

Thursday
22 February 2024

Volume 745
No. 52



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Thursday 22 February 2024

House of Commons

Thursday 22 February 2024

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

BBC Mid-term Review

1. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Whether she has had recent discussions with the BBC board on the implementation of recommendations in the BBC mid-term review. [901480]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): The BBC is a hugely valued institution, and the mid-term review seeks to ensure that it continues to provide an outstanding service by improving its processes in relation to both impartiality and complaints. I regularly meet the BBC's chair and director-general, and I will continue to use those meetings to raise these important issues.

Rob Butler: I started my career as a BBC reporter, and I firmly believe in the importance of our national broadcaster being both independent, particularly at moments and eras such as this, and completely impartial. However, every year, many people complain that the BBC is not as impartial as it should be, even that it is biased, and the BBC then dismisses the vast majority of those complaints. Does my right hon. and learned Friend think that the public would perhaps have more confidence in how those complaints are investigated if they were investigated independently from the outset?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The public rightly expect the BBC to be an exemplar of impartiality. Our review highlighted issues in relation to both impartiality and complaints. As a result, the BBC will undertake significant reforms on both impartiality and complaints. At the charter review, as I have already said, we will examine whether the BBC first process remains the right complaints model.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My innate lack of deference has probably not got me far in this place over the past 22 years, but it is good to see you in your rightful place this morning, Mr Speaker.

The BBC is a great British institution, as the Secretary of State says. In considering the mid-term review, will she reflect on the importance, in this era of fake news,

biased comment and social media, of having a space in which information and news are presented impartially and in accordance with editorial guidelines? The BBC is criticised from the left and the right, which probably reflects the fact that it generally gets things right.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the BBC plays a critical role. It is extremely trusted not only here but across the world. The BBC is an important institution, which is why it is so important that it remains impartial. I know that the director-general agrees and, like me, thinks there is more to do. That is why, in the mid-term review, we set out things that the BBC continues to need to look at. The BBC agrees with our mid-term review and has accepted all our recommendations.

Short-term Lets: National Registration

2. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What progress her Department has made on introducing a national registration system for short-term lets. [901481]

3. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What progress her Department has made on introducing a national registration system for short-term lets. [901482]

8. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What progress her Department has made on introducing a national registration system for short-term lets. [901487]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): The Government have delivered the legal framework for a registration scheme for short-term lets in England under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 and have consulted on the scheme's design. On Monday we announced that we will implement a national mandatory registration scheme across all of England. We will set out further detail later this year on how the register will operate.

Selaine Saxby: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I thank the Secretary of State for her engagement on this issue both now and in her previous role as Housing Minister. It is great news that there will be a mandatory short-term lets register, which will hopefully begin to relieve some of the pressure on our local housing market. How can we ensure that North Devon's tourist economy fully benefits from these changes?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is a real champion for her local Devon tourist economy, and she is aware of the challenges that tourism can present in local communities, especially when it comes to short-term lets, which can make it too expensive for people working in the tourism industry to live near their job. This is a difficult issue, and we are trying to strike the right balance between people being able to have second homes and ensuring that hotels have a level playing field and that the local community has the right accommodation.

I appreciate my hon. Friend's campaigning on this issue. The next phase of the project will work with the sector to get the details of the registration scheme right. We will be reaching out to representatives of the visitor economy and likely users of the scheme to make sure it delivers for everybody as simply as possible.

Duncan Baker: North Norfolk has a significant number of holiday lets, Airbnbs and the like. I am glad that the Minister says the Government will look at this in moderation because, in life, too much of anything is sometimes a bad thing. There is a difference, a nuance, between a person who rents out a room in their home via Airbnb to earn some extra income and whole streets and areas being turned into holiday lets. Can the Minister assure me that we will properly consider the nuances?

Julia Lopez: I can provide my hon. Friend with that assurance. We are aware that the proliferation of short-term lets has caused real concern in communities such as his. We do not want to clamp down in a way that will make life difficult for people who rent out their rooms on a very irregular basis, but as he said, when whole streets are causing a problem, we think the most important thing is that we get an understanding of the scale of the problem. Our scheme is designed to give us that data and the next steps can be taken after that.

Mr Speaker: I call Bob Blackman—not here.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Cambridge has long suffered from the antisocial behaviour problems associated with short-term lets and Cambridge City Council has long asked for action, so I welcome this long overdue announcement. Will the Minister say more about enforcement and the resources that are needed for councils to enforce, so that we can actually deal with the antisocial behaviour problems that, sadly, too often come with short-term lets?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Member for raising the issues in Cambridge city, and I appreciate that in a city such as that there will have been significant problems in this area. He may be aware that this was a joint announcement with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We are there to put the mandatory register together, which gives us the data that local authorities can use, but it will be for DLUHC to look at some of the powers that can be implemented to deal with the antisocial behaviour problems that the hon. Gentleman cites.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for those answers. Tourism and short-term lets are very important to my constituency, and I understand the issues clearly. There are benefits—it is not all negatives—and it is important that the positives are marked up as well. Let me ask her a simple question: now that we have a reactivated Northern Ireland Assembly on the go and working hard—*[Interruption.]*—will she share some of her ideas on this issue with it, and in particular, with the council in my Strangford constituency?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but unfortunately, on the point of substance, somebody coughed and I slightly missed the key point—I apologise. I think he asked about sharing expertise with Northern Ireland. We will be happy to do so, because it is important to learn the lessons of how these issues are being addressed across the country. In Labour-run Wales, there is a real mess over how to deal with the issue of holiday accommodation, and the situation is similar in Scotland. We want to learn those lessons for the English scheme and we will be happy to share the lessons with Northern Ireland.

Gambling: Consultation

4. **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on responding to the consultations on the gambling White Paper. [901483]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The Government launched three consultations following the gambling White Paper. We are considering all the evidence that was received and will publish the Government response soon. Our response to the consultation on the introduction of the online slots limit is due to be published imminently, and we are on track for implementation of the recommendations by the summer.

Mary Glindon: Will the Minister ensure that the highly regulated land-based industry can better innovate and grow by, for example, ensuring that the right option is chosen on the changes proposed to machine rules for the adult gaming sector, which are out for consultation?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is right that the rules for the land-based sector have been very out of date for some time. That is why doing these consultations has been really helpful; it has identified further work that needed to be done. We have had a second consultation on some of that but, again, we will still be on course to implement the changes by the summer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The unregulated black market for gambling causes untold devastation to people's lives, even when they are trying to quit, so what are the Government doing to protect families from the illegal black market in gambling?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the dangers of the black market. That is why, as part of the White Paper, we said that we would give more powers to the Gambling Commission to be able to close down those black market websites which, frankly, are really quite dangerous.

Gala Bingo Hall: Kettering

5. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If she will meet promoters of the bid to the cultural development fund to restore the Gala Bingo hall in Kettering. [901484]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in the cultural development fund. As the application process for its fourth round is live, unfortunately Ministers are unable to meet bid promoters at present.

Mr Hollobone: Two remarkably talented and enthusiastic individuals from Kettering, Beccy Hurrell and Lindsey Atkins, have put together a really ambitious £2 million bid to repurpose the former Gala Bingo hall in Kettering High Street, changing it into a community arts, music and family hub, which will be transformative for Kettering

town centre. Expressions of interest in the Department's cultural development fund must be submitted by 15 March. Is there no way that I, Beccy, Lindsey and the council can meet the relevant Minister before 15 March to see whether our bid might be appropriate?

Julia Lopez: I congratulate the two women who are putting forward such an exciting and interesting bid for that important building on Kettering High Street. In preparing to answer my hon. Friend's question, I looked at a potted history of Kettering's bingo hall and I appreciate the important role it has to play in regenerating the town. I spoke to my noble Friend Lord Parkinson, as his ministerial brief covers this topic. He is happy to meet and look into the issue, but there is a question about the appropriate timing for that meeting. I noted the recent debate about levelling up. I hope the bid will be successful, but I am afraid I cannot influence that.

Leisure Centre Closures: North Shropshire

6. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the impact of the closure of leisure centres on the community in North Shropshire constituency. [901485]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Leisure centres provide important community hubs, connect individuals within areas in which they live and help to deliver important social and mental health outcomes. In recognition of this and of public leisure, we have provided £60 million to swimming pools across England.

Helen Morgan: Whitchurch swimming pool in my constituency closed in March 2020. Thankfully, there will be spades in the ground to reopen it in the coming years, but the council announced last week that swimming pools and leisure centres are at the top of its list for significant budget cuts in the coming year. Given the lack of public transport, I am concerned that young people will not be able to learn to swim and the wider community will lose access to the healthy lifestyle that leisure centres offer. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we ensure people in such a stretched out, rural area will be able to access leisure centres going forward?

Stuart Andrew: We provided that funding for swimming pools precisely because we recognised the particular challenges they faced given high energy bills. More broadly, we are providing over £300 million of support for facilities up and down the country, including rural areas. That will help us to get more people active, which is a key strand of our Get Active sports strategy.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend the Minister be willing to meet me to discuss the challenges faced by leisure centres in local authority areas facing budgetary pressures, such as Shropshire? He mentioned the swimming pool fund, but there might be other opportunities to sustain these vital resources for local people, including those in Shropshire.

Stuart Andrew: It sounds as if I need to have a cross-Shropshire meeting to discuss facilities in that area. We have been clear about the funding provided for

swimming pools. As part of our strategy and determination to get more people active, we will be doing a piece of work to understand the location of black spots where we need to do more to provide more facilities and what those facilities should be to address local needs.

Charities: Cost of Living

7. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support charities with increases in the cost of living. [901486]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The Government have invested millions of pounds to support charities across England with the cost of living pressures, including the £76 million community organisations cost of living fund, which has now awarded all funding to frontline services helping vulnerable households.

Liz Twist: Charities across my constituency in Blaydon do an amazing job in supporting people and communities in what are really difficult times. Today, a triple threat of rising costs, falling income and higher demand has created what the National Council for Voluntary Organisations has called a cost of giving crisis, with half of all charities saying they are at full capacity and some having to turn people away. What further steps can the Government take to ensure charities can continue with their vital work?

Stuart Andrew: Having been a head of fundraising for a charity, I recognise the position charities face when donations fall at the minute they need to help more people. That is why we have provided £100 million in funding and added another £76 million from dormant assets to help charities in that difficult situation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On Monday it was a privilege to speak at the launch of the "State of the Sector" report, which found that charities are propping up Government services by £2.4 billion a year. Will the Minister tell me why the Government expect the charitable sector to pick up the tab for Government responsibilities in the first place?

Stuart Andrew: Clearly, the hon. Lady does not understand the charity sector if that is the position she is taking. Having worked in it for 16 years, I will not be lectured on this. For example, I found that the hospices I worked in were able to respond to the needs of families in a much better and more holistic way than the state sector could. I am proud of the contribution that charities make to this country, and long may that continue.

AI: Creative Industries

9. **Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): What discussions she has had with representatives of the creative industries on the impact of AI on that sector. [901488]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): I recognise the enormous potential of AI, but also its risks. I have had extensive engagement with the creative sector on these issues, including a

series of roundtable talks on AI with, among others, media, music and film representatives. I am now working closely with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology on a programme of further engagement with the sector.

Dame Caroline Dineneage: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but creators across the creative industries are concerned about AI developers, some of whom are worth as much as \$100 billion, using their works without consent and without compensation. The inability of the Government's working group to agree a code of practice on AI and intellectual property fuels concerns that the status quo is working only for the developers. This will be a growing problem. If a voluntary code is not going to be possible, how will the Government and her Department in particular ensure that creators will be paid fairly when their work is exploited?

Lucy Frazer: I understand this issue and the concerns that my hon. Friend has mentioned. I know that, as Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, she understands and appreciates these matters. I want to assure her that the conclusion of the initial public offering working group is absolutely not the end of our work to find an appropriate regulatory solution for AI. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that AI development supports rather than undermines human creativity. For example, we will be focusing on ensuring greater transparency from AI developers and that AI outputs are properly attributed. It is also right, as she highlights, that creators should be compensated for their work.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Speaker. AI firms are committing large-scale abuse of copyrighted material, using copyrighted images and pieces of media to train their AI tools without consent or compensation for copyright owners. The United Kingdom Government say that they want to reduce barriers to AI companies, but that can only come at the expense of creators and artists. How does it make sense to sacrifice the 10% of UK GDP that comes from the creative sector in favour of less than a quarter of a per cent of GDP that AI produces?

Lucy Frazer: I recognise the point that the hon. Member makes in relation to the importance of protecting creative rights—the creative ingenuity that is such an important part of both our British culture and economic value. That is why I am hearing from the sector, and why, in the Government's AI White Paper, we recognise the importance of ensuring greater transparency from AI developers. We are continuing to work on that across Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry, but the Government's answer to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee was a load of hot air that could have been written by ChatGPT, except ChatGPT would have done a better job of it. The truth of the matter is that the Government's flagship on AI as it relates to creative industries, which is meant to be protecting the moral and economic rights of artists, musicians, and authors, while at the same time recognising the important advances that AI can bring, has sunk.

Last June, the Secretary of State said that if the code of practice was not achieved, legislation could be considered. So, in the words of Paul Simon, when is she going to make a new plan, Stan?

Lucy Frazer: I would just point out that the Labour party has said absolutely nothing in relation to what it would do, so to stand up here and say that we have no plan is absolutely unacceptable. I can be absolutely clear that we do have a plan. We have worked very hard with the sectors. We have already set out in our White Paper the steps that we are taking on a very important aspect in relation to transparency. I will continue to work with the sector on all these areas to ensure that this extremely complex matter comes to a satisfactory conclusion for the creative industries.

Charity Lotteries: Annual Sales Limits

10. **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): For what reason charity lotteries have annual sale limits. [901490]

16. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If she will take steps to remove annual sales limits on charity lotteries. [901496]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The limits for society lotteries allow them to raise funding for charities but to remain distinct from other forms of gambling and from the national lottery. The limits were last increased recently, in 2020, but I am aware that some operators want to see the limits raised or removed entirely. It is important that any decisions that are made are based on strong evidence. As such, I have commissioned research in this area, which I hope we will review by the end of the year.

Kim Leadbeater: The People's Postcode Lottery funds some brilliant organisations across Batley and Spen, including the fantastic Rainbow Baby Bank in Heckmondwike and the Game Changerz youth provision in Birstall. However, the current sales limits prevent the People's Postcode Lottery from giving away even more grants to worthy community organisations across the country, in all our constituencies. Will the Minister therefore explain why casinos and bookies, for example, do not face a sales limit but charity lotteries, which are low risk and fund so many valuable local charities, face that barrier?

Stuart Andrew: As I said at the reception that the People's Postcode Lottery held the other night, it was my privilege to set up a society lottery when I worked in a hospice. I recognise the value of such lotteries to charities, and I am aware of the issues that the PPL has raised. I have worked with the Gambling Commission to suggest ways that it can grow under the current network, as it is the largest brand in the sector; but as I say, I want to see more research. We need to understand what the potential harms are, and what the potential effects are on the national lottery. There is not enough data at the moment. That is why I am commissioning independent research, so that we can make decisions based on evidence.

Jamie Stone: Clearly, in my vast and far-flung constituency, it is difficult for charities to raise money, as Members can imagine. To date, some £432,000 in

community grants has been awarded to those charities. That is very welcome indeed. The Minister mentioned that consideration will be given to raising limits, or perhaps abolishing them altogether. May I make an impassioned plea that the particular circumstances of remote parts of the UK are considered when the decisions are made?

Stuart Andrew: I recognise the vast contribution that these lotteries make to charities, particularly those that work in rural areas. Of course, we will make sure that we take evidence on all those issues. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that we want to make sure that we are developing policy based on evidence, but that does not detract from our recognition of the enormous work that these lotteries do, and we are incredibly grateful to them.

Multi-sport Grassroots Facilities

11. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What recent progress she has made on implementing her Department's multi-sport grassroots facilities programme. [901491]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): The Government have committed over £325 million to multi-sport grassroots sites across the whole of the UK. This is part of our mission to ensure that every community has the pitches and facilities it needs. So far, 2,300 sites have been supported. That includes funding for grass pitch maintenance at Waveney football club in my hon. Friend's constituency, creating many more opportunities for people of all backgrounds to get active.

Peter Aldous: The development of multi-sport grassroots facilities is very often led by one sport, which then faces a variety of obstacles in getting other sports authorities to participate in a particular project. What steps is my right hon. and learned Friend taking to remove those barriers, and to promote collaboration between different sports authorities so that much-needed facilities can be built?

Lucy Frazer: I welcome my hon. Friend's question because it allows me to champion the fact that, as a requirement of the Government's investment in grassroots facilities, 40% of projects need to clearly benefit a sport other than football, such as cricket, rugby, basketball or netball. In England, the Football Foundation and Sport England work closely with the national governing bodies of other sports to encourage the development of multi-sport projects, to promote collaboration between clubs at a local level.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Over 1 million girls lose interest in sports when they become teenagers, mainly due to lack of confidence and feeling judged, but we know how beneficial sports are for mental health, and there are many other benefits. How has the Department included gender in the implementation of the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme?

Lucy Frazer: I welcome that question. We have a national sports strategy to get 3.5 million people more active. That is focused on trying to get those who are currently inactive into sport. As the hon. Lady rightly mentions, women and girls are less active in sport than

boys and men, so we are focusing in particular on that, with a national taskforce that brings together all relevant Departments and national governing bodies to ensure that we get more women and girls involved in sport across the board.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that grassroots sports can play a hugely important part in levelling up? As part of Darwen's £120 million town deal, we have invested in our football club, our cricket club and our skate park, and we are about to open a brand-new five-a-side pitch. Will she talk with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to see what part her Department can play in ensuring that sport plays its proper part in enriching the cultural lives of people in areas with levelling-up bids?

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend is a huge champion for his area and for the north in general. He is absolutely right that sport, drama, creativity—all those things—level up an area. I am very happy to talk to my right hon. Friend in the Levelling Up Department to consider how we can continue, across Government, to support the north.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I have recently visited sports clubs in Honiton, including youth rugby, gymnastics and football. They are all seeking support from the local authority, East Devon District Council, on the basis of its 2017 sports pitch strategy. The Government's multi-sport grassroots facilities programme is very welcome, but does the Secretary of State consider it generous enough for youth sport, given that the co-benefits of sport for young people include a sense of camaraderie, good health and civic pride?

Lucy Frazer: Our strategy is helping sport across the board, but I recognise in particular the importance of getting young people involved in sport. We have invested around £1 billion in sport for young people, including £300 million for multi-sport pitches and £600 million in schools so that more children get the required two hours of physical education. We are also investing across the board in youth services to get more young children active in constructive activities rather than in less appropriate ones.

Topical Questions

T1. [901555] **Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): I am proud of our Government's record in supporting the creative industries. Figures published last week, which I am sure Opposition Members will welcome, show that our powerhouse creative industries grew by 6.8% in 2022, generating an enormous £124 billion for UK plc, putting us ahead of our ambition to grow those sectors by an extra £50 billion by 2030. Of course, much of that depends on the amazing talent of Britain. Many in the creative industries are benefiting from the Government's targeted tax breaks, which are powering those industries.

Sarah Dyke: Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to support local initiatives to encourage more girls to get into—or back into—and remain in sport?

I myself enjoyed a long and prosperous rugby career playing in national league 1. Will she join me in congratulating Somerton rugby football club on its new girls rugby “skills and social” nights?

Lucy Frazer: More girls should have the opportunity to play sports that are traditionally the preserve of the boys. That is why we are encouraging all schools to offer all sports to all their pupils, whatever their gender. In addition, we are backing women’s football, with £30 million for 30 pitches across the country to which girls will have priority access. It is absolutely right that we continue to encourage girls and women to take up more sport.

T6. [901561] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Gainsborough was once the capital of England under the incomparable Sweyn Forkbeard. It is an historic market town with the Old Hall at its heart. What plans do the Government have to preserve the character of historic market towns such as Gainsborough?

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the beauty and heritage of Gainsborough. Heritage, of course, has a vital role to play in levelling up, and can act as a powerful catalyst to increase opportunities and prosperity. We recognise the opportunity that historic high streets give us, and we have a £95 million high streets heritage action zones programme that is driving the regeneration of 67 of our towns and cities. I believe that Gainsborough has previously been a recipient of heritage lottery programmes, and we also have a scheme to help with historic churches.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Coverage of yesterday’s Commons chaos showed how desperately we need good-quality journalism, so I am concerned about BBC Scotland’s request to Ofcom for a reduction in its broadcast news output, especially the loss of “The Nine”. BBC Scotland’s TV news had something of a couthie image until “The Nine” came along, placing Scottish news in the context of UK and international news. It was a compromise offering for those who wanted a “Scottish Six” on BBC 1. Although “The Nine” created a pathway for young talent, I said at the time that its slot—tucked away on a channel that many struggled to find—could be its undoing, and now it has been pulled. In an election year, we need more scrutiny of politicians, not less, and the need for a properly resourced “Scottish Six” remains. I hope Ofcom will say no to the proposals, and I know that the Cabinet Secretary for culture, Angus Robertson, opposes the reduction in news output. Does the Minister?

Julia Lopez: I am aware that the BBC is looking at changing its programme mix in relation to news in Scotland. My understanding was that those changes were cost-neutral, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and appreciate that he has concerns about them. He will be aware that we do not hold direct power over the BBC’s programming mix. I am sure that the director general has heard his concerns. As I say, I think the BBC is still investing in quality news content in Scotland, but it may be that the mix is changing, and the hon. Gentleman is clearly unhappy about that.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Cheadle Town FC have been a member of the north west counties football league since 1983. However, the oversubscribed division leaves Cheadle Town and other south Manchester clubs at risk of being moved laterally into a midlands division, meaning a significant increase in the club’s travel costs and an impact on gates, breaking their identity as a northern club, and challenging their future viability. I have met the Football Association and raised the club’s concerns. Will my right hon. and learned Friend join me in urging the FA to review its processes and listen to south Manchester clubs that want to keep their teams northern?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is a massive champion for her area—she has previously raised this issue with me and with the sport Minister. As she rightly recognised, levels five to 10 of the English football league system are administered by the FA, and decisions regarding which league a team plays in at those levels are for the FA in its role as governing body. I am sure the FA is listening to my hon. Friend’s concerns and will have heard her plea this morning.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): This week in the House, I raised with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury the fact that serious delays in His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs issuing A1 forms mean that touring musicians are waiting months to be paid. A1 forms ensure that musicians do not have to pay additional tax when touring in the EU, but some musicians are waiting six to nine months, or even a year, for those forms. One leading singer told me that musicians feel like “hostages” of HMRC incompetence, so what is the Secretary of State doing alongside Treasury Ministers to sort out this mess, which is hitting UK musicians so hard?

Lucy Frazer: I recognise the importance of touring to many of our fantastic industries. We have bilateral agreements with many other countries to ensure that touring can take place, but I will continue to ensure that as a Government, we take every step across the board to make sure that our musicians can tour appropriately.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the BBC’s proposals to launch four new national music radio stations and to relaunch an existing station, Radio 5 Sports Extra? To my mind, those proposals are a direct imitation of commercial broadcasters’ innovation, and the time and resource that the BBC is investing could be better spent in reversing the cuts to BBC local radio—a source of distinctive public service content that is not available anywhere else on the same medium.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is a stalwart of the radio scene. I would like to pay tribute to the 40-year career of Steve Wright, another stalwart of BBC radio. I have spoken to the director general about the launch of new radio services, and he is very aware of the strength of feeling in this House about the proposals for local radio. The mid-term review says that the BBC should engage much more closely with the market ahead of the launch of any new stations, but Ofcom also has powers to make a judgment on these matters before any new station is launched.

T3. [901557] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Now that the Government have moved to repeal section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, there remains no legislative measure to convince print media to sign up to the state regulator, so how do the Government plan to finally give the state regulator the power to do its job, as called for by the National Union of Journalists?

Lucy Frazer: I am very proud that we have a free press, and I think it is really important that we repeal section 40 to ensure there is not a chilling effect on our reporting. Of course, since that was first proposed, we have had greater self-regulation, and I am sure the press will continue to ensure that they do their outstanding job in an appropriate fashion.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can we recognise pickleball as a national sport, and will the sport Minister come to the Dunstable Hunters pickleball club, where he will see men, women, grandparents and grandchildren having a wonderful time?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): How can I possibly resist such an invitation? [*Laughter.*] People are laughing, but this is becoming a more and more popular sport. For me, anything that gets people active and enjoying sport can only be positive, so I am happy to come to see it in action.

T4. [901558] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On the annual sales limit on the People's Postcode Lottery, the Minister says that he wants to have some evidence on why an additional increase is necessary. Since the advent of the pandemic, funding and fundraising have come under increasing pressure, and that has led to charities in my constituency closing. Saje Scotland, a domestic violence charity, was unable to access funding, so the evidence of the need is there for everyone to see. Will he at least consider an additional uplift to the annual sales limit in the interim, so that charities can access meaningful funding and are not forced to close down because of a lack thereof?

Stuart Andrew: I think it is important to put it on record that almost every other society lottery is nowhere near those limits, but I do recognise that it may be getting tight for some of the individual trusts in the People's Postcode Lottery. We have been speaking to the Gambling Commission to see what else it can do by using some of the other trusts at its disposal to increase that funding, but I take on board the points the hon. Member made.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that individual sports clubs have a role to play in providing youth services? In that respect, can I thank the Government for funding Lichfield sports club and Chasetown football club, which have both received grants for the work they do—grants that reach up to £2.5 million?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a fabulous champion for Lichfield, and I am pleased that young people in Lichfield are getting the benefit of Government funding.

T5. [901560] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The Government's promise to protect music creators from the potential negative impacts of artificial intelligence relied on a deal between tech companies and the music industry. However, it emerged earlier this month that those discussions have collapsed. Will the Secretary of State admit that their plan has failed, and say what the Government are going to do about it to support the creative sector?

Lucy Frazer: I wish Labour Members would actually read our White Paper on AI, because in that paper we recognise the importance of this issue and the importance of protecting the creative industries. The White Paper sets out what we are doing about transparency, which is a key issue. We are of course continuing to work with both sides of the industry—the AI tech giants and the creators—to ensure we come to an appropriate resolution of this issue.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Will the Minister please update us on the independent regulator, and can he quite literally get the ball rolling to get this Bill in front of the House?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner when it comes to the issue of football regulation, and it was good for me—

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): She didn't say that.

Stuart Andrew: Do you know, I was told that the hon. Gentleman is a difficult man to ignore, but it is always worth trying.

Sir Chris Bryant: Try harder!

Stuart Andrew: I am, don't you worry.

Mr Speaker: Order. Maybe you can carry on that conversation afterwards.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend has done a lot of work in this area. We are absolutely committed to introducing the recommendations of the White Paper, which we have published, and a Bill will be published shortly.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The chair of Girlguiding UK has recently informed me that with Government funding, Girlguiding can at least be sustained in three overseas military bases. Will the Minister update me on his discussions to ensure that girls living on UK overseas military bases can continue to access Girlguiding?

Stuart Andrew: I know the hon. Lady has done a lot of work in this area, and we had a good Westminster Hall debate on this. Girlguiding is an independent organisation, and must make its own organisational and directional decisions. The Department is working closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Ministry of Defence, Girlguiding, and representatives from overseas territories to see whether we can come up with a solution.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What are the Government doing to promote facilities for padel tennis?

Stuart Andrew: We work closely with national governing bodies such as the Lawn Tennis Association. It has done amazing work training 17,000 teachers across the country to teach tennis, padel tennis and so on. I went to see it myself recently at the national centre—*[Interruption.]* I am not doing very well here, I know that, but my hon. Friend raises an important point, and I will continue to raise it with the national governing body in due course.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): There have been a number of late postponements of football matches recently, causing massive inconvenience and putting many fans, including Barnsley football club fans, seriously out of pocket. I have suggested to the English Football League that it adopts a postponement promise that would stop that from happening. Will the Minister work with me on that?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I have heard that from fans in my constituency. It is a decision for football, but I will be happy to raise the issue with the various leagues. I recognise the impact that such postponements have on fans up and down the country.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the large number of inquiries that Ofcom has launched against GB News, for conducting itself in exactly the same fashion as other channels routinely do, is in danger of looking biased and political, and that Ofcom is in danger of putting itself in judicial review territory?

Lucy Frazer: The Government and I are in favour of media plurality, and it is important that different channels express different views across our vast political landscape. I am pleased that GB News has chosen to be regulated by Ofcom, and I know that Ofcom carries out its job appropriately.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Protection for Members of Parliament

1. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What support and protection is available for Members who have experienced threats and other forms of intimidation. [901563]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will read quite a long answer into the record.

It is essential that Members and their staff can perform their parliamentary duties safely and securely, both on and off the estate. The Commission considers that to be of the highest importance. Members should report immediate threats to the police on 999. Members can report any other threats, whether online, on the street or in their constituency, to the parliamentary liaison and investigations team of police officers based on the estate.

The House administration recognise that threats and intimidation can impact MPs' emotional health and wellbeing. The parliamentary health and wellbeing service offers direct psychological support for Members, such as counselling and a confidential helpline, and assistance to family members who live with a Member of Parliament. Occupational health experts in the team are always on hand to support Members who might be subject to threat.

While we do not discuss security measures on the Floor of the House, I confirm that the Parliamentary Security Department supports Members with a range of other processes, which are kept under continuous review. I shall briefly cover those, Mr Speaker, and then come to a close. It provides protection at Members' homes and constituency offices, and can provide security operatives for constituency surgeries and Members' other parliamentary duties off the estate. It gives Members tailored advice for their individual circumstances. That includes security and situational awareness training, which is available to all MPs, their families, and staff. Members can access hands-on cyber-security advice for their personal mobile phones. A team monitors social media and other open-source sites for threats to Parliament or Members. As a member of the consultative panel on parliamentary security, this cause is close to my heart and I will continue to champion it as a member of the House of Commons Commission.

Mr Sheerman: Some Members of the House will know that I had a death threat. A gentleman was arrested and went into a mental institution. When he was released, the House authorities and the Met police met me and said, "This gentleman is now out and he knows where you live." I listened very intently to what the hon. Gentleman said, but that was the last I heard. I am a person who watches where he walks and does not stand by the side of the platform on the tube. I alter my way of coming into the House. It is very stressful. I have to say that in all that has been said by the hon. Gentleman—I know that he believes it and is passionate about it—there does not feel like there is very much for those on the receiving end.

Sir Charles Walker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me advance notice of his question. I am so sorry that he has experienced this after giving more than 40 years of service to this Parliament and this country. I will endeavour to meet him next week with security officials to go through his concerns one by one. I hope to see him at a meeting next week if he is free.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Theft: Security of Church Buildings

2. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Whether the commissioners have issued recent guidance to church parishes on securing buildings to prevent theft. [901564]

5. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Whether the Commissioners have issued recent guidance to church parishes on securing buildings to help prevent theft. [901568]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Before I reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, may I pass on my condolences, and I am sure those of the whole House, to the family and friends of Alan Wilson, the Bishop of Buckingham, who died suddenly last Saturday?

There is comprehensive advice to all parishes on the Church of England website about how to keep buildings secure, which we regularly update. All buildings used for religious worship are also eligible for the Home Office's hate crime protection scheme.

Greg Smith: I join my hon. Friend in passing on my condolences to the family of the late Bishop of Buckingham.

Vicars tell me that theft from churches is a continuing problem in my constituency and that the insurance sector is now demanding that churches must be locked unless someone from the church is present inside. That clearly creates a big challenge for those wanting a moment of quiet prayer or reflection or to just enjoy the beauty of our historic churches. Can my hon. Friend tell me what the Church Commissioners are doing with the insurance sector to ensure that our churches can remain, while secure, open for quiet prayer and reflection?

Andrew Selous: I am sorry to learn of the experience in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I can tell him that he is completely right about the importance of keeping churches open for those who want to come. The good news is that keeping churches open increases footfall, and that deters criminals. Locking up churches is a poor deterrent to thieves. I can also tell him that funding for roof alarms was provided by the diocese of Oxford back in 2019, when there was a spate of thefts from church roofs in his area. I encourage churches in his constituency to contact the diocese again to see whether that might be made available.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his answers thus far. He will recall that I have previously asked at Church Commissioners questions about thefts from churches in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies, St John's and St Andrew's. At St Andrew's, the theft took place during the mass, which is outrageous, to put it mildly. In my view, the Church Commissioners are not listening to the police's advice and support. What needs to happen is for churches to get at least the same support and assistance from the police as other places of worship. Will he use his good offices to go back to the Church of England and ensure dialogue between the police and the Church to protect our churches as places of worship?

Andrew Selous: I am sorry to learn of my hon. Friend's concerns. I will certainly feed that straight back to the hierarchy of the Church and ensure that those meetings happen. However, I am pleased to tell him that following his question to me on this issue last month, the police have arrested a suspect for a series of church burglaries in Barnet, Brent and Harrow, and he is remanded in custody. I have been told that the Metropolitan police is in close contact with the diocese of London and local churches, but there clearly needs to be more dialogue. I will ensure that that happens.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I recently had the pleasure of visiting the Holy Trinity church at Dunkeswell, which sits on the site of the Cistercian

Dunkeswell abbey in my constituency. Visiting it is a moving, spiritual experience. Given that some sites such as that are in rural, remote areas where there will simply never be the footfall that the hon. Member describes, can he assure us that we can continue to keep them open in spite of any threat of theft?

Andrew Selous: I completely understand the hon. Gentleman's point. Like him, I am a lover of our rural churches. I suggest that he points the churchwardens and the priest to the comprehensive advice on the Church of England website and perhaps has further conversations with the diocese and local police. If there are still issues, I ask him to come back to me about that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner for that answer. We live in an age where modern technology is available as a method of addressing these issues but is incredibly expensive. What funds are issued to us in Northern Ireland through Barnett consequential to ensure that churches can adequately secure buildings with security cameras and CCTV? If there is currently no funding, could that be considered when we take into account the rural and isolated status of so many church buildings?

Andrew Selous: I am sorry to tell the hon. Gentleman that, as far as I am aware, this area is not covered by Barnett consequential. Again, I direct him to the advice on the Church of England website, which can be seen by churches in Northern Ireland. If there are particular issues, I am happy to have a quiet conversation with him in the Tea Room to see how we can share best practice to try to help his churches.

Asylum Seekers

3. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** If the Church will have discussions with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the Church's guidance for clergy on supporting asylum seekers. [901565]

4. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** Whether the Church provides training for clergy on supporting asylum seekers wishing to convert to Christianity. [901567]

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** What guidance the Church issues for clergy on supporting asylum seekers wishing to convert to Christianity. [901569]

Andrew Selous: Both archbishops have offered to meet the Home Secretary, and the Church has provided advice and guidance for clergy to consider when dealing with requests for baptism from asylum seekers. The guidance refers to the need for discernment and recognises that there may be mixed motives on the part of asylum seekers requesting baptism.

Mr Hollobone: I welcome that meeting. Those who are genuinely seeking to convert to Christianity should of course be allowed to do so. But is my hon. Friend aware that there is growing concern in this country that the Church of England—naïvely at best, and deliberately at worst—is being seen to aid and abet asylum seekers in getting around the laws of this country and remaining in the United Kingdom? May I urge the Church of

England to update its guidance entitled “Supporting Asylum Seekers—Guidance for Church of England Clergy” as soon as possible to ensure that it is in alignment with new legislation passed in this House?

Andrew Selous: That guidance is being updated, so I can reassure my hon. Friend on that point. He is right that clergy will always rightly tell everyone they come across about the love of Jesus, but clergy do not determine asylum claims. Of course, priests are expected to uphold the law and make truthful representations of character. I hope that reassures him. I also note that in the recent *Times* investigation of 28 cases heard by the upper tribunal where a claimant cited conversion to Christianity as a reason to be granted asylum, only seven were approved, 13 were dismissed, and new hearings were ordered in eight other cases.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend will have heard the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) at Prime Minister’s questions. The problem is, this brings the Church of England into disrepute. It implies that some vicars are naive, foolish and innocent. It is important for the credibility of the Church of England that training is more robust and that well-meaning folk do not endanger our society.

Andrew Selous: I hear very clearly what my hon. Friend says. I know that he, like me, takes seriously the reputation of the Church of England. He cares a great deal about it, and I am grateful to him for that. I repeat the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone): priests are required to use discernment, to recognise that there might be mixed motives, and always to put forward truthful representations of character.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I heard the words of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) as well. When there is plenty wrong and plenty to complain about, it is not always the case that we should blame the established Church, is it?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Any institution run by humans will never be perfect, but he is right that the Church of England was unfairly accused of being involved in some cases, when it had no involvement at all.

Clergy: Same-sex Relationships

7. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on implementing the decisions taken by the General Synod in February 2023 relating to clergy in same-sex relationships. [901572]

Andrew Selous: In February 2023, the General Synod passed a motion to welcome the decision by the House of Bishops to replace a document called “Issues in Human Sexuality”. The House of Bishops has published pastoral guidance that partially replaces that document. It is working on further pastoral guidance that would allow the document to be replaced entirely.

Mr Bradshaw: Papers going to tomorrow’s General Synod once again recommend backtracking on the agreements made, not just in February but in the autumn General Synod, regarding same-sex blessings and the rules governing priests in same-sex relationships. That is totally unacceptable. Yesterday’s report by Professor Alexis Jay on safeguarding in the Church of England was excoriating. It pointed to serial failures, and recommended setting up a completely independent body, the Church being stripped of its responsibilities, and those being handed to an independent regulator. It pains me to say this, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that dealing with both those very important historical challenges for the Church appears to be beyond the capacity and will of its current leadership, and that perhaps our established Church might benefit from a fresh start at the top?

Andrew Selous: The right hon. Gentleman takes these issues very seriously and has a long involvement with the Church of England. Starting with the second issue, the Church commissioned Professor Jay’s report. The Church gets the seriousness of these issues, and it will consider very seriously how to respond. The archbishops have described her report as a “vital next step”. We are not in denial, and we will put things right. The right hon. Gentleman also knows very well how the General Synod of the Church of England works; it is a sovereign body. It meets again this weekend. Reconciling different viewpoints so that we can walk together is not easy, but we are committed to that. I know that his words will have been heard and noted by members of the General Synod in advance of its debate.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Members’ Productivity: Digital Tools

8. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If the Commission will take steps to increase the use of digital tools in parliamentary services to support the productivity of Members. [901573]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne): The Parliamentary Digital Service supports the Commission by delivering technology for Members, and tools are under constant development. A range of productivity tools are already available to Members and their staff from Microsoft via the Parliamentary Digital Service. They include Microsoft Forms, which helps with tasks such as collating constituents’ information. Microsoft Planner can track workstreams in an MP’s office and is used by some offices to induct new staff. “Bookings with me” can arrange one-to-one time with external guests, such as constituents.

PDS independently investigates and works with Parliament’s suppliers to explore new technologies that could benefit MPs in their work. The team welcomes volunteers from the Member community to pilot such services ahead of full roll-out. As the Chair of the Administration Committee, I would be happy to arrange for the hon. Lady to meet any relevant officials.

Chi Onwurah: Like most Members, I receive hundreds of invitations every week, and much more spam. It takes a member of my team hours—sometimes days—to go

through them all. That is time that could be much better spent supporting constituents, particularly in a cost of living crisis. There are digital tools that can help with that; none that the hon. Gentleman mentioned will do so. Microsoft recently demoed its Copilot tool, which uses artificial intelligence. Other tools are available. While there may be issues of privacy, security and bias with such tools, as with much AI, can he confirm that the Commission is looking specifically at AI tools to help us in our work for our constituents?

Sir Charles Walker: I can. The hon. Lady is absolutely right: there are security issues that need to be looked at closely, but I have an answer, specially prepared. Copilot is Microsoft's version of ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence service. Now, this is the relevant bit: PDS has arranged a series of internal workshops with Parliament's Microsoft partner to allow PDS staff to explore how this technology could be used in the parliamentary network. The outcomes of those workshops will feed into Parliament's overall AI strategy—I am nearly there, Mr Speaker. I speak as the proud owner of a Nokia. The recent and rapid development in artificial intelligence, especially generative AI, presents exciting opportunities.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

World Watch List

9. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to support Anglican churches in countries listed in the World Watch List 2024. [901574]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Through the sister Churches of our communion and our linked missionary societies, the Church of England

continues to provide both prayerful support and practical assistance to all parts of the Anglican communion where freedom of religion or belief is threatened or impaired. The Church works with our Government, other Governments around the world, and multilateral bodies such as the United Nations to advocate forcefully for freedom of religion or belief.

Fiona Bruce: Following the implementation of much of the groundbreaking Truro review, the UK is now seen as a global leader on religious freedom. However, sadly, persecution is exponentially increasing across the world, so we need to embed that work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, like Governments, religious leaders need to commit to strategic thinking, structural change and the provision of additional resources if together we are to effectively tackle this global scourge?

Andrew Selous: Indeed I do. On embedding that work, it is good news that my hon. Friend's International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill had a successful Second Reading in this House on 26 January, and that it goes to Committee in April. I am glad that the Bill is strongly supported by the Foreign Secretary, and that the Bishop of Winchester has offered to take it forward in the other place; of course, he was the person who wrote the original report. However, my hon. Friend's challenge is fair. As our Government step up on this global challenge, the Church of England and the Anglican communion need to as well. I will pass her remarks back to Lambeth Palace.

Mr Speaker: That completes the questions, but I would like to answer Sir Charles. The security of all Members really matters. It is taken very seriously in this House. Work is ongoing, and I am having serious conversations about what we do going forward. I can tell you that we have some of the best people working on it, and I would like to thank them for what they do.

Post Office Horizon Scandal

10.38 am

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on financial redress for sub-postmasters and outstanding issues relating to the Post Office Horizon scandal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): As a Back Bencher, I first spoke on the matter of compensation for victims in March 2020, which is obviously long after the right hon. Gentleman first campaigned for it. I pay tribute to his campaigning on this subject, which remains undiminished. My appetite for compensation for postmasters is equally undiminished, although I accept the need to increase the pace of delivery.

As of this month, £160 million has been paid in financial redress to more than 2,700 victims affected by the Horizon scandal. More than 78% of eligible full claims received have been settled as follows: 102 convictions have been overturned, and 42 full claims have been submitted, of which 32 have been settled; 2,793 applications to the Horizon shortfall scheme have been received, and 2,197 have been settled; 58 full claims have been submitted to the group litigation order scheme, and 41 have been settled.

Our top priority remains ensuring that victims can access swift and fair compensation. We have introduced optional fixed-sum awards of £600,000 for victims with overturned convictions and of £75,000 for group litigation order members as a swift means of settlement, and 100% of original applicants to the Horizon shortfall scheme have received offers of compensation. Today we are discussing what other measures can be taken to speed up compensation with the Horizon compensation advisory board, on which the right hon. Gentleman sits.

