did not previously have. For example, bit.bio, a leading UK cell-coding company, is able to manufacture human neurons that were previously available only through brain surgery. With such advances, I am certain that our brilliant scientists and innovators can help provide workable alternatives to animal testing. Given our country's strengths in artificial intelligence and data science, Britain can be at the forefront of this scientific revolution, which will make animal testing a thing of the past.

I would, however, like to ask the Minister whether he considers that a priority. Estimates show that NAMs receive as little as 0.2% to 0.6% of UK medical research funding. Being a first mover in this field will bring with it jobs, investment, economic growth and better animal welfare. Will he therefore explain what the Government are doing to support British scientists and to incentivise them to proactively seek to use NAMs in British labs, creating a customer base to pull through new labs?

Before I entered Parliament, I worked for the regulator Ofcom, so I know that regulation can drive innovation and open up competition—or be a barrier to it. Labour is proposing a regulatory innovation office to help ensure that regulation does the former, not the latter. We need to take a proactive approach to ensuring that regulation reflects emerging methods of research if we are to drive forward scientific discovery and trials while reducing animal testing.

With these new technologies, there is a huge opportunity to create new drugs much faster and for less money. Today, in the US, it takes an average of 12 years and \$1 billion to create a drug, from initial filing with the FDA to FDA approval. These tools can provide significantly better possible targets for a therapy, reducing time and therefore costs.

Responsive, proactive regulation will help to improve the uptake of new NAMs in accordance with the current regulations' principles of replacement, thereby eliminating avoidable tests as soon as is practical. That would help to assure the public that their Government are moving in the right direction and doing things proactively.

At the same time, our pro-innovation approach will create opportunities for entrepreneurs and innovators to develop and bring to market new NAMs, with a stable business environment and a path to market. Our ambition is clear, and the views of Members here today are well known. The opportunity is there to support NAMs development, drive the replacement of animal testing and support the welfare of all life—animal and human alike.

That will not happen overnight, and animal testing in human health has long been embedded in our pharma sector. However, we will not advance human therapies and cures, as we should, if we continue to rely on animals that do not get the diseases that humans suffer from.

5.36 pm

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (Andrew Griffith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for opening today's important debate.

As this is the first time I have spoken since, let me also commend him for his personal bravery when he spoke at the most recent Prime Minister's questions.

The number of signatories to these petitions—I think almost all hon. Members have mentioned it—indicates the strength of public feeling on this matter. This is not the first time that this issue has been debated, although it is my first time. Although I think none of us would want such a debate to become an annual event, this is absolutely the right forum in which to debate these important matters. I therefore congratulate all those who have contributed and everybody who has signed the petitions.

I completely understand that the use of animals in science, including in toxicity testing, is a sensitive issue. More than that, I believe that everyone here would share my view that the day cannot come quickly enough when we are able to end the practice of animal testing. It is to hasten that moment that, as hon. Members have observed, the UK is one of the world's leading nations in the development of non-animal methods. The Government are keen to ensure that those are utilised wherever possible, and I heard some frustration or concern from colleagues about the pace of adoption where the scientific methods exist. It is fair to say that most hon. Members accept—I have met charities and organisations working in the sector, including Animal Free Research UK—that we are not quite at that moment when we can fully replace animal testing.

To a degree, we are all in what my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) eloquently called that “mess of complexity”, but that does not mean that we are not clear about the direction of travel and the goal that we seek over time. As the Science and Research Minister, I take extremely seriously my responsibility within the multiple Departments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) talked about.

The Government are supporting and accelerating advances in biomedical science and technology to reduce reliance on the use of animals in research. When we hear data points about the percentage of research money that is spent, it is important to remember that not all of that research is clearly labelled as non-animal research. Developments in respect of artificial intelligence, cell cultures, cell research, understanding the function of human organs, and better imaging can all contribute to the advance of non-animal methods that can be put to work in this space. Indeed, we heard from the hon. Member for Newcastle ex vivo analysis upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) about the very successful spin-out from her university, and we are seeing that sort of development elsewhere. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth said, the rate of growth has been exponential, and this is an amazing moment in science of all kinds. There have been extraordinary advances in non-invasive techniques, such as medical imaging, sensing and ex vivo analysis, which are revolutionising human healthcare.

Through UK Research and Innovation, the Government are actively supporting and funding the development and dissemination of the three Rs, and I will have more to say about that later. Anyone who was not familiar with the three Rs when they came here today is probably more familiar with them now. They stand, first, for the replacement of the use of animals where it is not

[Andrew Griffith]

necessary for research, which I think is the aim we all share. Then, there is the reduction in the use of animals in the meantime, and the latest figures I have, which are slightly more recent than the ones my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to, show a 10% reduction in the use of animals in research. I do not want to over-weight any particular year's numbers, and we will have to look through and see the continued reduction we all seek. However, the latest data I have, for 2022, showed a 10% reduction. Finally, in addition to replacement and reduction, there is refinement to eliminate or reduce distress to those animals that are involved. All of that is achieved primarily, but not exclusively, through the approximately £10 million of funding per year that goes to NC3Rs, the national centre for the three Rs. We heard of other examples, including Queen Mary University of London's centre for animal research, which is also doing great work in this area.

We have also heard that the use of animals in science lies at the intersection of two important public goals. There are the benefits to humans and animals—a lot of the research benefits animals themselves—and to the environment, as we seek to have the very highest standards of environmental protection. But we must also balance that with the UK's proud commitment to the highest possible levels of animal welfare. That is why, as we heard from a number of Members, the use of animals in testing is strictly limited to specific purposes, including assessing the safety of medicines or chemicals, protecting human health and protecting the environment—a lot of research goes on into compounds to understand their downstream effect on our rivers, lakes, oceans and natural habitats.

We also heard that the use of animals in scientific procedures is permitted only if there is no non-animal alternative available, and I will try to address some of the remarks that have been made specifically about the way in which that legal principle, laid down by Parliament in legislation, is applied in practice and whether it is as effective as my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth would like.

Despite the general legal protections, some animal testing of chemicals is required under UK law to protect the environment, but such testing is permitted only once it is established that no alternative exists, and it is dependent on the chemical and quantity being manufactured.

As I said, we are world-renowned for our leadership in this space, and we should continue to be alive and open to what other countries are doing. The example of Canada was mentioned, and some of the work I have done and the meetings I have had have focused precisely on how we can ensure that the UK remains the best place in the world in terms of the legislative framework and the science and how we can ensure that non-animal technologies and the constant advances in them are reflected in policy, practice, legislation in this place and animal research regulations.