Since the Prime Minister's announcement on 10 January, officials in the Department for Business and Trade and the Ministry of Justice have been working at pace to progress legislation for overturning convictions related to the Post Office's prosecutorial behaviour and Horizon evidence. I will provide a further update to the House very soon.

Mr Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. I draw the attention of the House to my interest as a member of the Horizon compensation advisory board.

I like the Minister. He campaigned on this issue before he was a Minister, and he has been a very good Minister, but a lot of that good work was undone on Monday by the performance of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. I am disappointed that he has not taken the opportunity today to talk about the overturned convictions. I understand that later today, at 12 o'clock, there will be a written ministerial statement on the subject. I do not think that is the way to do it, as the House needs an opportunity to discuss the overturned convictions.

I will ask the Minister a few questions. It is quite clear now that Nick Read, the Post Office chief executive, wrote to the Lord Chancellor basically opposing the overturning of all convictions, saying that up to 300 people were "guilty". It is not yet clear who instructed him to do that. On Monday, the Secretary of State said it was done off his own bat. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

If there are to be overturned convictions, they cannot just be about Horizon; they should also be about Capture. Evidence that I have put to the public inquiry and sent to the Minister yesterday clearly indicates that the scandal predates Horizon. Those affected need to be included in both the compensation scheme and among those with overturned convictions.

The board is meeting this afternoon, and we have made recommendations to the Minister on how to simplify and speed up the compensation scheme. Will he give an assurance to the House that once the recommendations are agreed, we can announce them quite quickly, primarily to restore to the sub-postmasters some faith, which was wrecked by the performance of the Secretary of State on Monday?

If the Minister's written ministerial statement at 12 o'clock is about overturning convictions, will he give a commitment to come back to the House on Monday to give an oral statement, so that the House can interrogate him and discuss that issue?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The overturned convictions are a key priority for me and my Department. I am always keen to update the House whenever I can. There always has to be a sequence to ensure that we follow proper process. What we are doing potentially affects the devolved Administrations, so it is really important that we engage with them properly. That is one of the reasons why we need to make the written statement later today. I have never been unwilling to come before the House and report on what we are doing. I will, of course, continue to do that.

On the letter from the chief executive to the Justice Secretary, I am aware of the allegations by Mr Staunton. They are very serious allegations that should not be made lightly or be based on a vague recollection. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the letter from the former permanent secretary, it is clear that she believes the allegations are incorrect, and that there was never any conversation along the lines referred to by Mr Staunton. I think it is pretty clear that those allegations are false.

The right hon. Gentleman has regularly brought up Capture. We are keen to continue to engage with him on that to ensure that those affected are included in any compensation where detriment has occurred. I note his point about an oral statement. As I say, I am always keen to give such statements whenever possible, and to be interrogated on our plans. I do not think he will be disappointed by what we announce later today.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Now that the then permanent secretary has outlined that she did not implicitly or explicitly tell the then chairman of the Post Office to slow down compensation, I hope we can spend time less time talking about someone who has lost his job and more time talking about postmasters who have lost everything. Will the Minister, who is doing great work in sorting this out, recommit to August as his target date for getting compensation—life-changing compensation—out of the door as soon as possible?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this matter; as my predecessor, he did a tremendous job. The most concerning allegation we heard over the

weekend was about the delay in the payment of compensation. In her letter, which is publicly available, the permanent secretary wrote:

“It is not true that I made any instruction, either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, no mention of delaying compensation appears in either note.”

So I agree with my hon. Friend that we should move on from that and focus on what really matters, which is getting what he rightly described as life-changing compensation to postmasters as quickly as possible. That is his, and will remain our, No. 1 priority.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Let me first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing the urgent question, and indeed for all the work he has done over many years, along with other Members, in trying to secure justice for sub-postmasters.

The Post Office Horizon scandal is one of the most insidious injustices in our country’s history. It has robbed innocent people of their livelihoods, their liberty and, all too sadly, their lives. At least 60 sub-postmasters have died without seeing justice or receiving compensation, and at least four have taken their own lives. More than 20 years on, the victims and their families are still suffering from the consequences and the trauma of all that they have been put through. They have been trapped in a nightmare for too long. We all want to see the exoneration of all who remain convicted, and the delivery of rightful compensation to all affected sub-postmasters, as quickly as possible. Labour wants to see a swift and comprehensive solution to this insidious injustice, and we are willing to work with the Government to ensure that happens.

Will the Minister please provide an update on the timeline to which he is working to amend the seismic damage that this scandal has caused, and will he please give an assurance that he is acting with the appropriate speed that is required for necessary legislation to go through? Victims have already waited too long for justice, and we must act now, with the speed and urgency that this awful scandal requires.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has approached this matter. There was nothing in his remarks that I disagree with. As I said earlier, 78% of claimants have received full and final compensation, but we fully share his wish, and that of his party, for a swift resolution and a swift end to this, and we have engaged significantly and extensively with his colleagues on the Front Bench. As for how we overturn convictions, the measures that we are taking are clearly unprecedented, but this is an unprecedented situation.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the timeline. We have always said that it is weeks, but it is fewer weeks now than it was. I do not think he will be disappointed—I said this to the right hon. Member for North Durham as well—by what we will say, hopefully, later today, but this has taken too long. We are working daily to resolve these issues, and the overturning of convictions, the legislation and the compensation cannot come too quickly.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My hon. Friend has done a great job, but I am conscious that there are still many people waiting to settle. Much of

that is due to the fact that the Post Office is not releasing information that has been requested by my constituents or, indeed, their solicitors. I hope that my hon. Friend can put across to the chief executive of the Post Office how critical it is to regain trust by releasing that information, because I fear that other sub-postmasters, or people who might otherwise have been interested in dealing with the Post Office, will start either to move away or not to take up those business opportunities, which would also damage communities—and that is already happening in my constituency.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for making that point; she is absolutely right. Disclosure both to the inquiry and on individual cases, which is required to be able to compile claims, has been too slow. If Post Office Ltd and its management team are going to rebuild trusts with claimants and the wider public, it is absolutely incumbent on them that this is done properly and that the governance around it is done properly. That is part of the reason why the Secretary of State acted as decisively as she did, but I absolutely concur with my right hon. Friend. Alongside her, I urge Post Office Ltd to deliver disclosure more quickly.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Documents published this week by the BBC reveal that the Swift review, dated February 2016, noted that Post Office Ltd “had always known” about the balancing transaction capability that allowed transactions to be added remotely, which is what happened. The lawyers for Post Office Ltd did nothing about that, and many people still do not trust it. A letter has been circulated, and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) deserves all the praise we can give him today. I have a copy of his memo, which says that anyone can write to him on any issue and get advice on how to pursue claims.

The Minister has given us a list of percentages and so on, but it is still not fast enough. It is still not good enough, and one of the reasons is that Post Office Ltd is still not trusted; people want nothing to do with it. I cannot fix that, but I do not think that the spat between the Secretary of State and Henry Staunton this week did anything to increase sub-postmasters’ confidence, and we really need to get this sorted. Yes, the Horizon shortfall scheme has been well managed in some regards, and claims are going through and being paid, but how much is being paid? So many sub-postmasters are getting derisory offers—not just people in the GLO scheme, but normal, everyday sub-postmasters who have been putting in money for years. We need to get this sorted. I appeal to all sub-postmasters affected to put in a claim.

Kevin Hollinrake: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on that point and on a number of other points she raised, and I thank her again for the work she has done in this area for many years. I, too, am concerned about some of the information that came to light this week, and the public inquiry is there to examine any allegations relating to who knew what and when. It would be wrong of us to duplicate the inquiry’s efforts, because it is a public inquiry that has the powers to summon witnesses to give evidence and to carry out other forms of evidence gathering, which is the right way to do this.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

I agree with the hon. Lady that compensation cannot come fast enough and that Post Office Ltd has to rebuild trust not just with the wider public; key to this are the postmasters.

Yes, of course we want to make sure that people get fair compensation. May I point gently to the performance so far of the group litigation order scheme? Fifty-eight full claims have been received, 48 offers have been made and 41 have been accepted without going to the next level, which is the independent panel. That tends to indicate that those offers are fair, because people have recourse to the appeal process. I am aware of one or two high-profile cases where people say they have not been offered a fair amount. I cannot talk about individual cases, but we urge any of those individuals to go to the next stage of the process, which is the independent panel. The whole scheme is overseen by Sir Ross Cranston, who has a very good reputation both in this House and further afield. We absolutely believe that the process will offer fair compensation, but we urge people to return to the table and ensure that their claim is properly considered by all means available.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done on this issue—not only on the Front Bench, but on the Back Benches. No amount of compensation can compensate the victims of this complete scandal. However, it does help, and speeding up the process is obviously important. Will he, during the passage of the legislation that the Government have promised to introduce, ensure that innocent victims are not only compensated, but completely exonerated? In their communities, they have suffered the stigma attached to all this, and they need to have their names cleared and their reputations restored.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his regular contributions on this subject, which he frequently raised prior to the ITV series. I appreciate his work.

My hon. Friend is right to say that no amount of compensation can make up for what happened to many people's lives. We want all the innocent people to be exonerated. We know there is nervousness, with some victims not trusting the process—they have simply had enough. We met Howe & Co., one of the solicitors, to talk about this issue yesterday, and its contention is that around 40% of the people who received a letter saying, "We will not oppose an appeal," still will not come forward. We need a process that does not require people to come forward if we are to have a mass exoneration of those affected by this horrendous scandal. We hope to announce that later today.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I associate myself with the words of praise for the Minister's speed and attention on this issue. I think a legally binding instruction for the Post Office and the Department to deliver at speed is a necessity in the new Bill. The Minister has told us today that about £160 million has been paid in compensation, but there is provision for about £1.2 billion, which means that only 13% of the money has been paid

out. He updated the House on the number of claimants, and there were 555 people in the GLO group and 700 who were convicted. As the Minister told us, only 73 people have had their final compensation fully paid, which is only 6% of the two groups.

The confusion at the beginning of the week about who said what to whom shows there is confusion about the instruction to deliver at speed. When the Bill comes before us, will the Minister reflect on the necessity for a legally binding deadline under which the Post Office must make information available in 20 to 30 days and an offer must be made to settle within 20 to 30 days, with a legally binding deadline for final resolution? Otherwise, frankly, I worry that the ambiguity will still cause delays. He knows as well as I do that justice delayed is justice denied.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for paying regular attention to this issue. I know that the Committee has a session next week and will be asking some of those questions.

We are keen to get compensation to victims as soon as possible. We are somewhat at the mercy of claims, and we cannot offer compensation if claims do not come in. Like others, I am very keen for people to come forward to submit a claim. One of the reasons why we put forward the fixed-sum awards of £600,000 for overturned convictions and £75,000 for members of the GLO scheme is to try to accelerate the payment of compensation, which contradicts the claim that people are trying to slow things down.

I am meeting the Horizon compensation advisory board this afternoon to look at its recommendations for accelerating compensation. We have taken nothing off the table, and I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the House recently voted to extend the compensation deadline from 4 August, on the recommendation of Sir Wyn Williams, because we do not want people to be timed out of compensation. The maximum budget for compensation has, thus far, been set at £1 billion.

One of the issues we are trying to resolve urgently is the fact that people are reluctant to come forward to have their convictions overturned by the Court of Appeal, which is one of the reasons why we have not compensated enough people with convictions. We cannot compensate them until we overturn their convictions, which is exactly why we have proposed the legislation. Once we have done that, the door will be opened for compensation to flow freely. That is exactly what the right hon. Gentleman and I want to see.

There has never been any confusion in our mind about the need to deliver this quickly. I have focused on that every single day, both since I have been in office and before. I have never been resisted by anyone in my Department or in other parts of Government. There may be confusion, but I promise that there has been no confusion in Government.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I add my thanks to the Minister for his work in helping me to advise my constituents who have come forward asking many questions about the situation that they found themselves in. I am very pleased that the Government are working to compensate postmasters who were convicted in a court of law, but there are many individuals who worked for the Post Office and faced disciplinary

proceedings who did not end up in court. However, their professional reputations were trashed, they had no ability to find jobs when they were dismissed, and they were significantly out of pocket. The Post Office must know whom it disciplined; it must have records through the disciplinary procedure. Will the Minister outline what steps the Post Office has taken to contact those individuals so that they can get the compensation that they rightly deserve?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for so ably representing his constituents who have fallen victim to this scandal. People do not need to have gone before a court of law to be compensated. A postmaster with a contract with the Post Office can access either the Horizon shortfall scheme or the GLO. A prosecution of any form is not required to be able to claim through those schemes. I think he raises a point about somebody who worked for a postmaster or for the Post Office. That is separate and I am very happy to talk to him about that point, which has been raised by a number of Members. The Post Office would not necessarily know whether a postmaster who is working independently and runs an independent business had disciplined their members of staff, so it might not be as straightforward as he sets out. Nevertheless, I am happy to engage with him on that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The problem for many sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses is the quantification of what they are due to be repaid under the shortfall scheme, because payments were made out of their own pocket on several occasions over a long period. It is difficult in those circumstances for the claimants to know that they have been properly compensated, because the Post Office cannot tell them how much it should be repaying. To take a step back, is it not apparent that we cannot continue to leave the Post Office to mark its own homework and that the independent elements of scrutiny need to be strengthened? Somebody independent of Government and the Post Office must be put in charge of not just sorting this out, but doing so at speed.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with the right hon. Member's points, and he is right that quantification is very difficult. These situations are complex. It is about not just financial loss, but the personal impact, including the impact on mental health, physical health, reputation—all those things. In those situations, we should give the claimant the benefit of the doubt where this cannot be evidenced. In many cases, the records are no longer available.

We have independent people in all parts of the process. Members of the Horizon shortfall scheme include eminent KCs, such as Lord Garnier from the other place. We have Sir Ross Cranston overseeing the GLO scheme, and in the overturned convictions scheme, we have Sir Gary Hickinbottom—they are eminent retired High Court judges. I have great faith in their holding our feet to the fire and getting the right quantum of compensation to the right people at the right time. Indeed, the Horizon compensation advisory board, with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot, is also holding our feet to the fire, making sure that we do the right thing and deliver the right amounts of compensation. I will meet it again later today.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I know that the Minister means well and that he also understands that my affected constituents have had enough of being told that the Government are working hard to get them the justice they deserve and promises of swift compensation. One of my constituent's claims was submitted in October. She heard the Minister say in January that all claims would have offers within 40 days, but she still has not had an offer. She is right to conclude that the allegations of delaying payments to benefit the Treasury are true, is she not?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry that the hon. Member has taken that tone, but that is not true. As I set out, I think Henry Staunton has got this completely wrong. It is not the case, and there has never been any situation while I have been in this role—my predecessors have said the same—where we have tried to delay compensation. If the hon. Member wants to write to me, I am very happy to look at an individual case. Our commitment on the GLO scheme is that once we have received a full claim, we will respond to 90% of cases within 40 days. Some cases are more complex, but I am very happy to look at her specific case, as I have for other Members when people have contacted us directly. I am very keen to make sure that we get a resolution to her constituent's case as quickly as possible.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his tenacity in relation to this issue. When does he expect the inquiry to be completed? It seems that Fujitsu is hiding behind that inquiry and is unwilling to commit itself to compensating the taxpayer for the compensation the taxpayer will be paying.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. The inquiry is due to conclude by the end of this year and to report some time—early, I hope—next year. At that point, we will know more about Fujitsu's exact role and the amount of the final compensation bill. I welcome the fact that at the Select Committee Fujitsu acknowledged its moral obligation to the victims and the taxpayer in contributing to the compensation bill, and we will hold it to its promises in that regard.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The Minister is a perceptive man: he must see the problem of his reassuring the House from the Dispatch Box on a Thursday, after the Secretary of State's reassurances at the Dispatch Box on a Monday. The House and the country's patience is wearing thin. Many of the sub-postmasters, who are the victims in all this, including my constituents, have had their lives blighted and scarred for well over a decade. The delays to the compensation scheme are only exacerbating the pain and the problem. The public can see a pattern, whether it is the Horizon compensation scheme, the infected blood compensation scheme or the vaccine harm compensation, and it does not reflect well on the Government.

Kevin Hollinrake: I will be the first to admit that we want to deliver compensation more quickly than has happened in the past. As I said, 74% of claimants have received full and final compensation. It is absolutely right that the remaining 26%—as well as any more who come forward, and I am pleased that more are coming

[Kevin Hollinrake]

forward—receive that compensation too. It has never been a case of our trying to delay compensation. I do not believe there is a pattern here. These issues are complex but we are doing much to accelerate the process.

We did much to accelerate compensation payments prior to the ITV series, which is critical. The £600,000 fixed-sum award, which has been very effective in delivering rapid compensation, was brought in last October. We were looking at a blanket overturn in convictions some months before that series. We are trying to deliver the scheme at pace. It is not always straightforward to do that, but the hon. Gentleman has my commitment that we will do everything we can to deliver that compensation as quickly as possible.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Post Office Horizon scandal is now commonly called one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history—so many lives devastated, some lost. An inevitable consequence of that is to undermine public confidence in the Post Office, in technology, as misrepresented by the Post Office and Fujitsu, and in the Minister's Department, particularly following the performance—that is the right word for it—of the Secretary of State on Monday. What is he doing to restore public confidence in the Post Office, in technology and in his Department? Does he recognise that swift payment of compensation is an important part of that?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, it is the most important part of that. It is right that the Secretary of State responded to the serious and false allegations in the newspapers over the weekend. I hasten to add that those allegations were not about the Secretary of State but about a senior civil servant, who has been very clear that the allegations are false. The No. 1 way we can give confidence to those who might be submitting a claim, or have done so, is the fact that the processes do work for the vast majority of claimants. Of course, we want to improve the processes but we also want to reassure claimants that there is independence running through every single part of them. The No. 1 message we can give from the House is that if people come forward, they will be treated fairly and receive compensation as quickly as possible.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): How can the public have trust in the Government to stand up for whistleblowers when, by her own account, the Secretary of State attempted to cover up the departure of Henry Staunton?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not think that is an accurate portrayal of events at all. I am very happy to talk to the hon. Member about that particular issue. It was decided that Henry Staunton was no longer the right person to lead the Post Office. He then decided to make some allegations about what happened during his tenure, which have proven, in my view, to be completely false. I do not believe that Mr Staunton is a whistleblower. He spoke out, but I think the allegations he made have been clearly demonstrated to be not accurate. What the hon. Gentleman has just said is not an accurate portrayal of events. The No. 1 thing we should all focus on now is ensuring that people are properly compensated, that the

inquiry is allowed to do its work and identifies those responsible, and that those responsible—be they individuals or corporates—are held to account.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I have a constituent who was part of the group litigation order. They were not convicted, because the process was paused in 2015, but they have pretty much lost everything, having borrowed substantial amounts of money to make up the shortfall over a long period of time. They have now been told that the £75,000 up-front payment would be net of any interim payment that they have received. They are not confident to go forward with the full assessment, because of some of the highly publicised very low—derisory—compensations that have been offered. Can the Minister offer my constituent any reassurance that it is worthwhile pursuing that extensive and independently assessed claim? My assessment is that they have lost significantly more than £75,000.

Kevin Hollinrake: If that is the case, they should definitely submit a claim. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about her particular constituent. I am aware that some individuals have come forward and said that they received derisory offers. We urge them to engage with the rest of the process, which has not yet happened. There is an independent panel for the GLO scheme. Again, I would direct her to the actual performance of the GLO compensation scheme so far: 58 full claims received; 48 offers made; and 41 offers accepted without reference to the independent panel, which would tend to indicate that the offers being made are fair. However, I do understand that the people affected by this will not be satisfied by my assurances until they have gone through the process. I urge her to tell her constituent to do exactly that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I also add my thanks to the Minister for his very dedicated response to all the questions that we have asked and for his energy in trying to make this scheme a success for those who have been victimised? On those who have had to take out loans to repay moneys that they never owed anyway, will calculations be carried out to allow repayment of not simply substantive amounts but moneys borrowed from family, friends or banking institutions, and the interest that they have had to pay them?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for all the work that he has done in this area. I think he has spoken in every single debate that I have responded to in the House on this particular matter. [Laughter.] And every single debate across this House as well. That was also the case when we were working together, fighting for justice for banking victims. I pay tribute to all the work that he has done in this House in all these different areas.

On the hon. Member's question, the key principle is that somebody is returned to the position that they would have been in financially prior to the detriment taking place. That could take into account, for example, consequential losses, pecuniary losses—financial losses—as well as non-pecuniary losses, which are other impacts such as those on reputation or on health. The short answer to the hon. Member's question is, yes, absolutely.

Mr Speaker: That completes the urgent question. We now move to the next one.

Inter Faith Network Closure

11.13 am

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): Will the Minister make a statement about the closure that has been announced today of the Inter Faith Network?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of the Inter Faith Network? I am grateful for all his work as chair of the all-party group on faith and society and as a long-standing advocate for dialogue across faiths.

As the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said during an Adjournment debate in January, we know full well the role that faith communities play in our society. We are extremely supportive of efforts by faith groups and others to bring together people of different faiths and beliefs.

The Secretary of State wrote to the co-chairs of the Inter Faith Network on 19 January this year to inform them that he was minded to withdraw the offer of funding for the 2023-24 financial year. This was because of the appointment of a member of the Muslim Council of Britain to the board of trustees of the IFN. As the House will be aware, successive Governments have had a long-standing policy of non-engagement with the MCB. The appointment of an MCB member to the core governance structure of a Government-funded organisation therefore poses a reputational risk to the Government.

The Secretary of State invited the IFN to make representations on this matter, which it subsequently did. He carefully considered the points raised by the IFN before concluding that its points were outweighed by the need to maintain the Government's policy of non-engagement with the MCB, and the risk of compromising the credibility and effectiveness of that policy. Inter-faith work is valuable, but that does not require us to use taxpayers' money in a way that legitimises the influence of organisations such as the MCB.

The Department regularly reminds our partners, including the IFN, of the importance of developing sustainable funding arrangements rather than relying on taxpayers' money, which can never be guaranteed. The potential closure of the organisation is therefore a matter for the IFN, as an independent charity, and not the Government. The Government continue to be fully supportive of developing and maintaining strong relationships across faiths and beliefs.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Since 1987, the Inter Faith Network has been the UK's principal vehicle for inter-faith dialogue, supporting the annual Inter Faith Week, and activities and dialogue undertaken by inter-faith groups across the whole country. The network has been supported by Government funding for some 20 years. The IFN was told on 31 March last year, before the trustee appointment that the Minister referred to, that its funding would be ended from the following day. Why has the organisation been treated in that extraordinary way? Last July, the network received a letter from the Secretary of State to inform it that it would, after all, receive funding for the current financial year. That promise has never been honoured. Why not?

Given the debate in this Chamber yesterday, is it not extraordinarily stupid to be shutting down at this precise point our principal vehicle in the UK for Muslim-Jewish dialogue? Surely we need more, not to be shutting it down? Why has the Secretary of State not honoured the commitment that he made to me to meet me, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and the noble Lord Singh to discuss this matter before making his decision, and will the Minister pay tribute and express thanks to the trustees and officers of the Inter Faith Network for the very important contribution that they have made to UK national life over the last 37 years?

Felicity Buchan: I truly believe that inter-faith work makes a good contribution to our society. My constituency is one of the most diverse in the entire country, and I have on a number of occasions brought together my mosque, my synagogue, Christian churches and my gurdwara. We recognise the benefits of inter-faith activity. I thank the Inter Faith Network for its work; however, we have always been clear with that organisation and any other organisation or charity that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities funds that they need to put in place alternative sources of funding. As I said, the Government cannot fund this organisation when a trustee is part of the MCB.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I was contacted last year by my constituent Esmond Rosen of the Barnet Multi Faith Forum, who expressed concern about the imminent withdrawal of funding from the IFN. As we have heard, it looked in July as if the problem was resolved—at least for the financial year—so it is regrettable that we are in this position. I completely understand the importance of not engaging with organisations that have hard-line views, but surely we can find some compromise to keep the IFN in business, because it does incredibly valuable work to foster respect and mutual understanding between different faith groups.

Felicity Buchan: I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work on inter-faith matters. What has changed since July is the appointment in November of a trustee who is a member of the MCB. In terms of inter-faith work, there are so many examples of positive, thriving initiatives across the country that are bringing people together. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities funds a number of those partners, including Near Neighbours and Strengthening Faith Institutions, which organise local-level inter-faith events to foster community cohesion.

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

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing the urgent question.

Inter-faith and multi-faith dialogue are absolutely essential components of society, not only to resolve differences but to build strong and collaborative communities that are able to come together in times of need. Given recent events—the war and violence in Gaza—that is more important than ever. As I am sure the whole House recognises, the Government have a special responsibility to facilitate positive relationships

[Liz Twist]

between different faith communities, and although I appreciate that the Minister has now given some explanation of why they have chosen to withdraw funding for the IFN, outstanding questions remain.

Let me ask the Minister some straightforward questions. When was the decision to withdraw funding from the network made? What impact assessment was made, and what discussions were had about the vital need to continue to promote understanding about and between different faith groups, and to encourage co-operation? When was the Inter Faith Network notified of the decision? Does the Minister have plans to increase support for other groups to make up for any loss of provision arising from this decision?

Every Department will inevitably monitor and review the grants that they award, but the House should expect that to be done in the spirit of due process. As politicians, we have a responsibility to bring communities together. At a time when divisions are being exposed, I hope that the Minister can assure the House that the Government remain committed to inter-faith and multi-faith dialogue.

Felicity Buchan: I thank the hon. Member for her comments. Again, I stress the importance of inter-faith work. I see it in my own constituency; it is very important. The Government are already supporting other institutions that do such work.

The hon. Member asked specifically for timelines. The Secretary of State wrote to the IFN on 19 January saying that he was “minded to withdraw” the offer of funding in light of what we have discussed. He invited the Inter Faith Network to make representations to him on this matter, and he received its response on 22 January. After careful consideration of those representations, he confirmed that he wishes to withdraw the offer of funding to the Inter Faith Network for the reasons that we have discussed. He wrote to the co-chairs on 21 February to inform them of his decision. I stress again that the Department has been very clear that the Inter Faith Network should have been developing other sustainable sources of funding.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I am proud to represent the constituency in this country with the greatest adherence to religious faith, and many of those faiths are minority religions. We have a very strong inter-faith council that brings together people of all religions to sort out their differences and sort out tensions. I have had representations from the Jain community, the Zoroastrian community and others, expressing their concern that the majority religions—the larger religions in this country—will always be able to have their say because of their strength and power, but the minority religions will not. Given the Government’s decision to withdraw funding from the Inter Faith Network, what is going to take the place of that important organisation that brings together people of all faiths, enabling them to settle their differences?

Felicity Buchan: I thank my hon. Friend for everything he does with his faith communities in his constituency. As I have said, DLUHC continues to fund a range of partners, including Near Neighbours and Strengthening Faith Institutions; we believe in inter-faith work to strengthen community cohesion.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for having secured this urgent question; back in January, I secured an Adjournment debate urging the Government to think again about their decision. One of the things I find most concerning about how this decision has been handled is that, on occasion, journalists seem to have been in possession of letters from the Secretary of State to the Inter Faith Network at the same time as the IFN received them, or possibly before. That is no way to carry on. There has been very little attempt to have any serious conversations with the Inter Faith Network without those letters being in the public domain almost immediately. This work is more important now than ever before, so will the Minister think again about funding this organisation into the future? It is not too late.

Felicity Buchan: As I have said, very proper consideration went into this decision after we had heard representations from the Inter Faith Network. The decision on Government funding has now been made. We have always been clear that the Inter Faith Network needs to develop alternative sources of funding; institutions such as these cannot be solely reliant on Government funding.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is that not the point? This organisation has had about £2 million in income in the past five years, and three quarters of that income has come from the Government—from the taxpayer. Is not the message for other organisations that they should not be too dependent on taxpayer funding?

Felicity Buchan: My hon. Friend has expressed that point very well.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have been contacted by my constituent, Diana Francis—who is a Quaker—about her deep concern regarding the sudden withdrawal of funds for the Inter Faith Network. My inter-faith group in Bath has done invaluable work to bring communities together, nurturing tolerance, understanding, and the dialogue that is so important between people of different religious backgrounds. Can the Minister not see how this sudden decision to withdraw funding at a time of heightened tensions only drives division, and that people in my constituency are really concerned that there is nothing that will replace an organisation as unique as the Inter Faith Network?

Felicity Buchan: As I have said, we strongly welcome all of the inter-faith work that happens across our communities. We have always been clear that the Inter Faith Network needed to diversify its funding sources, and we were also very clear that funding would not be given after 2024 in any instance. That was communicated to the IFN back in July.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest: I am an active member of Christians in Parliament and a former parliamentary churchwarden of St Margaret’s. The closure of the Inter Faith Network is not seriously about a relatively small amount of money; it is about the message it sends at this time in our country, when all of us in this House are working for inter-faith dialogue, trying to cool the atmosphere

and address the problems we know about in many communities in this country. Psychologically, it is the wrong time and the wrong move. Please, for the good of our country and for community relations, will the Government think again?

Felicity Buchan: As I have said, inter-faith work is very important, and we fund a number of organisations to do it. I will not repeat the names; I have already mentioned them. This decision was taken because, as part of the core governance of the Inter Faith Network, there is a member of the MCB, with which the Government do not maintain relations.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I reiterate the points that other Members have made, particularly those of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). For this to happen in the current international context is absolutely outrageous. It is a politically obtuse decision. May I press the Minister on the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) about the risk assessment the Government have done to understand the impact on community relations?

Felicity Buchan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I have said, very careful consideration went into this decision. It has been a long-standing policy of successive Governments, first introduced in 2009 by a Labour Government, not to engage with the MCB.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I listened carefully to the Minister's response to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), when she said that the Government take inter-faith work very

seriously, but actions speak louder than words. Cutting off funding with just a few hours' notice is not helpful to this important organisation. What steps will DLUHC now take to support dialogue in any areas where it has been lost?

Felicity Buchan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I say, DLUHC funds a number of organisations that work very intensively at a local level to support inter-faith work and community cohesion.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. As images from outside this House last night made clear, it is very important that people of all faiths have a point at which to meet and to focus on the things that draw us together, rather than those that divide us. How will the Government and the Minister achieve that when this body, the Inter Faith Network, closes? How can we—that means all of us in this House together, and those outside this House—continue on journeys of embracing all faiths and increasing awareness of those faiths?

Felicity Buchan: I think understanding of faiths is incredibly important, and that is why we encourage inter-faith work, especially at a local level. I have already talked about what I do in my constituency, and I find it very valuable. In this particular instance, we cannot continue to fund the Inter Faith Network, but we do fund other organisations, and we wish them well. We have always made it clear to the Inter Faith Network that it needed to develop alternative sources of funding.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Business of the House

11.33 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I ask the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 26 February will include:

MONDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Consideration of a Humble Address following the return of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, followed by a general debate on farming.

TUESDAY 27 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill.

WEDNESDAY 28 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Pedicabs (London) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 29 FEBRUARY—Debate on a motion on language in politics on International Women's Day, followed by a general debate on Welsh affairs. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 1 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 March includes:

MONDAY 4 MARCH—Debate on a motion on risk-based exclusion following the recommendations from the House of Commons Commission, followed by a general debate on a subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 5 MARCH—Second Reading of the Automated Vehicles Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 6 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 7 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 8 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Lucy Powell: Yesterday was a very difficult day in the House of Commons, and for Mr Speaker personally, as he did his utmost to do what he thought was in the best interests of the House. We should all reflect on how we got to where we got to and accept our part in it. I welcome Mr Speaker's desire to resolve these matters in discussions with us and others across the House, and I am sure that the vast majority of Members accept his genuine and heartfelt commitment to this House, and that he always has the best intentions in making his decisions.

I do not want to go over those issues now, except to say that I am grateful to Mr Speaker for seeking to enable the widest possible range of views to be expressed. No one could have foreseen events unfolding as they did. As it was—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Let us not have a repeat of the behaviour last night. Can we listen to each other with respect? It is not good to have this shouting at the shadow Leader of the House—calmness, please.

Lucy Powell: As you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, it really is not a good look.

No one could have foreseen what happened. As it was, with the Scottish National party indicating that it would vote for our amendment, along with many Conservative Members, it was right that it should be put. The Government made an extraordinary decision to withdraw from the debate, raising a number of questions.

However, let us not forget that we were discussing the most serious of matters—those of life and death, war and conflict, and how we as a country, and as a Parliament, can play our part in bringing about a much-longed-for lasting peace, based on a two-state solution. It is to be regretted that at such a time we did not show ourselves at our best and that parliamentary antics were the story, not Parliament coming together with one voice, saying, "We want the fighting to stop, with an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and a meaningful process." We can all reflect on that. My final reflection is that I hope this place will have more time, not less, to debate and discuss these profound matters. It should not be left to Opposition day debates and urgent questions to get them aired in the first place.

As we debate these important matters, a long shadow is increasingly cast over us: threats, intimidation and security concerns—[*Interruption.*] I mean, it's remarkable. I know that this issue is of huge concern to Mr Speaker too; it is something that keeps him awake at night and is his first priority. I join him in praising the security team working to keep us safe. The legitimate lobbying of Members is part and parcel of our job and our democracy. That, at times, can be robust, and we can all disagree strongly, yet increasingly we are seeing a line being crossed.

I know that Members feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences for fear of attracting more unwanted attention, or because we do not want to come across as whingeing when we have such privileged positions, but during recess we saw another line being crossed, with the intimidation of a Member and their family at their family home. Reports that other organisations will be targeting the homes of MPs ahead of and during the election have caused huge anxiety. It is a totally unacceptable development. Oh, there is no noise for that one. It not only causes anxiety for MPs and their families, neighbours and staff; it is antidemocratic and is undoubtedly starting to affect people's decisions and behaviours. That is wrong, and we must do more to address it. Does the Leader of the House agree that the police should take a much more hard-line approach to so-called protests outside the homes of Members of Parliament? Can she confirm that the police should use the powers they have to stop such protests, and say whether further guidance can be issued?

Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to look at the causes, not just the symptoms, of this sometimes toxic and febrile environment? First, does she agree that we have a duty to be careful with our language and in how we conduct ourselves and challenge one another, and that we should avoid stoking division? Next, does she agree that more should be done, with extra powers given, to regulate social media and elsewhere to tackle the spread of misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes and other dangerous material? With the rise in antisemitism, Islamophobia and hate, can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will bring forward a hate crime and extremism strategy with urgency? Finally, does she agree that the defending democracy

taskforce should have a broader remit to defend democracy from threats within our borders, and that we should take a more cross-party approach as we head towards what is likely to be a very testing general election?

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I join with all those who have paid tribute to Alexei Navalny? In the wake of an assassination attempt, he returned to stand with his fellow countrymen against Putin's tyranny, knowing full well what that might mean for him and his family. He put his country and his countrymen before himself.

I remind the House that the Government will again outline our position on the very serious matter of Israel and Gaza in a written ministerial statement soon.

I join the hon. Lady in her thanks to the security services, particularly those of the House authorities, for keeping us safe. I point to our record on adapting legislation to cope with the evolving nature of some pretty awful protests that not just MPs but the general public have been putting up with. There is also the work we have been doing in the House on social media, the new services in the House of Commons Library and the defending democracy taskforce. It would be nice to have the Opposition's support on those matters, in particular on the legislation that we will bring forward.

I want to say that this House will never bow to extremists, threats or intimidation. It has not, it will not, it must not. I ask all Members not to do this House a further disservice by suggesting that the shameful events that took place yesterday were anything other than party politics on behalf of the Labour party.

Let me bring the House up to date. Two significant things happened yesterday, and I am not sure all hon. Members have clocked them. First, it fell to those on the Government Benches to defend the rights of a minority party in this House. If the hon. Lady cannot bring herself to reflect on the appalling consequences of her party's actions yesterday—if she cannot rise above the narrow and immediate needs of her weak and fickle leader to fulfil her duties to this House as its shadow Leader—perhaps she might like to reflect on the damage her party has done to the office of the Speaker. I would never have done to him what the Labour party has done to him.

Secondly, we have seen into the heart of Labour's leadership. Nothing is more important than the interests of the Labour party. The Labour party before principle; the Labour party before individual rights; the Labour party before the reputation and honour of the decent man who sits in the Speaker's Chair; the Labour party before fairness, integrity and democracy; in Rochdale, the Labour party before a zero-tolerance policy on antisemitism; and—many of us knew this about the Labour leader; I saw it in his frustration at our country getting the best deal possible when we left the EU—the Labour party before country.

I must tell the hon. Lady that the people of this country do not have a copy of the Standing Orders of this House lying around their home, and they have not been chatting about parliamentary procedure over their cornflakes this morning, but they value fairness and they want the rights of all to be protected. They cannot abide bullies and cheats. They cannot abide people who trash our nation or fail to defend its interests, or the institutions that protect them. Government Members often rightly criticise the former leader of the Labour

party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), for the things he stood for and for being wrong on matters, but I will say one thing about him: at least he thought he was right on them. The current leader of the Labour party is quite happy to do what he knows to be wrong. He puts the interests of the Labour party before the interests of the British people. It is the Labour leader who does not get Britain, and the past week has shown that he is not fit to lead it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I suggest that the priority of the House should be to command the confidence of our voters? I do not think that they, or indeed a majority in the House, feel that we resolved anything on the question of Gaza and Israel yesterday, so may I suggest to my right hon. Friend that the Government take up the suggestion made by the shadow Leader of the House and hold a debate on the subject in Government time, on a Government motion, so that the motion and every amendment can be considered? That would draw a line under this matter.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestion. It is sad that what happened yesterday with regard to the Speaker happened when the SNP was trying to hold an Opposition day debate on the most serious of issues. I heard what he said, and will be speaking to business managers.

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

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Yesterday was incredibly disappointing, from our point of view. It was meant to be an Opposition day, and it was one of only three times in a calendar year when our party gets an opportunity to put forward its business to the House. I do not think that what we came forward with was a surprise to anyone. We were allocated an Opposition day four or five weeks ago, but totally understandably, it had to be moved when the Northern Ireland Assembly was reconvening. At that stage, there were conversations, and I was asked when people would have sight of the Gaza motion that we would bring forward, so it is quite extraordinary for anyone to suggest that they did not know we might come forward with a motion on that topic. When it got to our Opposition day—one of the very few times when we can put forward our policies—our voice was silenced: our motion could not be voted on. That is incredibly disappointing for me and a significant number of my constituents, and those of my hon. Friends and hon. Members from across the Chamber who wanted to support the motion.

Given that, in effect, we did not get an Opposition day yesterday, can we be allocated an alternative date? As others have said, we lost a significant amount of time at the start of the debate, and because of the Speaker's decision, unfortunately we lost 40 minutes at the end of the debate. That meant that colleagues were cut short, and some withdrew from the debate. What consideration will the Leader of the House give to that suggestion—and, beyond that, to protection for the smaller parties, so that they are not simply railroaded for the political purposes of either of the bigger parties?

I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, but it is critical that all Members of this place, whatever their position or status, be protected from

[Owen Thompson]

bullying and intimidation. If reports from many media outlets are to be believed, it is entirely unacceptable that significant pressure was put on Mr Speaker to come to his decision yesterday. What steps will the Leader of the House take to investigate those very serious claims? If there is any substance to them, it is an affront to democracy that a party leader can direct decisions of the Chair of this place.

As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am, as Chief Whip, involved in a number of conversations on how business comes forward. I had direct assurances that I would have a vote on the words of my motion yesterday. Everyone knew well in advance what the potential outcome would be at the end of yesterday's debate, so to suggest that no one knew is utter nonsense. The reason we are in this position is that convention and the Standing Orders of this House were overruled, against the advice of the Clerks. That only happened because the Labour party wanted to be dug out of a hole. That is unacceptable.

Penny Mordaunt: It is no secret to anyone who regularly tunes into these sessions that frequently I disagree with Scottish National party Members on every point that they raise, but they have a right to say these things on the Floor of the House and to debate their issues. If I were able to speak in yesterday's debate, I would have been critical of how they brought forward their motion, and perhaps of their motives for doing so, but it was their right to do as they did. Our Standing Orders protect the ability of minority parties in particular to have those debates. Yesterday's decision has serious consequences for minority parties and for the Government; for instance, our amendment was the only one that mentioned the violence against women and girls that has taken place. It is important to ensure that the rights of minority parties are protected. I am very sympathetic to the SNP being given more time, and to it being knocked off the Labour party's allocation.

With regard to the serious matter of Mr Speaker, he came to the House yesterday and apologised. I know that he is meeting all parties on this matter, and I will meet him later today.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that I represent Romford in the London Borough of Havering, a historical Essex market town. Will she please arrange for a debate to take place on the Floor of the House about the fairness of local government funding? My borough is nearing bankruptcy because of the failure to have a fair funding system. We are also fleeced by the Mayor of London, who takes huge sums of money from places like Havering to fund the Greater London Authority. Can we have a debate about reform to local government in Greater London, and fairer funding for boroughs such as Havering—and hopefully a referendum, so that we can go back to being fully part of Essex?

Penny Mordaunt: I welcome my hon. Friend back to his place. He is quite right to raise the matter of pressures on his council, particularly those born of the actions of the Mayor of London, whose budget is in crisis. Local government has had about a 7% uplift across the board, but London boroughs clearly face local issues and particular

pressures because of the Mayor's mismanagement. My hon. Friend will know that the next questions to the relevant Secretary of State are on 4 March.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and, in particular, for announcing the Backbench Business debates for next Thursday. I think the Leader of the House will be aware that between now and Easter, the Backbench Business Committee has little or no time to allocate for debates in the Chamber beyond next Thursday, due to other business encroaching into Thursdays, including the Budget debate. I therefore wonder whether, if there is any additional time between now and the Easter recess, the Leader of the House could tip me the wink as soon as possible, and if she could tip us the wink, via the normal channels, when the date of the estimates day debates is known. We would really appreciate that, so that we can get the wheels in motion.

Of course, we continue to welcome applications for debates in Westminster Hall on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Our Committee has written to the Procedure Committee to ask for a change to Standing Orders, so that Westminster Hall debates on Thursdays can begin at 12.30 pm instead of 1.30 pm. It seems that the start time has not caught up with changes to the parliamentary timetable over the years; the change might facilitate better attendance at debates on a Thursday afternoon.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman, again, for his advert for the Backbench Business Committee. He knows that I am keen to give him time, and early sight of the allocation, so that he can fill in slots for debate, and will certainly make him aware of the dates for estimate day debates. I hope to be able to update him very shortly.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is hard for market towns to thrive without an open bank? That is why I hope she will join me in congratulating the people and businesses in Bacup in Lancashire, as well as Link, Cash Access UK and the ATM network, which have worked with me to deliver on my pledge to bring banking back to Bacup. I hope we can find time in this House to have a debate on the new banking hub that is opening in a fantastic historical market town in Lancashire.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his constituents who have worked to ensure that these services continue. It is understandable, as banks look to cut costs, that they give up bricks and mortar, but that does not mean the disappearance of those vital services from our communities. Well done to all. I am sure that many hon. Members will ask him for advice in the future.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Devon and Cornwall police have been in special measures since 2022, after multiple failings. Last week, it was revealed that seven current and former women police officers are suing the force for failing to deal with rapes, beatings and psychological torture by male colleagues over a number of years. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a

Home Office Minister to make a statement reassuring the people of Devon and Cornwall and serving women police officers that these allegations will be thoroughly and independently investigated, and any wrongdoing punished?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this terrible situation. He will know that the next Home Office questions is on 26 February, and I encourage him to raise it directly with the Home Secretary there, but given the serious nature of this issue I will make sure the Home Secretary has heard what he has said today and that at the very least his office is updated.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the real issue of the events of the last 24 hours is not the party political shenanigans suggested by the shadow Leader of the House, but that this House appears cowed by threats of violence and intimidation? The mother of Parliaments appears weakened and diminished as a result. We have allowed our streets to be dominated by Islamist extremists, and British Jews and others to be too intimidated to walk through central London week after week. Now we are allowing Islamist extremists to intimidate British Members of Parliament. This is wrong. It has to stop. Will my right hon. Friend organise a debate on extremism and how we tackle this challenge, which is one of the central issues facing our generation?

Penny Mordaunt: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. British Jews are suffering a grotesque level of hatred and abuse, which quite frankly shames our country. He is absolutely right that there cannot be any tolerance or quarter given to individuals who threaten and try to prevent Members of Parliament conducting their business and honouring the obligations they have to their constituents to use their judgment when they come into this place. He will know that there is a tremendous amount of work going on with the House and within the Government to ensure that we protect democracy and protect all communities in Britain. I will make sure the Home Secretary has heard his remarks today.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is quite a ticklish question. I am the longest-serving Member on the Opposition Benches and I have seen scenes like those we saw yesterday on, I think, only one other occasion. Indeed, it was shameful that the BBC had to blank off the proceedings at one stage because of the crude and vile language that was coming from one end of the Chamber. Can we seriously review what went wrong yesterday and get it sorted? I have every confidence —[*Interruption.*] Can I be allowed to say this? We should learn from what happened yesterday, rather than carry on the awful rowdy behaviour we saw.

As this is business questions, may we have an early debate on people up and down the country, mainly in the north of England but also in Wales, who have been fleeced by lawyers and legal companies over cavity wall insulation? People who have got bad cavity wall insulation are being absolutely ruined and are losing their homes because of predatory lawyers.

Penny Mordaunt: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I do not think there is any doubt about what took place yesterday. It was completely shameful. I do not think

there is any doubt about the procedural consequences—if Members are still in the dark about that, the Clerk of the House has provided some very clear advice. I do want to take the heat out of this. I think that we do need to reflect on what has happened, but I can tell him, as Leader of the House, that I will defend the rights of all Members to air views and the right voices of Opposition parties to be heard in this Chamber. It was to my great sadness that it fell to me yesterday to do that for this place. With regard to the other matter the hon. Gentleman raises, I shall make sure the Secretary of State has heard what he has said.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a point of order that is germane to the proceedings.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Points of order will come after the Select Committee statement. If the hon. Gentleman had wanted to intervene in business questions, I would of course have called him if he had been here at the beginning, but I am afraid that I have to direct him to make his point of order at the end of the Select Committee statement.

While I am about it, it might be useful for me to remind right hon. and hon. Members that any criticism of the Speaker or the Deputy Speakers can be made only on a substantive motion. Bearing in mind what the Leader of the House said about taking the temperature down, I wanted to remind Members that that is the case.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In order to be here at this time, I have delayed giving a personal statement to the police on the latest individual who thinks that Members of this House are fair game to be harassed, stalked and threatened. It is clear that the lack of transparency over the reasons why we sometimes vote one way or another means that our votes are often wilfully misinterpreted and used to drum up hatred against parliamentarians, and that that perverts our democracy.

Let me make a suggestion. The European Parliament has many flaws, but in that place it is possible to place a written explanation of vote on the Parliament's website, beside one's voting record. The Opposition and Government spokesmen do it on behalf of their parties, and any individual Member can submit their own written explanation of why they have voted the way they have. It prevents the votes from being misinterpreted, it keeps Members safer, and it stops democracy being perverted. Will my right hon. Friend take that idea on board, stop the Opposition wilfully misinterpreting our votes on Opposition days, and help to keep our democracy safe?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that I speak on behalf of all in the House when I say how sorry we are to hear that my right hon. Friend is having to endure the abuse that she has described. As I said at the start of my statement, this House will never kowtow to extremists or intimidation, and right hon. and hon. Members take their responsibilities in this place and to their constituents extremely seriously.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her very helpful suggestion, and I will certainly look at that. Let me just say, however, that while we can update practices and do other things in this place to help members of the public understand what is actually going on and draw clarity

[Penny Mordaunt]

in relation to what our proceedings are focused on and what we are voting on and why, we are all obliged to act with honour and integrity and to support democracy in this place. I have no jurisdiction over Opposition attack ads, and if there is any reflection to be done following the last 24 hours, I ask the Opposition to reflect on that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I add my thanks to the security services who are working so hard and effectively to keep us all safe? They did sterling work at a community meeting that I held last week in my constituency, and I thank them very much for that.

As the Leader of the House will know, I am a member of the Restoration and Renewal Programme Board. We all love this magnificent place of work and appreciate being able to work in this wonderful Palace of Westminster, but the structure of the place is not in a good way. As has been said during the programme board's meetings, it needs open heart surgery. [Interruption.] I am talking about the structure of this place. For much of last year, my colleagues on the board and I were working hard to identify a shortlist of options for delivering restoration and renewal that we felt would command the support of Members throughout the House. Given all the work we have put in, it is frustrating that we are still no closer to making progress. We need to maintain momentum and get on with R&R. When and how will Members be updated on the various options and proposals so that we can move forward and restore the building? This is important work that needs to be done to keep us and everyone who works here safe.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady and all those who have been serving on both the programme board and the client board. The House will be pleased to know that great progress has been made. We have been able to get some real grip and granularity into the programme, and we also have a number of projects that we can get on with while we are looking at decant options and other things that will take more time. She knows that the next client board meeting will be on Monday and will look to take some of those decisions, but this House needs to be sighted on programmes that are going forward and on the options, and it must have a say in those too.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the House was right to withdraw from yesterday's debate when it was clear that conventions were being broken. Those who put pressure on the Speaker to break with convention should reflect on their actions. If it was because Members of Parliament could be intimidated or at risk for how they voted, that is even worse and actually quite frightening. Having said that, the Speaker has said he made a mistake, and the House relies on us having confidence in the Speaker. We should move on now, and I would recommend that we do not put in motions of no confidence. Instead, we should restore our reputation as soon as possible by having a proper debate on a Government motion, whereby all amendments can be considered.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he has said and the tone he has struck in saying it. The Speaker came to this House last night, took

responsibility for his actions and apologised. He is reflecting on what has happened, and he is meeting all parties. I hope that everyone who was involved in the events yesterday, and in the consequences of them, will also reflect on their actions and take responsibility for them.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Charlie McKerrow has campaigned for redress for victims of sodium valproate and fed into the Baroness Cumberlege report, which, as far back as 2020, recommended a compensation scheme. Another constituent, Gillian McQueen, has contacted me. She states:

"I will not be around forever, I need to know my children will be financially secure."

The Patient Safety Commissioner has also recommended that compensation be paid, and has submitted a report to the Government. When will the Government design a compensation scheme for victims of sodium valproate? Will they confirm that it will be a UK-wide scheme, so that the children of my constituents get the compensation and support they deserve?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The report was recently published, and the Government have committed to respond to it very swiftly. He will know that the next questions to the Secretary of State are on 5 March, but I will make sure that the Government have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said and update his office.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House will have heard me ask the Prime Minister a question yesterday about the threat to food security posed by a string of monstrous pylons that will run down the east coast and through some of the most productive farmland in the country. Simultaneously, we face applications for huge solar plants on the best land we have, which feeds the nation; 30% of our fresh produce is grown on this land. Given her exemplary answer to me last week, will the Leader of the House, in that vein, arrange for a meeting with the relevant Secretaries of State and a delegation—inevitably led by me—of affected colleagues, so that we can immediately put an end to these threats to our food security?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the campaign work he is doing on this very important issue. It is an important matter not just for his constituents directly affected by it, because it has implications for our food security if large swathes of high-quality agricultural land are not being used to grow food and build this nation's resilience. He will know that the next questions to the Secretary of State are on 14 March, but I will write this afternoon on my right hon. Friend's behalf and encourage a meeting with a Minister and all colleagues affected by this issue.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I have to say that I was ashamed to be a Member of Parliament last night. However, I understand from what the Leader of the House has said this morning that she agrees that we should observe the Nolan principles. I was going to ask for a debate on that matter, but given that the Chair of the Liaison Committee and others are calling for a debate on Gaza, could she confirm that there will be a debate on Gaza in Government time, which will allow all of us to vote?

Penny Mordaunt: The issue of substance yesterday is a very important and serious matter. I can assure the House that there will be ample opportunities in the future to debate it on the Floor of the House, and I will announce further business in the usual way. I gently say to the hon. Lady that I am not ashamed to be a Member of Parliament, and I was not ashamed to be a Member of Parliament yesterday. I think if I were a member of the Labour party, I would be ashamed of that.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is with regret that I have tabled early-day motion 412.

[That this House has no confidence in Mr Speaker.]

May I ask the Leader of the House about a procedural point, as my EDM continues to gather names this morning? Could she confirm from the Dispatch Box the process by which that motion can be brought as a substantive motion to the Floor of the House in order to be debated and voted on?

Penny Mordaunt: The Government will always listen carefully to the views of this House, and the Speaker needs to command its confidence. The future of the speakership is therefore a matter for Members of the House, not the Government, but we will of course listen to any requests for debates in Government time. Members will also know other routes by which they can secure a debate. I reiterate that Mr Speaker has made himself available to speak to all the parties, and I am sure that his door is always open to Members individually too.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Yesterday I took the opportunity to pop into the Young Lives vs Cancer event, which was sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). I met a very inspiring young person, Amy, who told me about the obstacles that young people face when they receive a cancer diagnosis. Closer to home, my dear Uncle Tommy has just received a terminal diagnosis and been given four months to live. He is facing that news with great courage and determination, and with his usual sense of humour. Would the Leader of the House like to join me in sending the House's best wishes to both Amy and my uncle, Tommy Aitchison, who is back home in Viewpark? Could we have a debate on the Floor of the House about cancer outcomes for all people across all nations of the UK? The reality is that we must do better from the start to the very end for people who have a cancer diagnosis.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that I speak for all Members of the House in sending our good wishes and support to the hon. Gentleman's uncle and his loved ones following that very sad news. Cancer outcomes have improved dramatically over the past few years, thanks to our incredible science base, our third sector, which supports such research so critically, and of course the work going on in our NHS and the organisations that support it, but there is more to do. I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said today, and all our good wishes go to his family.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Collectively, last night was not our finest hour, but Mr Speaker has apologised to the House for his role in what happened, showing evident contrition, and I think we

should respect that. If we err in this Chamber, we are expected to apologise to him, and we hope that he will accept our apology in good faith. I think that we should pay him the same courtesy.

Speaking purely personally, I well remember everything that Mr Speaker did to help me, and all of us, when our great friend—my best friend—was murdered by, as it happened, an Islamic extremist, who told his trial that he did it because of how David voted in the House of Commons. Mr Speaker went the extra mile to help us all deal with that tragedy. Look at that plaque behind me.

We should put last night right by rerunning the debate in Government time. Mr Speaker is a decent man, as the Leader of the House said; he is not the villain here. We should rerun the debate, and he should be in his rightful place presiding from the Chair. We are lucky to have him, aren't we?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he has said. I think there is no need for me to add to that; he said it very well.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is rare that I find myself in complete agreement with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) but, on a personal level, Mr Speaker—both as Speaker and as a Deputy Speaker—has always taken my security concerns, and those of other Members, very seriously.

Despite the House's disagreements, I know that my constituents in Cardiff South and Penarth are not interested in debates about procedure; they are interested in the facts on the ground in Gaza. There is sincere concern about the suffering and horror that we have seen. Could the Leader of the House urgently provide some updated guidance for how all Members can respond to concerns raised by constituents who have family in Gaza? Many of us have been trying to deal with individual cases, as well as trying to support colleagues, and we need guidance for British citizens trapped in Gaza, for citizens of allies and other countries with which we have good diplomatic relations, and for those who do not have citizenship of other places. What can be done to support those who are, for example, being denied healthcare or are in perilous situations? We need urgent guidance so that we can all help to deal with the real issue, which is the suffering and horror we see in Gaza.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing us back to the matter of substance. He will know that I have worked with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and particularly its consular teams, to ensure that Members can get information fast, particularly during recess, when dealing with cases in which people are in peril or immediate danger. I will touch base with the FCDO and with Members after business questions to ensure that all the advice and guidance is up to date.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have been pleased to help obtain additional funding for urgent A&E services at Northwick Park Hospital, on which many of my constituents rely for their healthcare. The Northwick Park, St Mark's, Central Middlesex and Ealing hospitals now have a collective backlog of £56 million-worth of urgent repairs. It is clear that hospitals across the country

[*Bob Blackman*]

are crumbling. We need to have a debate in Government time on what we can do collectively to ensure that we have the medical facilities in this country that the public rightly demand and that we have a duty to provide.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued campaigning to ensure not only that his constituents have the healthcare professional uplift that they needed, and that they now enjoy, but that the buildings from which those professionals operate are fit for purpose. The next Health and Social Care questions are on 5 March. I know my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate on this issue, and I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what he said this afternoon.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is important that we discuss what happened last night in a moderate, reasonable and respectful way. We all have lessons to learn, but in order for those lessons to be learned we must be clear about what actually happened and the precise chain of events, so I would like to ask the Leader of the House a simple question: why did she decide to withdraw the Government's amendment?

Penny Mordaunt: I direct the hon. Gentleman to the advice of the Clerk of the House and the consequences that stemmed from it. The result of yesterday's decision is that minority parties would never be able to vote on their own motion in an Opposition day debate. That was a break with the procedure of this House, and I know there are ongoing conversations between Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers about how we can ensure that the office of Speaker is never again put upon in the way it was yesterday. We all know what happened yesterday. If the hon. Gentleman is not aware, he should talk to those on his Front Bench.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The most worrying thing about yesterday is that Members were being intimidated for what they say and how they vote, because of fears about their physical safety and that of their staff and family. Added to that, we have a climate of hard-line support that has seen antisemitism on the streets of our capital city. My constituents from the Jewish community feel intimidated about coming into the centre of London, so may we have a debate on how to address this intolerable climate? We cannot go on like this.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this very important point. It is beneficial to air these matters and to ensure that we focus the services of the House and other resources, such as the police, on protecting Members of Parliament when they go out to perform their daily duties for the people who sent them here. I know that people often like to beat up on Members of Parliament and what they do, but we are sent here by the British people. What we do protects their interests, and we have to be free to use our judgment to vote in the way that we think is in their interests. Anything that interferes with that is an assault on democracy, and we need to ensure that Members and the public can go about their daily lives and do their duty for their country without intimidation or worse.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If we are to believe Mr Speaker that his selection of amendments yesterday was to allow the widest possible debate, can the Leader of the House explain why he did not select the Lib Dem amendment? The reality is that the SNP was stitched up by yesterday's deal with the Labour party. Does she share my incredulity that a Speaker who insists that we cannot speak in this place without wearing a tie now wants us to move on and modernise?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for affording me another opportunity to direct Members to the Clerk's advice. Anyone who peddles the line that this decision would have led to a wider debate has not read that advice.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I met the Watford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association last year to discuss the challenges faced by our brilliant taxi drivers. The closure of Watford's Pryzm nightclub in January is a devastating blow to the local taxi trade. How can I encourage ride-hailing companies such as Bolt to consider including drivers from the Watford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association on their black cab scheme, which would contribute greatly to the local night-time economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising awareness and for demonstrating that a thriving night-time economy is vital for local taxi drivers, and the reverse is also true. I encourage him to seek a debate in which the Minister can hear his views; he knows how to apply for that. Our taxi drivers play an essential role in our communities, and he will know that the next Transport questions is on 21 March.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of my constituents, including members of the Sikh community and local gurdwaras, have written to me regarding their serious concerns about the safety of protesting farmers in their attempt to march towards the Indian capital, New Delhi. Yesterday, a protester was killed during a reported stand-off with police, where the cause of death was

"a bullet wound to the head."

The Punjab health Minister confirmed that a second boy also sustained a bullet wound but "luckily he has survived", with another 13 people being treated for injuries in hospitals.

The BBC have reported today that X—Twitter—admitted to being compelled, against their wishes, to take down the legitimate posts and accounts of activists. Does the Leader of the House agree that freedom of expression, the safety of protesters and their human rights must be protected? What representations have the Government made to their Indian counterparts to that effect?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that very serious situation. Of course, the Government support the right to protest in safety. I shall ensure the Foreign Office has heard his concerns and ask the relevant Minister to get in touch with his office.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is good to see you in the Chair. May we have a debate on rogue councils? Mid Devon District Council, which I have talked about many times, has now threatened its former leaders—other parties as well—with legal action for disputing what has gone on with the 3 Rivers development. There has been a lack of scrutiny and a lack of accountability. This is millions of pounds, not thousands. The chair of scrutiny, believe it or not, had a party on public funds—the chief exec is up to his neck in this—and the leader of the council, who, as we know, packs perfume for a living, is unprepared to do the work that a council leader should do, regardless of persuasion. Can we please have a debate in Government time about councils' responsibility for dealing with situations that have gone wrong and not suing their former colleagues who are trying to do their job?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is very diligent in pursuing these matters at all opportunities, including business questions. I suggest that the issue is perhaps best raised with the Secretary of State on 4 March in departmental questions.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): A lot has been said about the events of yesterday, but let us not forget that the outcome was that this Parliament has given a clear mandate on our position on Gaza—*[Interruption.]* That is very important.

Let me move on to a constituency matter. People in Oldham work very hard for a house for their family to live in and they expect security for that, but some are having the roof literally taken from over their heads, including Mr Potter through an agreement with A Shade Greener, a solar installation company. Thousands of people are affected by companies who were not clear about the terms and conditions and are now taking out loans on the properties, making remortgaging almost impossible. Can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of mis-selling in the solar industry?

Penny Mordaunt: On the hon. Member's latter point, I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what he said, and he can put that to Ministers directly on 27 February. With regard to his former point, it is in the interests of the British people that democracy is protected. As I said, the interests of the Labour party are trumping democracy.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Yesterday, we saw the politicisation of the situation in Gaza by SNP Members to engineer an issue within the Labour party—their Opposition day, their right. Labour Members were reportedly concerned about their security, as we are, but the Labour party frequently confects issues towards the Conservative side. We have seen Conservative Members called “scum” by a Labour Member, inside and outside this Chamber. We have been accused of starving children and dumping sewage in our seas. These are false assertions to generate intolerable hatred, death threats and abuse against Conservative MPs. Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether the Conservatives have ever asked for special treatment or convention to be overturned to protect us? Does that illustrate that both sides of the House, not just this side, need to take a responsible approach to debate in this House and public discourse, and in public life?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has made her point extremely well. Whether those debates were on storm overflows or free school meals, when Conservative Members faced very unfair slurs and intimidation, we did not ask that the procedures of the House be upended and put pressure on a decent man in the Speaker's Chair to change those processes. That is because it is at the heart of our party that we put the interests of this country first. One of those interests is that democracy in this place is protected.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Last evening, we saw the best of this House in its ability to debate, and we also saw the worst of this House as it descended into farce. I think I speak for everyone in the Chamber now, and yesterday, when I express my deep sorrow that that was able to happen, given the content of what we were debating.

Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, it descended into farce because of a decision that you—and you alone—made to ignore the advice that was given to you by the Clerks. In doing so, on the Opposition day of the Scottish National party, my colleagues and I were denied the ability to vote on a matter which is of grave concern to us, and which, over recent months, we have sought to raise in this Chamber at every available opportunity. It ultimately turned into a Labour Opposition day. That, quite frankly, is not acceptable. As I have expressed to you privately, prior to today's proceedings, we do not, on these Benches, believe that you can continue in your role as Speaker. We do not have confidence in your ability to do so. I would therefore welcome clarity, either from you or the Leader of the House, about how we can best facilitate the earliest possible vote in this Chamber to that effect.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I hope that he can see, in my actions yesterday, that I am a servant of this House, and that even though it may not be in the Government's narrow interests to do so, I will protect the rights of all minority parties to be able to air their views in this place and ensure that the parties who are afforded Opposition day debates can have those debates in the fullest sense and have votes on their motions. We create the rules of this House and the Speaker serves at our behest. Given the range of views that have been expressed on the Floor of the House today—many interventions have been supportive of the Speaker, pointing out the pressures that were put on him yesterday—I think that we should take time to reflect. Mr Speaker has said that his door is open to all parties and individual Members, as is mine. But as I said, the Government will listen to this House. I am a servant of this House and I will do its bidding.

Mr Speaker: I will also come in at this point. I reiterate that I made a judgment call that did not end up in the position where I expected it to. I regret it and I apologise to the SNP—*[Interruption.]* Just bear with me. I apologise to the House. I made a mistake: we do make mistakes and I own up to mine. We can have an SO24 to get an immediate debate because the debate is so important to the House.

I will defend every Member in this House. Every Member matters to me in this House. As has been said, I never, ever want to go through a situation where I pick

[Mr Speaker]

up a phone to find a friend, on whatever side, has been murdered by a terrorist. I also do not want another attack on this House—I was in the Chair on that day. I have seen, I have witnessed. I will not share the details, but the details of the things that have been brought to me are absolutely frightening for all Members of the House, on all sides. I have a duty of care and I say that. If my mistake is looking after Members, I am guilty. I am guilty because—[*Interruption.*]
—I have a duty of care that I will carry out to protect people; it is the protection that led me to make a wrong decision. With the risk being put on all Members at the moment, I had serious meetings yesterday with the police on these issues and on threats to politicians as we head towards an election. I do not want anything to happen again.

Yes, I will apologise, as I always will when I make a mistake as I did. I offer an SO24—that is within my gift and power—but I will also do whatever it is to protect anybody in this Chamber or anybody who works in this House. That is my duty of care.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I was in Israel last week meeting with hostage families, survivors and friends. I actually felt safer in Israel than I do in this country at this moment in time. I have two reflections on that visit and on what happened yesterday. First, nobody in this House has any business or agency at all in telling the state of Israel where it is able to operate to seek to rescue hostages who are being raped by the Islamic terrorists who hold them. Secondly, if we have a rerun of yesterday's debate, exactly the same thing will happen again and Members will not vote with their hearts because they are frightened and scared.

What do we expect? For months I have been standing here talking about the people on our streets who are a demanding deaths for Jews, jihad and intifada, as the police stand by and allow that to happen. Last night, a genocidal call, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free", was projected on to this building. That message says no Jew is welcome in the state of Israel—in that land. This is going to continue to happen because we are not dealing with it.

Will the Leader of the House explain what will be different if we have a rerun of the debate? How will hon. Members be able to vote with their hearts and consciences? Too many will not do that at the moment because of the threats we are receiving—threats that in some cases are telling us to leave this country and that we or our families should be subjected to pain and death?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. I do not think there is any Member of this House who has not received threats, intimidation and, increasingly, death threats to them and members of their family. I have had many such threats and other hon. Members have spoken about their experiences on the Floor of the House. We can do many things with regard to physical security, and I again thank the House authorities for what they did yesterday. The matter he raises of the projections on to this building last night is being looked at by the Speaker's Office, parliamentary security, the Metropolitan police and Westminster City Council, which will be responsible for pursuing prosecutions.

I say again to all Members of the House: we are elected to carry out our duty and take our responsibilities seriously. It is often a frightening task, but we cannot let those threats change this place or what we think is the right course of action. If we do that, they will have won. They will never win. We have to show courage and our constituents need us to show courage on these matters. We must vote and do what we think is right.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Despite huge and growing public interest and concern over excess deaths, there remains a reluctance to engage with the issue, or in some cases even to acknowledge it, by Front Benchers across this Chamber. How convenient that this week the Office for National Statistics announced it has suddenly found a large increase in the UK population—not newborns, but older people. Where have these seniors been hiding for all these years? The effect of that increase will be to suppress and mask the number of excess deaths. Can we have a debate on rebuilding trust in public health policy? We will not do that by fudging the figures at the ONS, which are now in complete conflict with those issued by other Government Departments, such as the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.

Penny Mordaunt: I am amazed that the hon. Gentleman is asking the Government Front Benchers for a debate while at the same time asserting that we will do everything we can not to have one. He knows how to apply for a debate. He has had many debates—Westminster Hall debates and Adjournment debates—and he is able to ask questions in the House. Many Members from all parts of the House take these issues extremely seriously. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on what has been said on the Floor of the House today about our conduct and what we say about other Members, and the security consequences.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): E-bikes and e-scooters are becoming increasingly popular as a mode of transport, but I am concerned that last year London Fire Brigade attended 155 e-bike fires—an increase of 78% on 2022—and 28 blazes involving e-scooters. Three people have lost their lives and approximately 60 people have been injured in those fires. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time on e-bike and e-scooter safety and regulation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. She will be aware that London Fire Brigade has issued new guidance, alongside the guidance put out by the Department for Transport, on safety for users of e-bikes and e-scooters. On 1 February, the Government published guidance on consumer safety when purchasing such vehicles. She is right to point to the fact that future regulation might be prudent in this area, given that we do not want people to have to focus on these matters in the way she has suggested.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are entirely correct that the level of intimidation against hon. Members is unacceptable, but many of my constituents have also faced a level of antisemitism never seen before. It is welcome that commitments to prevent antisemitism are heard in this place, but often actions undermine that commitment. My constituents remind me about the calls for jihad on the streets of

London, but the Metropolitan police refusing to do anything about it, and about men driving through north London threatening to rape Jewish women, but the Crown Prosecution Service declining to prosecute them. How do I reassure my constituents that this place does not treat issues of interest to my Jewish constituents differently, when last night the Labour motion came after the moment of interruption and was nodded through without a vote?

Penny Mordaunt: I know hon. Members will be asking questions about what happened with last night's vote. I have consulted the Clerks of the House and the vote stands because it is a matter for the Chair. I encourage colleagues to talk to the Clerks of the House to understand that more, but I fully appreciate the anger and disappointment from all sides of the House about people not being able to vote on particular motions or amendments last night and about what happened after the moment of interruption.

With regard to my hon. Friend's substantive point, he is right. We have to end the climate that he describes. We have to ensure that every community in this country can feel safe. He will know that the Home Secretary has been doing work with police forces across the country, particularly with the Met, about the additional powers that they need to be able to tackle these issues and to identify the individuals behind this violence and intimidation. He updates the House on a regular basis and will continue to do so. We have to end this.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Given the unprecedented breach of convention yesterday and the unseemly antics that we saw, despite the fact that we were debating the very serious slaughter in the middle east, will the Leader of the House make a statement to set out her view on the need for this House to have full disclosure on exactly what conversations took place between Mr Speaker and the leadership of the Labour party, amid grave allegations of the Labour party engaging in dark practices and possibly even blackmail before this unprecedented breach of convention, which has very sadly undermined confidence in our Speaker? Does she not agree that this is important in the interest of transparency? May I press her further and ask her to ensure that the SNP will be allocated another Opposition day, so that we can air our views, have our vote and express the concerns of our constituents about the slaughter in Gaza?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady has put her views on the record and I thank her for that. As I have said, I am sympathetic to the SNP being given additional time. She will understand that I will announce further business in the usual way, but I am very happy to speak to the leader of her party group.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I wish to associate myself with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). People are intimidated every day on the streets of this country. Having heard the heartfelt words of Mr Speaker yesterday, it is clear that he is worried about the intimidation of people in this place. We are reminded by the plaques of the people who have been murdered off the estate and

on the estate. We walk into this Chamber under the shadow of world war two, when this Chamber was bombed by people who wanted to stop this Parliament sitting; the entrance to the Chamber is still there to remind us of that. The only time we went through the Lobbies yesterday was on my ten-minute rule Bill. It still surprises me that the Labour party encouraged Members to vote down a Bill that would have helped community transport and disability transport operators—I still find that astonishing.

To return to formal business, the "Draft Strategy and Policy Statement for Energy Policy in Great Britain" was laid yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. It is supposed to be subject to an affirmative resolution. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will know that I have been concerned about our not being able to debate national policy statements. I would be grateful if she could find time for a debate on this, given that it is subject to an affirmative resolution.

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly raise my right hon. Friend's latter point with the relevant Department and make sure that it has heard what she has said today. On her former point, it is absolutely right that we do all we can to protect Members of Parliament. It is absolutely right that we hold to account those who seek to intimidate or threaten individuals, elected Members of Parliament and those holding local government office, and that they face the full force of the law. However, we cannot adapt our processes and procedures in this place to not have difficult debates. We have to be able to debate difficult issues. We have to stand up for our constituents and make the judgments that we think are right. If we are adapting the procedures of this House because we are fearful of the consequences of standing up and saying what we think is right, then democracy has failed and the extremists have won. We must never do that and, as long as I am Leader of the House of Commons, that will never happen.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware of Newport Wafer Fab in my constituency, which is part of the south Wales semiconductor cluster. It is currently waiting for a new owner, but the transition process is in limbo because the site is awaiting a decision by the Cabinet Office under the National Security Act 2023. This process has been dragging on for months. I have written to the Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office twice and the Secretary of State for Wales, and I have met with a number of Ministers. I have had no response to my letters. Can the Leader of the House advise me on what my next step should be, as staff morale at the site is plummeting and jobs are in danger of being lost with this ongoing delay?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that matter. If she gives me further details, I will certainly chase up the correspondence. Even if Departments have to send out holding letters, it is important that those letters meet the deadlines that we expect in this place. She will know that the next questions to the Minister for the Cabinet Office will be on 29 February. She will also know that it is important that these processes are gone through thoroughly. I encourage her to raise this matter in the next question session, but I will also make sure that we chase it up on her behalf.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): There are businesses that want to establish themselves in my constituency or to extend their existing premises, but they are being told that it will take years to get a grid connection. In addition, there are concerns up and down the constituency about plans for pylons. Can we have a debate in Government time about the role of the National Grid?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for his constituents and pursuing their interests in that respect. We want people to be able to get on and create businesses and to do all that their ambitions and their calling require of them. He will know that the next question session in which he can raise this matter will be on 27 February. I encourage him to do that, but I will also make sure that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has heard what he has said.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Schools in my constituency are far more likely to travel to the Scottish Parliament for educational enrichment than to this place. After the events of last night, when the third party's voice was silenced due to bullying and intimidation and for no other reason, who can be surprised? The UK Parliament Education Centre subsidises travel by up to 75% of the cost, up to a value of £2,000. However, unsurprisingly, travel costs from Scotland are significantly higher and, as a consequence, the vast majority of schools have to cancel, including two from constituency just this week. Can the Leader of the House provide for a statement to be made on how we can fix that inequity?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. He will know that the Finance Committee of the House recently did a review of the travel subsidy for different parts of the country, and there are some changes that will be made to that with regard to school visits and the opportunity for people from all parts of the UK to come to this place. I suggest that he speaks to the Chair of the Finance Committee about that. She sits on the House of Commons Commission and her recommendations come to us.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Homeowners on two recently built housing developments in my constituency were promised a GP surgery. The development at Appleton Cross has been completely finished and the section 106 money paid across, but there is no GP surgery. That is putting extreme pressure on the existing facilities that are provided elsewhere in Warrington South. May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time to look at how we can ensure that, when planning permission is agreed and the infrastructure that is needed to go with it is agreed, the local authority responsible for approving that planning permission ensures that the GP surgeries are delivered as required?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter on behalf of his constituents. He will know that in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 we introduced powers to create a new infrastructure levy to replace the existing system of developer contributions. It aims to generate more funding for infrastructure such as he mentions—GP surgeries and shops, for example—to mitigate the impact of new development and ensure that the needs of new people moving into the area and increasing the population size are served. We have

committed to further consult on the design of the levy before drafting regulations. He may wish to raise the matter directly with the Secretary of State on 4 March.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House kindly join me in congratulating North Tyneside's Benton Dene Primary School on topping the national leaderboard for active travel when taking part in the charity Living Streets' WOW walk to school travel tracker? Working with Living Streets and North Tyneside Council since last October, Benton Dene School has reduced traffic outside the school gates and reached an average walk to school rate of 57%. Will she also ask Transport Ministers to support Living Streets' call for a nationwide default ban on pavement parking to create safer routes for walking and wheeling to school, as it is now over three years since the Government consulted on the issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that we all join the hon. Lady in congratulating her local school. It is a tremendous achievement, and I thank her for raising it. Not only will I ensure that the Secretary of State for Transport hears her asks on pavement parking, but I will encourage him to send a letter to her local school congratulating it on its achievements.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I am very proud to represent historic Runnymede and Weybridge. I was in the Chamber yesterday evening when two motions of great concern were passed without a Division. I disagree with SNP Members on many, many issues, but I respect their position in this place as elected Members of Parliament. Right now it is on the record that the motions were passed unanimously, which I believe, given the clear vocal opposition, misrepresents the will of Parliament. *[Interruption.]* Does the Leader of the House share my deep concerns about the implications of that for our democracy and the rule of law, and does she agree that Opposition days must be upheld and respected in line with convention—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The shadow Leader of the House should not be shouting from the Front Bench. Simply don't!

Dr Spencer: Does the Leader of the House agree that Opposition days must be upheld and respected in line with convention as an essential part of the democratic operation of this House, and will she work to remedy the injustice of yesterday's debate?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend, which is why the Government took the actions that we did yesterday. It is not to the Government's advantage to facilitate debates that are likely to be critical of the Government, but it is in the interests of our democracy that we do so, which is why we did what we did to protect the rights of minority parties in this place. As I said in response to earlier questions, I fully appreciate the frustration at how yesterday's vote was recorded. I have raised it with the Clerks and taken advice. It is a matter for the Chair, and I am afraid to tell my hon. Friend that it will stand as it is.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Kellogg's factory in my constituency is an iconic reminder of the industrial heritage of Trafford Park. Like so

many of my constituents, I was shocked and saddened recently to hear of parent company Kellanova's plans to close the factory. Given the devastation that this will cause not just to my local community but particularly to the 360 Kellogg's employees who now face an uncertain future, could we have a debate in Government time on how we can safeguard manufacturing jobs in this country, now and in the future?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise the issue with the Secretary of State at the next Question Time on 7 March. I will also write on his behalf, if he has not already done so, to the Minister overseeing the redundancy service and the Minister for Employment in the Department for Work and Pensions. They will be able to provide his office with support in ensuring that the interests of his constituents are taken care of, and that they avoid hardship.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): We all face difficult votes in this House. I saw the consequences of one such vote when, after an Opposition day debate some time ago, my elderly parents were threatened with being stabbed to death. This is the first time I have revealed that information publicly. I know that colleagues on both sides of the House have faced similar threats recently.

It is very important, though, that when we vote on difficult matters we all do so under the same set of rules. Yesterday, many Government Members felt that changing the order of business meant that while, entirely legitimately, Labour MPs were protected from potential threats of violence and murder, Government Members were consequentially more exposed to such threats. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we cannot continue like this? Such breaches of procedure are unacceptable. The right of everyone in this House to vote in the way they wish, and their security, should be equal across all Benches.

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who has said it very well. I hope that all Members of this House have got that message. With regard to intimidation, as I say, it is not just about what is directed against us; it is about what is directed against members of our family, and perhaps most appallingly, against hon. Members' children. There have been many instances of that. We will ensure that individuals who make such threats face the full force of the law. While others reflect on what has happened, particularly in the last 24 hours, those who are, while not committing a crime, encouraging and giving licence to people on social media ought to reflect on their behaviour as well.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I have been in this place for about a year, and have spent almost all of it trying to get some progress on agricultural flooding and water management boards. The issue is of grave concern to my constituents in rural West Lancashire. A statutory instrument was expected on water management boards last summer. We have not seen hide nor hair of it. In answer to a written question, the Secretary of State said that it will come after a consultation, but that has not been scheduled. Can the Leader of the House advise me of how this relatively simple instrument can be expedited so that my constituents can move forward on this pressing matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her diligence in pursuing this matter for her constituents. She can obviously raise the matter at the next Question Time, but I sense her frustration, and will write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ask him to update her office.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): In view of the Labour party hijacking the SNP's Opposition day debate yesterday, can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the role of the Standards and Privileges Committees or the Procedure Committee, and whether there should be an inquiry into the role of the Leader of the Opposition and his chief of staff, and the Opposition Chief Whip, in Mr Speaker overruling the advice of the Clerks on yesterday's Opposition day debate?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer my hon. Friend to the response I gave to the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). I think that the Leader of the Opposition needs to reflect on what he did yesterday, as well as what everyone else will have been doing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Madam Deputy Speaker, this Tuesday, in responding to my point of order in relation to Sinn Féin's Short money, your fellow Chair, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), suggested that I raise the matter during business questions; I do so now on her advice.

As the House is aware, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been re-established. Previously, the salaries of Members of the Legislative Assembly had been reduced for a period of at least two years. The clear rationale was that if elected MLAs were not doing their job, they should not receive full pay. The general public saw the sense of it, and supported that decision.

Since the establishment in 2006 of representative money, as a scheme analogous to but separate from Short money, over £11 million has been paid to a small number of Sinn Féin MPs. Sinn Féin does not attend debates or scrutinise, amend or vote on legislation, so money paid from the public purse for that purpose is not used to that end. That has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), by my party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and by me and other colleagues. Just when will Sinn Féin moneys be reduced, and when will necessary steps be taken in this Parliament to stop the continued and unacceptable abuse of representative money?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for getting that on record. I have had some correspondence with other Members about it. He will know that it is primarily a matter for the House. He will have helped his particular point of view by getting it on record today, and I have listened to it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Research shows that those who intentionally inflict cruelty on animals are often also guilty of offences such as child abuse and domestic violence and involved in bullying and organised crime. Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the establishment of an animal offenders register?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for all his work on animal welfare, for which he is very well known. He can ask that of the Home Secretary directly on 26 February. It is an interesting suggestion—such abuse is, of course, a clear indicator of further and more serious crimes to come.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I place on the record my thanks to Mr Speaker for returning to the House last night, for the clear explanation and heartfelt apology that he made then, and for his comments today. I was in the House from 1 o'clock through to the end, and I spoke in the debate. I came here to represent my constituents, but I was unable to. That was a shame on us all. If there was any interference in the process, it has to be looked into.

Mr Speaker came to the House, and has apologised twice. On behalf of the people of Southend, that apology is accepted. I came into this House recently under very difficult circumstances, and Mr Speaker has been a great help and support, and has shown me and the Amess family a great deal of kindness. However, the point remains that if long-standing rules and conventions were put aside because of Mr Speaker's concern about Members of this House, and if the ultimate cause of that—this is not what he said—is Islamic extremism, that is a very serious situation, and we must, as a House, look into it. We must have an inquiry on exactly why those rules and conventions were not abided by yesterday, because those rules have been developed over many centuries not just to protect us but to protect our democracy. That did not happen yesterday, so I repeat the call for an inquiry into exactly what went on yesterday.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for getting her views about the Speaker on the record; she has done it well, and I am sure that he would appreciate it. I reiterated at the start of my response to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) that if we are to do better than we did yesterday, we must focus on the reasons why things were done. This House has never kowtowed to terrorists. Members of this House will never be dissuaded from what they think is the right course of action by intimidation, bullying or threats, and that is not what happened yesterday. What happened yesterday was that the procedures of this House were corrupted to advantage one party, and to disadvantage Members on the Government Benches and minority parties.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): That is unparliamentary language!

Penny Mordaunt: We have to be clear about that, and I will tell you why—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I think the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is trying to make a point of order. I do not know what he is trying to say.

Stephen Doughty: The word “corruption” has been used.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I'm sorry?

Stephen Doughty: Isn't the word “corruption” unparliamentary?

Madam Deputy Speaker: No—[*Interruption.*] Order. Please, it really is time to calm down and take the heat out of this. Let us calm down. I did not hear what the Leader of the House said.

Penny Mordaunt: I fully understand why right hon. and hon. Members have raised the point about intimidation, but they should reflect on the message that that sends to people outside the Chamber. Members of this House will not be moved from carrying out our duty to the people who send us here by intimidation and threats outside; that has not happened. That is not the reason why what happened yesterday was done. We should do everything we can to ensure that that remains the case. It is the case, it will be the case, and it must be the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes the business question.

Bob Blackman: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Points of order are taken after statements, Mr Blackman, but if yours relates directly to the business that we have just concluded, I will take it.

Bob Blackman: It does, Madam Deputy Speaker. The long-standing convention is that during oral questions, Ministers may, for the convenience of the House, choose to group similar questions to be answered together. When that happens, it is with the permission of the Chair. By custom and practice, the individuals whose questions have been grouped are notified by the Department in advance that that will happen. Twice now, when my question has been lower down the Order Paper, it has been grouped with another, but I have not been granted the courtesy of being told in advance that that would happen. As a result, I have not been present when those questions have been called. Clearly, that is unacceptable for those on all sides. Will you, Madam Deputy Speaker, through your good offices, encourage the Leader of the House to reinforce the view that Departments must notify Members in advance when questions have been grouped?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. As it happens, I recall the first of the incidents that he describes because I was in the Chair; I called him, but he was not here. Knowing that he is an assiduous attender of this Chamber, I was very surprised. He then told me that he had not been here because he did not know that his question had been grouped. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Members ought to be contacted, and that the Department ought to be sure that Members have received the message that their question has been grouped. Grouping does indeed happen with the permission of the Chair. It will be stopped if it is not properly carried out, I should think. Is the Leader of the House happy with that, or does she want to add anything?

Penny Mordaunt: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have heard what my hon. Friend said, and you are absolutely right. If he wants to give me the details of the Department, which I am confident is not the Ministry of Defence, I will deal with it.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will take the point of order if it relates to this business.

David Linden: It does indeed relate to the proceedings just now. I had hoped that Mr Speaker would be in the Chair for this point of order. I did give notice to the Chair that I would make this point of order, and to the Leader of the House.