Since it was established, the NC3Rs has invested in total almost £90 million in research and £27 million in contracts through its CRACK IT Challenges innovation scheme for UK and EU-based institutions, with that funding mainly focused on approaches for safer assessment of pharmaceuticals. The UKRI Biotechnology and

Biological Sciences Council—a different body—supports research aimed at developing and applying innovative methods to study human and animal physiology, including *in silico* approaches, organ on a chip, and organoid and other advanced cell culture systems.

Despite that funding, I believe that more can be done. Ahead of today's debate, I asked UKRI that we double our investment in research to achieve the three Rs and develop non-animal alternatives. I can announce that, from £10 million this year, that investment will reach £20 million per annum across the system in fiscal year 2024-25, which is a doubling of what is given to research in this space. In addition—I hope this is welcome across the House—I can announce that this summer, following on from work done by my predecessors and across other Departments, the Government will publish a plan to accelerate the development, validation and uptake of technologies and methods to reduce reliance on the use of animals in science. The former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth, will recognise some of the impedances on a Minister at the Dispatch Box, but I can see no reason why that plan could not at least consider some of the machinery-of-government changes that he talked about.

George Eustice: I think everyone will welcome the significant increase in funding that the Minister has pledged today to support research on non-animal methods, but is his Department at all curious why the number of animals used in experiments has not gone down, despite huge increases in technology in this area? As part of a review of the licensing process for projects, would he consider trying to get us some analysis of whether the decision to grant a licence is objective, or subjective and based on something that some ethical committee claims?

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes a very good set of points, and that is something that we will look at further. I am already in discussion about the efficacy of the licensing regime with the noble Lord Sharpe, who is the Home Office Minister responsible.

Patricia Gibson: As the Minister stands here today, how confident is he that the regulatory bodies that monitor these matters are sufficiently well versed and up to date with placement and reduction opportunities to prevent unnecessary testing? Does he have confidence in that system?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Lady asks a very detailed question, and she has made some statements that I would like to verify anyway. I was concerned to hear about dogs being shot or blown up and I would ask her, if she has evidence of that, please to share it with me. That would be a subject of great concern and perhaps bring to life some points in the regulatory system that have not crossed my desk to date. I take that matter very seriously, but it is also important that these debates are led by the facts, and I will let the facts decide the efficacy of the regulatory system.

We will produce the plan together with not only officials but the very widest group of stakeholders. In the coming weeks, a cross-Government group will convene to lead that work, and we will consult stakeholders across the industry, academia, medical research charities and those operating in this space. The commitment is to publish that detailed plan this summer.

Given the support for the petitions and the strong interest in this issue, on which Members of Parliament are regularly petitioned, I can announce today that we will restart the public attitudes to animal research survey, which was unfortunately delayed during the pandemic. It is important to me, and I am sure to the House, that these debates are informed by that survey. It was seen as a very useful tool for those working in this space, and I am keen that it is restarted. The next survey will take place in the coming months and the results will be published this autumn, restarting that chronological series about public attitudes.

We talked about how animals in science are highly regulated, and I hear the concerns about that process. Understandably, as with any regulatory process, different people will have different views about efficacy. There is a three-tier system of licensing, at the establishment, project and individual level. Again, I thought that my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth made a very thoughtful contribution; perhaps I will meet him to benefit from some of his insights on that. He talked about the importance of having qualified vets in the process. It is important to say that there are qualified vets, and the Animals in Science Committee oversees that process and advises the Home Office on it.

However, endemic in any regulatory or licensing regime is the danger—I do not say that this is indeed the case—of incumbent thinking. My right hon. Friend talked about there not being enough challenge in the process. One potential way of putting in more challenge—or nudging—is increasing the fees for licences, which the Home Office is going to do shortly. My right hon. Friend talked about a levy. This is not a levy, but by increasing the fees, and therefore the burden, we will perhaps shift some of the presumption away from defaulting to testing with animals.

In addition, the Home Office will review the duration of licences. The current duration is typically five years. We have observed the fast rate of change in technology. The Home Office will review the duration to see whether a shorter licence period would be more appropriate, and whether people coming back more often would put more challenge into the system.

In conclusion, I want to be clear: it is the Government's position that we want to replace the use of animals in scientific procedures with non-animal alternatives wherever we can. For now, the carefully regulated use of animals in scientific research remains necessary if we are to protect humans and the wider environment. That is why our current approach is to continue to support and fund the development, dissemination and adoption of techniques that replace, reduce and refine the use of animals in research, and to ensure that the regulatory framework is both robust in law and rigorous in practice.

I thank hon. Members for their insightful and thoughtful contributions to today's debate, and I look forward to working together going forward.

5.53 pm

Elliot Colburn: Do not worry, Dame Caroline; I do not intend to take the full remaining hour and a half to wind up. I thank the petitioners for bringing this topic to the House for us to debate, and I thank colleagues for their contributions.

I want to clarify for the record something I said earlier about the non-publication of data. I was referring to detailed information on procedures by establishment type—in other words, whether the venture is a commercial or an academic one—which ceased being published in 2021, and the annual publication of technical summaries for project licences that are granted. I may have inadvertently suggested that we stopped publishing data on how many procedures took place; I just want to clarify that that is not the case.

I thank again all the organisations, campaign groups, charities and others, many of whom are represented in the Public Gallery, for briefing me and colleagues in advance of today's debate. I thank in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who made an incredibly detailed and knowledgeable contribution, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I particularly enjoyed her description of her “melting in a mess of complexity”—a great Tinder profile if ever I heard one. I will certainly be investing in that.

I thank the Minister for his response. Regulars at petitions debates will know how frustrating it is to come here only to hear a response stating why the status quo is to continue; it is rare that we leave with nuggets of future policy. The restarting of the public attitudes survey, the doubling of investment next year, the Home Office review of licence duration and fees, and that all-important plan are excellent steps in the right direction. I am grateful that he was able to make some announcements during the debate, and I am sure that the organisations that are represented in the Public Gallery and that briefed Members will want to engage with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in order to feed into the plan. I am very grateful for that announcement. As we have made clear, if we do not make any progress, we will be back next year talking about exactly the same thing, because that is what the petitioners expect of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 633591 and 645885 relating to animal testing and non-animal research methods.

5.56 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 19 February 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-Gulf Co-operation Council Free Trade Agreement

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The sixth round of negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) between the UK and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) took place between 29 January and 9 February.

The round was hosted in London and held in a hybrid fashion. A number of GCC negotiators travelled to London for in-person discussions, with others attending virtually.

Draft treaty text was advanced across the majority of chapters. Technical discussions were held across 21 policy areas over 30 sessions. Good progress was made and both sides remain committed to securing an ambitious, comprehensive and modern agreement fit for the 21st century. The next round of negotiations will be scheduled shortly.

An FTA will be a substantial economic opportunity and a significant moment in the UK-GCC relationship. Total trade was worth £59 billion according to latest figures.

His Majesty's Government remain clear that any deal signed will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the national health service and the services it provides are not on the table.