It is with a huge amount of regret, because I like Mr Speaker personally, that I have signed early-day motion 412, indicating that I do not have confidence in him. If my understanding is correct, he outlined today that his desire is to allow the House to express its view. In the space of about 13 or 14 hours, scores of MPs—approaching 60 at the last check—have signed that early-day motion expressing no confidence in the Speaker of this House. Can I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to ask Mr Speaker to make it clear to the Government, as he said he would, that he has no objection to that motion of no confidence being tabled, and to allowing the House to express its view? Whether we like it or not, the conduct of the Speaker of the House of Commons has raised wider questions. The fact that 60 Members of this House have indicated that they do not have confidence in him means that the matter now has to be put to a vote. He cannot object to that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very clear point of order. Let me clarify: he is asking me to convey to Mr Speaker the message that he has just given, and the question that he has just asked.

David Linden *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can undertake to convey that message to Mr Speaker.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is the point of order directly in relation to this business?

Brendan Clarke-Smith: It is, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to a point of order that was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), I seek your guidance on why a Division was not called yesterday. It was clear that there were shouts of both “Aye” and “No”, and it is clear from the Standing Orders that in such a scenario, a Division should be called.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, and I thank him for his point of order. I will simply say this: at the point just after 7 o’clock last night when Questions were put to the House, the noise and turmoil in this Chamber made it impossible for the then occupant of the Chair, my colleague Madam Deputy Speaker—who was doing her best in very difficult circumstances—to ascertain whether she could hear any calls of “No”. She has told me that she could not hear calls of “No”, and she acted accordingly. It is always very easy to go back in hindsight and examine what each of us might have thought happened,

but I can assure the House that Dame Rosie did her very best in difficult circumstances, and that she thought—and I think, too—that she was carrying out the wishes of the House at the time. I was standing beside the Chair at that moment. I appreciate that other people have different views on the matter, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman and the House will accept my assurance that Dame Rosie did her very best in difficult circumstances.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am very reluctant to take further points of order. Is it directly related to this business?

Alan Brown: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: In that case, I call Mr Alan Brown to make a point of order.

Alan Brown: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance; perhaps as Chair of Ways and Means, you might be able to give further clarity. My point of order is regarding the response that Mr Speaker gave earlier to the SNP group leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), about the sequencing of the decisions he took. Yesterday, the guidance he gave at the start of the debate was that there was precedent for selecting an amendment by the main Opposition party to a smaller party’s motion, but the letter from the Clerk makes it quite clear that there is no precedent for that. Mr Speaker also said that that was about having the widest possible debate, but last night, the rationale changed to security.

In his response just now, Mr Speaker really homed in on security as the primary reason for his decision, and he intimated that lives were at risk. That is a very grave matter; it implies that as things stood, decisions that Members took on the SNP motion would effectively have put their life at risk. It implies that somehow, debating the Labour amendment took away that security risk, which in turn implies an assumption about how Members were going to vote. Why were those security concerns not shared with other party leaders? What do the security services say, and does this not set a precedent that mob rule can change the business of the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have to stop the hon. Gentleman there: he is trying to continue the debate, and he is again asking questions that Mr Speaker has already come to the Chamber and answered. Mr Speaker has dealt with those matters, and it is not for me to deal with them any further. I think there will be further opportunities to explore these matters, both in public and in private, and the leader of the hon. Gentleman’s party will no doubt have discussions with Mr Speaker, but I will not continue debate on these matters.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If it is another point of order directly relating to this business, I will take it now.

Dr Spencer: Thank you for taking my point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on an issue of substantial constitutional importance. It has

[Dr Ben Spencer]

been made fairly clear in my question to the Leader of the House, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and several other Members, that there are concerns about the motion yesterday evening. The BBC is reporting that the House approved the motion, and the Labour party is putting out adverts saying the same, yet there is concern as to whether it was a valid vote. It is critical that the public have faith in our democratic process. What mechanism is there to void yesterday's motion and have a rerun?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Once again, the hon. Gentleman has reiterated matters that have already been considered. On behalf of the people whom we all represent, I plead that this matter should now calm down, and that tempers and anger should not be encouraged to flourish further. These are matters that might have to be further explored, and Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House have both made clear to the House this morning that there will be other opportunities to consider and fully debate them. I will take no further points of order on this matter, recognising that Members on all sides of the House have strong feelings, most of which have been expressed. I now plead for calm.

Ukraine

1.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the conflict in Ukraine, as we prepare to mark two years since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion.

Like many in this House, I remember exactly where I was on 24 February 2022. Just before sunrise, I was woken by a phone call to be told that Russia had illegally invaded Ukraine, and that a car would be outside at 6 am, headed for Cobra. After that meeting, Ministers were all asked to speak to their respective Ukrainian counterparts. At the time, I was Transport Secretary, and my arrangement was to speak via Zoom with my then opposite number, Oleksandr Kubrakov. Oleksandr, who I have subsequently got to know very well, was standing in the middle of a field outside Kyiv. I asked him about the situation, and he told me that quite frankly, he did not know how much longer the city would last. The Russian army was understood to be just kilometres away; the wolf, or in this case the Russian bear, was literally at the door; and expert opinion suggested that Kyiv would be taken in perhaps three days.

However, as this war drags into its third year, far from winning, Russia has been pushed back since those early days. Putin has achieved none of his strategic objectives, his invading force has suffered a staggering 356,000 casualties, and Ukraine has destroyed or damaged about 30% of the Russian Black sea fleet and retaken 50% of the territory that Russia stole from it.¹

Meanwhile, Oleksandr Kubrakov is now the Deputy Prime Minister, and his job is the restoration of Ukraine when this is over. Putin arrogantly assumed that this conflict would be over in days, and he was wrong. He reckoned without the strength of the international support that would rally to Ukraine's cause. I am proud that, over the course of the past 730 days, Britain has been at the forefront of that global response. Our efforts, always a step ahead of our allies, have made a genuine difference. From the outset, we declassified intelligence specifically to scupper Russian false flags. Our NLAW anti-tank missiles, provided in advance of the full-scale invasion, and our Javelins helped brave Ukrainians devastate Putin's menacing 40-mile armoured convoy, which was headed directly at Kyiv. We were the first to send main battle tanks with our Challenger squadron, plus 500 armoured vehicles and 15,000 anti-armour weapons.

All of this helped to degrade Russia's once formidable fighting force, with Putin losses amounting to 2,700 main battle tanks, 5,300 armoured vehicles and 1,400 artillery pieces. Throughout this conflict, our 4 million rounds of small arms ammunition have allowed Ukraine to maintain a rate of fire, and recently helped keep the Russians at bay during their winter offensive. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has been unable to achieve the air superiority that it assumed it would have, in part thanks to our donation of 1,800 air defence missiles, and over 4,000 British drones have been sent to date.

This conflict has indeed demonstrated that drones are changing the face of modern warfare, and we are already learning the lessons from that. That is why, earlier today, my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence

1. [Official Report, 4 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 9MC.] (Correction)

Procurement launched the UK defence drone strategy to stay ahead on this new frontier of technology—backed by at least £200 million, announced by the Prime Minister recently—making the UK the biggest drone partner for Ukraine.

Yet it is actually at sea where the allied contribution to Ukraine's cause has been most keenly felt. Our mighty Storm Shadows and our uncrewed sea systems have helped Ukraine achieve a breakthrough in the Black sea. Not only has Russia's fleet lost seven different surface ships plus a submarine, but a Black sea corridor has opened up for trade, allowing Ukraine to export 19 million tonnes of cargo, including 13.4 million tonnes of agricultural produce. At the end of last month, Ukrainian agricultural exports from its Black sea ports reached the highest level since the war began, far exceeding what happened under Putin's Black sea grain initiative.

As President Zelensky said to me when I visited, the UK's contribution has been monumental. He pointed out that, since the start of the conflict, the UK has sent almost 400 different types of capabilities to Ukraine. Together, we have shown that when Ukraine gets what it needs, it can win, which is why the UK is continuing to step up our support. Last month, the Prime Minister announced that we will be investing a further £2.5 billion in military support for Ukraine, taking our total military package so far to over £7 billion and our total support to over £12 billion, accounting for humanitarian and economic support as well.

In that spirit, today I can announce a new package of 200 Brimstone anti-tank missiles in a further boost to defend Ukraine. These missiles have previously had significant impact on the battlefield, in one instance forcing Russian forces to abandon and to retreat from an attempted crossing of a river. Members will recall that, a few days ago, President Zelensky told the Munich security conference that an "artificial deficit of weapons" will only help Russia, and he is right.

So today we are giving Ukraine more of the help it needs, inflating its capabilities so that it can defend freedom's frontline. Other capabilities will also be coming its way. Our UK founded and administered international fund for Ukraine has pledged more than £900 million to help Ukraine plug gaps in its capabilities, delivering cutting-edge drones along with electronic warfare and mine clearance capabilities, with millions of pounds of kit to come.

We are investing not just in weapons, but in the brave personnel who serve. So far, Britain has put more than 60,000 Ukrainians through their paces here in the UK, but Operation Interflex, our main training effort, is going to expand even further. I am delighted to announce that Kosovo and Estonia have joined us, Australia, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania and Romania in all training Ukrainian troops here in Britain. Together, we will train a further 10,000 in the first half of 2024.

Meanwhile, we are building capability coalitions. Alongside Norway, we are leading a maritime capability coalition, and we have been joined by a dozen other countries in this enterprise. This is about mine detection drones, raiding craft and Sea King helicopters, which have already been sent its way, so that Ukraine can build its navy and defend its sovereign waters.

Last week, I met my NATO counterparts in Brussels, and I announced that, together with Latvia, we would lead the drone coalition. That will allow us to scale up and streamline the west's provision of miniature first-person view—FPV—drones to Ukraine, while supporting the establishment of a drone school for Ukrainian operators and a test range, as well as developing AI swarm drone technology, which will surely be critical in the next phase of this war. Britain has earmarked some £200 million to procure and produce long-range strike and sea drones, and become Ukraine's largest supplier of drones.

Yet this is far from the summit of our ambitions. In December, we set up a new taskforce to build a strong defence industrial partnership with Ukraine, ensuring that Ukraine can sustain the fight for years to come. In January, the Prime Minister signed the historic security co-operation agreement. This is the start of a 100-year alliance that we are building with our Ukrainian friends. Once again, it is the United Kingdom that has signed the first such agreement, with welcome signings from France and Germany having followed.

The Ukrainians have the will and they have the skills, and they have shown that if they are given the tools, they can do the job, but their need today remains particularly urgent. Russia is continuing to attack along almost the entire frontline, only recently decimating and then capturing the eastern town of Avdiivka. The Kremlin continues to callously strike at civilian targets, most recently hitting a hospital in Selydove. Putin is making no secret whatsoever of being in this for the long term. Russia's economy has indeed shifted on to a full-time war footing, spending some 30% of its federal expenditure on its defence—a nominal increase of almost 70% just on last year alone.

If the cruel death of the remarkable, brave Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has taught us anything, it is that Putin's victory is something that none of us can afford. The tyrant of the Kremlin is determined simply to wait out the west. He believes that we lack the stomach for the fight, and we must show him that we are wrong. This House may not be united on all matters, as we have seen in the past 24 hours, but we are united on one thing: our support for Ukraine. So the UK will continue to double down on that support, and all freedom-loving countries must be compelled to do the same. This year will be make or break for Ukraine, so it is time for the west and all civilised nations to step up and give Ukraine the backing it needs.

Two years ago, when I spoke to an anxious Oleksandr Kubrakov, who had retreated to that field outside Kyiv, he did not know what would happen to Ukraine. Now, entering the third year of this conflict, it is remarkable to see that Ukrainians remain in full fight. I know that the whole House will join me in saying that the UK will not stop supporting the brave Ukrainians, our friends, until they have won and have victory.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just for the record, Secretary of State, I think you may have misspoken—those on the Front Bench were smiling. I think you intended to say, "we must show him that he is wrong", but I believe you said, "we are wrong."

Grant Shapps: Perhaps I may take this opportunity to correct the "we" to "he", for the avoidance of doubt.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that *Hansard* can correct that to what is in the statement.

1.40 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement. This is his first statement on Ukraine, and he could not have chosen a more important moment, as we mark two years since President Putin's brutal, illegal invasion began; two years, in which cities have been smashed, hospitals hit by missiles, power plants bombed, civilians raped and children abducted to Russia; two years of war in Europe that has shattered wider European security. His statement today gives this House, on behalf of the British public, a chance to show that the UK is totally united and committed in support for Ukraine, as it fights for its freedoms, its territorial integrity, and its right as a democratic country to decide its own future.

The UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to win. We know that is the strong message that the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary convey to Ukraine. When the Labour leader met President Zelensky in Kyiv last year, he said that, on military help for Ukraine and on reinforcing NATO allies, the UK Government have had, and will continue to have, the fullest Labour support. Two years on, I am proud that the UK continues to be united on Ukraine; proud that British families have opened up their homes to Ukrainians fleeing Putin's war; and proud that people across Britain in all walks of life have organised donations and deliveries of assistance to Ukraine.

The Ukrainians are fighting with huge courage, the military and civilians alike. They have regained half the territory taken by Putin and disabled his Black sea fleet. They have developed new weapons at record speed. But Russia is far from a spent force, and if Putin wins he will not stop at Ukraine. The Defence Secretary mentioned Avdiivka, and the forced Ukrainian withdrawal there is a warning to the west. They had the heart to fight but they did not have the ammunition. So as Russia steps up its war effort, as the Defence Secretary said, so must we step up UK support. Putin is not just fighting on the battlefield; this is a war on the diplomatic front, the economic front and the industrial front—a struggle on all fronts against Russian aggression. We need a broad UK plan to help defend Ukraine and defeat Putin.

First, we must ramp up military support throughout 2024 and beyond by implementing the UK agreement, extending UK training and creating a clear path for Ukraine's NATO membership. Secondly, we must reboot the diplomatic drive to maintain western unity and support and hold Putin to account, by working through the G7, the UN, NATO, the International Criminal Court and a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. Thirdly, we must take immediate action against wider Russian aggression by enforcing sanctions, closing loopholes in the supply chain and reinforcing NATO allies on the Russian border. Fourthly, we must boost UK industrial production by fast-tracking in full the spring Budget's £2 billion to restock UK armed forces and Ukraine. Fifthly, we must get ready for Ukraine's recovery with more de-mining help, and enabling seized or frozen Russian state assets to be used for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Defence of the UK starts in Ukraine, and I am proud of UK leadership on Ukraine. I want still to be proud in six months' time, so may I press the Defence Secretary?

We welcomed the extra 200 Brimstone antitank missiles. Will he now go beyond these ad hoc announcements and set out a fuller military aid action plan? We welcomed the £2.5 billion for 2024. Will every pound be spent on Ukraine, and not on UK operational costs at NATO bases? We strongly endorsed the UK-Ukraine agreement on security co-operation. Will he now follow that up with an implementation plan, so that Ukraine gets the urgent and sustained help it needs? Finally, we backed the Ukrainian homes and visa schemes. Will the Government rethink their decision this week, with no consultation and no notice, to close the family visa scheme? In conclusion, Ukrainians are watching elections around the world very closely this year. That is why when he met President Zelensky, the Labour leader pledged on behalf of Britain:

"There could be a change in Government this year, but there will be no change in Britain's resolve to stand with Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes.

Grant Shapps: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support, and indeed all Members of this House from all parties, for the tremendous support that Ukraine has experienced from this Parliament. As he said, whatever else our divisions, no one should be in any doubt about the united voice with which we speak on this subject. He is right to mention the exceptional work done with training. I imagine he has seen some of the Interflex training, and there is no greater pride than seeing, with other world leaders, their own trainers training here in the UK. We can be truly proud of that and, as I mentioned, we will be doing more of it.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right about NATO membership as the ultimate path for Ukraine. We have the 75th anniversary of NATO coming up in summer in Washington D.C., and it is important that the west helps to set that path for Ukraine's membership even more firmly. He will be pleased to hear that my right hon. Friend the Attorney General is working proactively on the legal matters, as are the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on sanctions, which will only work, as recent reporting shows, if they are done in a collective manner, including with the G7 and other bodies.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about a military action plan. In conversations with my opposite number, Minister Umerov, as well as President Zelensky and others, what they want is for us to work privately with them on the £2.5 billion, and that is what we are doing. There are strategic reasons for not producing a published plan on that. We will release information to the House as appropriate, but there are military reasons to do it rather differently on this occasion. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that not only do we spend the published amount, but we go over and above that in a variety of different ways.

The right hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of the partnership co-operation agreement, and we will be publishing a series of follow-ups. For example, one measure is to teach English as the second language for Ukraine, and I know from talking to my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary that 100 universities are in the process of being linked to Ukrainian institutions to press that plan forward, and much else besides is involved with that agreement on security co-operation.

Lastly, the shadow Secretary of State mentions the family visa scheme for Ukrainians. As he knows, I had a Ukrainian family of three and a dog live with us for a year after the invasion, and they are still living in this country. They are keen to return home to build Ukraine back when this war ends. In the meantime, this Government have put in place further visa arrangements, which, if not the most generous in the world, are among them. I know from speaking to the family who lived with me that they were delighted with that statement by the Home Secretary recently.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Defence Secretary has recently drawn parallels with the 1930s. He spoke powerfully at Lancaster House about our transition from a post-war world to a pre-war one. In a similar vein, I was part of a Conservative Friends of Ukraine delegation to Congress recently to lobby Republican congressmen to support the aid package. In one such conversation, a Republican perfectly reasonably asked me, “Why should I tell the people of my district to send their taxpayer dollars to Ukraine?”, to which I humbly replied, “Because as a member of NATO, it is ultimately cheaper than sending your sons and daughters.” In that context, does the Defence Secretary agree that while we must respect American domestic politics—it is not for us to tell them what to do—this, again, is a time for the new world in all its power and might to come to the rescue and liberation of the old?

Grant Shapps: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that matter. I am aware of his work in Congress—in fact, I think we were there at roughly the same time last month—and his clear explanations and lobbying of Congress to help release that money to Ukraine. His point is absolutely right: the aid package is in America’s interest not just to come to the rescue of Europe but because other despotic leaders, other autocrats and other regimes of any type will be looking at whether we simply lose and give up because we get bored of the fight and then walk away. They will draw conclusions about that and whether they can always take on the red line of the west and the no-go area if all they have to do is wait it out. This is why my right hon. Friend is right to say that it is indubitably in America’s interest to step in, because otherwise they will find it far more expensive in the future, perhaps in other parts of the world, to defend the world order.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me thank the Secretary of State for prior sight of his statement and reiterate the unequivocal support of SNP Members for the defence and, we hope, liberation of the rest of Ukraine in its battle against Vladimir Putin. I know he recognises that part of being an Opposition party is to highlight where we think there may be improvements, and I will highlight supply chain issues, which were alluded to by the shadow Defence Secretary.

Today, Ed Conway of Sky has been highlighting issues around sanction-busting exports from the UK, critically around heavy materials, notably car exports, saying,

“let’s imagine you’re a Russian unit needing weapons. Imagine you rely on a certain input or tool from the UK. Back in the past you’d get it directly. But you can’t anymore.”

One solution that Ed alludes to is the setting up of shell companies in friendly Caucasus states, and notably in Kyrgyzstan. He says that since the sanctions, implemented

not only by the UK, but other allies, exports from the UK to Kyrgyzstan of the very materials that those frontline Russian troops need have increased by more than 1,100%. Can the Secretary of State advise the House whether he will take that information away, engage with his Cabinet colleagues and write to me or the Defence Committee about how the Government will seek to block off those sanction-busting processes? Will he highlight to those companies that are participating that they are undermining the democratic value of the future Ukrainian nation?

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the support from the SNP, adding to the weight of support from this House for Ukraine, and for raising that issue. I read at length the excellent thread from Ed Conway this morning talking about this issue. It is the case that when sanctions are set up, initially they tend to work, but then, rather like water flowing around a boulder in the stream, people will eventually work their way around and find another route to market. It is important that we continuously look at and assess whether those sanctions are doing the thing we initially intended them to do. As Ed Conway points out in the thread, this is an international problem. He takes the UK as an example, but extends it out and says that it is happening elsewhere, too. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the British Government will be taking a close look at what is happening in reality. This is clearly a Treasury and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office lead, but I undertake to work with them, and I thank him for raising the issue.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to emphasise that the light attendance in the House this afternoon is not an indication of any lack of resolve among Members or any of the political parties to stand up to President Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, which the Prime Minister recently described in the Liaison Committee as an “existential” threat to European and transatlantic security? Can the Secretary of State also share with the House whether he believes there is evidence of an emboldening of Russian aggression, particularly towards Moldova, perhaps being threatened from Belarus, which appears to be preparing for an entry into this conflict? Can he shed any light on that?

Grant Shapps: On his first point, my hon. Friend is right. It is a Thursday, and many Members will have returned to their constituencies, but the Russian viewership of the Chamber should not mistake the level of attendance with the level of interest. The reason that people have felt confident to return to their constituencies is that they know there is no dispute in this House, as we have heard from all sides, in our solid, iron resolve for Ukraine.

On the wider picture, Members will see the news. They understand that with Putin, he simply murders those who stand up to him. He will go to any lengths. He turns his entire economy on to a war footing, and he tries to work with others to further his means, whether that is Belarus at the beginning or more recently North Korea, Iran and other pariah states. I had better not go into the detailed intelligence on the Floor of the House, although I am sure more briefing can be announced. It simply adds to the overall need for us to stick together—not just in this House, but with the civilised countries of the

[Grant Shapps]

world—and ensure that Putin understands that no matter how long he carries on, we will always be there to help defend Ukraine.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Defence Secretary was certainly in full Duracell bunny mode today, but it is clear that Britain and this Government have much to be proud of in our response to the Ukraine crisis. It was also clear, however, that right from the outset of the invasion it would be an industrial munitions war, harking back to the last century. While Russia has got itself on to a full war economy footing, our Government machine frankly seems to have failed to mobilise British industry in the same way. To highlight that, I will pose a simple question. Why did it take from February 2022 to July 2023 to place the vital order for additional, desperately needed artillery shells?

Grant Shapps: I do not entirely agree with the right hon. Member's characterisation of the UK response in terms of deindustrialisation. I do agree that it is difficult overall to suddenly ramp up from whatever level we are producing at on a non-war footing, but it is heartening to know—I think this is right, but it is off the top of my head; I will correct the figures if I have got it wrong—that our munitions and missile production is now eight times the level it was before the war, so we have certainly stepped up.¹

In addition, we are carrying out rounds of procurement through the international fund for Ukraine, which we established and which is still receiving new contributions. I am delighted that Australia has just donated \$50 million to that fund. I think—again, this is off the top of my head—there have been 27 rounds of contract procurement so far. I am not familiar with the particular case that the right hon. Member cited, so I will write back to him on the detail, but it is encouraging that we have been able to set up a mechanism so that other countries that have not had our scale of ambition and footprint on Ukraine can put in their own money, so that we can buy in coalition on their behalf. We will continue to do that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Yesterday, I and several other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee were in Warsaw to speak to members of the Polish Government and British military and security officials based in that country. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to British military officers for the work they are doing in supporting Ukraine and other allies such as Poland and the Baltic states? Will he comment on the increase in Russian air incursions into NATO airspace? Sadly, last year missile incursions killed two people, and missile incursions have taken place in recent weeks. What can we do to strengthen air defences not only to defend Ukraine against Russia's aggression, but to ensure that democracy in Europe is strengthened?

Grant Shapps: I am delighted that my hon. Friend was in Poland yesterday. The Poles have been right on the frontline next to Ukraine on this. They have been tremendous in their support for Ukraine and in investing in their own defence sector. He is right to highlight British military assistance, which comes in many different forms, much of which we cannot discuss, but it has

certainly assisted in Poland and elsewhere in the region. He will be pleased to hear that we also contributed to Poland's own defence: before its election, we provided two Typhoons to prevent escalation and exacerbation by Putin. We also provide other air defence mechanisms to Poland. I would be happy to provide him with a further briefing.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I very much thank the Government for the statement and offer our wholehearted support for it. This week, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev asked the rhetorical question, "Where to stop?" Medvedev, who is now deputy head of Russia's security council, answered, "I don't know." He continued:

"Will it be Kiev? Yes, probably it should be Kiev."

He went on to make an outlandish claim that there is a threat to the Russian Federation from Kyiv, and he made outrageous threats, including to the UK. Will the Defence Secretary first condemn the ambiguity of Medvedev's rhetoric on Russia's ambitions? Secondly, will he rebut the wild claim that the Russian Federation is somehow threatened? Thirdly, will he ask his counterparts in Delhi and Beijing to urge Medvedev to halt his nuclear sabre rattling?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Member is absolutely right to point out those irresponsible comments, which very much follow in the footsteps of what Putin goes around saying. It is completely irresponsible in the modern era to have world leaders going about threatening others. There is absolutely no justification whatsoever for an autocratic state or any state walking into a demographic neighbour and claiming it as its own. To go further than that and to start threatening other states on a trumped-up charge that NATO somehow wishes to do the same in reverse is, as the whole House will know, complete fiction. NATO has no desire to do anything but defend the existing borders. That is why NATO is no threat whatsoever to Moscow.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement. He is right that the House is united in its support for Ukraine. We should be proud of the UK armed forces personnel who have trained so many Ukrainian recruits. I think he said earlier that there will be another 10,000 in the first half of the year, which is obviously welcome. Will he take the opportunity to confirm that our vital training programme will not stop in the summer but will continue for as long as it takes for Ukraine to win the war?

Grant Shapps: We are always looking at the best ways to train people. My expectation is that that training will continue, but we are always looking at how to improve it further. I mentioned that our friends from Estonia and Latvia are joining us in the training, so in a sense it continues to expand. We always want to ensure that we are providing training that is actually needed. It is extraordinary to know that having had that training in the UK dramatically improves people's chances when they get to the frontline towards the east of Ukraine. We will always want to do more. The hon. Member is right to point out that the figure was 10,000 for the first half of the year, and the plans will be assessed from there on.

1. [Official Report, 4 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 10 MC.] (Correction)

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): May I urge the Secretary of State to step up pressure on his colleagues to shut down sanctions evasion? The Business and Trade Committee recently took evidence from the National Crime Agency, which said that the UK is still one of the world's favourite places for economic crime and sanctions evasion. Companies House and the proposed new identification regime were widely criticised by the stakeholders we heard from. Of course, we also have the whacking great loophole called limited partnerships, which the Government are not currently proposing measures to shut down. We must shut down the spigots of cash that are funding Putin's war machine, and we can play a role in that in the UK as well.

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. As I said, after a period of time, sanctions become holed, and people can get around them and through them. I have always taken a particularly tough line on the basic principle that people should not be friends with Putin and be able to benefit from that. Indeed, at least one yacht and a couple of private jets are grounded as a result of measures I took in the early days of the war when I was Transport Secretary.

The right hon. Gentleman made a wider point on seizing assets. The way to do that and make it work is through the G7 and international partners, so that it is completely solid. Again, as in many other areas, we will try to lead that debate. As I have promised the House before, we will also look at what may have worked initially but now is not working. I respect the work that he has been doing on it, and I will certainly encourage my colleagues in government to follow through.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for Defence for his important statement and for answering questions from Members throughout the House.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act:

Finance Act 2024.

Points of Order

2.7 pm

Kevin Brennan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is there an orderly way in which I can raise the plight of my constituent Marte Prenga, who is currently in Italy with her two-year-old daughter Starya? She travelled abroad for medical reasons and is unable to return to the UK despite having pre-settlement status because her daughter is not being allowed to travel back with her. Before she left, she contacted the settlement resolution line four times to ensure that, if she travelled, her daughter could come back with her to the UK. She was told that there would be no problem with that. However, in the meantime, her daughter's visa for pre-settlement status has been turned down and is under appeal. She wrote to me:

"Kevin, is there anything you could possibly do to help me return to the UK with my daughter, so she can see her father again and we are able to defend her when the appeal for her visa comes around? The whole situation is...badly affecting me... I just want to take my baby home where she belongs."

I wonder if I could raise that issue on the Floor of the House to draw it to the urgent attention of Ministers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and his forward notice of it. This is clearly an urgent matter, and I know that he is a diligent MP and will have already contacted the Home Office on it. I ask those on the Treasury Bench to bring it to the attention of the Home Department today so that we can at least get some clarity on where it could go. I appreciate that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to make a helpful suggestion, and seek your guidance on it. The Speaker is a good, decent and honourable man, and we are lucky to have him as the Speaker of the House of Commons. He has my 100% full support and my total confidence. He made a mistake yesterday and, unlike most politicians, he has been big enough to come to the House and admit that. If only other MPs would admit when they made mistakes, we probably would be seen in a better light. I am pretty certain that he retains the full confidence of the overwhelming majority of people on both sides of the House. By the way, if we all had to lose our jobs every time we made a mistake, I would have lost mine 19 years ago, and probably every week since. Let us be reasonable about this and put it in perspective.

May I make a suggestion? There have been many reports about what pressure was or was not placed on Mr Speaker before his decision yesterday. I do not want him to be asked to breach any confidences, because conversations between the Speaker and Members should remain private—we should respect that. However, it would be helpful if the Speaker or the Chairman of Ways and Means could issue guidance to Members of this House on what is an appropriate way to make a request of the Speaker, and what would be considered undue influence or inappropriate, over-the-top requests.

If we could have some guidance on that, it may stop instances in the future where Members are accused of putting intolerable pressures on the Chair, because we would all know where we stand and what is and is not acceptable. I ask if you could go away and think about

[Philip Davies]

that, Mr Deputy Speaker. Hopefully, we can draw a line under this matter and get on with what the people who elected us want us to focus on—important matters nationally and internationally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful for the hon. Member's point of order. He said that if he had to resign every time he made a mistake, he would have been gone 19 years ago. I expect he would never have even got here! None the less, I am grateful for his warm words, which I will pass to the Speaker. I know that there are ongoing discussions, and I am sure that he will be in touch with the hon. Member.

UK Accession to CPTPP

Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, which should be brief and not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call Liam Byrne.

2.13 pm

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for the chance to make a brief statement about an excellent report that the Business and Trade Committee published on Monday, to coincide with the opening of the period of reflection, under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, on the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

It is timely for me to make this statement because, like many in the Chamber, I am old enough to remember that a major Brexit benefit was, allegedly, the freedom for us to negotiate free trade agreements more quickly than the EU, and to sign those free trade deals in a way that suited the UK. It is fair to say that, since Brexit, we have learned some hard truths about the difficulties of negotiating free trade deals, not least because the world has changed since then. Economic security is now a much more significant issue, which makes trade barriers harder to bring down. We have to navigate new imperatives on economic security and there are new dilemmas, which is why statements such as this are so important.

The Government have discovered that they cannot just rely on bluff, bluster and a bit of boosterism to get trade deals over the line. I remember the manifesto produced by His Majesty's Government at the last election, which said that 80% of our trade would be covered by trade deals. We are at about 60% now. The Government promised around £1 trillion in exports by 2030—I am not sure that we are on track to hit that. The Australia trade deal was criticised by UK farmers for being a giveaway, and the Canadian trade talks are in a state of some confusion. The India trade deals, after 14 gruelling rounds, have some hurdles before the Indian elections. The broad point is that we have all learned a lesson about how difficult trade deals are. That is why it is important that the Government do not oversell the deal before us. The role of the Select Committee is to throw some light on what has been put before us, so that we can have a proper debate in this House.

I have five brief points that I want to draw from our report. The first is about precise gains, which in the short term are hazy, and in the long term are hazier still. Without doubt, geostrategic gains are to be had from joining the CPTPP. That was the objective set out in the integrated review, and it is a good and real one. There is a prize there. The impact assessment on economic gains said that the boost to UK GDP would be about £2 billion a year—less than one tenth of a per cent. by 2040. Even that number is in doubt, because in the evidence we took from the Secretary of State, she resiled from the models used by her Department and was unable to give any alternative numbers.

We heard evidence from exporters that the treaty would be good for export growth, but we noted that it would be limited because we already have many trade agreements in place with CPTPP members. Some UK sectors could lose out because of international competition: electronic equipment, transport equipment and semi-processed food. In our conclusion, we asked the Government to explain what steps they will take to ensure that UK businesses fully exploit the treaty.

The second point is about the future. Much has been made about the future possibilities of the CPTPP because it is a gateway to the wider Indo-Pacific region, which is expected to account for the majority of global growth between 2021 and 2050. We made the point that the members of this particular trade treaty account for about 15% of the Indo-Pacific market. That is quite small. Perhaps we were expecting to hear more about the Government's game plan for using this treaty to grow. China will apply to join, but the Secretary of State is not willing to go on the record to explain the Government's road map for expanding this trade agreement in future, or say whether they would endorse or block China's application, if it materialises. We are at risk of willing the ends and not the means, which is not necessarily good policy. In our report, we asked that the Government update their trade model, give us some numbers to look at and set out their idea of what a future road map might look like. If the great prize in the Indo-Pacific tilt is economic trade of the future, let us understand how we will use the CPTPP in a strategic way to cover a bigger fraction of that market with free trade agreements for our country.

Thirdly, we looked at trade standards and food standards. We took lots of evidence and noted the Trade and Agriculture Commission's advice to the Secretary of State. We noted that there was lots of evidence about the risks of maintaining UK bans on imports on beef and pork. We noted that the Trade and Agriculture Commission was pretty confident that existing protections could be kept in place. We also noted that protections on imports using more pesticides were unlikely to be diluted. There was evidence on either side of the argument about increases in palm oil, although the Minister addressed that rather well in the Bill Committee on Tuesday.

The fourth point on which we took evidence was the investor-state dispute settlement. That was the subject of lively debate in the Bill Committee on Tuesday. Again, we flagged that there are arguments on both sides of the debate. The Government are within their right to say that they have not lost a case like this, but the big strategic concern is that if such provisions are in a treaty, it may have a chilling effect on regulatory innovation in the UK. The point is that there is an argument to be made.

That brings me to my fifth and final point. Whatever the merits and drawbacks of the UK joining the trade agreement, the Government must allow that House to play a meaningful role in scrutinising trade policy. There are contentious issues raised by this treaty—there is no doubt about that. That is why my Committee recommended that Government should permit the House a debate on the ratification of the accession protocol. That debate, we said, should be on a substantive motion; it should take place during the 21-day scrutiny period under CRAg, which would give the House the option of exercising its power under that legislation to delay ratification. When we asked the Secretary of State

about this in evidence, she said that she was happy to support a general debate. I very much hope that those are not hollow words, and that the House will get to debate this treaty in the way that was initially envisaged when CRAg was passed by this Parliament.

Those are the key five points; I hope they are of use to the House. Let me conclude by thanking, on behalf of my Committee, all the trade officials at the Department for Business and Trade for the hard work they have put into getting this treaty signed and over the line. It is in the national interest, and it is appreciated. I commend this report to the House.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On behalf of the Labour party, I thank my right hon. Friend and indeed the other members of the Business and Trade Committee for their sterling work. We referred to much of the Select Committee's work in the Bill Committee earlier this week. The Minister will be aware of some of the amendments tabled by Labour, and of the concerns not just of the Labour party, but of civic organisations and bodies such as the Trades Union Congress, on issues such as workers' rights and investor-state dispute settlement. I hope that the Minister will take on board all those various points.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that before the CPTPP is finally ratified—Labour is firmly of the view that that would be in the national interest—it is important to iron out those concerns? To do otherwise would be to the detriment of our country. We also look to the Minister for clarification on issues around parliamentary scrutiny, on which there was an amendment in Committee.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I think the Minister made the point in the Bill Committee on Tuesday that this is not necessarily an under-scrutinised treaty, as it has been the subject of quite a lot of debate; my Committee has certainly taken lots of evidence on it. However, when we left the European Union, one of the big arguments made was that this Parliament would reassert its sovereignty and—in those infamous words—take back control. That means that this House needs to have a strong hand in scrutinising trade agreements.

We hope that there will be many more free trade agreements to come. I know that they are getting harder, but this House none the less needs to develop expertise in scrutinising free trade agreements, so that we can ensure they are genuinely in the national interest. That is why I hope the Government will, within the 21-day CRAg period, find Government time for debate on an amendable motion, to give the House the opportunity to delay ratification, if that is the judgment we all come to. That is the process; we have to test it, use it, and make sure it works.

We have to get much better as a House at navigating the dilemmas of free trade in a world where economic security is a much sharper imperative than before. That means we have to have better debates, but also better numbers. We cannot have a situation where we produce models using very old data—going back to 2017 in the case of the models used for this treaty's impact assessment—and when the Secretary of State comes to our Committee, she resiles from the models of her own Department. That is not a good way of producing evidence-based policy.

[Liam Byrne]

I hope we can have a discussion across the House on how to ensure that the economic models that we use are good. Free trade agreements are choices, and sometimes free trade agreements in one part of the world rule out those in other parts of the world. We have to judge what is in the best interests of the country, and it is difficult to do that if the numbers are flaky.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I would like to pick up on the point from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). During the passage of the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill through this place, many concerns have been raised about investor-state dispute settlement arrangements. It is good to see that the Select Committee is calling for a debate to resolve some of the contentious issues around that. However, does the Select Committee Chairman consider the provisions of the CRaG legislation to be sufficient, or might this be an opportunity to look again at how the specific requirements of trade deals are dealt with by Parliament?

Liam Byrne: That is an excellent question. The hon. Lady may have seen a really good report produced by not our Committee, but the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on 29 January 2024, which makes precisely that point. We need a better way of scrutinising trade agreements. The CRaG structure allows us to delay things, but not necessarily veto them. When CRaG was introduced back in 2010, it was an innovation, because in the past, that was something that Governments did without any scrutiny whatsoever. Now we are in a different kind of world, in which we are signing free trade agreements at, I hope, increasing pace. However, the House will still have to navigate when we want open trade, when we want to de-risk trade, and when we put economic security first and free trading second. These are dilemmas in which there is not an obvious answer. We cannot prejudge the answers to those questions; they will have to be debated case by case. It could well be that a Government will come to the wrong conclusion about that balance between open and free trade and maximising our economic security as a country, and therefore we in this House must be able to apply a brake—put a hard stop—to trade deals that we think are ultimately not in the national interest.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I represent a rural constituency in Devon. Farmers in the west country were alarmed at the sorts of concessions made in the Australia and New Zealand trade deal. Until yesterday, we thought that the UK and Canada were negotiating a roll-over trade agreement. Canada is a member of the CPTPP and it will be crucial, if the UK-Canada trade talks resume, for the UK to avoid paying twice, because we will want to avoid further market access concessions. Can the right hon. Gentleman offer any reassurance that, through CPTPP accession, we will not open up our markets to unmanageable volumes of produce that will damage British farming and put farming businesses in danger of going out of business?

Liam Byrne: The way that we approached our analysis was to look at food standards and whether they would be diminished by our joining the treaty. The Trade and

Agriculture Commission looked at three questions, which are talked about in paragraphs 40 to 42 of the report. We reported the Trade and Agriculture Commission's advice, which was that there would not be a diminution in the statutory protection of food standards in this country, and that we would, in fact, be allowed to reinforce some of those protections.

However, as the hon. Gentleman importantly flags, we are now finding that sometimes the devil is in the detail. Despite having joined CPTPP with Canada, we now appear to be struggling to get in place a free trade agreement with Canada. The Canadian Government are very clear that technical discussions have stopped. I understand that the Secretary of State, or a spokesman for her, told the *Financial Times* yesterday that discussions were ongoing, but discussions are not trade talks. If discussions were trade talks, we would be having trade talks with the entire world right now, because our diplomats around the world are in constant engagement with their counterparts in different parts of the planet. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to flag that issue. The reassurance that I can give him is that we do not see this treaty lead to a softening of the trade standards that we so treasure in this country.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I welcome the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and his report. I think that this is the first time that I have had an interaction with him since my return to the Department and since he became the Chair of the Select Committee. Of course, as two former Chief Secretaries to the Treasury, we are well used to a bit of sparring over the years. His report is good, strong and constructive, and he makes some strong points about FTAs being, of course, choices. I welcome his statement that CPTPP has been well scrutinised in this House.

I do not intend to give an answer to any general questions raised, because it is not me who is being asked. However, I point out to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) that the National Farmers Union does welcome the UK joining CPTPP. I say to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill that a new FTA implementation unit in the Department for Business and Trade is looking at the important point he raised about how, post-signature, we ensure that the agreements work for British businesses and British consumers. On investor-state dispute settlement, nothing prevents a right to regulate in this country and it can be of benefit to British businesses overseas, guaranteeing jobs at home.

My only question for the right hon. Gentleman is really just a clarification. He says that CPTPP represents 15% of the Indo-Pacific area, which I think is true in the sense that China and India are not in CPTPP, and that therefore it is quite a small economic bloc. But if I can just take issue with him, CPTPP is currently about 12% of global GDP and the UK joining would make that 15%. So he is not wrong in what he says, but if he could just acknowledge that the part of global GDP in CPTPP is also 15%, not just a portion of the Indo-Pacific trade.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful to the Minister for that question and for welcoming the report. We look forward to welcoming him before the Committee at some point in the near future to talk about some of our forthcoming reports on export-led growth. The point he makes is

right and I am glad that, for once, he and I agree on the numbers—that has not always been the case. The reason we wanted to flag it is that the Government’s impact assessment states:

“CPTPP membership acts as a gateway to the wider Indo-Pacific region which is expected to account for the majority...of global growth between 2021 and 2050.”

We appreciate that all Governments need to hard-sell their policy achievements—that is the nature of the game we are in—but it is important that we do not oversell the treaty. The reality is that it accounts for only quite a small fraction of the Indo-Pacific market, which is trumpeted in the impact assessment and in the integrated review as one of the treaty’s virtues. We must be clear-eyed and hard-headed about precisely what gain comes from this treaty specifically, and it would help us all, frankly, if the Government set out their road map for growing the treaty in future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for making his statement and responding to questions.

Backbench Business

Civil Nuclear Road Map

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environmental Audit Committee on 13 December 2023, on Small nuclear reactors in the transition from fossil fuels, HC 281; Written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, on Small nuclear reactors in the transition from fossil fuels, reported to the House on 13 December 2023, HC 281; and Correspondence from the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, on Small nuclear reactors in the transition from fossil fuels, reported to the House on 7 February 2024.]

2.32 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the civil nuclear roadmap.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for a debate on this very important subject. This is probably the biggest moment for the nuclear industry in the UK for 50 years. The Government have set a very important and ambitious target of an extra 24 GW of nuclear energy into the grid by 2050. It will require a huge feat of civil engineering to create the facilities required to deliver that. We will do that in the context of wishing to see less reliance on imported oil and gas in our economy, with more clean sources of energy and electricity, and recognising that other changes in technology are creating enormous demands for new energy. The impact of artificial intelligence on energy demand will be very significant indeed. A researcher in the Netherlands estimated that the amount of electricity just to power AI in the world by 2027 will require enough electricity to power a country the size of the Netherlands. That is a not insignificant amount and an entirely new demand, in addition to the high levels of water required to power the cooling systems required for the amount of computing power and energy. Our demands for the electricity market are changing, but technology is also changing the impact it will have.