[HCWS261]

CABINET OFFICE

Covid-19 Inquiry Response: Costs

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Minister of State, Baroness Neville-Rolfe DBE CMG, on 9 February 2024, made the following statement:

Throughout the pandemic, the Government acted to save lives and livelihoods, prevent the NHS being overwhelmed, and deliver a world-leading vaccine rollout which protected the nation. In establishing the UK covid-19 inquiry, the Government recognised the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, and the importance of examining as rigorously as possible the actions the state took in response, in order to learn lessons for the future.

As such, the inquiry is unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile, looking at recent events that have profoundly impacted everyone's lives.

Following the publication by the covid-19 inquiry of its costs for Quarter 3 of the 2023-24 financial year on 5 February 2024, I would like to update Parliament on the UK Government costs associated with responding to the UK covid-19 inquiry.

The figures provided below include input from a number of Government Departments, including the Cabinet Office, the Department for Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department (GLD).

The figures we are publishing reflect those that the inquiry publishes—legal counsel and solicitors costs, and secretariat staff costs. The figures are based upon a sample of departmental costs, and are not a precise figure for accounting purposes and are therefore subject to change. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

Total inquiry response unit legal costs (April-December 2023).

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and counsel. Associated legal costs—excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs—for April-December 2023 are below.

Total legal costs: £20,900,000

Breakdown of staff and costs (April-December 2023).

The Government's response to the UK covid-19 Inquiry is led by Inquiry Response Units across Departments.

Number of UK covid-19 Inquiry Response Unit staff:
249 Full Time Equivalents (as of Q3).

Cost of Inquiry Response Unit staff: £12,900,000

It should be noted that alongside full time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. The Senior Civil Servant staff costs associated with appearing as witnesses, preparing witnesses and associated policy development work on the Covid inquiry are significant. Early estimations place these at least £120,000 for Cabinet Office for preparatory work for Modules 1 and 2, but further work is under way to produce a more accurate figure. Those costs are not included in the figures above.

[HCWS262]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Short-term Lets: Registration Scheme

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): Following consultation on a registration scheme for short-term lets in England, today the Government set out further details on how the scheme will operate.

Short-term lets are an integral part of the UK's visitor accommodation offer, and the Government are clear that they bring a range of benefits—from extra income for ordinary homeowners and local economies through increased visitor spend, to increased choice for consumers, to supporting our ability to host world-class events such as the Commonwealth Games and Eurovision by providing additional accommodation capacity. We understand, however, that the growth in short-term lets has brought challenges, such as difficulty monitoring compliance with existing health and safety regulations, and the impact on the availability and affordability of homes in areas with higher numbers of short-term lets.

In order to address these challenges, the Government took action by legislating to deliver the legal framework for a registration scheme through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. The details of how a scheme should operate were explored through consultation, held last year. The analysis of this consultation has demonstrated support for a mandatory registration scheme across all of England—61% of those who responded supported this option. A mandatory, national approach will promote a level playing field in the guest accommodation sector across England, particularly in the application of existing health and safety regulations. It will provide clarity to all short-term let providers on the existing rules they should be following, and promote greater

consistency across providers in applying these rules. A mandatory, national registration scheme will also provide valuable data at a local level in all areas of England: this will give all local authorities the information they need to identify short-term lets in their area and help them address community and housing impacts. The Government will separately be introducing planning measures to provide local areas with more control over the future growth of short term lets. We will be introducing a new use class for short term lets, associated permitted development rights and flexibility and certainty for homeowners to let out their own main or sole home for up to 90 nights a year.

The Government have also decided that the registration scheme should be designed to be as light touch, low cost and simple to use as possible—this will underpin all our decisions on how to deliver. For example, we do not wish to disproportionately apply new regulation on property owners that let out their home infrequently. We will continue to consider the case for the potential application of a threshold in finalising the register.

Work will now begin at pace to establish the scheme, which will be delivered primarily online. We will begin by conducting an initial phase of digital development which will test how the scheme is best delivered and administered. The findings will inform the detailed design of a scheme—such as who should administer it, frequency of registration and which information should be collected. We will set out further detail on how the scheme will work later in the year, including a full response to the questions we sought views on in our consultation, the full analysis of responses, and further information on the legislative process that will bring the scheme to life.

In the meantime, it is vital that we work with the sector to get this right and ensure the scheme delivers for everyone in the simplest way. For that reason we will be reaching out to representatives of the visitor economy and likely users of the scheme—such as local authorities, operators and platforms—in the next phase of our work to develop it.

[HCWS263]

EDUCATION

Mobile Phones in Schools: Guidance

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Today, the Department for Education published new guidance to ban the use of mobile phones in schools. This guidance provides advice to school leaders on how to develop, implement and maintain a policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones throughout the school day.

There is an increasing body of evidence that shows the unnecessary distraction, disruption and diversion caused by mobile phones in schools. Ofcom's report found that by the age of 12, 97% of children own a mobile phone. The National Behaviour Survey (2021-2022) found that 29% of secondary school pupils reported mobile phones being used without permission in most of their lessons.

This is why we are determined that all schools should prohibit the use of mobile phones throughout the school day—not only during lessons but break and lunchtimes as well. This will create an environment where pupils can focus on learning and socialising, while ensuring

that cyberbullying is never tolerated. We know that there is large variation in how different schools are managing the use of mobile phones. We also know that schools with exemplary behaviour cultures already prohibit their use. This guidance will allow us to achieve consistency and share best practice to ensure that all pupils are protected from online harms in schools and their teaching time is not disturbed by the use of mobile phones.

This is part of the Government's plan to continue to improve educational standards and give children the skills they need, something we have done successfully since 2010.

[HCWS260]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Changes in Immigration Rules

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (James Cleverly) is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Changes to the Ukraine schemes

Almost two years on from the start of the conflict, we continue to stand firm with the people of Ukraine and show that those who need our help are still warmly welcomed in the UK. We have extended that welcome to nearly 230,000 people who have come to the UK—or had their existing permission in the UK extended—under the Ukraine schemes. The British people have shown incredible generosity and solidarity with the Ukrainian people, opening their homes up to those seeking sanctuary.

Today, we are making changes to the Ukraine schemes to ensure they remain sustainable and meet the needs of those seeking temporary sanctuary in the UK.

We have today announced the intention to create a new Ukraine Permission Extension scheme (UPE) which will provide a new route for Ukrainians to apply for a further 18 months' permission to stay in the UK on expiry of their current visa. We are also today reducing the length of new visas issued under the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme (HFU) from 36 months to 18 months. The change to the HFU permission period is made to align with the period which will be offered to those who choose to extend their permission under the UPE. This will mean that those initially granted a visa for 36 months under the Ukraine schemes will be able to stay in the UK for a total of up to 54 months.

To ensure that visa holders have appropriate accommodation as well as the necessary in-country support to help them assimilate and thrive independently in the UK, we are also changing the sponsor eligibility under the HFU through updates to HMG guidance. Sponsors for new visas will need to be British or Irish citizens or settled in the UK—which means they have the right to live permanently in the UK. Previously, a sponsor only needed to hold at least six months' permission to stay in the UK from the date of the visa application.

The changes to the rules and HMG guidance being made today will also apply to the eligible minor's route for unaccompanied children, which is part of the HFU sponsorship scheme.

We are rationalising the offer for Ukrainians coming to the UK to provide one single out-of-country route (HFU) for all Ukrainians to apply to when seeking to come to the UK. Under HFU, there are accommodation checks, a minimum accommodation commitment from the sponsor and safeguarding checks, none of which feature in the Ukraine Family Scheme (UFS). The UFS was created as an immediate response to the Russian invasion and allowed UK-based British citizens and settled persons to act as sponsors for their Ukrainian family members. We are, therefore, closing the Ukraine Family Scheme (UFS) to new applications from today. This will strengthen and improve the sustainability of the schemes we provide.

Ukrainian nationals who may have previously been eligible to apply to come to the UK under the UFS will remain eligible to apply to the HFU sponsorship scheme.

To ensure Ukrainian parents who have permission to stay in the UK under the Ukraine schemes can regularise the immigration status of their UK-born children, we are also amending the rules for the Ukraine Extension Scheme (UES) to ensure it remains open beyond the current closure date of 16 May 2024 for those children.

In order to ensure the integrity of the Ukraine schemes, we are reinstating a number of the general grounds for refusal provisions, which were temporarily disapplied from the Appendix Ukraine scheme.

Changes relating to care workers and senior care workers in the skilled worker route

On 4 December 2023, the Prime Minister and Home Secretary announced a plan to curb immigration abuse and cut net migration. This plan, alongside the package we have already introduced to restrict student dependants, is expected to mean around 300,000 people who would have been eligible to come to the UK under last year's rules would not be able to.

These changes include some of the measures announced in that package, namely preventing overseas care workers and senior care workers from bringing their dependants to the UK and requiring care providers in England who wish to sponsor migrant workers to be registered by the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

These measures will ensure we continue to protect our NHS and social care systems, while addressing significant concerns that have emerged since the introduction of the visa about high levels of non-compliance and worker exploitation and abuse within the adult social care sector, particularly for overseas workers employed within care occupations.

Care workers and senior care workers who are already in the route will be able to extend their permission with the same sponsor, and settle, without the CQC regulation requirement applying to them. They will also be able to bring dependants, including in cases where they change jobs to another sponsor who meets the CQC regulation requirement.

The changes to the Immigration Rules are being laid on 19 February 2024. The changes to close the Ukraine Family Scheme and provide one single out-of-country route for Ukrainians to come to the UK under HFU will come into effect on 19 February 2024. All other changes will come into effect on 11 March 2024.

[HCWS258]

JUSTICE

Progress Report on the Implementation of the Rape Review Action Plan

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (James Cleverly) and I have published on 14 February 2024 a progress report on the end-to-end rape review action plan—published June 2021. This is the fifth progress report on implementation and demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to transparency on our progress in delivering the ambitions of the rape review.

The report details the improvements we made over the last six months, including:

Implemented the national rollout of Operation Soteria across all 43 forces in England and Wales, the highly effective police investigation model pioneered by the Avon and Somerset Police where investigations focus on the behaviour of the alleged perpetrator, not the victim.

Supported police and prosecutors as they implement this new approach, including by establishing a Joint Home Office, College of Policing and National Police Chief's Council Soteria Unit.

Ensured that police officers have the right skills and knowledge to respond effectively to these offences. We have commenced specialist training for 2,000 investigators in rape and serious sexual offences, and are on track to complete these by April 2024 with appropriate specialism in all 43 forces.

Introducing legislation to strengthen support for victims and build victim trust in the system, including ensuring police requests for third party material are necessary and proportionate, and introducing statutory guidance to embed vital roles like Independent Sexual Violence and Domestic Violence Advisors (ISVAs and IDVAs) through our Victims and Prisoners Bill.

Further improving the victim experience at the Crown Court through our specialist sexual violence support project, introducing additional measures to make sure that victims feel informed and comfortable, and are treated sensitively, through best practice in communication, trauma informed training for court staff and additional facilities.

Introducing the Sentencing Bill, which will ensure that convicted rapists spend the entirety of their custodial sentence in jail, with no possibility of early release. This builds on the Conservative Government's strong track record of tough sentencing for rape. We previously raised the release point to two thirds of the custodial term after the previous Labour Government lowered it to the halfway point in 2003.

We are now exceeding all three of our initial ambitions to return volumes of cases being referred to the police, charged by the CPS and received in court to at least 2016 levels by the end of this Parliament. In practice, this means we have more than doubled the numbers of these metrics from the levels at which they stood when the end-to-end rape review was commissioned in 2019. The volumes of adult rape cases reaching court have continued to increase quarter on quarter, with the latest data—July-September 2023—showing that:

Adult rape cases referred by the police to the CPS—for either early advice or a charging decision—continue to increase. There were 1,470 police referrals in this period, which exceeds our ambition of 766 by 91% and is up by 219% from the quarterly average in 2019, when the rape review was commissioned.

Adult rape cases charged by the CPS stand at 668, exceeding our ambition of 538 by 24% and up by 174% from the quarterly average in 2019.

The number of adult rape Crown Court receipts has increased to 665, exceeding our ambition of 553 by 20% and up by 188% from the quarterly average in 2019.

The number of people prosecuted for an adult rape offence went up by 54% in the latest year of data—12 months to June—rising from 1,410 to 2,165. This is more than double the number recorded in 2019. Adult rape prosecutions are also up by 32% compared to 2010—2,165 prosecutions in year ending June 2023, compared to 1,644 in 2010.

While strong progress has been made, we made clear in our last progress report that we recognise that this is only a start and there is much more to do. This is why we extended our action plan until December 2024.

Beyond our action plan we are committed to addressing the remaining challenges, particularly in regard to victim attrition and court timeliness. We need to ensure that victims remain engaged in the process and feel confident that they will be supported at every stage.

To assist us in driving improvements in the criminal justice system, we have recruited a new Independent Advisor to the rape review, Professor Katrin Hohl. Professor Hohl is an internationally recognised academic specialising in serious sexual offences and domestic abuse. She was the joint academic lead behind Operation Soteria and her work with victims and frontline services will be invaluable in unlocking the most challenging issues that remain.

The action set out in this publication forms part of the Government's ambition to improve the experience and ensure justice for victims.