The review that the civil nuclear road map sets out has to consider not only those challenges but the requirement set in 2011, when the current nuclear site list was agreed by Parliament, that it would need to be reviewed in 2025 for the next period. I remember very well, as a new Member of Parliament, the 2011 review, and with the nuclear power station at Dungeness in my constituency. The idea of the site list then was to try to give certainty to communities that nuclear power stations could be developed there, largely alongside existing facilities. Eight locations were agreed. Dungeness in my constituency was not expressly ruled out, but it was not included at that time. I have tried to be an advocate for looking at what is possible for nuclear sites such as Dungeness, and not just looking to say, “Well, if they can’t accommodate a nuclear reactor the size of Hinkley Point C or Sizewell C then there is no future for them at all.”

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Does that not indicate why there ought to be greater latitude in particular when considering small modular reactors, and preferably those produced in the United Kingdom?

Damian Collins: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I will come on to that in more detail—that is normally an excuse to say I am not going to answer his question, but I wholeheartedly agree with what he says and I want to give it some attention as I go through my remarks.

The advent of advanced nuclear technologies and small modular reactors is the big thing that is different now compared to 2011. They give us more flexibility in the technologies that can be deployed. I also agree with the premise of the right hon. Gentleman's point: this is exciting not just because it opens up new opportunities for nuclear power in the UK, but because it creates an opportunity for a renaissance in the civil nuclear industry in the UK. It is particularly exciting to see British firms such as Rolls-Royce leading the development and design of new small modular technologies. While the Government have their competition to identify best bets in terms of technologies to invest in, we need to look not just at the unit price of that technology, but at the wider impact and benefit to the UK economy of investing in the new technology, in particular the modular reactors that can be factory built and assembled. They can be designed not just to meet our energy demand; they could also be an export industry for the future for the UK. That is an incredibly important part of the equation.

In designing the civil nuclear road map and through the creation of Great British Nuclear, the Government have tried to make it as easy as possible for the industry to work with the Government, to understand what the Government's needs and objectives are, and to understand the technologies that they may seek to invest in. I think all of that is welcomed. Certainly, the people in the industry I have spoken to welcome that step, which creates a degree of certainty. We are looking at far more players to be involved in the UK nuclear market than was the case in the past, with a far greater range of technologies and different businesses investing in them and developing them in the UK, Europe, the United States and further afield. This is all to be welcomed and encouraged.

I appreciate why it is difficult for the Government now, as it would have been in the past, to say, "These are the technologies that we know with certainty we can back" because the range is so great, but nevertheless we need to give certainty to the market and investors. The Government's competition for SMRs is also important, but there will be developers of technologies that do not necessarily require Government subsidy and support, but simply seek sites where they can deploy their technology and know they connect to the grid.

John Spellar: The hon. Gentleman talks about the competition. I would also mention the time it is taking. Is the underlying problem not that while we have a manufacturer with a proven capacity to produce modular reactors, as it has been doing for the Royal Navy for many decades, the United States is out there selling its technology with the full backing of the US Government and their various departments right the way across Europe and other parts of the world? We are just considering it. Are we not hobbling British industry and the possibility of us being involved, as he rightly said, in this exciting new development?

Damian Collins: I am sure the Minister will speak for himself on that particular point, but that is not a characterisation I would share. What the competition

and Great British Nuclear are doing is giving a very strong signal to businesses such as Rolls-Royce not only that this is a sound technology to invest in, but that there is potentially a very robust market for it in the UK. That is what I would like to see and why I said earlier that when these technologies are considered we need to think about the broader impact on UK manufacturing and jobs that supporting and backing these technologies would bring, not just the manufacture of modular reactors and electricity.

I have met Rolls-Royce and seen its SMR plans and designs. They are incredibly exciting. As the right hon. Gentleman says, this is technology that has been developed for the Royal Navy, and its applications for civil nuclear are very exciting indeed. I hope that it is very successful with it. I would certainly be very happy to see a Rolls-Royce SMR in my constituency at Dungeness.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I do support the introduction of small modular reactors, but I hope the House would not want Rolls-Royce to be given preferential treatment by the Office for Nuclear Regulation in its generic design assessment, because we need to ensure that it is safe. Does my hon. Friend agree that while Sizewell C is now getting under way, it is important that the contractors do honour what they say they will do, such as sourcing the water and ensuring that skills and jobs are happening locally, in order to give people confidence? We know how long these projects have taken to get off the ground.

Damian Collins: I agree with my right hon. Friend, particularly on her point about the labour markets, and in the Sizewell area that is incredibly important. I know from Dungeness in my constituency that it is the certainty of having long-term employment that attracts some of the best talent and encourages people, including apprentices, to join the industry. The Minister will probably want to comment on the substance of my right hon. Friend's remarks.

In the time available to me, I want focus on the site lists consultations element of the civil nuclear road map. The Government are saying that the criteria that were applied to nuclear sites in 2011 should still apply today, and in most cases that is true. Safety, access to water—where appropriate—and grid connections could all be important considerations when it is being decided where the sites could be, along with habitat implications and, in coastal areas, flood risk. All those are constants. The one factor that has completely changed since 2011 is the size of the footprint of the nuclear facility itself.

In Dungeness, an important factor has been the existence of a special protected area as a consequence of the unique shingle peninsula on which it sits, which is the second biggest in the world and a habitat that is unique in Europe, let alone the UK—the biggest shingle peninsula in the world is Cape Canaveral, in the United States. The protections are there for areas of the shingle banks that have never been disturbed. However, there are plenty of areas surrounding existing nuclear sites that are, in effect, brownfield sites where that disturbance has taken place. As they are not in special protected areas, I believe that future development would be possible.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is advancing a powerful argument. If we are to persuade people that SMRs are suitable for

use outside conventional nuclear sites, siting them in places such as Dungeness and Trawsfynydd which do not fit under the 2011 list conveys an important message. We have to be able to persuade people that small modular reactors can be used in other areas, as well as not misusing sites that might be better used for larger nuclear projects.

Damian Collins: I completely agree. I have a request to make to the Government, who will be considering the responses to the consultation on the road map. I was keen to hold this debate now, during the period of the consultation, so that Members can have their own views as well. I appreciate that it would not be easy or desirable for Great British Nuclear to make technology-by-technology recommendations for every nuclear site in the country, but there should be a recognition of footprint size. There are sites, such as Dungeness in my constituency and Sizewell in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), where smaller facilities could easily be built. They could be built on decommissioned land, where old power stations have been subject to advance decommissioning. They could be built on land that was used as the building works site for the construction of the existing Dungeness B station, or even on the land that is currently a car park for the existing nuclear stations.

We need to give the market some certainty that buildings of a certain size can sit within the footprint of an existing nuclear site, on land that does not have the highest levels of habitat protection, but at present that is not envisaged. What the consultation envisages is that every site on the list must be able to do everything. If there is to be no distinguishing feature between different sources of technology, we are not distinguishing between a single SMR unit and something as big as Hinkley Point C. There must clearly be some relaxation, because otherwise other sites that are currently among the eight locations on the existing list will not be included on the new list.

The industry will have an opportunity to come forward with recommendations to the Department and make a case for individual sites—but obviously without the certainty of knowing that it is believed that technologies below a certain footprint would be suitable there—and to take into account all the other important site considerations such as the local workforce, grid connections, access to water for cooling if it is required.

I think it would be much better if, following the consultation on the civil nuclear road map, we could provide certainty about the types of technology that are possible on some of the smaller sites, so that developers and businesses coming forward with those technologies would know they look with confidence at some of those sites. I think that would make a huge difference to sites such as Dungeness, which in other respects ticks every box in respect of its suitability for new nuclear. It is on the grid, it has a domestic labour market, and it has strong support from the local community. In almost every case, the existing nuclear sites are the most supportive of investments in new nuclear, because people are already familiar with the industry and know how many jobs would be created.

If the Minister could say something about this today it would be much appreciated, but I should certainly like it to feature in the Government's response to the consultation. As I said earlier, I am not seeking site-specific information about each technology, of which there

could be many more in the future, but I hope it will at least be recognised that the big difference between SMRs and reactors the size of Hinkley Point is literally that: their size. SMRs will not be suitable everywhere—in fact, they will be suitable in relatively few places—but other technologies will be suitable on a wider base. If the Government are to meet their target, they will have to do so by deeming sites that are not currently being deployed to be suitable for SMRs. We should give the industry as much backing as possible in making that investment.

2.45 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for initiating the debate. It may not surprise him that I will approach it from a different angle, providing the opposition, as it were.

In my view, this should be called the nuclear road map fantasy. Even if we put aside my objection and that of my party to new nuclear power, all the evidence and all the understanding of the development or non-development of nuclear power in the UK over the past decade point to the fact that this will not happen. As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, the 2011 plan never came to fruition. It is obvious that the nuclear ambitions have not been fulfilled in the past 13 years.

Every pro-nuclear enthusiast seems to ignore the fairly recent market failure whereby Hitachi walked away from Wylfa and Oldbury and Toshiba walked away from Moorside. Notwithstanding the intended competition for the construction of all these new nuclear sites, EDF and China General Nuclear remained the only show in town, and EDF is still the only show in town as the only company willing to build large-scale nuclear. EDF has a blank cheque when it is at the negotiating table, because there is nowhere else for the Government to go. Large-scale nuclear ambitions also ignore the fact that as a concept the EPR design has been a failure, with every single EPR project in the world being over budget, late and experiencing technical difficulties. Finland's Olkiluoto 3 was 15 years late. Flamanville in France is 12 years late and at four times its original budget. Taishan in China was held up as the delivery exemplar when it was commissioned, but has been plagued by safety concerns owing to rod damage, and has been offline as much as it has been online since it was commissioned.

We were told that the lessons learned from all the problems with all the other EPR projects would be put into place in Hinkley and that it would be much more efficiently delivered, so let us look at Hinkley Point C. In 2016, its estimated cost was £18 billion, but EDF has recently updated that estimate to £48 billion in today's prices—a mere £30 billion overspend. Instead of generating power in 2025, it will now be as late as 2031. As costs have continued to spiral, the Government's attitude remains that it does not really matter for the taxpayer, because all the risk sits with EDF.

However, China General Nuclear, which is a partner in the project, has already reached its cap on the money and capital it is willing to put in, so clearly EDF is now having to find a lot more borrowing than it anticipated. Frankly, it beggars belief that the Minister and the Government claim not to be speaking to EDF about this, especially when just last week the chief executive of EDF, Luc Rémont, stated:

[Alan Brown]

“We’re confident we can find a pathway with British authorities on Hinkley Point C and Sizewell.”

When will the Government admit that Hinkley Point C will need some sort of bailout to allow it to get to completion, or is the intention to throw more money at Sizewell to offset Hinkley’s financial black hole for EDF? The Government also need to come clean on why they put back the contractual payment cut-off dates for Hinkley by six years. Do they know that there is potentially further bad news for Hinkley?

The lessons learned have not worked out for Hinkley, but now we are told that it has been a good learning project and that Sizewell C will be different and will be delivered efficiently, learning from the lessons of the delivery of Hinkley. Again, this is head-in-the-sand stuff. The last Government estimate for Sizewell C was £20 billion, but we now know that Hinkley will cost nearly £50 billion, so it is quite clear that Sizewell C will cost £50 billion—a lot more capital than the Government have intimated they are required to raise. It is no wonder that pension funds have been running a mile from investing in Sizewell C.

Dr Coffey: It is not a straightforward comparison, because I think Sizewell C is still in line with its 2015 prices. It is fairly standard to try to stick with an estimate, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As the local MP for Sizewell C, I am concerned that there have been significant delays at Hinkley. I appreciate that the SNP does not approve of nuclear power at all, but I would like to understand why he is concerned that the Government will have to bail out Hinkley C, when that is clearly not the situation. I would be interested to explore why he thinks that is the case.

Alan Brown: I quoted the chief executive of EDF, who says he hopes to find a pathway with the British authorities, which suggests that EDF wants to be talking about getting more money. The reality is that if there is a £30 billion overspend, EDF must recover that money somewhere, if it can afford to deliver the project without getting a bailout and in line with the 35-year contract it has for selling electricity. If the company has been able to swallow that level of overspend, it shows that the site rate originally agreed in the £18 billion estimate for construction was way too high, because the original £18 billion was supposed to cover contingency as well. Something does not stack up, given that there is such an overspend and such a delay. The delay means that it will be even longer before EDF starts getting payment for the project, so something is not quite right and we need to get a better understanding of that.

I disagree that Sizewell C is still in line with its 2015 prices. At the end of the day, although some lessons can be learned and replicated, the site for Sizewell C is smaller, more constrained and geologically different. It is surrounded by marshes and adjacent to an internationally renowned nature reserve. It is also in one of the fastest-eroding coastlines in Europe, which is subject to rising sea levels and more extreme weather events. In other words, I would argue that Sizewell C is a daft location for a new nuclear power station. With the groundwork and initial civil engineering that will be required, it is not a straightforward carbon copy of Hinkley. We need to know the official estimate for Sizewell C. Taxpayers

deserve some transparency, especially given that the Government have already allocated £2.5 billion of taxpayers’ money to EDF for the development of the project, just to get to the stage of a final investment decision. Enough money has already been ploughed into Sizewell C, yet there is still a lot of uncertainty.

On the wider programme delivery considerations for these large-scale nuclear sites, Hinkley will have taken 15 years to complete, if it is completed, by 2031. Even if we are optimistic about Sizewell C, which will be delivered much more quickly, it is still going to take at least 10 years, so it could be between 2035 and 2040 before it is delivered. These timescales alone show the folly of relying on nuclear for decarbonisation and of planning for nuclear to deliver 25% of generation output capacity by 2050, as set out in the road map. It also shows the folly of the road map stating a delivery target of 3 GW to 7 GW every five years. It is a fantasy target, as is 24 GW overall, unfortunately.

The concept of 24 GW, or 25% of generation output, is the wrong model, given that nuclear power is so inflexible. Such a large nuclear output on the grid means that, at times, even greater constraint payments will be paid for renewable energy companies to turn off their turbines.

Large-scale nuclear cannot deliver the intended five-year targets, so how will those targets be met? As the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) outlined, the road map talks about small modular reactors. The name sounds innocuous, but do people really believe that a footprint the size of two football pitches is small? It clearly is not, and there is not yet a single licensed prototype in the UK. Good luck in the competition for SMRs, considering that none has been licensed and approved for construction in the UK.

Of the designs that the Office for Nuclear Regulation is considering, the only one to have reached stage 2 is the Rolls-Royce proposal, with the ONR’s stage 2 assessments due to conclude in July 2024. Stage 3 timescales are still to be confirmed, so the reality is that SMRs are just a glint in the UK’s eye at the moment. There is no understanding or certainty on timescales, even if SMRs do come to fruition.

NuScale is supposedly the world leader in SMR technology, and it has just given up on its proposed SMR in Utah because costs have ballooned to £7 billion. The cost of electricity generation has rocketed, too. Our road map tells us that the UK will pioneer and lead the way on new nuclear and SMRs, but that does not make sense. The Government estimate that SMRs will cost £2 billion a go, which makes no sense given the cost of the project in Utah. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), is in his place, and I welcome the questions he has put to the Government. The Government need to consider this closely, and I look forward to their response.

Why does the road map outline two possible funding models—contracts for difference and a regulated asset base? At a £92.50 per megawatt-hour strike rate over 35 years, Hinkley Point is way more expensive than renewable energy at circa £40 to £50 per megawatt-hour over just a 15-year concession period. When we debated the legislation on the regulated asset base funding model, the Government told us that the CFD model does not work for nuclear as it is too expensive, and that switching to RAB would save £40 billion to £80 billion over the

lifetime of a nuclear project. If that is the case, why are two funding models listed in the road map? Are the Government now concerned that RAB transfers too much risk to the bill payer? Are they concerned about repeating what happened in South Carolina where, under a regulated asset base model, a company abandoned the construction of a nuclear power station and ratepayers were left paying for a power station that was never completed? What is to stop that happening at Sizewell?

The road map outlines the need for a geological disposal facility, but there are no plans in place to show how such a facility will be identified, constructed and paid for. What is the estimated cost of a GDF? How big will it need to be? Will it be one facility or will there be more, depending on how many nuclear power stations are built? Worryingly, the road map talks about having interim storage in the meantime. This shows that there is still no solution in place for disposing of radioactive nuclear waste, other than burying it for hundreds of years. Our current decommissioning legacy is estimated to be £124 billion, so why do we want to create another generation of nuclear waste for future generations to pay for? There is always a risk that a future Government will need to pick up the tab for decommissioning, no matter what companies sign up to at the outset.

Finally, we are told that nuclear is required because of its reliability and because it produces power when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine. Over the last 12 years, however, each nuclear reactor has been offline for roughly a quarter of the year, so the dependability of nuclear is not a given. Indeed, Heysham and Hartlepool power stations are offline and have been since December, so two out of three in the existing fleet in England are offline. Before Hinkley comes online, seven of the original eight nuclear stations operating just a few years ago will have gone offline. If we can operate with such a depletion of the existing nuclear fleet before Hinkley comes online, that undermines the argument that we need nuclear to supply the baseload. The Government clearly do not think that the lights will go out when the rest of these nuclear stations are being decommissioned before Hinkley comes online. To me, the road map seems to be all false aspiration and not enough substance, and it flies in the face of the reality of what we know about the operation of nuclear in the past few years and how the market really sits at the moment.

3 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for referring to the letter that the Environmental Audit Committee has just sent under my name to the Secretary of State. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) allowed the letter to be tagged to this debate when he secured it, and I congratulate him on doing so. It is on an important subject and, from our Committee's point of view, it is timely, because we wrote to the Secretary of State only a few weeks ago, before the recess.

Some members of my Committee—it is a very diverse Committee, with a complete range of opinions on this subject—have very strong reservations about the role and scope of nuclear energy in the UK, but I will start by placing on record my personal support for nuclear energy and the SMR programme, which was the subject of our letter and will be the subject of my remarks

today. It is an important part of the path to net zero, contributing not just to baseload, but to the significant increase in electricity generation that will be required if we manage to decarbonise our economy, as is supported across the House.

I look forward to listening to the contribution from the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), but the Labour party's energy policy is in complete disarray. I therefore welcome the stark contrast that the Minister has provided—particularly in his new role as Minister for nuclear—by getting nuclear on the road to regeneration as a core part of our energy mix as we move towards net zero. It is precisely because the Labour party, during its last period in office, made no decisions and would not even debate the subject that we have such a skills shortage in the UK civil nuclear sector. That was picked up in an intervention by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). No new nuclear reactors have come online in the UK since 1995 because of that indecision, so I welcome the civil nuclear road map, which sets out the Government's ambition to reach as much as 24 GW of nuclear power by 2050. The intent to deploy SMRs will assist the UK in reaching that target, as is set out in the British energy security strategy.

I ask the Minister to consider the concerns that I raised in the Committee's letter of 13 February to the Secretary of State, among which is the fact that the investment decisions sought between 2030 and 2044 are likely, on current plans, to realise generating capacity of between 9 GW and 21 GW. The Minister, who is very good at maths, will recognise that that is quite a range: 12 GW, or half the Government's 24 GW upper target for nuclear capacity by 2050.

Great British Nuclear told our Committee that the Government's target of producing up to 24 GW of nuclear power was not sufficient to give industry confidence about the scale of investment that would be required and suggested that a specific programme should be required to facilitate industry confidence. Further clarity—this was the essence of my letter—would be welcomed. Despite the Government's assertions in response to the Committee's recent intervention, as it stands the road map does not offer as much clarity as industry and investors require.

Given the increasing international interest and competition in investment in building nuclear energy capacity, we need to recognise that the UK market for creating that additional capacity cannot be considered in isolation. We are in an international race to transition our economy into a decarbonised world in which many other countries are looking to build nuclear capacity. Those involved in delivering that capacity will have choices: where to invest, to build and to bid.

A key role for Government in achieving their objective of introducing SMR nuclear energy is to provide as much clarity as possible in the process for decision making, the timescale to which they are working and the manner of the procurement process, including funding and contracting models. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to make the Government's expectation on gigawatt roll-out as clear as possible, so that the contribution SMRs are expected to make to the electricity generation mix in the UK by 2035 is made available to industry. That will give it the confidence it needs to invest in the programme to the extent the Government would like and

[Philip Dunne]

according to the timetable they have indicated in the road map. I assume Ministers are as convinced as I am about the future role of baseload generation in supplying electricity to the grid, alongside the power to be provided by renewables, and I am sure the Minister will need no further invitation to set that out in his response.

On current estimates, it seems unlikely that SMR deployment will be contributing generating capacity to the grid until 2035, the date by which the Government expect the GB electricity grid to have been decarbonised, with both Hinkley and Sizewell likely to be operational in the early 2030s. Quite how the Labour party believes it can decarbonise the grid by 2030, a full five years ahead of that, against all consensus of prevailing expert advice, is a matter for Labour, but it seems wholly fanciful and frankly misleading to the British public.

So what will the additional generating capacity to be delivered through an SMR fleet provide? There are strong suggestions in the road map and its supporting papers that a fleet of SMRs based on advanced nuclear technologies will have applications beyond power generation, but until those technologies are proven to be viable for deployment in SMRs, with the benefits that a modular approach to construction is expected to provide, which were highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) in introducing the debate, they remain some way off being ready for investment.

Not only is nuclear, and the SMR approach to deployment, a crucial component of reaching net zero, but there are significant economic benefits to the UK if we are a leader in this technology, including a large potential export market for SMR units. The UK's SMR programme is in an advanced position among western countries. It has the potential to facilitate a nascent export market and deliver new skilled jobs across the UK.

Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), in 2015, when I was Minister for defence equipment, science and technology and had responsibility for defence nuclear procurement, I was proud to launch the coalition Government's programme for sustaining the UK's nuclear skills. The competitive advantage we have in this field is potentially huge, if properly resourced and incentivised.

However, all of this requires the Government to flesh out the road map in ways that further demonstrate a long-term commitment to the UK's nuclear future, and to learn from the issues in procuring gigawatt-scale nuclear when developing its strategy to deliver nuclear through SMRs. Simon Bowen, whom I commend for his clear leadership of Great British Nuclear, explained to the Committee that between one and four SMR designs are to be selected for Government contracts, with at least one SMR project to be taken to final investment decision by 2029.

On the issue of the timetable, I was disappointed that the road map removed reference to clarity of the timeline for the conclusion of the current design competition, signalling that the Government may push back awarding contracts to winners of the SMR design competition beyond summer 2024 as originally intended. I hope the Minister will use this opportunity to clarify when he expects to announce the outcome, and hopefully that will be prior to the summer recess. Any of us who have

held responsibility for procurement in Government will know that time is a constant pressure, so I encourage the Minister to do all he can while in post to put in place the right processes early, so that deadlines do not slip.

Our Committee has said that, in the interests of parliamentary and public confidence in both the expenditure of public money and the timely delivery of expected benefits, the SMR programme should be fully subject to a value for money audit by the National Audit Office, provided that this in itself does not add delay to the delivery. I recognise the pressure to streamline planning and regulatory processes, but the Committee thought it vital that robust governance and safety arrangements were maintained. This is not an area where Ministers will want to cut corners.

While I am on my feet, I ask the Minister to comment in his closing remarks on media reports that Great British Nuclear is in discussion with EDF to purchase a part of the existing nuclear site at Heysham as a likely location for one of the first SMR facilities. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris)—a neighbour of yours, Mr Deputy Speaker—in whose constituency Heysham sits, cannot be here for this debate, but he has told me that the site in his constituency has grid and rail connections, a supportive community, and, clearly, a highly skilled workforce—the largest of any generating nuclear site in the UK—which could support the operation of any future nuclear development at Heysham. In order to help accelerate deployment once the successful designs have been selected, which other speakers in this debate have called for, can the Minister confirm whether GBN could make a start on preparing one or more sites for the eventual successful bidders, once the Government have announced which sites they have designated for initial deployment?

Finally, the fact that every nuclear power plant started life under a Conservative Government demonstrates our willingness to make important decisions for the long-term future of this country. I welcome the Government's plans, as they represent the biggest expansion of nuclear power for, I believe, 70 years—my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said 50 years—which will lead to a quadrupling of nuclear capacity by 2050. The UK can once again become a leading nation in providing civil nuclear energy, and this Government can take credit for taking the key decisions to bring that about. It would be great to expedite those decisions as soon as possible.

3.12 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We have already had mention of the significance of net zero. We know that, alongside that, the demand for electricity will increase exponentially. We know, too, that energy security not just for the United Kingdom, but for the supplies of electricity that we currently receive from European countries—or the prices that they will be prepared to pay for electricity and energy—will affect what we produce here. Ireland, to the west of the United Kingdom and, very significantly, to the west of Wales, is also going through the same thought processes about its needs for electricity.

The all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy paid a visit to Finland. Alongside the great significance of employment, which is in no way insignificant in any

of our constituencies—least of all in one such as Dwyfor Meirionnydd, which is one of the lowest-paid constituencies in the UK—there are other socioeconomic drivers, which could be part of this programme and which are implicit in the road map. One of those drivers, which we have not considered in sufficient depth, is the cost of electricity in the United Kingdom.

Again, I speak for my constituency when I say that we, alongside Merseyside, pay among the highest standing charges—if not the highest standing charges—in the UK. Yet we have a tradition of generating electricity. I can think of a hydro production facility in Tanygrisiau, which is producing and feeding into the grid and goes over some of the poorest-built housing that we know of in my constituency, and certainly among the poorest-built housing in western Europe. There is a deep anomaly here. We know how much energy poverty is hitting our communities. We must be looking in future not just at the boon that comes with employment, but at the boon that comes from generating electricity. In Finland, for example, large-scale power stations pay in to real estate taxes. They pay so much that everyone else pays less. In France, people pay less for electricity when they are in the environs of a generating station. These are things that we need to consider, because as things stand we are dealing with inequality and people suffering from power poverty.

Like the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), I want to speak about the decommissioned power station in my constituency, but first I welcome the announcement on Wylfa. It is the policy of my party, Plaid Cymru, to support development at Wylfa and Trawsfynydd, although not at any more sites in Wales. I previously worked in further education. We saw expectations and hopes raised and then dashed in communities, which is of course what has happened at Wylfa in the past. I urge the Government to ensure that what is proposed is robust, resilient and sustainable, and that the development is brought forward. I remember a programme of apprentices who had to finish their apprenticeships elsewhere because they were no longer able to do so at Wylfa. That is very damaging. There is immense potential, but this must not be just a political boon in the run-up to a general election. These schemes matter immensely to our communities, and must not be handled lightly.

Trawsfynydd, just like Dungeness, is a site that did not find its way on to the 2011 list, for reasons that were perfectly understandable at the time, but I would strongly argue that it should be under consideration in the here and now. Why? First, I will namecheck a constituent, Rory Trappe, who, when he worked at Trawsfynydd—he was also the Prospect union rep—almost single-handedly got Trawsfynydd mentioned in the *Financial Times* and elsewhere as the first site for which an SMR was being considered. That raised people's hopes in my constituency. As I mentioned, the difference that would make to salaries in an area such as Meirionnydd in Gwynedd is immense. It has been part of the Ambition North Wales growth deal as well. Public money has been allocated to Trawsfynydd, but there is now a question mark hanging over that funding.

Another advantage of the site is that we have grid connectivity. I know that for some other sites that will be a question; there will be a cost, public controversy, and issues over pylons, but at Trawsfynydd, grid connectivity exists. The site is entirely in public ownership. There is a

question about the best use of public money. Trawsfynydd was not on the 2011 list because it was on a lake, rather than on the sea. It was recognised then that the site was not sufficiently supplied with water for large-scale development in the future. That comes back to an argument that I raised in my intervention: if SMRs are to be shown to be suitable on sites other than conventional sites, the Government should look at how they can show that on the ground. Again, that was one of Trawsfynydd's original positive points.

Alongside that, the Welsh Government have invested Cwmni Eginio as a development company for the site. That appears to have been disregarded in the criteria. I am sure that the criteria for GBN were very worth while, but that factor, which was unique to Wales, was not considered. I strongly urge that it now be considered. Finally, there is a mix for the area. We have a hydro-generation scheme at Maentwrog, so old that it existed even before the national grid. We also have a company called Ynni Twrog with a local scheme for energy and a scheme for community energy. It wants to engage with the profits generated from Maentwrog. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss that further, and everything else that I have raised, with the Minister.

Trawsfynydd ceased to generate over 30 years ago. The fear is about what is being proposed now. I will be told that Trawsfynydd is not off the list, and I know that other sorts of technologies will be mentioned, but they are 30 years away. That is 60 years without any generation at a publicly owned site. That is more than a professional lifetime. This is a waste of a resource. We are talking about something that would make an immense difference to the area, and to north-west Wales as a whole. I would like to know what the Minister proposes for the site. Is there a possibility of an SMR? If the Minister proposes an alternative technology, what is it? How realistic is that? Are we talking about medical isotopes as well, because that has been mooted? I have mooted it, because there is a security question over their supply. I reiterate that this is a waste of a public resource. Just like at Dungeness, we have so much that we could be making better use of. I urge the Minister to consider how best to do that.

3.19 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am a little cautious about rising to speak, because like other Members in the past, I have great enthusiasm and a great understanding of the need, but considerable ignorance of the physics involved, having left physics behind 30 or 40 years ago.

I have two personal links to this matter, the first being a slightly amusing one. I lived in a little place called Richmond in the north of the south island of New Zealand. Just down the road is a place called Appleby, which is even smaller. In the 1870s, the school at Appleby had four pupils. One of them was Ernest Hemingway. Sorry, it was not Ernest Hemingway. [Interruption.] It was—our nuclear man. His first invention was a potato masher for his grandmother, which I thought was quite an interesting link because, as we all know, he went on to smash the atom, as it has been put. My enthusiasm comes from recognition that we must have nuclear power in this country, even if we take into account the point about hydroelectric, but without the facilities, we cannot have it.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

My second link to this matter is that a firm in my constituency, KBR, is a power in nuclear production. It welcomes this road map, but has concerns about it. I invite the Minister to have a roundtable discussion; he could bring in the key players to sit down with him and talk the whole project through. KBR's feeling—and I sense this as well—is that we have a classic case of UK caution in this area. We had a positive response to small modular reactors in the case of Rolls-Royce and TerraPower, but we do not seem to be getting stuck in with and behind advanced modular reactors, as has already been mentioned.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Paul Beresford: I think the right hon. Member might make this rather difficult for me because of my lack of knowledge, but I will give way.

Mark Tami: I promise the hon. Member that I will not. As someone who is very pro-nuclear, I believe that one big issue is that we have loads of reviews, and identify all the problems and what we will do, and then never actually do it. If we do get around to building a station, we build one—not a number of them; just one. Then, a number of years after that, we might build another one, but to a completely different design. That is how we keep going in this country. Does he agree?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Mr Beresford, I think the name you were struggling to find was Ernest Rutherford.

Sir Paul Beresford: Sorry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It was Ernest Rutherford. The Government Whip, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), is the genius, not me.

Sir Paul Beresford: Thank you. The Whip has saved me! I had actually worked it out and was going to bring it up. The other thing that rather kicked my memory was that when I went out to the same place last September, I stayed at the Rutherford hotel. Oh dear; my English and English literature are better than my physics, I concede.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). That is the point that KBR and others are making: this is an opportunity that we have the distinctly British possibility of missing. KBR is going in particular for AMRs. It has come back to me and complained, as it will to the Minister—just to prepare him for that meeting—about our clumsy development consent order, which delays everything, is bureaucratic and problematic, and could be considerably easier. As a result, we are slipping behind some of the rest of the world. For example, the United States advanced reactor and advanced modular reactor technology developer, TerraPower, has a financed match programme well under way that will achieve power generation in the US by 2030. We have that opportunity, and we have the right attitude, but we are not doing it.

I stop at this point, having made my complaint and missed Lord Rutherford's name. We owe our nation the facilities to produce the extra 40% of power that we will

need when the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow. The water will keep running, but that is a very minor part of our power. We do not have those facilities, and if we miss this opportunity, we will hand our children a low-grade state. While I welcome the road map, it is not enough. It does not move fast enough, and it does not contain the funding we need, but it does have the co-operation of the industry, which will bring its money bags with it. As such, I invite the Minister to come along and talk to some of the key people in a short roundtable discussion. Lord Rutherford will be there in the walls behind us.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before we go into the wind-ups, I remind Members that there is a second debate, which we would like to get on to as quickly as we can to give other Members as much opportunity to discuss their issue as possible. I ask Members to leave two minutes at the end for Philip Dunne as well.

3.26 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I will be mindful of that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is fair to say that while there are very different opinions on nuclear energy, and indeed on the civil nuclear road map, we can all agree on how important energy is to our future—the future of all nations across the UK—and, indeed, that it is becoming an increasingly important resource across the world. As a member of the SNP, representing the Scottish constituency of Livingston, I am proud that we are an energy-rich nation. We in Scotland are particularly rich in renewable energy, and we want to see those resources made the most of. I do not believe, nor does my party, that nuclear is the way forward.

The effects of climate change and resource competition have demonstrated that access to the amount of energy we need is not a given, and we must act to ensure that we have secure and sustainable energy resources. However, the goal of energy security cannot be achieved by going backwards, which many SNP Members feel is what is happening. It is interesting that even Members in this debate who support nuclear energy are critical of the road map. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who is not supportive of nuclear energy, made a very pertinent point; he described that road map as a fantasy. That is probably the best and fairest description that could be given.

None the less, Members—particularly those who have constituency interests—raised pertinent and serious issues about cost and delivery throughout the debate. As we have heard, the cost of nuclear energy is staggering. The numbers we have heard in this debate are almost inconceivable: £35 billion for Hinkley Point C, including a £2.3 billion budget increase this year alone, and an eye-watering approximation of £20 billion for Sizewell C's budget. For some context, the UK Government will spend only £1 billion to increase the availability of hospital beds in NHS England, and only £4.1 billion on England's new childcare plan—a stark contrast to the cost of nuclear energy.

Every single project run by EDF, the company commissioned to build Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C, has run over budget and between six and 14 years behind schedule. At a time when we face a cost of energy and

cost of living crisis, that is not value for money; the plan is not efficient, effective or practical. What is more, those large investments come at the expense of green energy development in the UK. Non-nuclear renewable energy sources are credible options to solve energy instability. Scotland has proven that it can fuel its entire country and more just with wind power—in fact, according to National Grid, Scotland's full energy mix has been keeping the lights on in England. We are doing our good turn, but the reality is that money invested in nuclear projects is taking away from investment in green energy, particularly in Scotland.

Turning to grid connection, an issue that a number of Members have raised, I recently met with a developer who is trying to develop a solar project in my constituency. I had concerns about how close it was to houses in my constituency; these are new developments, and there are still lots of areas that are being looked at. However, that developer said to me that if the project had been built in the south of England, it would have been half the size—it needed to be twice the size because of the grid connection charges. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), the grid connection charges and the standing charges in her constituency are absolutely outrageous. The green industrial revolution is the greatest economic opportunity of the 21st century, and it will deliver more jobs, cheaper energy and greater economic growth, but this focus on a blank cheque investment in unproven nuclear power is utterly ludicrous.

At the end of the day, we need energy in order for the United Kingdom to function, and fuel is becoming a scarce resource. Action must be taken to resolve that—this much we can all agree on—but the civil nuclear road map does not even solve the problem. In fact, the plan, as we have heard, focuses largely on the great development of small modular reactors, but the proposed 300 MW SMRs appear to be based on the 1,500 MW design that has not actually been built, making the technology in the civil nuclear road map unproven. To have such an important road map and spend so much public money on it, and to have at the heart of it a technology that is unproven just does not make sense.

As if that was not enough, these SMRs are thought to produce up to 30 times more waste than conventional nuclear reactors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun highlighted, waste is one of our major concerns. We are seeing water pollution across the UK, with sewage being pumped into rivers and seas, particularly on the coasts of England, and now we want to dump nuclear waste in bunkers—or, according to this road map, not actually to have any proper plans, but just to kick the can down the road.

Scotland, and the rest of the UK, needs a Government who will deliver a comprehensive energy strategy that includes jobs and lower bills, and that grows the economy. We deserve a plan that can unleash our full green energy potential, and Scotland's future growth and green future will come from investment in renewable energy, not nuclear. The UK-wide focus on nuclear energy runs counter to common sense, frankly. We have seen projects—and I know the Minister knows this and, I hope, feels it keenly—that were cancelled, as when I worked in the north-east of Scotland in the energy industry myself, and saw that repeatedly with carbon capture, with the devastation that wreaked on the industry.

Sadly, we cannot trust the UK Conservative Government with our energy policy. At a time when other countries are ramping up investment in green energy, Westminster is showing itself to be incapable of delivering a credible plan. It is clear, as this debate has shown, that the UK Government's civil nuclear road map does not deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

3.32 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this timely debate via the Backbench Business process. That is extraordinarily efficient, since the road map was published only on 26 January. To get a parliamentary debate in less than a month of that publication is good going indeed, so congratulations go to him.

I need to say at the outset, for the elimination of any doubt, that the Opposition consider that nuclear will play a significant role in our low-carbon economy for the future, and we therefore support its development over the future period. However, the very substantial questions that have been raised this afternoon are about what that development will consist of, how it will be organised, and what sites may or may not be available for its development, as well as a number of related issues.

It is good that we now have a nuclear road map, but I think it is fair to draw attention, as other hon. Members have done—the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), and the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe—to a number of the issues in the overall headline in the nuclear road map, which is that there should be a 24 GW target for nuclear development out to 2050.

By the way, contrary to the suggestion that the previous Labour Government did nothing on nuclear, in 2009 there was a nuclear national policy statement that set out the sites that should be made available for new nuclear and started the process of discussing those sites with developers. The problem is that since then, yes, there was a revised EN-6 national policy statement, but not a single electron of nuclear power has appeared between 2009 and the present. We are talking about a target for the future in the context of serious delays as far as nuclear is concerned.

Yes, we must talk about that target and what the energy mix will consist of for the future, but we must also talk about whether those things will materialise in the way envisaged, and about how we can overcome the substantial delays that seem to be baked in to the process of nuclear development. It is not clear whether that target will largely be filled by gigawatt-sized plants or by small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors. It is not clear what consideration should or will be given to the mix of nuclear, as it will sit in what will be a very different power mix from hitherto. What planning will be undertaken to ensure that such a mix will be optimal, given the need to have power systems that can act compatibly with other forms of power?

The road map commits to at least one gigawatt power station in addition to those under way at the moment, but as we have heard this afternoon, substantial delays in existing large nuclear plants are the order of the day.

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

Hinkley is now 10 years delayed, Sizewell C does not yet have financial closure, and it does not look as though there will be any power from that until the early 2030s. The good news is that Sizewell B is likely to have a 20-year extension on its life. It is currently due to close in 2035, so that will be effectively the equivalent of a new large power station generating in the late 2030s onwards.

So far the Government have put £2.5 billion into Sizewell C and not one stone has yet been laid on another. I imagine there would be a need in principle for similar sums to be laid before future gigawatt nuclear power plants, if that is what the Government envisage for their 24-gigawatt strategy in the main. It is not indicated on the road map whether the Government are able or prepared to do that. Indeed, the money that has already been put into Sizewell was not planned.

On the other hand, while we are having a competition to determine what support, if any, should be given to the winner of the competition for SMR developments, an agreement in principle has been reached to build four SMRs on Teesside at no cost to the public purse, by the American company Westinghouse Electric Company, and Community Nuclear Power. It at least appears—competition or no competition—that there may be circumstances in which, at no cost to the public purse, nuclear power in the shape of SMRs can come forward. That is another reason why the competition needs to go ahead as quickly as possible, to get what we are doing in the UK as up to speed as possible with what people are doing elsewhere in the world.

What the agreement that has been reached in Teesside currently lacks is a clear route forward about sites. That is a proper subject for another delayed action, which, as mentioned in the road map, is the updating of strategic planning statements concerning nuclear. The last such statement, a revised EN-6, was published and adopted in 2011, and it identified, as the 2009 document had done, a number of specific sites for gigawatt power stations. However, it runs only until 2025. Indeed, a number of those sites were initially earmarked for nuclear plants, but the consortia advancing them withdrew.

We are now in a different age. The priority now is surely to identify sites, or at least to put in place clear conditions under which SMRs in particular might go ahead. I see from the road map that an intention for the development of an updated EN-7 appears to be that it will establish clear criteria for such sites. That is of course delayed, as with so many things related to nuclear planning and action. It is not with us at the moment, but it should be. I hope the Minister will give us a firm indication of when it will be published and adopted by this House.

An area where we have had delays and prevarication in the past is nuclear fuels. I am pleased to see in the road map a firm commitment to support the development of new forms of nuclear fuel and support for the production of existing fuel, such as high-assay low-enriched uranium, which at present is available only from Russian sources. Securing those fuel developments for Springfields nuclear fuels and establishing the funding that will make it work is an important piece of work under way early in the path of the road map, and I see the Minister has already laid a revised designation for Springfields in

respect of enabling new uranium conversion facilities to be developed. All of that is a good piece of work by the Minister, and he should be applauded for it.

On the subject of delays, one of the most egregious is the absence of any progress on the identification and establishment of a nuclear repository. In the words of the road map:

“A process is well underway to identify a suitable site in which to develop a GDF”—

a geological disposal facility—

“that has suitable geology and the support of a local community.”

Those words vary little in content from the original White Paper in 2008 that stated that such a process was to get under way.

Mark Tami: I have been to Finland and seen its waste repository. It is not rocket science—it is not that difficult. We have put this off for years and years. The argument always used against the industry is, “There is no answer to the waste.” Well, there is an answer, and it is straightforward. We just need to make that decision.

Dr Whitehead: My right hon. Friend has more or less written the rest of my speech for me. He is right that it is not rocket science; it is nuclear science. And it is pretty straightforward, essentially.

By the way, the White Paper under the previous Labour Government said in 2008 that the process should get under way rapidly, with community consent, and that a geological disposal facility should follow shortly after. Nothing has happened since then, but it is vital, as we contemplate the kind of programme that we are envisaging for nuclear and the decommissioning of all but one of our current nuclear fleet, that a storage facility gets under way. We need rather more in the road map than the sparse words right now, or we at least need a renewed specific pathway for a disposal facility to be published. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether he is positively inclined towards that idea and whether he appreciates the urgency of making progress on a secure geological disposal facility.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this important debate, and on the speed at which he was able to secure it, given that it was only a month and a half ago that I was standing at this Dispatch Box and publishing the nuclear road map. He is absolutely right to seize the opportunity presented in the civil nuclear road map, and I commend him for his consistent efforts on this agenda and for championing his constituency. I was grateful to visit Dungeness last year with my hon. Friend. I saw the strong local support for that site as a potential future location for a small modular reactor. I very much enjoyed my trip to the local pub and the fish and chips—should that be fission chips?—that we were served following our visit to the reactor.