[HCWS259]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Long-term Plan for Housing

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Last week I set out the next step in this Government's long-term plan for housing, announcing a package of measures to ensure that more homes get built where they are needed most—in our inner cities—while ensuring that the green belt and environmentally sensitive site are able to be protected from inappropriate development.

The Government have a strong record of housing delivery: we have delivered over 2.5 million homes since 2010; over a quarter of these have been affordable homes; more than 876,000 households have been supported into home ownership through Government-backed schemes, including the right to buy and shared ownership; and we are on track to meet our commitment to build 1 million homes over this Parliament.

In December of last year, we made changes to national planning policy designed to support housing delivery by addressing legitimate concerns about weaknesses in the planning system, and to facilitate the adoption of up-to-date plans with clear pipelines of delivery. The further, targeted action that the Government announced on Tuesday 13 February builds on those changes by making it easier to pursue the right kind of development on brownfield land.

Brownfield development

Last July, our long-term plan for housing drew attention to the poor record of housing delivery in London, where housing affordability challenges are most acute. Only 35,000 new homes were delivered in the capital last year, just over half the 66,000 homes the Mayor of London's own plan identifies as needed each year. That is why I urged the Mayor to take urgent action. When he failed to do so, I commissioned an independent review of the London plan led by Christopher Katkowski KC. The review was published on 13 February and recommended a presumption in favour of brownfield development be introduced into the London plan.

The Government intend to deliver this recommendation—and believe it is important to ensure delivery not just in London, but in our other major towns and cities that serve as engines of jobs and growth. We have therefore launched a consultation on proposals for a new “brownfield presumption” in the 20 most populous cities and urban centres in England, where housing delivery has dropped below expected levels. These 20 places, which include London most conspicuously, are areas to which an “urban uplift” already applies when determining the need for homes. They already have the infrastructure and services for new residents, and they are where we can best maximise productivity through increasing housing delivery. The more we can focus efforts in the heart of these urban centres, the better for our ambitions to level up.

The new presumption in favour of brownfield development will apply where an authority fails to meet at least 95% of its housing requirement. It has strong support from the development sector and will make it easier to get permission for new homes. It will raise the bar for refusing applications and ultimately help more young families to find a home. Analysis in the “London Plan Review” report indicates that these changes could lead to up to 11,500 more homes in the capital each year. By extending the reforms across the country, even more homes will be unlocked.

We also want to support brownfield development more widely, by making it clear to every local authority in England that they need to be more flexible in approving planning applications on brownfield land. To make this happen, the consultation proposes a change to national planning policy that would require councils to give significant weight to the benefits of delivering as many homes as possible where there is a shortage of land for homes. This change would also require councils to be more pragmatic in applying policies on the internal layout of developments—cutting through what can sometimes prove too complex a web of constraints that misses the prize of building new homes.

Using brownfield sites will reduce the need for development on greenfield land and help protect the green belt. Neither of the policies out for consultation affects the definition of previously developed land in national policy and so would not alter existing protections, including for residential gardens, nor amend other relevant policies on the character of suburban neighbourhoods.

Permitted development rights

Complementing these changes on brownfield development, I am also delivering new planning freedoms to enable more commercial buildings to be converted into new homes. Following a consultation last year, we have now amended the existing permitted development

right for conversion to residential such that commercial buildings of any size will have the freedom to be converted into new homes, resulting in thousands of new homes by 2030.

I have also launched a consultation proposing changes to make it easier for homeowners to extend their homes. I want to ensure permitted development rights reflect current aspirations for how we use our homes. Our proposals would allow larger loft conversions, bike stores and more flexible extensions. They would free homeowners from the arduous process of going through planning permission for additions helpful to all. The proposals balance flexibility for homeowners with respect for neighbours' amenity. These proposals will also allow homeowners greater freedoms on installing heat pumps and electric vehicle charging points and will ensure these rights deliver what people want for their homes.

It is important to reiterate that new homes created via permitted development rights must not sacrifice quality. Permitted development rights require new homes to meet national space standards, provide for natural light, and must always comply with building regulations, ensuring that these are quality homes that make the best use of our building stock.

London delivery

In London, we want to go even further to make sure that our capital city has the housing it needs, so our changes in policy are accompanied by additional funding: £50 million of investment to unlock new homes and improve the quality of life for existing residents through estate regeneration in London; working closely with the London Borough of Camden, a new Euston Housing Delivery Group to explore maximum regeneration and housing at Euston, backed by £4 million; and £125 million loan funding from the home building fund infrastructure loans portfolio and long-term fund for sites in east and south London, which will unlock 8,000 new homes. To help tackle undersupply in the medium term, we also confirmed our intention to legislate at the earliest opportunity to remove the current block on Homes England's role in London.

Support for SME housebuilders

Our changes ensure more homes are built—but we are determined in particular to support the SME housebuilders who play such a vital role in our communities. To that end, we have expanded the £1 billion ENABLE Build guarantee scheme to increase the amount of finance available to SMEs by covering loans issued by non-bank lenders and seeded portfolios. We are also helping to tackle SME access to land by introducing SME-only sales of Homes England land, with pilots starting in the south-east and midlands later this year, and developing a pipeline of future small sites by parcelling Homes England land.

In addition, a number of community infrastructure levy (CIL) charging authorities have set higher rates for minor sites (of less than 10 units, and lower in designated rural areas) to reflect the fact that affordable housing is not sought on these sites. This is not within the spirit of the Government's policy on small sites. The Government will be updating CIL guidance to make it clear that CIL-charging authorities should consider the impact of CIL rates on SME developers and should not set higher residential CIL rates on minor development. This will apply to new and revised charging schedules.

Public sector land

It is also crucial for the Government to release more land for housing development. That is why we are working with the three main landowning departments—the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Health and Social Care, as well as Homes England—which have pledged to set aside suitable unused or unwanted land for housing. So far Departments have pledged to release Government-owned land for at least 15,000 homes before the end of March 2025, and we have set up a ministerial taskforce to assure and accelerate delivery over the longer term.

Short-term lets

All of these actions will help further bolster the supply of new homes—but the Government are also as committed to making the best use of our current housing stock. While short-term lets are an integral part of the UK's visitor accommodation offer and bring a range of benefits, in too many of our communities uncontrolled growth of short-term lets is causing concern. This is particularly, but not exclusively, where they are concentrated in coastal and tourist areas; affecting the availability and affordability of homes for local people, and contributing as a result to wider homelessness pressures; making it difficult to monitor compliance with key health and safety regulations; and in some instances causing nuisance to local residents and a broader "hollowing out" of communities.

In recognition of these challenges, the Culture Secretary and I consulted on interlinked proposals last year to establish a register of short-term lets and introduce planning measures to provide local areas with more control over future growth. Our aim with these measures has been to get the balance right between protecting local communities and enabling our visitor economy to continue to thrive.