The UK already delivers high-quality apprenticeships in the nuclear sector. We recognise the need to increase the number of apprentices to ensure that the nuclear sector can keep up with demand, without compromising

the quality of training or career opportunities. The value of energy generation to communities around the country is an essential part of the discussion.

A month on from the publication of the civil nuclear road map, I am pleased to be discussing it here today. The Government are focused on creating a stable, secure and clean energy supply for the country. The publication of the road map sets out plans for the great nuclear revival of this country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who has been a consistent champion of this, pointed out, nuclear plays a key role in our drive towards net zero. That has been recognised not only by this country but at COP by 30 other countries around the world, who came together to pledge to increase their nuclear generating capacity by 30% so that we can take concrete action on the biggest challenge of our time, which we all agree is climate change.

Nuclear power generation is a low-carbon, proven technology that will play an important role in making our energy system more resilient and less polluting. We have set out this expansion with quantifiable aims. We want to achieve up to 24 GW of nuclear power generation by 2050, which is four times what we currently produce. That ambition will require us to deploy a range of technologies from large-scale gigawatt reactors to small modular reactors and, coming down the stream, advanced modular reactors. On the first of those technologies, I am pleased to say that we are making incredibly good progress. Since the subject was last raised in the House on 11 January, the Government have made available a further £1.3 billion for the construction of Sizewell C. That brings the total Government investment available for the project to £2.5 billion.

Beyond Sizewell, we have committed to a pragmatic approach to nuclear deployment. As set out in the road map, that means committing to explore a further large-scale nuclear project beyond Sizewell. *[Interruption.]* I will not give way. I will address the comments made in the debate further on in my speech. I am conscious that we have another debate to get to, and I do not want to take up any more time for that debate; we are already eating into it.

On SMRs, we have set up Great British Nuclear, an arm's length body responsible for helping to deliver new nuclear projects. In 2023, GBN launched a technology selection process for SMRs—it has been referenced—with the aim of identifying the technologies best able to reach a project final investment decision in the next Parliament, potentially releasing billions of pounds of private and public investment. In October, Great British Nuclear announced the designs of six technology vendors it had selected to proceed to the next stage of the process. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that the next stage of the competitive selection process will be launched shortly. The ambition is to announce this year which of the six companies the Government will support.

Importantly, whatever the technology, the nuclear programme requires new sites to enable construction within the decade. The Government's plans, published last January, set out how we will achieve the expansion in the coming years. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkstone and Hythe will know from the road map that, in order to reach our destination of up to 24 GW by 2050, we have proposed a new approach to siting nuclear power stations, which will empower developers to identify sustainable sites.

The current national policy statement for siting nuclear power stations deployable before the end of 2025 lists potential locations for nuclear sites. Our new national policy statement for beyond 2025 aims to enable developers to identify sites that best match their technology. To open up more siting opportunities and facilitate longer-term market development, an updated, robust site assessment criteria will ensure that only those sites that are suitable for a new nuclear programme progress through the planning system.

While I am afraid that we cannot today speculate on the location of these new nuclear sites, we will pave the way for new nuclear sites in the UK to be made possible by this new nuclear siting national policy statement and civil nuclear road map. I suggest to my hon. Friend and any others who are rightly looking to the job creation and economic benefits of new nuclear sites that my Department shares their eagerness to confirm these projects, and we will share news of them as our consultation progresses.

I know that red tape and over-cautious regulation have slowed the progress of many construction projects in this country. However, I urge that cautious planning and adherence to correct procedure are a necessity when, after all, we are here discussing nuclear power. This is a slow process, because it is a diligent one, and it should be a diligent one. I will not make any promises today about the location of new nuclear sites, but my hon. Friend and others can be certain that community engagement will be central to the development of any new sites, and my Department is working to deliver that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) talked about new technologies. In January, I launched the alternative routes to market for new nuclear projects consultation, which aims to explore what steps can be taken to enable different routes to market for advanced nuclear technology and the uses and potential benefits they can provide to the UK economy when they do not need the support of the British taxpayer. The consultation will end on 12 April, and we are seeking responses to support the development of policies that will allow the nuclear industry to thrive. Expanding our nuclear power generation will benefit every community in the country with clean, reliable power, but it is the communities that host these new nuclear sites that will see that benefit most directly.

The skilled workforces that exist around our existing nuclear sites will, I expect, be an important consideration for those looking to develop new nuclear reactors. We expect that the nuclear sector workforce in the UK will need to double in the next few decades in response to the challenge. We recognise that we cannot close the skills gap without urgent collaborative action. We have worked with the Ministry of Defence and will soon launch the nuclear skills taskforce, of which I am incredibly proud. It will set out the action needed to ensure that the UK's nuclear sector will have sufficient and appropriate nuclear skills to deliver our civil and military nuclear ambitions.

Mark Tami: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Bowie: I will not, because I do not want to eat into the time for the next debate. The taskforce will set out our aims and ambition, and the work involves close co-ordination with industry, across civil and military, to

[Andrew Bowie]

turbocharge the work already happening to develop the skills we need. We look forward to seeing the taskforce's final recommendations very soon.

Right hon. and hon. Members raised extensive points about the road map. I have been advised that we want to give time for the next debate, so I will not be able to address them all today. However, I promised the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) that I would come back to his points on Hinkley Point C and Sizewell. Hinkley Point C is not a Government project. EDF Energy is responsible for its delivery. Additional costs will not fall to the taxpayer, despite what hon. Members might read in the press.

Sizewell C will be a crucial part of the UK's agenda for new nuclear power. As I said, we have made available a total of £2.5 billion to support the project's development. Last year, the Government and Sizewell C started the process to bring in private equity, backed by our new regulated asset base model for nuclear, in which we have considerable confidence. The hon. Member claimed that the RAB would not deliver. It was established as an option for funding new projects, following recommendations by the National Audit Office. The most appropriate funding models will be determined by negotiations with project developers on a project-by-project basis. As I said, we have full confidence in that.

I will write to the other Members who took part in this debate to address their points, because important points were raised, but I do not want to eat any more into the time for the next debate. We have published three key documents, which reinforce the UK's position as a leader in the civil nuclear renaissance: a civil nuclear road map, a consultation on alternative routes to market, and a consultation on proposed policy for

siting new nuclear power stations. The UK needs to increase the resilience of its energy supply while reducing its emissions. For that reason, nuclear power is a source of real optimism. The continued work of my Department and Great British Nuclear will ensure that the UK has a world-leading nuclear power industry. I am very glad to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe as we turn this plan into a reality.

3.52 pm

Damian Collins: I am grateful to the Minister for what he has said and, as he alluded to in his remarks, for visiting both Dungeness power station and the Pilot Inn at Dungeness. Both were welcome visits for the local community. I thank all the Members who spoke in this debate, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), the Chair of the Select Committee.

The issues on which the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and I are in lockstep are probably not numerous, but this is one of them. As the Minister just said at the Dispatch Box and as is in the road map document, we recognise that to achieve the Government's aims, we need more nuclear sites than are currently in the planning framework. Those nuclear sites will probably be other nuclear sites that already have the technology and the connections but, for whatever reason, were not suitable in the 2011 list but will be in future. Moving forward, if the Government say, "We know we need extra sites", it will be helpful to give some idea of where they might be.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the civil nuclear roadmap.

Heart and Circulatory Diseases: Premature Deaths

3.53 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases.

I start with something I never thought that I would stand here discussing. As I shared in Prime Minister's questions a few weeks ago, at 47 I had a heart attack. It happened back in August last year, but I must admit that it took several months for me to feel comfortable talking about it more publicly—although I knew that I was on the path to full recovery, and I feel that I am now recovered. As I said in Prime Minister's questions, I feel a bit thinner for it—that is the physical response. One thing that came through, beyond the fantastic support of the NHS, to which I will refer later, friends and family and my team, was the support of the British Heart Foundation. Its online resources, support and guidance were invaluable in helping me when I was on my own, to find a way through this, get on the path to recovery and understand the stories of others.

I hope the debate will not just share my story—this is not about me—but raise awareness of the early signs and symptoms and some areas of prevention, as well as raising with the Minister, on behalf of others who were perhaps not as fortunate as I was, some of the challenges to early identification of risks. I will aim to cover as much as I can, but I know that others will want to speak, so I will not hog the short time we have. I hope that even one person might come away from watching this debate—I am sure there are millions at home following this debate this afternoon—able to spot a sign for themselves or for a family member or friend, which might save or change their lives.

To start, let us talk about the symptoms. I appreciate that symptoms differ slightly for everybody, and the British Heart Foundation has excellent examples and guidance for what they might be. For me, it started with feeling a sort of numbness and tingling sensation in my left arm and an increasing tightness in my chest, which, as it grew, started to filter to the back of my body. It was not immediate. One often thinks of a heart attack as a cardiac arrest, which is where the heart literally stops and one needs a defibrillator or CPR, but a heart attack can feel more like a slow process that happens quite quickly, if that makes sense.

Even though many years ago, I worked on campaigns to talk about these symptoms with the British Heart Foundation as a client of mine, and even though I knew instinctively what was happening to me, as I started to get those symptoms, even I thought, "I don't want to phone 999. I don't want to waste their time." I ended up calling 111, expecting to hear, "Don't be silly; take a pill. Go to your GP tomorrow and they'll get you sorted out." But they did not say that. The message I had back immediately was that an ambulance was on its way, at which point, I thought, "This might be a bit serious"—but even then I was still in a little denial about the situation.

I will not tell the full story, but I was transferred very quickly to Watford General Hospital, where I was seen and given exemplary care. The East of England Ambulance Service was absolutely incredible with its speed and the compassion and support I was given—the same was

true at Watford General, a hospital I love dearly. I was then transferred to Harefield Hospital, where I was again seen very quickly. During that process, I realised the enormity of the situation I was in and the potential that I could lose my life, although I was then unlikely to because I was in the right place at the right time.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the work of Harefield Hospital. My son has been at Harefield for four months after having a heart transplant just before Christmas; it has been a very traumatic time. I would like to place on record the incredible support and care the hospital provides. I also want to say that we think of heart attacks, heart failure and similar conditions as affecting people my age—maybe people a bit younger or a bit older—but heart failure and heart conditions can affect young people as well. We must not have lazy diagnoses where people think just because somebody is young, they cannot possibly have heart issues, cancer or other issues. As I said, I really want to put on record the great support that Harefield Hospital provides.

Dean Russell: May I send my best wishes to the right hon. Gentleman's son? From my experience, his son is in absolutely the right place, and I hope he has a swift recovery. I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments—the staff at Harefield were exemplary at every stage of the process.

Again, I put on record—for my own benefit, rather selfishly—my gratitude to the East of England Ambulance Service, Watford General Hospital and Harefield Hospital, but also the cardiac rehabilitation teams. The experience of being in hospital and having a heart attack was a matter of days, but that of the rehabilitation, exercise programmes and diet changes—all the things that are so important—was a matter of months. I can talk about it not so much as having saved my life, but it has changed my life. I cannot say that I am pleased that it happened, but I am pleased that it happened the way it did, if that makes sense, in making a difference.

I recognise that my experience is not unique, however lucky I am in the experience I have had and the subsequent opportunity to use the platform of Parliament to raise awareness of these conditions and the work of the British Heart Foundation and the NHS. It just felt very apt to have this debate this month because it is World Heart Month. Back-Bench debates are an opportunity to have these conversations and to raise concerns.

Cardiovascular diseases include conditions that affect the heart and circulation, including high blood pressure, stroke and vascular dementia, which I will refer to collectively in the debate as CVD. Over the past six decades, huge strides have been made in improving outcomes for those affected by CVD, with the annual number of deaths falling by around half since the 1960s in part thanks to decades of medical and scientific breakthroughs. That is why research is just so essential.

Today, more than 7 million people are living with heart and circulatory diseases in the UK, and they cause more than a quarter of all UK deaths. In 2022 alone, over 39,000 people in England died prematurely of cardiovascular conditions. That is, on average, 750 people a week. Just to provide a sense of scale, that would fill the Chamber two times over. Despite the premature death rate for CVD continuing to fall by 11% between

[Dean Russell]

2012 and 2019, sadly it remains one of the UK's biggest killers. The British Heart Foundation is doing a lot of work to raise awareness of waiting lists going up for heart tests and treatment. We need to ensure that we tackle that head on. There is no room for manoeuvre on this. Let us keep moving forward to make a difference.

More analysis is needed. From lifesaving research by the British Heart Foundation, we know that the causes of premature deaths from CVD are multifaceted and complex. The NHS long-term care plan intends to look at many of those areas, but I call on the Government to be bold and consider co-ordinated action to address the issue in three ways. I urge them to prioritise heart care within the NHS to accelerate vital care; to ensure better protection from heart disease by addressing the drivers and underlying health conditions, such as obesity and smoking; and finally, to create a research and development ecosystem for breakthroughs, treatments and cures.

I welcome the significant work already under way through the Government's major conditions strategy and the inclusion of cardiovascular disease in it. The interim report, published last summer by the Department of Health and Social Care, made clear the scale and urgency of the Government's priority to address this issue. Urgency is absolutely key here. Around 80% of cases of CVD are attributed to modifiable risk factors such as high blood pressure, obesity, poor diet and smoking, making CVD largely preventable through a number of lifestyle choices.

Politically, I am not one who thinks that the state should intervene and stop people from being able to enjoy their lives, but I think education is key. Education can come through many different means, including engagement with the NHS and GPs providing advice. It is not about the state stopping people making lifestyle choices, but it is fair enough to let them know what those lifestyle choices might lead to, and what can make a big difference to them and their family.

Nearly two thirds of adults in the UK, around 64%, are overweight or living with obesity. Up to 8 million people have either undiagnosed or uncontrolled high blood pressure. From my own personal experience, I admit that I knew I was not going to be running in the Olympics any time soon—I cannot exactly describe myself as an Adonis—but while I knew I was slightly overweight, I thought I would be okay. I thought that these things do not happen to somebody at the age of 47. Like most of us, I thought these things happen to somebody else. That is the way our minds work. This was a wake-up call for me, and that is why I want to make a wake-up call to others from this wonderful platform of the House of Commons Chamber. Do not assume that it is all okay. Get checked out and make sure that you watch out for the signs.

I therefore welcome the Government's ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030, and to help adults reach a healthier weight through a range of preventive measures to empower people to take control of their own health. Of course, everyone has different ways of doing that. I will not share my own dietary habits, because I am sure that some dietician will watch this and tell me I have got it totally wrong, but I have lost about 2 stone in the past four or five months. I did not do it by fasting—I know the Prime Minister does his

fast each week, so I will not comment on that—or by adopting a fad diet; I simply made some small changes in my lifestyle and the way I live my life.

Like many people, we as Members of Parliament work long hours. My father was a lorry driver, and I am proud of the long hours he worked and the work that he did to bring me up. Our job here is not particularly physical, but it does involve long hours and is quite sedentary at times, and the same probably applies to the jobs of a great many people throughout the UK. Being mindful of that, and going for a walk and getting a bit of exercise, can make a big difference.

The NHS long-term plan sets out the Government's determination to prevent 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases over the course of 10 years. I welcome the focus on early intervention to help people live longer, healthier lives, but we all know that smoking is still the single leading behavioural cause of preventable death in this country. I very much support the Government's desire for a smoke-free generation by 2030, and I am glad they are pressing on with a tobacco and vapes Bill to ensure that children who are now 14 or younger—that is, anyone born on or after 1 April 2009—can never legally be sold tobacco products.

Addressing lifestyle concerns and identifying underlying conditions earlier could help to prevent tens of thousands of heart attacks and strokes, and could support the Government's ambition to increase healthy life expectancy by five years by 2035, but I think it means more than that. To me, it means that a child will grow up seeing their father or their mother. It means that friends and families can see a loved one reach the age at which they can call that person a grandparent, or that person can see them graduate. This, for me, is not just about Government policy; it is about the impact on real people who can be helped to lead a positive life.

When we talk about heart attacks, heart disease and the other issues we are discussing today, we are of course talking about premature deaths, but for most people who are affected those conditions constitute a restriction on their lives, and I want to ensure that we improve that situation for everyone in the country. I am proud to say that the UK continues to lead the way in medical research, establishing innovative methods of early diagnosis and effective treatment.

As many Members will know, I campaigned vigorously with West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust to secure the necessary funding for the new hospital in Watford, and it was a proud and important moment when we did. One reason I supported that so strongly was the incredible work I saw being done at Watford General Hospital, especially in relation to the virtual hospital programme. It has led the way in showing that there are other ways of supporting people's health, particularly at home, and adopting the idea of using technology and data to help improve people's lifestyles. The beauty of the modern age is that many apps can give people guidance on their health. They have Apple watches or Fitbits or whatever else is out there; I do not want to go down the route of one particular brand. We are now able to track so much more of our health, but I think we need more education on what that data means. We can all see our heart rates, but what is the actual impact on people's lives?

Virtual care is important in this regard, but—I will not go too far down this route, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I think it is for a different debate—I have long

argued for what I call data donation. At present someone who sadly loses their life may donate an organ, but if we could donate our lifestyle data throughout our lives, the NHS and other organisations could start asking themselves whether they could, for instance, cure cancer by using that data, which would be anonymised, with all the necessary checks and balances to ensure that it was done well.

I am conscious of the time, and I am sure that I am going over my allocated period, but I want to highlight the fact that despite all the developments, CVD continues to have an impact on the wider economy, costing an estimated £21 billion annually in England alone. As I say, behind every figure is a person or a family who have been deeply affected by these conditions. As part of this process, I was fortunate to work with the House of Commons Chamber engagement team, who reached out to constituents across the country to share their own experiences in preparation for this debate. I believe that the correspondence should be in the Library; if not, I will make sure that it is shared with colleagues and put online. One respondent really moved me. They said that their daughter

“has half a working heart; she’s had two open heart surgeries and will need another. If it hadn’t been detected early, she wouldn’t be with us today.”

That is a life, an ambition and a future that is still there because of the support that has been given.

I know that I am doing a bit of a plug for the British Heart Foundation today, but one of the other comments, which rings true with my experience, was that the

“British Heart Foundation has a brilliant website for facts, and the consultant team we are under at our local hospital are fantastic.”

There were many quotes from people sharing very similar stories. A common concern, though, was about aftercare following surgery or medical treatment and the effects that people’s conditions have had on them mentally and socially. From my own experience, I have to admit that I suddenly started to feel twinges all the time and think, “Is there something wrong with me? Is it happening again?”

My experience is that within two weeks of having a heart attack, I promised that I would go to a local event; I did not want to let people down. I remember going to it on a searing hot day. I was genuinely frightened about going out in the heat with people and not knowing whether my body would still work in the way I hoped it would. I am glad I did it, because once I had gone through the experience of being there and realising that I could still be me, I was able to overcome that and continue to work as safely and as best I could as I recovered.

However, not everybody gets that opportunity. When someone has had a physical illness, particularly when it affects the heart, it is easy for them to suddenly worry that they do not have control over themselves, and they do not know what might happen next. I must admit that there have been many times when something has twinged and I have thought, “Is this a heart attack again?” Thankfully, it has not been, but aftercare is absolutely essential. We can fix the body, but helping to support the mind through that psychological process is absolutely essential. I know that colleagues in the House will have far more powerful stories about their experiences than mine, and I look forward to hearing them later.

This is about multidisciplinary care that does not end when the patient leaves the hospital. It is about supporting their full recovery and helping them with some lifestyle changes. I have to admit that the cardiac rehabilitation team I worked with were phenomenal. When I was extremely concerned, they would put my mind at rest, which meant that I was better physically and mentally. I therefore ask the Minister whether consideration will be given to offering counselling services and mental health support to those affected by heart and circulatory conditions.

As I have said, heart and circulatory diseases cause a quarter of all deaths in England, amounting to over 140,000 each year, 480 a day or one every three minutes. Sadly, in the time that I have spoken today, five people will have lost their lives. I therefore call for urgent action to do more to protect our hearts. By prioritising the right action and supercharging the progress that has been made on addressing heart and circulatory diseases, we can improve the nation’s health, grow the economy and give people hope for a brighter, healthier future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It will be obvious to the House that we have very little time this afternoon, so I hope that Members will limit their remarks to around five minutes.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Five minutes?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Would the hon. Gentleman like to find some way to make the House sit longer?

Andrew Bridgen: No, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am just rather surprised. We often have three hours for Backbench Business debates, but we have ended up with an hour.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but there is nothing I can do about it now. Don’t we all sometimes wish that we could turn back the clock? I do not have that power.

4.14 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) for securing this important debate, and for sharing his personal experience of suffering a heart attack. I am delighted to see that he has made such a strong recovery that he can be here in the Chamber today. I am sure that many Members have been affected by cardiac disease, or know people close to them who have been deeply affected by this appalling and shocking killer.

The Library briefing pack for this debate contains a startling statistic. Almost casually, it mentions that cardiovascular deaths per 100,000 population have risen by 10% since 2019, after falling steadily for decades.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman, but I have taken what he has just said to heart. I have done my best to squeeze out more time, and he can have around seven minutes.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is a 40% increase. Ask and ye shall receive.

The previous steady reductions followed major improvements in public health policy, reductions in risk factors such as smoking, and the controlling of blood pressure, as well as improvements in medical care. Although I am grateful to the hon. Member for Watford for securing this debate, and to the other Members who will contribute, there is an elephant in the room—indeed, there are so few speakers that there is probably room for a herd of elephants. Why has there been a significant uptick in cardiac deaths in recent years? What novel intervention in public health has occurred since 2019?

Some might think that covid is the cause. Not so. The same uptick in cardiac deaths was observable in Australia and Singapore before those countries got covid but after they rolled out the experimental messenger ribonucleic acid injection. Ah, the jab! I can see some Members tutting and turning away. Everyone knows that MPs with a science degree are few and far between, and that some Members' eyes glaze over when science is discussed. Well, I am one of those MPs fortunate enough to have a science degree. Another was Margaret Thatcher, who was rather prouder of being the first Prime Minister with a science degree than of being the first woman Prime Minister, and rightly so.

Some Members appear to have prejudged the issue. It is often said that it is easier to fool someone than to persuade them that they have been fooled. For posterity, we must remember that it was 11 years after the thalidomide scandal was exposed in 1961 before the word “thalidomide” was mentioned in the Chamber. I refuse to let this new mammoth medical scandal be ignored in the same way.

We are witnesses to the greatest medical scandal in decades—perhaps in living memory, and possibly ever. It is bigger than thalidomide and bigger than the Tuskegee untreated syphilis scandal, in which some black people were deliberately not treated to see what would happen to their bodies over time. It might be bigger than the Vioxx scandal, hitherto the granddaddy of medical scandals.

I can see some Members looking puzzled. Vioxx was a new drug invented by Merck as an alternative to aspirin—a mild painkiller. A researcher first highlighted an issue to Merck's senior management in 1997, two years before the drug was approved. One in 115 people who took Vioxx suffered a heart attack. Merck's profits from Vioxx comfortably exceeded the criminal fine, the compensation and the litigation costs after the drug was pulled. It was a good business decision for Merck. Not one pharma executive went to jail for skewing the trial results, for deceiving the regulators or for recklessly causing the deaths of 60,000 ordinary Americans for profit. It is always for profit—lives tragically cut short, families destroyed and children devastated. Imagine the incentive structure in an industry where profits like that can be made, and the corporate greed where there is full immunity from prosecution. In 1986, pharma companies got immunity in the USA for all vaccines. The number of vaccines administered to children in America has exploded since then.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does the hon. Member share my hope that the Minister, in responding to the debate, will address the article in *The Daily Sceptic* on 20 February this year by Will Jones,

headlined “Covid Vaccines Linked to Large Increase in Heart, Blood and Neurological Disorders, Major Study Finds”?

Andrew Bridgen: I hope that the Minister will address that, and of course this will go on. Cardiac deaths were already the biggest killer in our country, but we have a mysterious 10% increase. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like others in the Chamber, has witnessed the horrifying sight of super-fit athletes keeling over on pitches around the world. A mountain of peer-reviewed evidence is emerging and hypotheses are being proposed. Numerous cardiologists have concerns, but unfortunately, many experts do not feel able to speak out openly about their concerns because of the climate of fear, and the consequences of whistleblowing or speaking out against big pharma, which has so often been found to be not operating in the public interest, and causing harm. I am afraid that we will see much the same, following the roll-out of the covid-19 vaccines, as we saw with Vioxx and thalidomide, and in so many other cases.

The evidence is mounting up so rapidly, and the only people who cannot appreciate what is going on in this country are those who really do not want to see. The public will be extremely harsh on this Parliament and our response to the covid-19 pandemic, including the roll-out of the vaccines. We were going to stop vaccinating after the over-70s, but we then decided that vaccination would include the over-50s. We then decided it would be for everyone. Then this House took the appalling decision, unsupported by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, in September 2021 to vaccinate children who were at very little risk, if any, of covid, but who have been harmed seriously by the vaccines.

Why ever did we use a systemic vaccine for a mucosal respiratory virus? One expert said last year:

“it is not surprising that none of the predominantly mucosal respiratory viruses have ever been effectively controlled by vaccines. This observation raises a question of fundamental importance: if natural mucosal respiratory virus infections do not elicit complete and long-term protective immunity against reinfection, how can we expect vaccines”

to work, when natural immunity does not give protection? And what is the name of this expert? Mr Anthony Fauci, the former head of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in America, who pushed the vaccines.

I wish I had more time, Madam Deputy Speaker; this is a huge issue and we need to debate it again. It is the biggest killer of our constituents, and our fear is that the rate of increase in cardiac deaths will not slow in the UK, or the rest of the world.

4.23 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), as I often seem to in these debates, which often resemble Madame Tussauds: the same faces appear, time after time. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have a reputation for brevity in my speeches, and I intend to support that reputation now.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) on securing this important and rather timely debate, and I echo the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire in saying that we enjoy seeing him looking so fit and healthy after the trauma that he had.

This is a really important matter, and he is right to raise it today. As I highlighted in last month's Westminster Hall debate on excess death trends, a recent article in *The Lancet* found that although the causes of ongoing excess deaths in the UK

"are likely to be multiple",

Office for National Statistics data showed some clear trends—in particular, the "largest relative excess deaths" since the pandemic occurred in young and middle-aged adults, with the number of cardiac deaths happening outside hospitals being the most elevated. In other words, young and previously healthy people are dying at home from cardiac-related events, and we do not know why.

These are not just numbers and statistics—these are real people, loved ones, often from younger age groups, who are dying before their time. It is urgent and our duty to get to the bottom of the situation sooner rather than later. As I am sure we are all aware, there are many theories circulating about the causes of these excess deaths. One is the possibility of a causal link between the population-wide use of covid-19 vaccines and the marked increase in cardiovascular-related critical events, including heart attacks and strokes, among otherwise apparently healthy people. We do not know if that is the cause or not, because the data is not being released. Until certain data sets are released, it is impossible to rule that theory in or out.

That is why I, along with cross-party colleagues, wrote yesterday to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care; Professor Steven Riley, the director general for data at the UK Health Security Agency; and Dr Alison Cave, the chief safety officer at the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. We warn that by withholding official data, the Department, UKHSA and MHRA are helping fuel concerns and hesitancy about public health. We have asked that anonymised record-level official mortality data be released, alongside vaccination dates, doses and co-morbidities, without delay. We understand that the MHRA has collected and already shared this data with pharmaceutical companies to enable those companies to produce post-authorisation safety studies for their products, so I see no reason why it cannot also be shared with parliamentarians and the public right away. Will the Minister say whether that data has been shared with pharmaceutical companies? If so, why is not being shared with the rest of us?

As the Minister surely realises, repetitive generic assurances that the Government and the UKHSA take excess deaths "seriously" and monitor them "constantly", and that the MHRA have

"systems in place to continually monitor the safety of our medicines"—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 235WH.] do not serve to reassure anybody at all. Likewise, the news from the Office for National Statistics this week that it has revised its excess deaths methodology, and that there are suddenly 20,000 fewer excess deaths last year, has done little to quell public concern. If anything, it has done the exact opposite: people cynically see it as a convenient sleight of hand.

As we say in our letter, if the Government and their agencies are not willing to share the data we have requested, will the Minister explain to us why not? We are all on the same side and want to look after people. We are all concerned to do the best we can for everybody, but until we have all the data, we just do not know what we do not know. If there is any potential that public

health interventions, such as covid-19 vaccines, are causing harm and premature death to some, we must act on that without delay. If the evidence shows that that there is no issue, then it is in everybody's interest for that reassurance to be in the public domain as quickly as possible.

Sir Christopher Chope: If that information was in the public domain, then the Prime Minister would have been able to answer the question that he was asked in the GB News interview the night before last.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right. It is in everybody's interest that the information be in the public domain, so that we can reassure people, or at least let them know. Frankly, there is never any harm in giving people information and letting them make their own mind up about what has happened.

Opinions need to be put to one side, and the data need to be examined in the cold, hard light of day. Otherwise, we will do harm to people, and we will do even more and irreparable damage to trust in public health policy. I hope that the Minister will provide some reassurance that the data will be forthcoming as soon as possible, and that the Government do not give the impression that there is something to hide.

4.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) for setting the scene today. We have spoken many times on this issue. It is a real pleasure to see him back to health and strength, and working very effectively in this House.

The rates of premature death from heart and circulatory diseases do not make for easy reading. The British Heart Foundation has been clear about how stark the situation is. As the DUP's health spokesperson, I try to involve myself in all health matters—whether they be in ministerial questions or in debates—in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall, because that is part of my duty.

The number of people dying before the age of 75 from heart and circulatory diseases has risen to the highest level in more than a decade. Waiting lists for heart operations and other heart procedures are nearly 100,000 higher than they were a year ago. Those figures are stark and worrying.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. We all have great respect for her. Although we do not want to burden her with questions, we do need to ask ourselves why these figures are so high and what is being done to reduce them. Worryingly, there are more people over the age of 75 waiting over a year for treatment—the rate is 140 times higher than before the pandemic began.

Latest figures show that, in 2022, more than 39,000 people in England died prematurely of cardiovascular conditions, including heart attacks, coronary heart disease and stroke—an average of some 750 people each week. Again, worryingly, that is the highest total since 2008. What is being done to address those issues?

This backwards trend—because that is what it is—has been broadly mirrored in age-standardised premature death rates, which account for changes and differences in population sizes and demographics. Before 2012, the number and rate of deaths from these conditions under the age of 75 were falling, in part thanks to decades of medical and scientific breakthroughs.

[Jim Shannon]

But after nearly a decade of slowing progress, recent statistics show that the rate of premature deaths from cardiovascular disease has now increased in England for three years back to back. This is the first time that there has been a clear reversal in the trend for almost 60 years. Again, the question must be: what has brought that about and what has been done to stop it.

The British Heart Foundation has said:

“The reasons for the rise are multiple and complex. While increasing pressure on the NHS and the covid-19 pandemic have likely contributed in recent years, the warning signs have been present for over a decade.”

If those signs have been present for over a decade, the question we must all ask is: what steps have been taken to slow the trend that has been there for some time.

I know that there will be many in this Chamber with opinions as to the cause. I do not hold a medical degree. I am a very simple person, but I do have an interest in health and I do ask the questions. The fact is that the sharp rise needs to be better managed. I can quickly give some examples of what we are doing back home in Northern Ireland. We have a developing plan with the Irish Football Association that includes more defibrillators and CPR training, which is really important. Many people who are fit and healthy—the hon. Member for Watford referred to this—have had heart attacks on the football pitch. Those are things that we need to address. May I commend the Chest, Heart and Stroke charity back home for all that it does?

This month in Northern Ireland, 340 people will die from heart or circulatory disease, around 90 of whom will be younger than 75 years of age. Some 225,000 people are living with a heart or circulatory disease, 320 hospital admissions will be due to a heart attack, 130 people will die from coronary heart disease, and 13 babies will be diagnosed with a heart defect this year. Those are the figures for Northern Ireland. The statistics are shocking, especially given the small size of Northern Ireland. There are an estimated 225,000 people living with heart and circulatory diseases in Northern Ireland. An ageing and growing population and improved survival rates from heart and circulatory events could see these numbers rise still further. It is clear that this really is a ticking timebomb and therefore we do seek some help from the Minister here.

I can see the Minister formulating her response. Both she and I are glad to see that the Northern Ireland Assembly is up and running. As health is a devolved matter, may I ask her in a genuine fashion, as I always do, whether she can indicate what discussions will take place with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland.

We in Northern Ireland are in the situation in which every region of the UK finds itself: there is not enough funding, not enough staff, and not enough support. Across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we need to address the growing problem with solutions, which can only come about with reasonably paid staff and a better system. Let us exchange our thoughts and ideas, and move forward together towards a system where we can help each other. An overhaul of the system is needed, and we look to the Minister for a plan of action, beginning here in this place and extending through the NHS and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

You told me to finish within a certain time, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have just done it.

4.35 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) on securing this debate on such an important and prevalent issue. He and I have a shared interest in health inequalities, largely due to our personal experiences. He and I joined the House at the same time. I remember sitting in this very Chamber for his maiden speech, in which he quoted Sir Elton John's song “I'm Still Standing.” I am absolutely delighted that we are both still standing. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Just a few short months after my hon. Friend's maiden speech—I will call him my hon. Friend—I was in rehab recovering from a stroke. “I'm Still Standing” was one of the songs that we ironically listened to while doing physio—a dark sense of humour can be a powerful tool in the face of adversity, but of course we need to equip people with more than just a sense of humour to get through these very difficult conditions.

This issue is one that my party and I are deeply concerned about, with nearly three in 10 Scots dying from heart and circulatory diseases, equating to about 50 people per day or 1,500 people per month. Preventing those deaths, and in particular premature deaths, is something that the Scottish Government are committed to. The hon. Member for Watford outlined the signs and symptoms of many heart and circulatory conditions. I commend him for shining a light on them. We cannot overestimate the impact that a debate like this will have. Support for the mind after a health trauma is necessary, as he also outlined. After my stroke, I did not realise that I needed help for my mental health until I reached a crisis point. Getting help was the best thing that I could have done for myself. That support needs to be there for everyone.

As we have heard, there are clear risk factors for developing cardiovascular diseases centring around people's lifestyles. We can call them lifestyle choices, but the choices are often heavily influenced by inequality and poverty. We know that people in poverty have poorer health outcomes, and improving people's ability to make healthier choices on diet, smoking and alcohol consumption are essential to change that. We know that sadly the prevalence rates for circulatory and cardiovascular diseases are significantly higher in the most deprived areas. We also know that poverty rates are higher for some minority ethnic groups, and therefore they are often disproportionately vulnerable to health inequalities.

That is why improving health and reducing health inequalities across Scotland are clear priorities for the Scottish Government, especially in the face of UK Government austerity measures. The British Heart Foundation says that there has been

“a lack of meaningful action”

from the British Government

“over the last 10 years to address many of the causes of heart disease and stroke, such as stubbornly high obesity rates”.

Obesity and unhealthy lifestyle choices are intrinsically linked to poverty. That is why the SNP's action to mitigate the effects of this Tory Government's cost of living crisis are so important to today's debate.

Recent analysis from the British Heart Foundation shows that the number of people dying before the age of 75 in England from heart and circulatory diseases has risen to the highest level in over a decade. We know that 700,000 people in Scotland are living with circulatory diseases. We do not know how much that is affected by covid-19 or other factors, but it is clear that an increasingly unhealthy population plays a key role in these worrying statistics. This is why the SNP's focus on tackling these inequalities and tackling poverty is such an important and proactive step in reducing these premature deaths.

The Scottish Government's focus and commitment to tackling poverty and other risk factors relating to cardiovascular disease are despite this Tory Government's austerity measures. The British Government's austerity policies are harming the economies across these isles, driving more people into poverty and making our health outcomes worse. Health inequalities are rampant the length and breadth of these isles. I stand here as proof of that. I had cancer as a teenager and had a stroke in my mid-20s—an example of the health inequalities prevalent in the west of Scotland.

Economic austerity is to blame for the slowing progress in health outcomes over the past decade. The British Government would do well to cast their eyes up to Scotland and consider a focus on our wellbeing economy, with people at its heart, as we do. Funding—or, in this case, the lack of it—is a political choice. The UK has considerable wealth, so it is shameful that so many people are in poverty and that their health is suffering as a result. The levels of universal credit have been too low for too long. The SNP and the Scottish Government continue to call on the UK Government to introduce an essentials guarantee to ensure that social security benefits adequately cover the cost of essential goods and properly support our most vulnerable people. The Scottish Government have gone to great lengths to increase income for Scots by promoting fair work and improving the value of social security through bold measures such as the Scottish child payment and the real living wage.

I know that we are short of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. I urge the Government, and whomever forms the next Government, to consider taking the Scottish Government's approach to tackling health inequalities by reducing poverty and guaranteeing that people have the resources to make healthy lifestyle choices. It is abundantly clear that while Scotland is tied to this place, Westminster and the British Government hold the purse strings, and any action that the Scottish Government take can be outdone by austerity measures in this place. Only with the full powers of independence will we truly be able to tackle health inequalities in Scotland and reduce the number of premature deaths from cardiovascular disease.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

4.40 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) for securing it. I think we all agree that he made an excellent and heartfelt speech not just about his own experience, but about the effect on his family and his team. He thanked the British Heart Foundation, and

I agree that the resources of such organisations are well received at such times, which can often be very lonely. We wish him and his family the best of health going forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who is no longer in his place, spoke about his experience as a family member of a young person who has suffered a heart condition, and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), highlighted her own experience. Cardiovascular disease affects not only us, but our families too.

As has been said, every week in 2022 an average of 750 people died prematurely of cardiovascular disease, including heart attacks and strokes. Every premature death is of course a tragedy, and our thoughts are with all affected families. NHS England has reported that cardiovascular disease is responsible for one in four premature deaths in the UK. As we have heard, the rate of premature deaths has risen for the past three years consecutively—that is something that we all wish to understand. Many of my constituents, and people across the country, are worried about the state of heart and circulatory disease services. Despite the best efforts of staff, there is a significant backlog in treatment, the number of people on waiting lists for cardiology services is rising, with a huge 189% increase in the past 10 years.

According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, waiting times for cardiology treatment have risen even more sharply than for elective waiting lists as a whole. That is deeply concerning, because long waits mean poorer outcomes for patients, often with devastating results. An estimated 7.6 million in the UK are currently living with heart or circulatory disease. It is vital that every one of those people receives effective and timely diagnosis, referral and treatment, yet under this Government the NHS has lurched from crisis to crisis, and far too many patients are not receiving that timely care.

Labour has an ambitious 10-year plan of reform and modernisation to speed up treatment, with 2 million more appointments a year. We want to return to the constitutional waiting-time targets within a Parliament. As our mission sets out, it is vital to restore the NHS as a world-leading health system—something that we have lost under this Government. The Government have promised to eradicate waits of over a year for elective care by 2025. It would be good if the Minister indicated whether they are on track to do just that.

Labour has a mission to reduce deaths from heart attacks and strokes by a quarter within 10 years, so that fewer lives are lost to the biggest killers. Under our “Fit for the Future” fund, we would double the number of scanners—speeding up heart and circulatory disease diagnosis—and ensure that patients receive the timely treatment that is so vital for managing those conditions. We would also incentivise continuity of care in general practice, which would improve care in our communities for people living with heart and circulatory disease. It would be helpful if the Minister explained why, in the past 14 years of Conservative Government, we have seen such paltry ambition on cardiovascular care and a decline in cardiovascular health. The Minister is probably going to talk about the major conditions strategy, which was announced 13 years into the Conservative party's time in power, but when can we expect the full strategy to be published, and will it explore the reasons for the

[Karin Smyth]

backward trend in cardiovascular disease that we are currently seeing? I agree with other hon. Members: we all need to understand the reasons for that.

One of the most concerning aspects of cardiovascular disease in this country is that many of its drivers are higher in areas of greater deprivation and, as we have heard, for black and minority ethnic groups. That is exacerbating health inequalities; we have heard from the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the levels in their communities. In 2022, those in the most deprived 10% of the population in England were more than twice as likely to die prematurely from circulatory diseases than those in the least deprived 10% of the population, something I see very much in my own constituency of Bristol South. That is utterly unacceptable across the United Kingdom in the 21st century, particularly given that cardiovascular disease is largely preventable.

Tackling the issues that impact cardiovascular health, from obesity to high blood pressure or smoking, is vital—not only to tackle CVD, but to improve population health overall. That is why we have to tackle social inequalities that influence health and focus more on prevention, improving capacity in local public health teams that do so much vital work to improve the health of their communities. Innovation will also be vital to centre prevention in our health service, and I would welcome an update from the Minister about the NHS digital health check trial in Cornwall. Given that results from that trial will inform the roll-out this spring, can the Minister indicate any challenges apparent in the trial? When can we expect the results to be published?

As we have heard, prevention starts long before the age of 40, when that health check takes place. That is why Labour will introduce a child health action plan that will put prevention at the top of the agenda, ensuring that the next generation can live healthier lives. There are also widespread concerns that the restructuring of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities could have a detrimental impact on health inequalities. It would be good to hear a reassurance from the Minister about how those concerns about health inequalities will be prioritised in the event of changes to that body.

Finally, research is crucial to preventing further premature deaths. That is why Labour's regulatory innovation office would make Britain the best place in the world to innovate by speeding up decisions and providing a clear direction based on our modern industrial strategy, alongside a plan to make it easier for more patients to participate in clinical trials. That will deliver better treatment to patients. We owe that to all those families who have lost a loved one to premature death, as well as those who—are pleased to see—are surviving and living well with this disease. We must improve outcomes; I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on the major conditions strategy, but that strategy must be delivered in tandem with a plan to provide the NHS with the staff, technology and resources it needs to bring down waiting lists and improve patient care. I am pleased that a future Labour Government has a plan to do just that.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford

(Dean Russell), and say how pleased we all are to see him fighting fit and in his place? I also say to the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) that we wish his son absolutely all the best and a speedy return to full health, and to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan)—who has had so many health problems of her own—that we all wish her very well and a full recovery. Some very good contributions have been made to today's debate. I would just like to mention a very, very dear friend of mine who died of a sudden cardiac arrest very unexpectedly aged 55. It was a tragedy for his young family, so I really do understand—thankfully not personally, but through very close friends—how terrible this is.