Today I can confirm that the Government will introduce a mandatory national register of short-term lets. That will help local authorities understand which properties are being let out in their area. We will also create a new planning use class for short-term lets. That will apply to properties that are not someone's sole or main home. We will implement associated permitted development rights allowing for a property to be changed from a standard residential dwelling to this new use class and vice versa. Local authorities will be able to remove these rights and require full planning permission, as they can with any permitted development right.

Separately, where people want to let out their main home for short periods of time, we will provide flexibility and certainty to homeowners that they can do so without the need to apply for planning permission.

Further details of these measures will be set out when the Government formally respond to the respective consultations—including the timeline for implementation of the register, the use class, and the individual permitted development rights. The changes will be introduced from this summer. The Government want a light-touch, low-cost and simple registration scheme and do not wish to disproportionately apply new regulation on property owners that let out their home infrequently. As such, we will continue to consider the case for the potential application of a threshold in finalising the register.

Second staircases guidance

Finally, our focus is of course not just on building more but on building safely. In October last year I announced intended transitional arrangements to accompany new guidance relating to second staircases in new residential buildings in England above 18 metres. As I said then, this is the latest step in a continuing effort to ensure that new buildings are constructed, managed and maintained to the very highest standards.

The Building Safety Regulator will publish the new guidance on second staircases before the end of March, making clear the need for a second staircase in new multi-occupancy residential buildings that have a top occupied storey above 18 metres, and confirming that evacuation lifts will not be called for as a matter of course, providing housebuilders with the clarity they need to progress developments.

The revised statutory guidance, known as approved document B, represents general guidance: it will not be exhaustive, and the design of each high-rise building will continue to receive individual scrutiny from experts,

now via the Building Safety Regulator. The fire safety design for any higher risk buildings above 18 metres will be subject to review at planning gateway 1 by fire safety professionals, and by a multi-disciplinary team at gateway 2, who must be satisfied that the final fire safety provisions are appropriate to the requirements of each individual building. It remains the responsibility of the owners and those carrying out building works, including developers, to demonstrate that the functional requirements of the building regulations have been met.

A second staircase will provide new buildings with additional resilience to support exit from the building and enhanced options for firefighting in the rare event of a catastrophic incident. This evolution of safety standards will be a helpful addition to existing building safety measures that we have already introduced and, alongside the enhanced scrutiny of the new building safety regime, will provide people with further confidence in the safety of new homes.

[HCWS264]

Petitions

Monday 19 February 2024

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ulverston Library

The petition of residents of the constituency of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that the Ulverston library offers a vital service to a local people from lending books to supporting literacy, to enabling community groups, and bringing local people together; further that Ulverston library must be re-opened as a matter of urgency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to help ensure that Ulverston has a full library service restored as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Simon Fell, Official Report, 13 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 962.]

[P002891]

Observations from The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez):

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires all local authorities in England to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. Public libraries are, therefore, funded and run by local authorities. In considering how best to deliver this statutory duty, each local authority is responsible for determining local needs and how best to deliver a modern and efficient library service that meets the requirements of their communities within available resources.

The Government recognise the importance and value of public libraries for all members of the public. Libraries support the transformation of people, communities and society as a whole. They provide access to books, opportunities for people to learn and improve, and bring communities together to support integration and tackle loneliness. In addition, they provide practical help and guidance, including for literacy, digital skills, health and wellbeing, and business development.

We understand that Ulverston library has been closed since September 2023 following a routine statutory check which identified issues with the building's electrics meaning it was unsafe for public use. We are aware that Westmorland and Furness Council established temporary library provision with a "pop-up" library in the Coro that offered a selection of books for borrowing and public access to laptops and printers. This has been supplemented with further temporary provision provided in early December at Ulverston indoor market providing more stock for borrowing, as well as spaces which can be used for community groups, meetings and events.

We further understand that the temporary provision has been strengthened following the management of the Coro reverting from Ulverston Coronation Hall to the council on 1 January 2024. This has enabled the council to extend the library opening hours at the venue, in line with previous library provision, including opening

at weekends. The council is working on extending the temporary library provision further, using more space within the Coro and it hopes to launch this in early March.

We understand that the council is committed to finding a long-term future for a library in Ulverston and recognises that it is one of their most important library services. The council has confirmed that it is undertaking an options appraisal with a view to agreeing a permanent site for the library in Ulverston and for that to be in place and fully operating later this year. The options include the full repair and refurbishment of the existing library building, as well as options to relocate to alternative premises or co-locate within other council facilities in the town. The council has confirmed that on completion of the assessment of the options it will consult local residents to ensure they have the opportunity to comment and their views will be taken into account as part of the process.

We support the approach to restore a permanent location for the library service in Ulverston and note the council's intention to consult on the preferred option. However, it is not for the Government to direct the council about how it should run or manage its statutory library service. It is for Westmorland and Furness Council to determine based on the needs of local residents and consideration of the resources it has available.

My officials have discussed with council officers the current position with Ulverston library and we will continue to monitor Westmorland and Furness Council's library service provision, including arrangements for Ulverston residents. We thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and the signatories of this petition for bringing this matter to the attention of the House.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Boots Pharmacy closures in Hull North

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kingston Upon Hull North,

Declares that the Boots pharmacies in Hull North should not be closed; notes in particular residents' concerns about losing the pharmacies at 860 Beverley Road and 132 Chanterlands Avenue; further notes that pharmacies play a vital role in alleviating pressures facing the NHS and are relied upon by local communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Boots pharmacies in Hull remain open and that local pharmacies are sufficiently supported and easily accessible to residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dame Diana Johnson, Official Report, 9 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 270.]

[P002885]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom):

The Government recognise that pharmacies are an integral part of the fabric of our communities, an easily accessible front door to the NHS, staffed by highly trained and skilled healthcare professionals. However, community pharmacies are private businesses that receive

funding to provide NHS pharmaceutical services. Whether to open, divest, consolidate or close a pharmacy is a commercial decision made by the business owner, not by the NHS or the Government.

The Department continues to monitor changes to the market closely to ensure patients retain good access to NHS pharmaceutical services. In addition, the law requires that every three years, local authority Health and Wellbeing Boards undertake pharmaceutical needs assessments to identify if there is a need for improvement or better access to services. Contractors can apply to open a pharmacy where there is a gap or a need for improved access to services or if they can make a case for providing other benefits to the local communities.

When their usual local pharmacy closes, patients can choose to access any of the remaining pharmacies nearby. Patients can also choose to access NHS pharmaceutical services remotely through any of the approximately 400 internet pharmacies in England, which are contractually required to deliver medicines to patients' home address free of charge.

The statistics published by the NHS Business Service Authority show that there are 24 pharmacies, including one distance selling pharmacy (DSP) in Kingston Upon Hull North.

NHS Humber & North Yorkshire integrated care board, responsible for commissioning NHS primary care services, reports that there are six pharmacies within 1 mile of 860 Beverley Road and 10 pharmacies within 1 mile of 132 Chanterlands Avenue.

Community hospitals

The petition of residents of Axe Valley in the Tiverton and Honiton constituency,

Declares that community hospitals play a vital role supporting health and wellbeing in rural communities; further that the hospital in Seaton was built with active support and fundraising efforts by residents across the Axe Valley; and further that plans to turn the wing of the hospital building over to NHS Property Services puts the future viability of the hospital at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take action to return the facility to the local community, so it can be repurposed to provide better care for those living in the area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Foord, *Official Report*, 16 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 800.]

[P002897]

Observations from The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson):

The Government are aware that the NHS Devon integrated care board (ICB) is seeking to review its future requirements for community hospitals. We understand that the building of Seaton Hospital in 1988 was only possible with significant public fund-raising and that the continued availability of healthcare services delivered in community hospitals are strongly valued by the communities they serve. However, they also need to be able to adapt to changing clinical needs.

Between 2015 and 2017, NHS Devon clinical commissioning group (now the ICB) undertook a review of community services which resulted in the transfer of ownership of the North Devon community hospitals

estate, including Seaton Hospital, to NHS Property Services. At the same time the service delivery model was changed, resulting in a reduced requirement for community hospital beds and leading to some properties such as Seaton being significantly underutilised.

The ICB is responsible for meeting the costs of continuing to run this operational property and in seeking to address its significant financial challenges is now considering how best to rationalise its property needs.

Ultimately, whilst the long-term healthcare commissioning requirements for Seaton Hospital is for the ICB to determine, the operational costs of running the property have to be paid for and therefore a long-term sustainable use must be established. The ICB is currently working closely in partnership with NHS Property Services to identify and evaluate suitable options to achieve this objective. Whilst the property remains an operational healthcare facility, it is not surplus to commissioning requirements and there are no current plans to sell the facility.

The Government believe that ICBs are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders and local populations to meet people's needs.

TRANSPORT

Grove Station Reopening

The petition of Residents of the constituency of Wantage and Didcot,

Declares that Grove station should be re-opened, further that this is required due to the growing population in the local area; notes the economic benefits of improving connections to local businesses; notes the environmental benefits; and further notes the social benefits of ensuring people in the local area are better connected to friends and family.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that Grove station is reopened.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 1P.]

[P002914]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):

I am grateful to see the continued support for the potential reopening of Grove station among residents in Wantage and Didcot.

A bid for Wantage and Grove station was made to the second and third rounds of the restoring your railway (RYR) ideas fund. The bid proposed opening a new Wantage and Grove station around the site of the former Wantage Road station on the electrified Great Western main line between Didcot Parkway and Swindon. Unfortunately, the bid was unsuccessful, and detailed feedback was provided to stakeholders in October 2021.

Whilst there are no further RYR funding rounds planned by my Department, the Government believe that local authorities and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) are best placed to decide on, and take forward, transport schemes that will most benefit their local

areas. I encourage campaigners to engage with these bodies and work together to bring forward a revised bid to be considered for development under an alternative source of funding.

Local businesses and the closure of the Botley Road in Oxford

The petition of residents of the constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon,

Declares that the closure of Botley Road due to ongoing works at Oxford rail station is having a significant and detrimental effect on local businesses; notes that local business owners report they are experiencing up to 60% drop in income; further notes the vital contribution of small businesses to the UK economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure local businesses are able to access a business support fund during the extended closure of Botley Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Layla Moran, *Official Report*, 23 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 270.]

[P002902]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):

The Department is funding a £160 million programme of works to improve physical and operating constraints both at Oxford station and along the rail corridor in the area. The scheme is being led by Network Rail with the support of Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils and with funding contributions from the local enterprise partnership (LEP) to not only address railway constraints but to improve road, pedestrian, and active travel provision in and around the Botley Road/western side of Oxford station. In addition, a new western entrance adjacent to Botley Road is being constructed which will make the station more accessible to residents living to the west of the station, reducing the current walking time.

It is unfortunate that complexities arose following the discovery of a Victorian inverted brick arch under Botley Road where the new railway bridge which will enable additional rail capacity is to be installed. The brick arch is 100 metres in length and suppresses rising ground water from the nearby River Thames. The presence of the arch has required a change in the delivery methodology for the railway bridge including the arrangements for relocating utility services and this has unfortunately resulted in the continued closure of Botley Road until October 2024. I have stressed the importance of getting this work completed as quickly as possible so that the road can be re-opened to the public and businesses.

Whilst it is not Government policy to compensate businesses for the impact of such critical works, I understand that Network Rail has engaged with the councils, the Federation of Small Businesses and with the Oxfordshire local enterprise partnership to support the business community as best they can. This includes production of promotional videos and the use of dedicated social media groups to highlight that Oxford remains open for business throughout the period of the works. This started in the run up to Christmas 2023 and Network Rail advises that it is continuing discussions with the city council and the Federation of Small Businesses about

other ways they can continue to help. Network Rail is regularly keeping local residents and businesses informed of the situation through newsletters and social media.

Network Rail has assured me that such engagement will continue throughout the period of the road closure.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Frozen British pensions

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares the UK pensioners deserve a full uprated state pension wherever they choose to live; further that UK pensioners who have paid their fair share of NI contributions should not suffer the consequences of successive UK Governments' failure to establish bilateral agreements with certain countries; notes the new report "UK-Canada: An Unequal Partnership" that highlights the stark contrast in engagement between the UK and Canada on the frozen pensions policy, which impacts half a million British citizens worldwide and 127,000 in Canada alone; and further declares that despite Canada formally requesting negotiations on the policy four times between 2013 and 2022, the UK has refused to engage.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with the Canadian Government on the issue and finally remedy this injustice and reflect respect and courtesy for our British citizens and our Commonwealth neighbours. —[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 12 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 866.]

[P002884]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard):

The United Kingdom state pension system is primarily intended to provide support for pensioners who ordinarily reside in the UK. State pensions are, however, up-rated overseas where there is a legal requirement to do so, such as a reciprocal social security agreement. This long-standing policy has been supported by successive Governments of all political persuasions for over 70 years. It has been the subject of parliamentary debates and has been approved by Parliament and the courts. This Government concurs with that position.

There are two separate social security agreements between the UK and Canada made in 1995 and 1998. Neither of these provide for state pension uprating in Canada and the UK Government has no plans to revisit the social security relationship with Canada.

A decision to move abroad is a voluntary one and will depend on an individual's circumstances. Ultimately, individuals have a responsibility to fully understand the implications of their decision to move abroad. For a number of years, the UK Government has provided clear information for people moving to and living overseas, including Canada, which sets out that the UK state pension is not up-rated overseas except where there is a legal requirement to do. Therefore, any impact on state pension is just one factor in considering whether to move overseas.