I will write to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and my hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Philip Davies) and Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) about the statistics. I do not have any information today; I wanted to focus on the Government's strategy for preventing cardiovascular disease, but I will write to them. As ever, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his thoughtful remarks, and say to him that I have already been in contact with the Minister in Northern Ireland about the smoking Bill. Meeting with him will be one of my early priorities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford is a vocal supporter of the British Heart Foundation. On behalf of the Government, I thank the BHF for all the incredible work it has done throughout Heart Month, including introducing online CPR training that takes just 15 minutes to complete—15 minutes that could genuinely save a life. I also pay tribute to the many other charities that work tirelessly to support people at risk of, or living with, cardiovascular disease.

Over the last decade, the Government have taken significant action to prevent cardiovascular disease and its causes. Just over 10 years ago, we launched the NHS health check, which is our CVD prevention programme. Health checks play a key role in preventing heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cases of dementia and kidney disease. The numbers show that, through health checks, people have a lower likelihood of being admitted to hospital for CVD and type 2 diabetes, and for all causes of death one, three and five years after attending a check. So far, well over 10 million checks have been delivered, and data shows more people are receiving checks than before the pandemic. We are now investing £17 million in the creation of a digital NHS health check.

In fact, we are looking at every opportunity to prevent CVD throughout the course of a person's life. Two years ago, the NHS published its CVD prevention recovery plan, setting out four high-impact areas for every part of the health service to focus on risk factor detection and management. This began by rolling out blood pressure checks in high street pharmacies and helping people measure blood pressure at home, and we are now helping thousands more people detect hypertension earlier. Our forthcoming major conditions strategy will focus on prevention throughout the life course, which is essential in creating a more sustainable NHS. It aims to improve care and health outcomes for those living with multiple conditions and an increasingly complex set of needs.

We are tackling salt, sugar and calories through the voluntary reduction and reformulation programme. Working with industry, we have already delivered reductions of up to 20% in some foods. The second pillar of our

prevention plan is smoking cessation. I am proud to be part of a Government who will introduce the ground-breaking smokefree generation, so that children aged 15 and younger will never legally be sold cigarettes. This will be the most significant public health intervention in a generation.

I now turn to managing risk factors. Once we have diagnosed hypertension, it is vital that we properly manage it, and we are doing more than ever before. Among those under the age of 80 with GP-recorded hypertension, 170,000 more people had their condition managed to safe levels by March 2023 compared with the same month in 2020. The NHS has set hypertension management as a key priority, investing over £3 million to bring CVD leadership roles within every integrated care board.

We recognise that outcomes are often worse in different parts of the country, and understanding why variations occur is critical so that the NHS can take the right action. I support it in its launch of CVDPREVENT, a national primary care audit, which will provide data to highlight gaps in diagnosis, identify inequalities and find room for improvement. I am confident that the programme will help integrated care systems make real change in their areas.

A heart attack is a medical emergency, and recognising the symptoms can be a matter of life or death. People's chances of surviving a heart attack are far greater if they seek care as soon as possible. In August last year, the NHS launched a lifesaving campaign, helping people to recognise the common signs of a heart attack that are often dismissed or ignored, and to seek help by calling 999. I absolutely applaud my hon. Friend for raising his specific symptoms in this Chamber so that others can understand more about what to look out for. Of those who reach hospital early to receive treatment, about nine in 10 survive a heart attack, compared with only seven in 10 of those who do not. That is why raising public awareness is so critical. To improve survival rates for out-of-hospital cardiac arrest cases, the Government have announced a new £1 million fund to expand defibrillator access in the community. We have already delivered over 700 defibrillators towards an estimated total of 1,000.

We are also taking huge strides in making our NHS simpler by providing for patients at home, because we know that patients prefer to avoid hospital if they can be safely supported in their own homes. The NHS programme "managing heart failure @home" is pioneering this approach, and addressing health inequalities as a key aim. Thanks to record funding, we are rolling out up to 160 community diagnostic centres, which will provide echocardiography services by March 2025, and I am pleased to update the House that 153 CDCs are live at this time.

Amy Callaghan: Will the Minister join me in congratulating East Dunbartonshire Council on its good work in getting so many community defibrillators for use across East Dunbartonshire?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. I am happy to do that, and I would encourage all local authorities across the country to make best use of the funds that are available to them.

Let me turn to mental health and counselling services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Watford discussed, surviving a heart attack can have significant psychological

impacts on individuals and their families, and I am grateful to him for sharing his own experience so powerfully. Integrating NHS talking therapies with physical health services can provide better support to people with combined physical and mental health needs, including people with cardiovascular disease.

Mark Tami: The right hon. Lady is making an important point. This should not be a bolt-on. It should be part and parcel of the treatment. We tend to address the physical side of the illness, open the door and away we go, and we do not ask people about some of the issues that they are struggling to cope with.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As part of the NHS long-term plan, all integrated care boards are expected to expand services locally by commissioning NHS talking therapies services integrated into physical healthcare pathways. I encourage anyone experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, even a long time after the event, to reach out to their GP or NHS talking therapies for support.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important issue. Across the House we all share the ambition to bring down premature deaths from heart and circulatory disease. Specifically, this Government aim to prevent 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases in the next five years. Prevention is not only kinder but so much cheaper than cure.

4.57 pm

Dean Russell: I thank the Minister for her response to the debate, and all the contributors, including the hon. Members for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the incredibly moving points raised by the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). I truly wish his son the best of health—he is in the right place in Harefield Hospital. I also remember the joy of seeing the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), my hon. Friend, when she returned. We were on the Health and Social Care Committee when we first joined Parliament, and it was a joy when she returned. I am pleased she is doing so well.

Several themes came out today, and one that several Members raised was about transparency and data. The more transparency we have in data, the easier it is to calm people's concerns. The three outcomes are about protection, including through education, and ensuring that we protect our society and that people know the harm they might be doing to themselves. We must focus on that area, as well as on opportunities to break through with research. I thank the Minister for the work the Government are doing, and if anyone at home is worried, they should get checked. If they are concerned that they have symptoms, they should get them looked at. It is better to get rid of fears before the event than to wait for them to become a reality and have to deal with the outcomes of that. I thank all contributors, and I hope everybody has learned something from today's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases.

PETITION

Face to Face Banking Services

4.59 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of my constituents in Hornsey and Wood Green, who are angry and disappointed that Barclays bank wishes to close its busy Crouch End branch, barely a year after it closed its Muswell Hill branch. Before that, it closed the Wood Green and Highgate village branches. It must be a world record for four branches of one bank to close in an area. It is deeply disappointing that a bank started off by Quakers in the 1690s has such a poor sense of how to serve its community.

Many of those who signed my petition are older residents. They told me that they feel “left out and discriminated against”

because they are being pushed online when they want to talk to “people not machines”. A lot said how anxious they were about becoming victims of fraud and how to travel to the next bank would take a round trip of an hour on two buses.

Almost half of all banks across the country that were open in 2015 have closed. That is bad for customers, bad for businesses and bad for our dying high streets, and action needs to be taken.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect essential in-person banking services.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Hornsey and Wood Green,

Declares that the petitioners are extremely disappointed at the announcement of the closure of Barclays Crouch End branch in March 2024; notes that this is barely more than a year since their Muswell Hill branch closed; further declares that bank branches are the heart of communities, and are relied upon by local communities, especially older and disabled people, those who need access to cash and those without internet banking; and further declares that they are also vital for local businesses.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect essential in-person banking services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002915]

Mole Valley Local Plan

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

5.1 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister and her officials for coming, and I thank her in advance, because I am hoping for an excellent, useful response. I realise that I am picking on a specific planning case that is under an inspector’s review, so the Minister can only respond in the round and not to the specific case.

I came to London from an area of open green hills, bush, trees—the lot—from horizon to horizon, and arriving in east London was more than a shock. I then moved to Mole Valley, so I am particularly delighted that the voters of Mole Valley have returned me as their MP several times.

Mole Valley is south of London, bordering on the M25 with Epsom and Ewell, with Guildford to the west and Gatwick to the east, and it is halfway to Worthing going south. What distinguishes it from London is the green open spaces. There is the famous Box Hill, and farms, commons and parks, and they are all amalgamated together—glued together—and retained by the green-belt land. It is a lovely place to live. The residents live there because it has two small towns and many villages spread among the green.

The local planning council is Mole Valley District Council. It is liberal—no, wait a minute: it is controlled by the Liberals; there is nothing liberal about it at all. The last ratified local plan for Mole Valley was dated 2009. I understand that more than 90% of English local authorities have adopted and are up to date with their local plans. Liberal Mole Valley is among the errant 10% of local authorities, which leaves it vulnerable, as it is finding now, to developers.

In May 2019, the Liberals took control of Mole Valley District Council and with that the responsibility for producing the draft local plan. It was produced between May 2019 and February 2020 and passed for consultation by the council executive and the council without a vote. It contains 30 or more green-belt sites—I am told that; I have not counted them—and the inclusion of many, if not most of them was vehemently opposed by local residents. That was not just those next to the green-belt sites, but those within what New Zealanders would call “cooe”.

I recognise that the proportion of land protected from development in Mole Valley is considerable, and, relatively speaking, the quality of brownfield sites free for development is small in comparison, but it is not impossible to increase the number of dwellings on those brownfield sites. I know from my own time in inner London that with imagination and the new rules and regulations on building, it is possible to increase density and height and adapt those sites.

It has been claimed that the percentage of green-belt sites that the Liberal plan will remove from protected status is small. However, that is a bit like my saying to a cancer patient that the prospect of a long-term cure is 97%—it sounds great, unless they are in the 3%. That is what is happening with green-belt sites. The figures are small in percentage terms, but if they affect someone who chose to live there in part because of those green-belt sites, it is bad news.

The plan went to inspection, but, as last May's local elections arrived, the Liberals asked the inspector to stall her inquiry, and she did. The Liberals announced on their election leaflets that they would remove the green-belt sites from the draft plan. They did not. Last month, at a full council meeting, the council faced a decision on three choices provided by its planning officers. The first was that the plan be withdrawn for a complete rethink. The second was to continue with the inquiry but withdraw the green-belt sites. The third was to continue with the planned inquiry with the 30 or more green-belt sites included, which the Liberals said they had redrawn but had not.

Just before the council met, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, being aware that a restart is probably the worst option, wrote to the council to tell it that it had to keep the plan in the system; it could not withdraw it. The Liberal council, in a classic Liberal, duplicitous way, chose to proceed with the inquiry with the green-belt sites—which it said it had removed but had not—still in the plan.

The need for a clear plan is obvious: it would protect sites that are not appropriate for development, but also set out development sites that are considered suitable. The current situation with the Mole Valley plan has come back to bite the Liberals. I will give one example, but there are others. A site near Dorking called Sondes farm is a green-belt site that was put in the draft local plan by the Liberals for its green-belt protection to be removed. In spite of that, the Liberal council did an about-turn and refused a developer's application for housing on the grounds that it was a green-belt site, ignoring the fact that it was going to withdraw that protection. That refusal was in line with what a large number of local people wanted to happen. They wished to support Sondes farm as a green-belt site. Perhaps they were unaware that the Liberals had in effect already given it away.

Not surprisingly, the developer, having faced a refusal, took its application to appeal and won, with the inspector pointing out that the site was down in the plan to be taken out of the green belt. Others in the portfolio will be in the same situation; one of them is not very far away from that position now.

My ask of the Minister is that she re-emphasises the importance to her, to Ministers and to the Government—certainly to me and most of my residents—of the protection offered by the green belt, that the removal of that protection from a site can happen only in exceptional circumstances, and that those circumstances do not include housing. This is a long-standing situation. It applied when I was a planning Minister, and I think it still applies now. It is not specific to Mole Valley—it applies across the country—and I cannot but emphasise how important it is for so many in Mole Valley and many other areas throughout the country that the strength of protection for the green belt is retained.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this debate and on his eloquent speech. I would like to respond by commenting on the latest position of the emerging Mole Valley local plan, and by explaining why the Department has intervened.

On 25 January, the Secretary of State exercised his powers under section 27 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to direct the council not to take any step to withdraw the plan from examination. As my hon. Friend has alluded to, my ministerial role in the planning system dictates that I cannot go into the specifics of the local plan, which remains at the examination stage. However, I will try to deal with some of the general points and the reason why we have taken action.

My hon. Friend will know that Ministers have consistently set out the importance of having an up-to-date plan in place. As he correctly said, the Mole Valley local plan is from 2009—remarkably, it is over 14 years old. It should have been updated many years ago. As he rightly said, that puts the plan in the bottom 7% of plans in the country by age. That is clearly not acceptable.

The council submitted its emerging local plan for examination in February 2022, and the hearing sessions commenced in June that year. It is the role of the independently appointed inspectors to look at whether the plan is legally compliant before considering whether it is sound. For a plan to be found legally compliant, the local planning authority must demonstrate that all the procedural checks and balances had been followed. Effective co-operation early in the plan-making process is essential to ensure that the homes and infrastructure needed are planned for. Authorities are expected to collaborate with stakeholders to identify the relevant strategic matters to be addressed. For a plan to be considered sound, it should be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy. Ultimately, the inspectors may report that the plan is unsound and cannot be adopted by the local council—as my hon. Friend will understand, that is not for me to decide.

As I have said, Mole Valley has an old local plan, so having an effective and up-to-date plan in place is long overdue. Such a plan is essential to identifying the very latest development needed in any given area, deciding where it should go and dealing with planning applications. The plan is also the main vehicle for setting out the vision for Mole Valley and how to address housing needs, along with economic, social and environmental priorities. It is for the independent inspectors to consider the council's planned strategy, but I know that Mole Valley's emerging strategy has been not to fully meet its own housing needs. It is clear that Mole Valley has not been delivering homes—its delivery is within the bottom 10% nationally, as shown in the latest housing delivery test results. The council has indicated, as part of its examination documentation, that it had a shortfall of 1,164 dwellings over a five-year period, with only 2.9 years of supply. My hon. Friend will also know that housing affordability is a significant issue in Mole Valley. The council is clearly way, way behind, first on having a plan, and secondly on delivery of housing.

The inspectors had agreed to pause the examination between February and May 2023 to take account of the local election result. That pause was later extended to allow for publication of the updated national planning policy framework. That was a perfectly reasonable position to take. However, the transitional arrangements in the updated NPPF make it clear that the Mole Valley local plan will be examined using the pre-December 2023 NPPF—that is, the NPPF under which the draft local plan was developed.

[Felicity Buchan]

My hon. Friend will know that our Government's policy is clear: councils and their communities are best placed to take decisions on local planning matters, without unnecessary interference from central Government. However, when it becomes clear that a council is not acting in the best interests of its communities, it is only right that the Government consider whether it is appropriate to act. With that in mind, the Department became aware of an extraordinary council meeting arranged for 25 January, which included a motion to withdraw the local plan from examination.

It is not unusual for a council under a new administration to want to change direction on its local plan, but that is normally before a plan is formally submitted for examination. However, there was no change of administration at Mole Valley; a Liberal Democrat administration voted to submit the plan to examination, and a Liberal Democrat administration subsequently wanted to consider a motion to withdraw the plan. That was after the plan had reached an advanced stage in the process; the hearings had been completed and the main modifications were to be finalised. This is highly unusual.

The council had one of the oldest adopted local plans in the country. Withdrawing the plan at that stage would have meant starting the whole plan preparation process again. The Secretary of State quite rightly concluded that such an action would not be in the best interests of the people of Mole Valley and decided to intervene. I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that further delay in a plan coming forward would not serve his constituents' interests.

Sir Paul Beresford: I completely agree with the Minister, and with the reasons why the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety wrote to the council. The difficulty is that there were two choices left: one was to withdraw from the green belt; the other was to remain. The council's choice was to retain the green-belt sites. The Minister said that the council will have to justify its decisions. As I see it, the council will have to justify why it has 30 or so sites—perhaps individually—in that plan in the green belt, in spite of the fact that the local population are vehemently against that.

Felicity Buchan: As my hon. Friend will appreciate, I cannot talk to the specifics of the plan—that is not my responsibility. However, I will talk generally about the Government's philosophy on the green belt. Just to be clear, the process is that the local plan goes to examination by the Planning Inspectorate, and the Planning Inspectorate comments on the plan. It then goes to consultation.

It is definitely not in the interests of my hon. Friend's constituents for there to be further delay in the plan coming forward, as that may well mean that homes are built on a speculative basis, with no co-ordination and with limited buy-in from local people. Even the council has acknowledged that in the absence of an updated plan, with no prospect of a new plan coming forward for years, the district would be at risk of developments on green-belt sites getting planning permission because of the district's poor housing delivery record.

I am pleased to hear that following the Secretary of State's most timely direction, Mole Valley District Council has indicated its willingness to progress, and to then conclude its work at the examination. Its intention is to inform the inspectors that the council wishes to continue with the draft local plan, subject to the modifications identified by the inspectors.

I want to step away from the details of Mole Valley and the local plan, update the House, and clarify the Government's position on green belt. Let me touch on what we are doing to not only protect but enhance our green belt. I am proud to say that our national planning policy delivers on the promises we made in the 2019 manifesto. The Government remain committed to protecting and enhancing the green belt. National planning policy includes strong protections to safeguard this important land for future generations, and this policy remains firmly in place. I should emphasise that national policy will continue to expect that green belt boundaries are altered only where exceptional circumstances can be fully evidenced and justified at examination of the revised plan. In order to demonstrate exceptional circumstances, a local authority has to show that it has examined all other reasonable options for meeting its identified development needs. Green belt release is a last resort.

Sir Paul Beresford: In broad terms, is it not unacceptable to assume that an exceptional circumstance is the need to increase housing? It certainly was when I was in the Minister's shoes. Is that still the case?

Felicity Buchan: The Government's position is clear; let me restate it. To demonstrate exceptional circumstances, the local authority has to show that it has examined all other reasonable options for meeting its identified development needs. As I say, green belt release is definitely the last resort.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 February 2024

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Coastal Tourism and Hospitality: Fiscal Support

1.30 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fiscal support for tourism and hospitality in coastal areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. Today I wish to highlight the vital role of hospitality in our coastal communities, such as my North Devon constituency, and the support that the sector needs and deserves. I thank UKHospitality for its ongoing work and support on this matter. I had the opportunity to bring Kate Nicholls, its chief executive officer, to North Devon last year to meet some of the fabulous hospitality businesses and hear their frustrations as well as their plans for the future. We visited businesses such as the Saunton Sands Hotel, the Carlton Hotel and the George & Dragon in Ilfracombe, and SQ Bar and Restaurant in Braunton.

Some of the challenges facing the sector are not always obvious, particularly in remote coastal locations. Hospitality venues extend far beyond just pubs, hotels and restaurants, and include holiday parks, music venues, bowling, children's play centres, bars and clubs, which contribute so much to all our enjoyment of coastal areas and resorts as well as to the economy.

I have been lobbying Ministers for quite some time to continue to find solutions to ensure that this vital part of the economy of North Devon and so many other coastal areas continues to thrive. I thank this Minister—the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—who I know is a champion for the sector, for his ongoing patience and engagement in listening to my concerns and those of my constituents.

My hon. Friend visited Ilfracombe back in 2021 in his previous role as Minister for tourism. We met several business owners and discussed business rates, VAT thresholds and Ilfracombe's ambitions in hospitality. I am sure that he recalls the unanimous voice of Ilfracombe's tourism sector calling for the Government to raise the £85,000 VAT threshold, which currently sees much of Ilfracombe, like so many coastal communities, close its doors when the businesses reach the threshold. When first elected, I naively thought that that was just seasonality, but as staycations came back into vogue post pandemic, we saw some businesses close in mid-August as the threshold was reached. Indeed, a local accountant told me just last weekend that he advises all his hospitality businesses to remain below the threshold. At a time when we are looking for our economy to grow, why do we have a threshold that creates a cliff edge that does the exact opposite for the hospitality sector?

North Devon alone is home to nearly 2,500 hospitality venues, employing more than 8,000 people and contributing more than £400 million to our local economy. The hospitality sector's success is vital for economic prosperity and plays a crucial role in shaping the very essence of our community. Yet despite the resilience inherent in the sector, recent years have presented unprecedented challenges, particularly in our coastal towns. The impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the energy crisis and a labour market grappling with record vacancy levels, have stifled growth and posed significant threats to the sustainability of hospitality businesses—but I also want to draw on the positives that have happened. With all the challenges presented, the Government supported the sector substantially during the pandemic, not least with the furlough scheme, which continued even if hospitality venues were shut.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing today's debate. She is making a barnstorming speech about Devon, which may even make me traipse slightly further north in Devon to her constituency to help out her industry. As we know, the hospitality and tourism industry in Devon supports thousands of jobs. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism, I want the Government to build on the record that she has been describing of support for the industry in Devon and the UK. The trade association UKHospitality—whose CEO, Kate Nicholls, my hon. Friend has already mentioned—has three asks of the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the upcoming Budget: first, implementing a 3% cap on the increase in the large property business rates multiplier; secondly, introducing a cut in the lower rate of employers' national insurance contributions to 10%; and thirdly—this is a big one—permanently reducing the VAT rate for hospitality businesses to 12.5%. Does my hon. Friend agree that those measures would really help and provide a big boost for jobs and investment in her part of Devon and my part of Devon?

Selaine Saxby: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his contribution; it is as if we both speak to the same group! I agree entirely with his contribution, as I so often do. I am very keen that Devon hospitality businesses, right the way across and down the peninsula, can benefit, and that the Minister will hear our asks.

We cannot underestimate the pandemic's impact on businesses. The hospitality sector came out of covid-19 heavily indebted. I hope that the financial sector can look at what more can be done to support hospitality businesses to repay their debts, which currently stand at £8 billion in bank debt and £2 billion in landlord debt. The pandemic harmed hospitality businesses and made their recovery much more difficult.

Although I warmly welcome the small business rate relief that was introduced in the autumn statement, which provided some support, up to two thirds of hospitality businesses find themselves excluded—not due to generating immense profits, but because they operate in larger premises in high-footfall areas. Consequently, the impending 6.7% rise in business rates and skyrocketing wage costs present a daunting prospect for the survival of many businesses.

While I applaud the Government's commitment to creating a higher-wage economy, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by hospitality businesses,

[Selaine Saxby]

especially those based in coastal areas like my North Devon constituency, which are often small in scale, seasonal and working to tight margins. These businesses anticipate a 17% increase in staffing costs from April, with 98% of them expressing concern about how to manage the impact of the upcoming national living wage hike. Many of the businesses that should have benefited the most from the small business rate relief actually face wage rises in the hospitality sector that far exceed the business rate relief itself.

We are already seeing hospitality businesses contracting their hours and reducing the number of staff they employ or the hours that they work. Far too many of our pubs are now open at weekends only or cannot find chefs, so have some nights without food service, which reduces their profitability even further.

Although the national living wage hike was warmly welcomed by the hard-working teams who work across our hospitality businesses, it is a headache for business owners, who themselves frequently earn significantly less than the national living wage, due to the extensive hours they work and a reliance on their businesses' ever-declining profitability to pay their wage. Far too many of our hospitality businesses face a crunch this April. Too many of the sums that we do up here rely on a 35-hour working week. Hospitality is a 24/7 business, and in remote coastal areas with low unemployment, such as my North Devon constituency, many members of staff are also much younger. The increase in the national living wage will hit those businesses particularly hard.

One key ask today is for a cut in the lower rate of employer national insurance contributions to 10% and consideration of increasing the threshold in order to share the burden of this policy between business and Government, but the biggest ask from my hospitality businesses across North Devon—I had the pleasure of chatting to many landlords in some of the fabulous pubs back home during the recess—is because their VAT burden is too high. In the hospitality sector, VAT is significantly higher than it is elsewhere in Europe, putting us at a competitive disadvantage. During covid, we saw huge success from the reduction in VAT for the hospitality sector. In that time, 70% of hospitality businesses benefiting from the VAT cut passed it on to consumers, in order to keep prices low. A hugely successful local pub shared its figures with me. With a turnover of just over £1 million, it is paying 25% in tax just in VAT and employment taxes. That is a quarter of a million pounds going to the Exchequer before payment of bills and wages, and payments to suppliers, are even considered.

Last year, we lost 3,000 hospitality venues in the UK, and I am concerned that if the Government do not take further action to share the burden of this tax cost, we may lose even more this year. Unfortunately, there is one recent case in my North Devon constituency; Broomhill Estate is closing due to VAT costs. I thank Alex Kleiner for all his work and for letting me know how much of an impact a reduction in VAT from 20% to 15% would have made to his business. I heard directly from Alex, a business owner, that there would have been three benefits: a reduction in absolute VAT; an impact on cashflow; and an uplift in footfall because of more attractive pricing, although that is harder to quantify. He said in “4 out of the past 7 quarters 5% VAT reduction would have completely offset my electricity bill.”

Unfortunately, in this instance any changes to VAT will come too late for such an important landmark in North Devon.

Although I know that it is a big ask, I hope that the Treasury might again consider a reduction in the VAT rate for the hospitality and tourism sectors—to 12.5%—as that would help them to overcome the above inflation increases in tax and the national living wage, avoid further inflationary price spikes and unlock investment. The measure aligns with international standards, stimulating tourism and offering domestic tourists a more affordable alternative to travelling abroad. I am confident that not every publican and hotelier is wrong in telling me that this is the one measure that would help them the most. A cut—even a temporary one—would be a boost.

For so many coastal communities, their tourism industry has changed since the hotels were built in the Victorian era. Many have large properties that may not benefit from all-year-round occupation, particularly in those communities where swathes of the tourist attractions, shops and restaurants have closed for the winter because of the VAT threshold issue. Hospitality businesses rely on space to host people and therefore have larger premises in high-footfall areas. Businesses in the industry will often hit the upper rateable value band at a far lower turnover or profitability than others. The hospitality sector pays 2.5% of turnover on business rates, which is 10 times that of banks and insurers. I hope the Treasury is looking at the introduction of a cap on the increase in the large property business rates multiplier at 3% in England, aligning with the expected inflation rate in April. Additionally, I hope the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales pass on the benefits of that relief in full.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend, first, for securing the debate and secondly, for her compelling fiscal case for the reforms that, frankly, are essential. We have been here in recent weeks talking about the same thing. In addition to fiscal measures, does my hon. Friend agree that we need supply-side reforms for coastal communities? Many of our constituents in coastal communities feel isolated. She has spoken about labour market shortages. We need to make sure that we have public services, NHS doctors, education, employment and banking facilities in those communities that serve their purpose, make those places healthy and help them to thrive, therefore increasing the footfall for the hospitality trade as well as the employment market for hospitality.

Selaine Saxby: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend that there are many asks for our coastal communities; I have spared the Minister the rest of mine this afternoon. While I am here, however, it would be remiss of me not to mention alcohol duty. The freeze on that duty at the autumn statement was welcome, but it does not directly help our much-loved pubs, which have reported significant price increases from brewers and other producers despite the freeze. A reduction in VAT would leave the choice to pass on and/or reinvest in the hands of the retailer and not with the multinational brewery in the case of alcohol. I have continuously supported the Campaign for Real Ale's campaign, as it would play a crucial role in stopping our many vibrant pubs and hospitality businesses going under. Whatever the scheme, a reduction bringing us in line with the clear

majority of our European neighbours—permanently or even temporarily—would be a lifeline for our hospitality venues.

While talking about great pubs, I will take the opportunity to highlight The Bell Inn at Chittlehampton, as well as Chittlehampton Village Shop, which serves excellent tea and cake; both are finalists in the Countryside Alliance awards, and voting is now open for anyone who would like to help them along.

The potential of the hospitality sector to contribute to economic growth cannot be overstated. UK Hospitality's economic evidence submitted to the Treasury outlines the conditions required for growth, estimating the creation of 500,000 new jobs by 2029 and an annual growth rate of up to 6%. I hope the Treasury will carefully examine the evidence and arguments presented, recognising the immense potential that the hospitality and tourism sector holds for the UK. By supporting the sector, we not only ensure the prosperity of businesses but contribute to increased tax revenues that fund essential public services.

I am hugely reassured to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire here today, as he has been to see us and understands so much more about our tourism and hospitality sector, particularly in remote coastal locations such as my beautiful North Devon constituency. I hope that may influence some of those critical Budget decisions.

1.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for leading the debate. She is always very enthusiastic and zealous about her constituency. I always like to hear what other right hon. and hon. Members say about their constituencies, because I find it mirrors what I have to say about mine.

I am going to take a wee step down Strangford way, and talk about some of the good things we have back home. I also want to support the hon. Lady in what she put forward, because this issue is so important. She represents and clearly understands a coastal constituency, which she is so passionate about. It is fantastic to be here and support her, as all our constituencies have those similarities. In another debate, she mentioned the impact that the recent storms and weather have had on businesses in her constituency. I was there for that one as well, and that is certainly something that needs to be addressed.

We are here to discuss many things. We look to the Minister, as we always do. He is always receptive to our comments and has an ability to respond in such a way that we all feel encouraged. We will feel better encouraged, of course, if there is some help financially or some ideas at the end. I am sure the Minister will have those ideas; I have no doubt about that. I am also pleased to see the shadow Ministers for the SNP and the Labour party, the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) and for Ealing North (James Murray), in their places. They are both committed to making lives better and to ensuring that help for tourism and hospitality in coastal areas becomes a reality.

Why do I enjoy these debates? I enjoy them because, right away, there is a subject matter that I can relate to. The hon. Member for North Devon spoke very well about her constituency. These debates give me an opportunity

to understand other areas, but also to show off the beauty of my constituency of Strangford. What is known as the Ards peninsula consists of numerous villages such as Ballywalter, Portavogie and Portaferry, which have stunning scenery. Strangford lough is an area of outstanding natural beauty and a Ramsar-designated area as well, so it is really important. I am privileged to live on the edge of that area.

There are many tourism attractions and hospitality businesses that are pivotal to the local economy and play a huge role for local visitors. I will try to do as the hon. Member for North Devon did. The businesses in my constituency are often family run, so when I speak about the individual businesses, I speak with the knowledge of having known them for many years. There is such a variety on offer. What makes Strangford so special is all those businesses that come together in the tourism and hospitality sector along the coastal areas.

We have numerous tourist attractions, such as the National Trust grounds at Mount Stewart, between Carrowdore, Greyabbey and Newtownards. Mount Stewart really is the jewel of the crown for Strangford, with well in excess of six-figure sums of people coming to visit at all times of year. During covid, those numbers did not drop very much. It has fabulous walks and hosts events such as jazz nights in the summer, not to mention the fact that it is a much-used location for weddings.

Another example of what we are doing is the land in Ballywalter that was transformed into a minigolf course as part of the farm diversification scheme. Jim Davidson, the guy I sat beside in primary school—that was not yesterday—is in farm diversification, and that is one of the things he has come up with. It is much loved and visited by families and couples from all over. It is has become a fun day for families whenever they are about. The sheer volume of hospitality that is offered is just incredible. You can probably guess, Mrs Cummins, that I am very enthusiastic and proud to tell others about it. I have told some Ministers here. The Minister in his place will no doubt be booking his trip to Strangford before the day is out, as a former Minister did. She came to visit my constituency and she enjoyed her time across the water.

Glastry Farm ice cream is another example of farm diversification. One of the dairy farmers in that area realised that there was potential for his ice cream. He has been developing that over the years and has done exceptionally well. Echlinville gin distillery is one of many gin and whiskey distilleries that we have across the constituency. The owners of Harrisons of Greyabbey are family friends and my next-door neighbours. It came out of nowhere and they have built it up into a restaurant, a café and a garden centre. The hospitality costs are part of the problem for them. They have a lovely, visual venue that looks right over Strangford lough, which is quite an attraction.

Local DUP councillor, David Kerr, started his own fruit and veg shop from his farm in Kircubbin; fantastic B&Bs in the village of Ballywalter, and a hotel in Portaferry, provide warm and homely accommodation for tourists; and the window of the very much sought after Orange Tree wedding venue—where I attended my niece's wedding just last year—has a view of Strangford lough, so is coastal in every sense of the word. All the businesses I have mentioned, like those in the hon. Lady's constituency, create jobs, wage packets in people's

[Jim Shannon]

pockets and opportunities for young people who want to have a part-time job or to start off somewhere. It is vital that the tourism and hospitality issue in coastal areas is addressed so that those jobs and opportunities can be retained. The list of what is on offer is truly endless.

As the hon. Member for North Devon said, exceptional circumstances, such as weather conditions, ultimately play a massive role in footfall at coastal areas. Especially after covid, we have witnessed many places shutting down as they cannot sustain the lack of business; it is just impossible for them to carry on. Furthermore, the rise in the cost of living has had a significant impact on businesses' ability to pay their bills. I know that is true of the retail trade and those involved in hospitality.

Colin Neill is one of those guys who represents the industry; he is always vocal, factual and evidence-based, and he tells us about the pressures these businesses are under. Some smaller and medium businesses were being charged thousands of pounds for electricity and severely struggling to pay their gas and oil bills. This is ultimately not sustainable—it was not for some of them, and unfortunately they had to close or sell on to new management.

I replicate what the hon. Member for North Devon has said, and other Members will do likewise. Although we represent different parts of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we are probably seeing the same issue. When we look to the Minister for a response, we do so from the basis of facts on the ground and what people are telling us. There is certainly a call for Government to better support local businesses, especially in the coastal constituencies that we all represent.

Government incentives for more local businesses that want to choose to open are crucial to sustain the livelihoods of these areas. Over the last few years—the last two in particular—I have seen quite a few smaller hospitality businesses, shops and venues in my area close; it is important that we keep what we have and that those opportunities are in place. The Government must do more to support local businesses, especially through the Barnett consequentials and the block grant. That is my request to the Minister.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee heard from the Secretary of State this week. To be fair, I think he clearly understands that the Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland has not been okay for the last few years, and because of that the Government are committed to a change in the Barnett formula to something more along the lines of the Welsh model. That is where we think we should be, because it would reflect better our population growth—which has jumped up to 1.95 million, whereas it was approximately 1.75 million about 10 years ago—and the peculiarities of costs for Northern Ireland. I am very encouraged by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and by the Government's dedication to making those changes. Although the Secretary of State had outlined a timescale, he did say in answer to my question in the Select Committee that the Government were looking very much at how they could make the process quicker. That would bring substantial moneys in and give equality to the Barnett consequential.

I would greatly appreciate it if the Minister would look at the matter and discuss it with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—there is a commitment and

I think an agreement can be reached—to see whether any more can be done to support local businesses in coastal areas, including in my constituency, because they need help. I am very pleased, as I think most people are, to have the Northern Ireland Assembly back, because it ultimately ensures accountability in the process, but for us to do well and deliver for our constituents—as a very much integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—we need to have that Barnett consequential change, which will enable us to support our businesses across the whole of Northern Ireland.

1.54 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing today's debate.

It is important to acknowledge the Government's work following covid-19 to support and rebuild our tourism and hospitality sector, with reductions in VAT and business rates, the job retention scheme, business grants, and support for coastal communities with the recent news that holiday lets will be controlled this summer through a registration scheme and a planning permission requirement. I am delighted that the Government have taken that step, which is something I have raised directly with Ministers, think-tanks and through the APPG for coastal communities.

Despite all that support, coastal communities have significant underfunding challenges. My beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye is a tourist hub, in 1066 Country. Based on the most recent figures for 1066 Country, tourism supports more than 12,600 jobs locally, with an estimated turnover of £550 million per year. However, like many other coastal communities, there is a lack of specific and targeted fiscal support.

Tourism has long been overlooked as an industry. I am delighted that the Minister was previously a tourism Minister, so has a great understanding of the industry. It is often described as a Cinderella industry, but is vital to the UK's economic growth. UK-wide, tourism is recognised as an important part of rural and coastal economies and has huge potential for growth, particularly in the more deprived rural areas and coastal towns and villages, where there is untapped potential to generate tourism-related economic growth and employment.

Essential infrastructure, such as roads, public spaces and facilities catering to tourists, often suffers from neglect due to insufficient financial support. It is imperative that the Government prioritise strategic investment. It is great to see levelling-up funding going into many coastal areas, with Hastings and Rother receiving in total £80 million over the next few years. The tourism sector cannot thrive in this country without sufficient fiscal support. By investing in the upkeep and promotion of coastal areas, often by providing seed funding to leverage in private-sector investment, the Government can ensure the long-term sustainability of both the tourism sector and the unique identity of these areas.

Many businesses have felt the effect of the national minimum wage increases. That could be mitigated by temporary cuts to the lower rate of employment national insurance contributions to 10%, and/or an increase to the lower threshold. Additionally, permanently reducing the rate of VAT to 12.5% for hospitality businesses, as

my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon said, would help them to recover and thrive without having to reduce employment or increase prices.

The Pragmatix report, “Communities on the Edge”, into which the APPG for coastal communities that I chair had significant input, made a number of recommendations to support the visitor economy, such as improving seasonal workers visa schemes for temporary hospitality workers and supporting the initiation of business mentorships for small coastal enterprises to share best practice and help with the digital transition. I encourage relevant Ministers to look at that report.

The hospitality and service industries sustained by the tourism sector are particularly crucial for the livelihoods of coastal residents. I thank all the hospitality and service workers and businesses in Hastings and Rye for their dedication and amazing hard work. Supporting tourism in coastal communities is not just an investment in the local economy; it is an investment in our residents. We have amazing hospitality businesses—I cannot go through them all because they are all so incredible. There are cafes, restaurants, pubs—so many things. I invite Members to come and see for themselves: Hastings and Rye is a fantastic place to visit.

Due to the seasonality of tourism in the UK, it is vital that the hospitality and tourism sector is properly supported through a replacement for the coastal communities fund for projects that specially tackled that issue. I emphasise that point: we need specific policy funding and a strategic plan for our coastal communities. Coastal communities need increased fiscal support, especially in the summer months, to combat the impact of seasonality, manage waste issues and over-congestion and provide a larger police presence due to antisocial behaviour in tourist hotspots such as Camber Sands, which on hot summer days might get 25,000 visitors coming at once. We therefore need a fairer funding formula for local authorities, the police and other public sector services. It is essential that we do not leave any of our coastal communities behind due to poor fiscal investment: we must prioritise them.

2 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this debate. By accident or design, Members have spoken about a range of communities although there have been a number of common threads.

I first remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a partner in the firm that runs my family farm, which also includes holiday let accommodation. In many ways, that is a living example of the changes and opportunities that the visitor economy brings to communities such as mine in Orkney and Shetland, and doubtless to those in other coastal and island communities around the country.

Tourism is of enormous importance to communities such as ours. I listened with interest, as always, to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who described the ripple effect of dropping a stone in the water. The stone in this case is the visitor economy. The benefits come very obviously to those who operate the hotels, the bed and breakfasts and the self-catering accommodation, and they go out to those who are able to work part time as self-employed tour guides, for example, and those who have jobs servicing that accommodation—they go out

and out. Tourism may be a useful add-on to a conventional business. The hon. Gentleman said that a number of farm businesses in rural and coastal communities have some sort of tourism add-on—perhaps seasonal. At the end of the day, it is what they can show to their accountant at the end of the year that matters.

The way in which our rural and island coastal communities have got up and done things for themselves is an inspiring story. The real beauty of it is that, by and large, these are the self-employed or small businesses—medium-sized enterprises at most—and the money they earn and pay out stays in the communities. It goes into local shops and post offices. It allows families to live in those areas, because their children can go to local schools. We can keep local doctors, services and banks; the story continues. There is no single silver bullet for these economies, but tourism is an important part that makes the whole thing more feasible.

There are a number of significant challenges. They are not, strictly speaking, fiscal, but they are significant, given the way that they hold back island communities. In Scotland, we have an ageing ferry fleet. For island communities, that has been problematic for the past few years, and sadly it is only getting worse. The availability of labour in the local community causes real difficulty, especially in a seasonal economy. People moving into work in island communities need accommodation at a time when people are coming to stay in the same accommodation, so housing availability in our island and coastal communities is a significant issue, and Government-led—public sector—provision could make a real difference to businesses’ ability to grow.

The regulatory burden unfortunately seems to get greater every year. In Scotland, we now have the short-term let licensing scheme. It will be interesting to contrast how that works with the way in which things are now being done south of the border through a planning mechanism. I have not yet seen figures for it, but my sense is that we may see, especially in the smaller outer isles in Orkney and Shetland, a lot of people walking away from the provision of bed and breakfasts or self-catering accommodation as a consequence of the licensing regime. It is expensive for people to comply with, especially if they are away from the centre of the population. Goodness knows it is difficult enough for someone operating a business in Kirkwall and Lerwick to get work done, but if they are operating in one of the outer isles—in Sanday, Stronsay or North Ronaldsay, or perhaps in Unst, Yell or Fetlar in Shetland—that becomes yet another extra burden and cost. The farther the accommodation is from the centre, inevitably the fewer weeks in the year it can be let and the fewer people coming to stay in the community. Again, at the end of the day, is it worth it? The balance is sadly tipping in the opposite direction, towards saying no.

Those are some of the challenges, but at the end of the day, these people are self-starting and entrepreneurial and do a lot to bring economic growth to their communities, and there are certain levers that the Treasury could use to help them grow their businesses. The difference between the fiscal levers we can pull and the other grant-aided incentives and opportunities is that fiscal levers give people more opportunity to decide what is best for them and their business, rather than having to design their business to conform with the various requirements of a grant application or discount scheme.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

There is a real opportunity for the Government to add value and opportunity to tourism and visitor-economy businesses in our island and coastal communities. The single most important change I hear advocated by those businesses, time and again, is the one touched on by the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby)—the reduction in value added tax. It is rare in any sector that we hear such consistency in message. We have seen a small example of that already with the reduction to 5% during the covid pandemic. It would be interesting to know what analysis the Treasury has done of the tax take in that time—albeit everybody was operating in a much-reduced market.

I come back to my experience from my time in government, when we reduced the duty on spirits. We did so—for only the second time in history, I think—in the expectation of a significant cut in revenue. In fact it produced a significant increase in revenue to the Treasury. I cannot remember the exact figures of the tax take, but I think we expected a £600 million decrease and actually got a £800 million increase. That shows what is possible sometimes when we reduce the burden on industry and business and allow them the opportunity to use that extra cash to grow their business. I strongly suspect—indeed, significant research has been done on this by some of the big consultancies; Ernst and Young springs most readily to mind—that the same would be possible for the visitor economy in our island and coastal communities. That being the case, at a time when we want to grow the economy and are relying on that to spread the benefits of growth throughout the country instead of hoarding them here in London, surely that is something that must commend itself to the Government.

2.9 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. Tourism around the British coast remains a vital component part of the UK economy. That is perhaps overlooked at times, and it is right that we are holding this debate in advance of the spring Budget statement at the beginning of March. At the end of March we have the start of the season, with the Easter weekend.

I shall start as other colleagues have, by providing an advertorial for the tourism and hospitality industry in the Lowestoft and Waveney area. Some might find that a bit of a joke or tedious, but it serves a very important purpose. We are showcasing the enormous range of leisure and tourism opportunities available on the coast of all four nations, as well as the beauty and diversity of the coastline. There is something for everyone to savour, as well as many job opportunities.