Furthermore, the rate of national insurance contributions paid (or credited as paid) by an individual has never earned entitlement to the indexation of a state pension. The national insurance system is financed on a "pay-as-you-go" basis, which means that today's contributions

fund today's expenditure. This means that the rates and levels of contributions are set each year to ensure that the overall income to the national insurance fund is enough to pay for the full range of contributory benefits.

An individual's contributions provide a foundation for calculating entitlement to future personal entitlements. The contributions do not actually pay for those entitlements directly. Twenty per cent. of national insurance contributions go towards the national health service, the remainder fund contributory benefits, the vast majority of which goes to the state pension. National insurance contributions are pooled and people do not have an individual pot which funds their own state pension.

Cost has also been and remains an important factor in deciding whether state pension increases should be paid in overseas countries. In drawing up expenditure plans for pensioner benefits, the Government believes its responsibility is primarily toward pensioners living in this country. Uprating overseas state pensions to the rate payable in the UK would cost approximately £900 million a year.

Successive Governments have maintained the view that it would be unfair to place additional burdens on UK taxpayers to fund increased pensions for people who decide to live abroad. The Government have no plans to change the current arrangements for payment of the UK state pension overseas.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 19 February 2024

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following extracts are from Transport questions on 8 February 2024:

T7. [901440] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Heathrow airport saw a significant increase in noise complaints last year. Residents in my constituency are regularly woken up in the middle of the night by the roar of jet engines overhead, and there are well-documented impacts on their physical and mental health. Will the Secretary of State finally commit to banning night flights between 11 pm and 6 am?

Anthony Browne: On noise, it is important to strike a balance between the negative impacts of aviation on local communities who live close to the airport and the economic benefits of flights around the UK. We will shortly **publish the results of a consultation on night flights**, and the hon. Member should wait for it.

[Official Report, 8 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 361.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne):

An error has been identified in the response to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) in Transport questions. My response should have been:

Anthony Browne: On noise, it is important to strike a balance between the negative impacts of aviation on local communities who live close to the airport and the economic benefits of flights around the UK. We will shortly **launch a consultation on night flights at designated airports**, and the hon. Member should wait for it.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the ministerial team seen the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety's recent report on the growing number of accidents involving e-scooters, and if not, will they look at it? Not only are e-scooters an increasing danger to all our constituents, there is a lack of police follow-up when accidents happen.

Anthony Browne: The use of private e-scooters on public land—on roads and pavements—is illegal in the UK, and it is up to the police to enforce that law. We have **23** different legal trials of rental e-scooters around the country.

[Official Report, 8 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 362.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne):

An error has been identified in the response to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) in Transport questions. My response should have been:

Anthony Browne: The use of private e-scooters on public land—on roads and pavements—is illegal in the UK, and it is up to the police to enforce that law. We have **19** different legal trials of rental e-scooters around the country.

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill

The following are extracts from the Second Reading debate on the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill on 26 January 2024.

Kevin Hollinrake: Our 2019 manifesto pledged changes to enhance workers' rights and support people to stay in work. The Government have delivered on those commitments by supporting a package of six private Members' Bills helping new parents, unpaid carers and hospitality workers; giving all employees easier access to flexible working; and giving workers a right to request a more predictable working pattern. We have been pleased with the successful progress of that legislation through Parliament, where it has received cross-party support, resulting in six Acts successfully receiving Royal Assent. The Government have already made good progress on laying secondary legislation in due course to implement those new Acts.

The **Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023**, for example, will **give all employees with 26 weeks' continuous service** the right to request flexible working, empowering employees to ask for a working arrangement that suits them and their unique circumstances.

[Official Report, 26 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 523.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake):

An error has been identified in my speech on Second Reading of the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill.

The correct statement should have been:

Kevin Hollinrake: Our 2019 manifesto pledged changes to enhance workers' rights and support people to stay in work. The Government have delivered on those commitments by supporting a package of six private Members' Bills helping new parents, unpaid carers and hospitality workers; giving all employees easier access to flexible working; and giving workers a right to request a more predictable working pattern. We have been pleased with the successful progress of that legislation through Parliament, where it has received cross-party support, resulting in six Acts successfully receiving Royal Assent. The Government have already made good progress on laying secondary legislation in due course to implement those new Acts.

The **Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations 2023**, for example, will **result in all employees, including those without 26 weeks' continuous service**, having the right to request flexible working, empowering employees to ask for a working arrangement that suits them and their unique circumstances.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 will provide greater protection to women who **are on** maternity leave or an employee who **is on** adoption or shared parental leave in a redundancy situation.

[Official Report, 26 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 523.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake):

An error has been identified in my speech on Second Reading of the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill.

The correct statement should have been:

Kevin Hollinrake: The Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 will provide greater protection to women who **have returned from** maternity leave or an employee who **has returned from** adoption or shared parental leave in a redundancy situation.

Kevin Hollinrake: Obviously, all legislation should include an impact assessment, including a financial impact assessment on business. The impact assessment result was de minimis—I think that is below £5 million, which is not a significant impact. We therefore do not think that the changes will create a significant burden on businesses. We have engaged with business representative organisations and payroll professionals throughout the policy development of these changes. They have responded positively and understand how the changes will increase flexibility for families. We **are working** with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to plan communications with businesses to ensure that they fully understand the new arrangements, and we will continue to engage with them while we finalise guidance to ensure the smooth introduction of these changes.

[Official Report, 26 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 525.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake):

An error has been identified in my speech on Second Reading of the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill.

The correct statement should have been:

Kevin Hollinrake: Obviously, all legislation should include an impact assessment, including a financial impact assessment on business. The impact assessment result was de minimis—I think that is below £5 million, which is not a significant impact. We therefore do not think that the changes will create a significant burden on businesses. We have engaged with business representative organisations and payroll professionals throughout the policy development of these changes. They have responded positively and understand how the changes will increase flexibility for families. We **will work** with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to plan communications with businesses to ensure that they fully understand the new arrangements, and we will continue to engage with them while we finalise guidance to ensure the smooth introduction of these changes.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Action Plan

The following is an extract from the statement on the disability action plan on Monday 5 February 2024.

Mims Davies: I reiterate that the disability action plan is not just another consultation, but real, tangible action to change people's daily lives, with **13** practical actions across 14 different areas.

[Official Report, 5 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 40.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies):

An error has been identified in the statement on the disability action plan.

The correct information should have been:

Mims Davies: I reiterate that the disability action plan is not just another consultation, but real, tangible action to change people's daily lives, with **32** practical actions across 14 different areas.

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**not later than
Monday 26 February 2024**

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