I return to Lowestoft and Waveney. In Lowestoft, to the north at Corton and to the south at Pakefield and Kessingland, there are a wide variety of beaches, including the gloriously sandy South beach in Lowestoft. We have two piers—the Claremont pier, which the Llewellyn family are restoring to its former glory, and the South pier, which is let for a peppercorn by Associated British Ports to a community interest company, which I chair. To the north and south of Lowestoft we have two of the

biggest visitor attractions in East Anglia, the Pleasurewood Hills theme park and Africa Alive, which is run by the Zoological Society of East Anglia.

All along the coast are a variety of holiday parks run by family businesses and larger national companies. We are also the gateway, at Oulton broad and Beccles, to the—often overlooked by our noisy neighbours in Norfolk—Suffolk broads, which are surrounded by a stunning landscape that the Suffolk Wildlife Trust plays an increasingly important role in restoring at Carlton marshes, Oulton marshes and, as announced last week, Worlingham marshes. Finally, Hoseasons, which takes the strain for many of us out of organising and arranging our holidays, has been based in Oulton broad and Lowestoft for nearly 80 years. I hope that I have painted a picture highlighting the importance of coastal tourism in the Waveney area.

Covid hit local businesses hard, although the support that the Government provided was a lifeline for many. The pandemic, as we are hearing, unfortunately has a long, bitter tail, and for many the 2023 summer season was worse than that of 2022. Looking forward to the forthcoming season, many businesses' confidence is low. High energy costs continue to have an impact. The response to those challenges by many businesses and operators is to cut their opening hours, delay investment and reduce staff.

One business has highlighted to me the negative impact—described by hon. Members around the Chamber—of the national minimum wage. That business does not begrudge paying the increase to its staff, but that presents challenges that cascade right through the business and ultimately leads to higher charges to customers, at a time when their wallets are under enormous strain.

A holiday park operator has brought to my attention the delays in obtaining planning permission for an upgrade and extension to its facilities, not in the Waveney area but elsewhere on the East Anglia coast. An application that should have taken eight weeks took one and a half years.

Leisure businesses in coastal areas including those of Suffolk are not asking for handouts, but they rightly seek a level playing field. To achieve that, I should be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister would consider the following fiscal measures—I am largely repeating others' words, but in this place repetition plays a very important role indeed. First, as UK Hospitality seeks, we must cap the increase to business rates for larger premises at 3%. Ultimately, we must have annual revaluations and drive the rate in the pound back down to the 30p to 35p level, which is what we had when business rates were introduced in the early '90s. That said, in the short term, hospitality and leisure businesses, many of which are what I would describe as property-hungry but relatively low income-generating, should not have to pay onerously high business rates.

Secondly, to address the challenge of funding the increase in the national minimum wage, in his forthcoming Budget the Chancellor should cut to 10% the lower rate of employer national insurance contributions and increase the thresholds. The benefit of this policy, which in many ways is welcome, would thereby be shared not only with businesses, but with the Government. That is only equitable.

Thirdly, to ensure that planning applications of the type that I have mentioned are promptly dealt with and are not a brake on investment, the fair funding review

of the local government funding settlement needs to be carried out as quickly as possible. That funding settlement is skewed against county and coastal councils.

I ask the Minister to act as a messenger—not Cupid, perhaps—to other Departments about other things that coastal businesses in coastal communities need not only to survive, but ultimately to thrive.

The first message is to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Along the Suffolk and Norfolk coast, we need urgent investment in coastal defences. Our glorious beaches are increasingly unsafe, and holiday park operators and other businesses will not invest in facilities if they are at increased risk of disappearing over a cliff or being washed away. There should also be national investment in the co-ordination and promotion of the King Charles III England coast path national trail.

The message to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is that VisitBritain and VisitEngland should provide parity of support for coastal and rural economies with what is given to London and other core cities.

The message to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is that we need to revive the coastal communities fund and separate the funding provided by the Crown Estate from the granting of licences for offshore wind farms. That money derives from our coastal waters. It should be used to address the many challenges that coastal communities face, rather than thinly dispersed across the whole country.

The final message goes back to DEFRA. Although progress is being made on improving the quality of bathing water around the coast, further pressure must be applied to the water companies to completely eliminate storm overflows as quickly as possible.

Coastal Britain is utterly unique. We must cherish it and ensure that the tourism and hospitality businesses operating there have every opportunity, first to survive and then to flourish and bring significant benefits to the people who live all around our coast.

2.19 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this debate. It is always a pleasure to come to Westminster Hall and give the Scottish National party perspective.

The hospitality sector across coastal and rural communities has weathered relentless storms of financial hardship over the past few years. Surely the UK Government must now extend a helping hand via Barnett to businesses across the hospitality sector, because it is so important to the long-term success of our rural communities and remote areas, and to halting the continued closure of hospitality venues to which we have all become accustomed throughout our constituencies.

From the economic fallout of Brexit to the devastating impact of the pandemic, compounded by energy price shocks and inflationary spikes, our pubs, restaurants and cafés have been fighting an uphill battle for their very survival. The multifaceted challenges that they are confronting have been unprecedented. As a result, between March 2020 and the end of 2022, a staggering 10% of UK hospitality businesses closed their doors permanently. In Scotland alone, more than 500 pubs and breweries closed

in 2023, and the struggle persists for many more. Many of them cite rising energy costs: nine out of 10 hospitality businesses now face far higher energy and supplier costs.

The negative impacts of Brexit on rural and coastal communities are never hard to find these days. The compounding effects of border controls on fresh food and flowers to and from the European Union further exacerbate the situation, burdening Scottish hospitality with over £500 million in increased costs and delays annually. Inflation is undoubtedly a key factor in consumer choices. With the increased energy costs, the picture is bleak for many in the industry.

As representatives in this Chamber of many diverse and different communities, we all recognise the part that venues play in local areas. Pubs and cafés are essential social hubs that foster community cohesion and combat loneliness. They are places that connect our communities and bring people together to share life's highs and lows. The Scottish hospitality sector is also a massive employer, accounting for 8% of all workforce jobs, employing more than 220,000 individuals and contributing £140 billion to the economy and £54 billion in tax receipts.

Another issue of great concern, particularly in Scotland, is depopulation in our rural and coastal communities. Experts tell us that it threatens their very existence. We know that the UK Government's legal migration policy does nothing to draw people into our coastal or rural communities, because the median wage in a place like the Western Isles in Scotland is £24,000, but anybody looking to come into the UK will have to earn a lot more than that, which basically means that huge parts of Scotland will have no inward migration. That is a real concern for us, which the Scottish rural visa pilot scheme championed by the Scottish Government aims to address by attracting workers to key sectors such as hospitality.

Brexit-induced labour shortages persist, with 72% of hospitality businesses struggling to fill their vacancies. Across Scotland, the vast majority of people in the hospitality sector came from among our friends in the European Union. The UK Government's reluctance to heed the calls for special visa arrangements exacerbates the issue and is imperilling the Scottish economy further. The SNP has consistently advocated for fiscal measures to be enacted to alleviate the strain on the sector. As we have heard today, VAT reductions, particularly for hospitality and tourism, could provide much-needed relief; I hope the Minister has heard that from all sides today. Additionally, slashing beer duties could stimulate job creation, benefiting businesses and individuals.

The Scottish Government have implemented measures such as the 100% relief for island hospitality businesses, but broader support is still very necessary. The small business bonus scheme and the generous rates relief exemplify the commitment to support businesses and communities across Scotland. The Conservatives' proposed tax cuts for the wealthy diverge wildly from the public's preference for prioritising public services, as a recent YouGov poll evidences.

We must ensure that the upcoming spring Budget allocates resources where they are needed most, supporting this vital sector and safeguarding our rural and coastal communities across Scotland. If the Government here in Westminster do not want to stand up for and stand with our hospitality industry, ensuring its resilience and

[Steven Bonnar]

longevity for generations to come, the very least they can do is give Scotland full fiscal powers so we can do the job that they are not doing.

2.25 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this debate on fiscal support for the tourism and hospitality industries in coastal areas. I put it on the record that, like her, I have benefited greatly from my conversations with Kate Nicholls at UK Hospitality.

I am pleased to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. Hon. Members have spoken passionately about the importance of hospitality and tourism, the jobs they bring to local economies, the vitality they bring to our local areas and the enjoyment they bring to all our lives. As we have heard, the tourism and hospitality industries have been hit by a series of challenges, from covid to the cost of living crisis. The Opposition are clear that hospitality and tourism are vital to the UK economy and need a Government who are ready and able to help them thrive.

In 2019, the economic output of tourism-related industries was estimated at £134 billion, of which £74 billion was estimated to be generated directly by tourism. Those figures are respectively equivalent to 6.6% and 3.6% of the whole economy. Additionally, as I mentioned in a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, on fiscal support for the hospitality sector hospitality provides 3% of the UK's economic output, and billions in tax revenues for the Treasury.

Hospitality and tourism are important industries for communities across the country. As we have heard from the hon. Member for North Devon and others, they are especially critical to coastal areas. Coastal communities are particularly reliant on tourism and hospitality for employment and income. When the economy is not working as it should, those communities are more likely to suffer deprivation and unemployment. VisitBritain data shows that 10% of inbound tourists in 2019 visited England's coasts and beaches, and those most likely to journey to the coast were on visits lasting a week or longer. That figure is higher in Wales, Scotland and the south-west of England. Such trips are vital to people's livelihoods right across the UK.

In my west London constituency, we have no coasts that I can praise in this debate. But may I put it on record that when I occasionally leave Ealing North, I enjoy visiting coastal areas across the country, including Oban on the west coast of Scotland and Saltburn, Whitby and Staithes in North Yorkshire, and visiting my family on the south coast of England from Brighton to Fareham and Littlehampton?

Many hospitality and tourism businesses in coastal communities are finding it harder and harder to succeed, with high inflation, rising rents and the burden of business rates. At the same time, their customers find that they have less money to spend on enjoying what seaside hotels, pubs, cafés, restaurants and so on have to offer, as people have seen their wages flatlining while taxes and the cost of living climb relentlessly. Today's debate is rightly an opportunity to recognise the central

role of hospitality and tourism in British life, but it is also an opportunity to make it clear that those industries need a Government who will support them to thrive.

Labour will revitalise the hospitality and tourism industries. We will help coastal communities to get back on their feet after 14 years under the Conservatives. It is clear that the antiquated system of business rates is doing the industries no favours. As I set out in the debate on fiscal support for the hospitality sector a few weeks ago, hospitality and tourism businesses in coastal areas may have had hope when they heard the Government's promise of a fundamental review of the business rates system in their 2019 manifesto. However, that review never materialised, and trade groups representing consumer-facing businesses have expressed their dismay at the Government's inaction on that promise. In March last year, the Federation of Small Businesses responded to what the Government were doing on business rates by saying that

"the 2019 Manifesto commitment to hold a fundamental downward review of business rates has not happened...these changes do not amount to the fundamental overhaul the system needs, to reduce the chilling impact of a regressive tax that you pay before even earning a penny in turnover, let alone profit."

We will not stand by while businesses struggle from year to year, facing uncertainty. As the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), has set out, if Labour were in Government we would scrap and replace business rates, shifting the burden away from hospitality and retail businesses, which continue to shoulder a heavy burden compared with those operating primarily in the digital economy.

Our new system would incentivise investment, promote entrepreneurship and reward businesses that move into empty premises. It would help the hospitality and tourism industries once again to thrive. Our plan to revitalise Britain's tourism and hospitality industries is clear, so in advance of the spring Budget, I would be grateful if the Minister explained what representations he or the Government have taken from businesses in coastal communities, and what measures they are considering offering to address the points that hon. Members have set out today.

I am sure that many people across coastal towns will be interested to hear the Minister's response, but whatever he says, we know that last week's news about the economy being in recession will further have added to the sense of gloom facing hospitality and tourism in coastal areas, and indeed businesses in every sector in every region and nation of the UK. That is why our plan to get the economy growing is so important, to make sure that the tourism and hospitality industries in our coastal communities can thrive once again.

2.31 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Let me join others in thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing it. As she referred to in her speech, she is indeed a persistent and persuasive advocate not only for her own constituents and constituency, but for the vital tourism, hospitality and leisure sector. I thank everybody for their contributions today; we have heard many good arguments, showing right across all four

nations the passion, enthusiasm, empathy, love and support for this vital sector that employs so many of our constituents directly, and even more indirectly.

The Government are committed to promoting economic growth in all parts of the UK, and in order to do so we recognise the unique challenges faced by coastal communities, as raised by many Members today. We have supported coastal communities to level up through the dedicated funding under the coastal communities fund, while the levelling-up fund has provided more than £1 billion to projects in coastal areas. That was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and others. More than £400 million has been provided from the UK shared prosperity fund, which will go to lead local authorities within or serving coastal areas.

The long-term plan for towns also targets more than £1 billion of support for towns up and down the country, including coastal towns, each of which will get about £20 million over the next decade. This is built on the support offered through successful bids into town deals and the future high streets fund. It is important to mention that of the 101 towns receiving a town deal, 22 are coastal and are set to receive more than half a billion pounds alongside almost £150 million from the future high streets fund. Therefore, directly or indirectly, the tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors will rightly benefit from some of this additional investment. Every Member has outlined today how the sector makes such a significant contribution to the UK economy as a whole, and to coastal areas in particular.

Let us not forget that the sector particularly suffered from the pandemic and is still recovering. Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided more than £37 billion for the tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors in the form of grants, loans and tax breaks. I think the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned some of those loans that are still being repaid. She was right to point out that they are still a burden on many businesses, but she will be aware that we have introduced considerable flexibility in those loans, extending the time to pay some of them from six to 10 years, and other measures. We are aware of the challenges. There is still a lot of debt to be paid off by individual companies, but also by the nation as a whole, because about £350 billion of support in total was provided to support individuals and the economy during the pandemic. That needs to be paid off, and everybody is sensible and aware that that will not be easy. It is why tax levels are as they are at the moment.

Of course, over the 2021 spending review period, the Government also allocated over £100 million to support the British Tourist Authority, which of course supports VisitBritain and VisitEngland, whose important work was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous); he also raised the point about where they spend their money, which is something that my colleagues at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport maintain a focus on. I applaud the work done by those bodies and by VisitScotland, Visit Wales, and the equivalents for Ireland and Northern Ireland. They do incredibly valuable work and attract not only domestic visitors but visitors in their millions from around the world, who come and enjoy everything that we have to offer.

Many Members have mentioned business rates. I have been lobbied by the ever-busy Kate Nicholls from UKHospitality; it sounds like she has been around quite a lot recently—and rightly so, because she represents such an important sector and so many people across the country. We have heard what those people have had to say and many Members have today re-emphasised the points that the industry bodies are making; UKHospitality is one of many industry bodies that are incredibly powerful and persuasive.

In the autumn statement, we announced tax cuts for the sector worth about £4.3 billion over five years. As has been mentioned by several Members, we also extended the retail and hospitality leisure relief scheme on business rates to 75%, creating a tax cut worth almost £2.4 billion for about 230,000 retail hospitality and leisure properties, which of course helps our high streets and protects small shops, many of which are in our coastal communities.

Of course, that relief was not extended by our colleagues in Scotland, nor fully extended in Wales. I assure hon. Members that we keep an eye on what is happening in other parts of the country and we share ideas. The sector is not particularly party political, as I know from my tourism role; tourism Ministers and others meet regularly across the nations, and work together and share ideas. In these difficult financial times there is not always the money to go around to do all the things that we would like to do, but we prioritised retail, hospitality and leisure for that specific additional relief in England.

The UK Government also decided to freeze the small business multiplier for the fourth consecutive year in 2024-25. That will protect over 1 million ratepayers and, combined with small business rates relief, will protect 90% of properties from inflationary bill increases. It will have a significant impact. For example, the typical pub will receive £11,800 of RHL relief off their final business rates bill in 2024-25; and, combined with the frozen small business multiplier, will benefit from about £12,800 of support.

Many Members also mentioned the registration threshold, which we have also received quite a lot of lobbying on. Of course, the Government recognise that accounting for that threshold can be burdensome on small businesses. That is why the UK has the second highest VAT threshold, at £85,000, within the OECD—keeping the majority of UK businesses out of VAT all together. I recognise that views on the VAT registration threshold are divided and the case for change has been reviewed regularly over the years. There was a review just a few years ago. No clear option for reform emerged from that review, but, as with all tax policy, we will continue to keep this policy under review. I am afraid that that might be a point I make several times in my concluding comments.

Quite importantly, several Members also raised the issue of cutting national insurance. As part of our long-term plan for growth and to ensure that work pays, we have cut taxes for 29 million working people. From last month, 27 million employees have had their national insurance contributions, or NICs, cut from 12% to 10%. That means that the average worker on £35,400 will receive an annual tax cut of more than £450 a year. Of course, the self-employed will have a tax cut and that benefit will come in from April. That comes on top of the existing £5,000 employment allowance, which means that about 40% of all businesses—around 675,000 in

[Nigel Huddleston]

total—have been taken out of paying employer NICs entirely. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon and I have spoken about that on many occasions. I heard the many calls for further reform of and further movement on national insurance contributions, but in advance of a fiscal statement, I am afraid that the Chancellor would not be impressed if I announced policy today. Nevertheless, all these issues are being looked at.

Hon. Members mentioned a few other issues. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) always makes important contributions, but from my multiple roles over many years, I know that the tourism, hospitality and leisure sector is a particular passion of his. I will finally take him up on his invitation to visit his constituency; my goal is to sort that out, so let's talk dates very soon. As usual, he brought up something that other people do not. He reminded us that, although we can control certain things and pull certain levers, the all-important thing for the tourism, hospitality and leisure sector is the weather, which plays a vital role—sometimes boom or bust.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney pointed out the incredible diversity of offerings in the United Kingdom, so it is important to remember that at all times of year, in all weathers, there is something compelling to visit. We need to get that message across domestically and internationally through marketing.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned our heritage and the role played by the National Trust and many others in the ecosystem. I am more than happy to have conversations with other colleagues about his points about Barnett consequentials and the block grant, and I know he is having those conversations too. I will make sure they hear what he said today and his contributions in other areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye mentioned the importance of seasonality, which is related to the weather, and what we can do to reduce it. That is a particularly acute issue for the UK tourism industry, and it of course impacts productivity over the course of the year. She also mentioned planning policy and the important changes recently announced by DLUHC in response to its consultation with DCMS. The sector has been calling for a registration scheme for some time, and we hope it will have the desired impact.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) also talked about planning policy in different parts of the UK and about different regimes. He is an extremely knowledgeable advocate for the sector, and rightly pointed out that the multiplier impact is key. There is obviously a direct impact, but sometimes the indirect impacts are difficult to assess. He mentioned the VAT cut during the pandemic. We estimate that that cost the Treasury about £8 billion, but of course that was needed; it was a very difficult time. It was always intended to be temporary, although we are hearing many calls for a further reduction in VAT. That figure alone shows that it would not come without considerable cost, which needs to be factored in, but we recognise that there is a multiplier impact.

If we were to repeat that reduction, the cost would probably be £10 billion or £12 billion. Some are lobbying for a smaller rate cut to about 12.5%, which would have a smaller cost, but we are still talking about a loss of

billions of pounds of revenue to the Treasury. As with all requests for a VAT cut, we need to know what the purpose is, what the impact will be and whether we can be confident that the lower prices will be passed on to the end consumer. That is usually the purpose of VAT cuts, in contrast with help with cash flow through other mechanisms such as business rates relief. The right hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to point out that, in this sector, pulling one lever can have a positive impact across a very wide area indeed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney was right to showcase his constituency and others, because we have so much to offer. He unsurprisingly had a very broad range of asks and requests, which I will pass on to the relevant Departments. I assure him that we do talk across Departments, so I have had conversations with colleagues about many of the points he raised and other issues, because no one Department has oversight or control over the sector. As we have found in this broad-ranging debate, many Ministers and many Departments have some control over certain levers, but we talk to each other.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Hoseasons in his constituency. I should declare that I have visited on many occasions, because it was a client of mine many years ago. As some may know, I worked in the sector before coming into Parliament. I always enjoyed my visits to Lowestoft and the area—it was always sunny.

I am coming to an end, Mrs Cummins; I know that the debate could go on for three hours, but I will ensure that we do not. I am in agreement with many of the points made by my SNP and Labour opposite numbers—the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) and for Ealing North (James Murray) respectively—because of the nature of the sector. In some other areas, I am in slight, respectful disagreement with them, but that should not detract from the fact that this sector has all-party support.

We may have differences of view on what levers to pull, but the sector has support across the whole House, so I conclude by saying that I very much appreciate all the contributions made today by right hon. and hon. Members—many substantial contributions, some compelling arguments and some very good ideas. In advance of a fiscal event, I cannot make any announcements or commitments, but I want to make it clear that we are always listening.

2.45 pm

Selaine Saxby: Thank you, Mrs Cummins, for your chairmanship. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions and the Minister for his response.

It is always my pleasure to be the one-woman tourist board for North Devon for the afternoon. On a slightly more serious note, part of the reason for the debate has been highlighted by so many other colleagues: coastal communities often hide severe deprivation behind the phenomenal tourist businesses that we are all talking about today. Unfortunately, Ilfracombe in my constituency is no exception to that rule. I take this opportunity to put in one final pitch to the Minister. Yes, we have levelled up across the country at large, but small coastal communities such as Ilfracombe, with a population of just 12,000, have missed out on multiple pots of money, and yet it is the third most deprived town in the country. There is more that we could do for these small areas,

which is why this debate was so vital—tourism and hospitality is the No. 1 part of their economies. It is vital that we get that right for those communities. Meanwhile, I will continue to fight for more funding for coastal communities from other pots of money.

Again, I thank hon. Members. The draw of the sea and of the pub is now upon us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fiscal support for tourism and hospitality in coastal areas.

2.47 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 22 February 2024

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): I would like to inform the House that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).

The advance is required to cover costs relating to the investigation and prosecution of very large cases pending parliamentary approval of the 2023-24 supplementary estimate. Part of the SFO's supplementary estimate will seek an increase in both its resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and net cash requirement in relation to these cases.

This reflects funding arrangements agreed with HM Treasury, whereby through the supplementary estimates process the SFO can access the HM Treasury Reserve for the additional costs of cases that are individually over 4% of the SFO's non-ringfenced resource DEL.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £22,253,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the SFO. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £22,253,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent to the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS278]

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Post Office: Proposed Legislation and Financial Redress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): On 10 January, the Prime Minister and I announced a major step forward in response to the Horizon scandal. The Prime Minister confirmed that the Government will introduce new primary legislation to make sure that those convicted as a result of the Horizon scandal, which began in the 1990s, are swiftly exonerated and compensated. Our announcement attracted widespread support in both Houses of Parliament and beyond.

With a number of the cases over 20 years old, some of the victims have sadly passed away, and many others are in declining health or have lost faith in the system and do not wish to engage further with it.

The Government recognise the constitutional sensitivity and unprecedented nature of this legislation. The Government are clear that this legislation does not set a precedent for the future relationship between the Executive, Parliament and the judiciary. The judiciary and the courts have dealt swiftly with the cases before them, but the scale and circumstances of this prosecutorial misconduct demand an exceptional response. We are keen to ensure that the legislation achieves its goal of bringing prompt justice to all of those who were wrongfully convicted as a result of the scandal, followed by rapid financial redress.

Progress to date

Over the last 6 weeks, the Department for Business and Trade and the Ministry of Justice have been working at pace to determine the most effective approach to this unprecedented intervention, which will deliver long overdue justice to postmasters, respectful of the separation of powers and constitutional balance. This has included consultative engagement with relevant stakeholders across interested groups as well as parliamentarians, including the Chairs of the relevant Select Committees. In addition, detailed work has been undertaken to collect and analyse the available data from the Post Office, the criminal justice system and others to establish suitable criteria and understand the impacts of this intervention.

Scope of legislation

The legislation, which will be brought forward shortly, will quash all convictions which are identified as being in scope. That scope will be defined by a set of clear and objective criteria which will be set out in the legislation and will not require any element of discretion or subjective analysis in order to be applied. The legislation will prescribe criteria, each of which will need to have been met, to determine the convictions to be quashed.

The criteria will include:

Prosecutor(s): the legislation will specify who the prosecutor was in the relevant case. The Horizon inquiry has heard evidence of the egregious behaviour of the Post Office's investigatory practices. It is therefore proportionate that the Government legislate to quash these prosecutions where the prosecutor is, in effect, discredited. In addition, two cases have been quashed by the Court of Appeal which were prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) but based on evidence provided by the Post Office. It is therefore reasonable to include CPS cases within the Bill's scope. However, we will not include any convictions from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). No convictions prosecuted by DWP have been quashed. Due to the nature of these cases, most DWP convictions relied on physical evidence; and when Horizon data was used it was not relied on, this evidence was corroborative of, rather than essential to, the case. The existing and established Court of Appeal processes remain available to those cases.

Offence dates: a set timeframe will ensure convictions are only quashed where the offence took place during the period that the Horizon system (and its pilots) was in operation (with exact dates confirmed in due course).

Offence types: the legislation will specify which offences are in scope, ensuring these align with the offences known to have been prosecuted by the Post Office. This means that only relevant offences such as theft and false accounting will be in scope. Non-related offences such as offences against the person will be excluded.

The contractual or other relationship of the convicted individual to Post Office Ltd: only sub-postmasters or their employees/officers or family members, or direct employees of the Post Office will be within the defined class of convictions to be quashed.

Use of the Horizon system at the date of the offence: the convicted person will need to have been working (including working in a voluntary capacity) in a Post Office that was using the Horizon system software (including any relevant pilot schemes) at the time the behaviour constituting the offence occurred.

It is intended that the convictions in scope of this legislation will be quashed at the point of commencement.

Territorial Extent

At the time of the original announcement, it was stated that the Bill would legislate on an England and Wales only basis. Since then, we have been working

closely with other jurisdictions on this important matter and wish to see equitable outcomes for postmasters delivered across the whole of the UK.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, prosecutions in this matter were undertaken by the relevant authorities in those legal jurisdictions. The Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly have the responsibility of holding those systems to account. We believe victims in those jurisdictions are best served by local decisions tailored to the judicial systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland; as such, the UK parliamentary legislation will proceed on an England and Wales basis.

While it is for the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive to decide on, and progress, their own approaches to the quashing of convictions, we will work with them to ensure those are compatible with the UK compensation scheme, so that compensation can be paid to victims across the whole of the UK.

Financial Redress

As noted in my statement on 10 January, the legislation is likely to exonerate a number of people who were, in fact, guilty of a crime. The Government accept that this is a price worth paying in order to ensure that many innocent people are exonerated. The Government will seek to mitigate the risk that such people will receive financial redress when they have not been wronged. That mitigation will require, as a condition of access to financial redress, that the individual signs a statement to the effect that they did not commit the crime for which they were originally convicted. This and any other aspects of the process will be in line with best practice principles on fraud prevention. This statement will be part of their wider application for redress. Any person found to have signed such a statement falsely in order to gain compensation may be guilty of fraud. Along with other aspects of the financial redress arrangements, this will not need to be part of the legislation.

Outside the legislation, we shall provide a route to full, fair and rapid financial redress for quashed convictions. This will be paid on the same basis across the UK, regardless of where or how the conviction was quashed. Claimants receive an interim payment of £163,000 within 28 days of applying. They can then choose between an up-front settlement offer topping up their redress to £600,000, or having their financial redress considered on an individual basis. Their reasonable legal costs will be met.

The Government will continue to engage closely with relevant stakeholders as they continue to prepare the legislation for introduction to Parliament, with the aim of achieving Royal Assent as soon as possible before summer recess. As the quashing of convictions is processed, the resultant financial redress will be delivered as swiftly as possible.

[HCWS283]

Ukraine War: Trade and Business Support

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): This week marks the two-year anniversary of Russia's unprovoked and illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The UK and its allies stand united with Ukraine in condemning the Russian Government's reprehensible actions, which are an egregious violation of international law and the UN charter.

Daily, Ukrainians continue to defend themselves against Russian aggression, while also working to emerge from it as a strong, sovereign and free country.

Following the outbreak of the full-scale war, the UK has now wholly or partially sanctioned over 96%—£20 billion—of the goods traded with Russia. This includes every item Russia has been found using on the battlefield to date. We will continue to maintain pressure on the Russian regime to secure peace.

The UK will continue to support Ukraine to defend its sovereign territory through the training of its soldiers and the provision of military aid, but we are also laying the foundations for a private sector-led economic recovery with UK businesses at the forefront of reconstruction efforts.

The Government has enabled UK and Ukrainian companies to trade more easily.

Last year, we signed Ukraine's first digital trade agreement, which supports Ukraine's transition to a digitally-led post-conflict economy. To help unlock necessary private capital at scale to aid economic recovery, and as part of the UK's commitment as hosts of the Ukraine recovery conference 2023, we spearheaded development of the London framework for war risk insurance and donated £20 million to the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency's Ukraine trust fund, which supports trade finance and considers war-risk insurance for select real-sector projects.

Earlier this month, we put in place a world-leading extended tariff liberalisation for an additional five years on almost all goods, with eggs and poultry to be extended for two years, continuing to provide much needed economic support to Ukraine and its businesses.

We are connecting UK businesses with their Ukrainian counterparts to unlock new innovations and shared expertise.

The UK-Ukraine business bridge offers a platform through which UK businesses can connect with partners across the global private sector to engage with Ukraine's repair, reconstruction and recovery opportunities. This includes supporting businesses to attend international conferences and events such as ReBuild Ukraine, providing a platform to champion and promote UK private sector expertise. The UK-Ukraine TechBridge, formally launched last month, will nurture tech talent and promote skills development in a priority sector for both our nations.

The Government are advocating for the interests of UK businesses.

The UK-Ukraine infrastructure taskforce, co-chaired with the Government of Ukraine, offers a strategic dialogue to agree where and how UK companies can best support critical infrastructure projects.

Ukraine must be able to defend itself and to support this we are deepening our defence-industrial relationship, using commercial and strategic partnerships between UK and Ukrainian companies to support the recovery of Ukraine's industrial base.

As the Prime Minister made clear in his most recent visit to Ukraine, the United Kingdom will continue to do everything in its power to support Ukraine's fight against this brutal invasion, for as long as is needed. A more prosperous Ukraine is one that can best safeguard its own citizens. And a more secure Ukraine supports wider UK and global security.

[HCWS282]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Charter Treaty: UK Withdrawal

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government have today announced that the UK is withdrawing from the energy charter treaty (ECT).

The statement follows the Government's announcement on 1 September 2023 that the UK was reviewing its treaty membership in the event that the modernised treaty was not adopted by November 2023. The modernised treaty was not adopted, and the review has now concluded. It has carefully considered the views of stakeholders in business, civil society and Parliament following extensive engagement.

The energy charter treaty was signed in 1994 to promote international cooperation in the energy sector in eastern Europe and central Asia following the break-up of the Soviet Union, primarily to facilitate investment in fossil fuels. However, the failure of the modernisation process means the treaty is no longer fit for purpose. The treaty means British taxpayers could bear unfair financial risk as the Government implement the necessary policies to secure the UK's energy supplies and decarbonise.

The UK has been a strong advocate for modernising the treaty to better align it with modern energy priorities, international treaty practice and commitments on climate change. However, over a year after contracting parties reached an agreement in principle on modernisation, following two years of negotiations, there is still no clear route for adopting the modernised treaty. I am clear that the UK cannot remain in an unmodernised treaty that does not align with our unwavering commitment to energy security and net zero.

I am proud of the UK's strong and stable investment climate. Twenty-three billion pounds were invested in UK low-carbon sectors in 2022 alone, and the review into the UK's ECT membership particularly considered investor and business interests. Business groups supported withdrawal over remaining in the unmodernised treaty, and the UK will now join Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Luxembourg, Spain, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Denmark, and Portugal in leaving the treaty. Alternative protections for investment and trade in the energy sector will remain with all but four out of 48 of the treaty's existing signatories. Following withdrawal, the UK will remain an attractive destination for investment in the energy sector due to its favourable environment and strong rule of law.

The UK will now initiate the process to withdraw from the energy charter treaty. The UK is required to give a one-year notification of withdrawal, removing treaty protections for new investments made after this period.

[HCWS279]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Sanctions Strategy

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Today, HM Government are publishing their first sanctions strategy.

The world is more complex and more dangerous. It is marked by hostile states, terrorist organisations, cyber-threats, criminal gangs, and a whole range of challenges to our interests and values.

Sanctions are an important tool we have to respond. In recent years, the UK has built formidable sanctions capability and transformed its use of sanctions as an instrument of foreign and security policy. Working alongside our partners and allies, our carefully deployed sanctions are tackling malign activity and making a difference—from disrupting Russia's war machine to confronting human rights abuses and violations in Iran.

Our new sanctions strategy sets out our approach and priorities since the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. It covers our objectives; the responsible design and targeting of sanctions; and how we collaborate across Government and with international partners and the private sector to maximise impact. It emphasises our renewed push to bear down on efforts to get around our sanctions and the further investment made in strengthening sanctions implementation and enforcement. It underlines that the UK remains fully committed to working with allies to pursue all lawful routes through which Russian assets can be used to support Ukraine.

Sanctions remain a mainstay of our response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. We are publishing the strategy as we prepare to mark two years since that terrible and illegal step and as we demonstrate further the UK's unwavering support for Ukraine. This includes today's announcement of a package of over 50 designations targeting the Russian military-industrial complex and Russia's major revenue-generating industries, including energy and metals.

And following the tragic news of Alexei Navalny's death, the House will have seen our announcement of the targeted designation of six individuals heading up the penal colony where Alexei Navalny suffered such brutal mistreatment by the Russian authorities.

Sadly our sanctions remain all too necessary in other parts of the world. We have used sanctions in support of regional stability in the middle east and the Red sea by targeting Hamas leaders and financiers, key Houthi figures involved in attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and extremist settlers in the west bank. We have also used our sanctions this year to target malign cyber-actors, entities propping up the brutal Myanmar military regime three years after the coup, and those undermining peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We will also be publishing a post-legislative scrutiny memorandum for the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 in early March. The memorandum provides a summary and a preliminary assessment of the provisions and implementation of the Act, including the legislative amendments that have come before this House to strengthen our approach.

I thank the House for the continued support and engagement to ensure our sanctions are as effective as possible in advancing global peace and security and protecting the UK.

A copy of the strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS281]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Baby Loss Certificates

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I wish to inform the House that the new baby loss certificate service has launched today.

As the House will be aware, the Government published the independent “Pregnancy Loss Review” in July 2023, alongside our response. The review examined the impact on families of not being able to formally register a baby or pregnancy loss before 24 weeks’ gestation.

In an interim report provided to me in 2022, the review recommended that the Government introduce a voluntary scheme to enable parents who have experienced a pre-24 weeks baby or pregnancy loss to record and receive a certificate to provide recognition of their loss. The recording and issuing of a certificate to bereaved parents who want one will provide comfort and support by validating their loss. I subsequently committed to introduce a certificate of baby loss in the women’s health strategy for England—July 2022.

Either parent is entitled to a certificate of baby loss if they have experienced a loss under 24 weeks’ gestation, are at least 16 years of age, and at least one parent was living in England at the time of the loss.

I am pleased that we are able to offer this on a retrospective basis to those who have already experienced a baby loss. Initially, this will be available to those who have experienced a loss since 1 September 2018. This will be continually assessed, and we will extend eligibility as soon as we can.

Delivering this important service highlights our continued commitment to delivering on the women’s health strategy and is an important step forward in supporting parents to provide recognition of a life lost.

[HCWS277]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Stewardship Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): All hon. Members will recognise the critical role local councils play in providing essential statutory services to their residents and being accountable to the communities they serve. Where councils do not meet the high standards that we set for local government, it is right that the Government intervene in order to protect the interests of residents. Today I am informing the House of a best value inspection of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, confirming the final decision to appoint commissioners to Nottingham City Council and providing an update on the existing statutory interventions in Slough Borough Council and Birmingham City Council. *London Borough of Tower Hamlets*

It is a matter of public record that the London Borough of Tower Hamlets was subject to statutory intervention under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 between December 2014 and September 2018. This followed an inspection by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, and an inspection report published in November 2014,

which identified best value failure, particularly in relation to grant making, property disposal and publicity spending. As the then Secretary of State, my noble friend Lord Pickles, noted when initiating that intervention on 4 November 2014:

“The abuse of taxpayers’ money and the culture of cronyism reflects a partisan community politics that seeks to trade favours and spread division on the rates. Such behaviour is to the detriment of integration and community cohesion in Tower Hamlets and in our capital city.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2014; Vol. 587, c. 666.]

It is also a matter of public record that Mayor Rahman and his agent, who was also the cabinet member for resources, were found to have been guilty of election offences by an election court in 2015 and were banned from standing for elected office for five years, and that the conduct of making grants amounted to the corrupt practice of bribery under section 113 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

Commissioners were withdrawn and functions returned in March 2017 on the condition that the council continued to achieve against its best value plans and report regularly to the Secretary of State on its ongoing compliance with the best value duty. In June 2018 a Local Government Association (LGA) corporate peer review concluded the authority was now “on a positive trajectory” but that to continue to improve, it must

“be forward looking and learn the lessons of the past”.

Following that peer review and recognising the role of the then Mayor and chief executive in providing leadership to drive change, Ministers took the decision to end the intervention in September 2018.

It is clear to me that the council has made significant progress in the past years to improve governance and assurance processes. A recent corporate peer challenge by the LGA highlighted a range of areas in which the council does very well. These include strong relationships with statutory partners and that the council knows its places well. However, some recent changes have the potential to undermine the improvements that allowed the previous intervention to end. These changes include significant churn at the senior management level, which has resulted in a number of interims in the senior management of the council; the use of policy advisers and expansion of the mayoral office, which has reportedly resulted in the creation of a “two council culture”; the review of the constitution; changes to the grant regime, given the election court judgment of 23 April 2015 and the improvements put in place by commissioners previously; weaknesses in the scrutiny function; the decision to bring some services in house and the need to realise substantive savings in the short term. While the Mayor has a clear democratic mandate, and change to the way the council is organised to deliver priorities is not itself a cause for concern, given the history of the council, changes made to arrangements that were necessary to ensure compliance with the best value duty could mean that compliance is now at risk.

To support the council to continue to make arrangements to secure improvement in its governance arrangements and other areas linked to the past intervention, I am clear that the Government require direct independent assurance that the London Borough of Tower Hamlets is compliant with its best value duty. Therefore, I am today informing the House that the Secretary of State has exercised the powers granted to him by Parliament

under section 10 of the 1999 Act, to appoint Kim Bromley-Derry CBE DL as lead inspector and Suki Binjal, Sir John Jenkins and Philip Simpkins as assistant inspectors to carry out an inspection of the council's compliance with its best value duty.

The inspection will occur in relation to specified functions where we have concerns. This includes the council's functions under part 1 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, and the strength of associated audit and scrutiny arrangements, with particular attention to potential changes to constitutional arrangements, budgetary proposals and medium-term financial planning, the appointment of senior management posts, the use of policy advisers, the expansion of the mayoral office, the policy and practice of grant making, functions that relate to the appointment and removal of an electoral registration officer and returning officer, the funding of electoral registration and local elections work, the use of resources for elections and the maintenance of the independence of the returning officer, and the arrangements to bring services in house, such as Tower Hamlets Homes and leisure services. Given that our concerns also relate to wider decision-making functions, and whether expectations for effective and convenient local government are being met, the inspection will also consider decision-making in relation to those functions, encompassing leadership, governance, organisational culture, use of resources and impact on service delivery.

The lead inspector has been asked to report findings by 31 May 2024, or such later date as may be agreed.

Once the inspection is complete, we will carefully consider the inspection report. If it shows that the council is in breach of its best value duty, we will then consider whether or not to exercise powers under section 15 of the 1999 Act.

This action is not undertaken lightly, and my Department is committed to providing the council with whatever support it may need to support compliance with its best value duty. I will update the House in due course.

Nottingham City Council

On 13 December 2023, I announced to the House that the Secretary of State was "minded to" appoint commissioners to take over certain functions at Nottingham City Council. Commissioners would replace the existing improvement and assurance board, chaired by Sir Tony Redmond, with immediate effect. I also announced that the commissioner team, if appointed, would consist of three appointments: a lead commissioner, a commissioner for finance, and a commissioner for transformation.

These proposals followed the evidence provided in Nottingham City Council improvement and assurance board's latest reports, also published on 13 December, which included the board's assessment that the council is still not acting at the required pace to make the necessary improvements; and the council issuing, on 29 November 2023, a section 114 notice due to an inability to balance the budget for 2023-24. The Secretary of State concluded that the council is continuing to fail to comply with its best value duty. He was minded to escalate the current intervention arrangements in order to secure compliance with that duty and to ensure that the necessary improvements are made at pace for the benefit of the local community.

I invited representations by 2 January 2024 on the intervention package proposed in December from the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Nottingham. The Secretary of State and I have now received the representations on his proposals, which we have considered carefully.

We received a total of 70 representations, including from the authority, the Nottingham Labour group, 16 Labour councillors, local MPs, 35 from members of the public, four local businesses, two community leaders, Unison and eight partner organisations.

The representations presented a mixture of support and opposition for the proposals to appoint commissioners. The representation from the council made clear its preference for retaining the improvement and assurance board, but stated that it will co-operate with commissioners if appointed and noted the proposed commissioner team. It requested that any decision to appoint commissioners is taken expeditiously and that a smooth transition is ensured.

Having considered carefully all of the representations received, and all other developments since the "minded to" decision, the Secretary of State and I are satisfied that no further issues have been raised which were not known at the time we made the "minded to" decision and that no change is warranted to the position outlined in that "minded to" decision. The Secretary of State is satisfied that Nottingham City Council is continuing to fail to comply with its best value duty, and that the necessary improvements are still not being made quickly enough. I am today confirming that commissioners have been appointed to Nottingham City Council and new directions have been issued.

The Secretary of State, as proposed in December, has decided to appoint three commissioners: a lead commissioner, a commissioner for finance, and a commissioner for transformation. This team structure reflects the most pressing priorities at the council as highlighted in the improvement and assurance board's latest reports, namely weaknesses in finance and transformation, along with an underlying culture of poor governance. The Secretary of State is today appointing individuals to the roles of lead commissioner and commissioner for finance. The chosen commissioners have a proven record of leadership, finance, transformation and strong governance, together with the specific expertise relevant to their functions. We will appoint a commissioner for transformation in due course.

Tony McArdle OBE (lead commissioner) has extensive experience in local government and is the former chief executive of Lincolnshire County Council, and Wellingborough Council. Tony has experience in multiple interventions and best value roles, including as current chair of the London Borough of Croydon improvement and assurance panel, former lead commissioner at Northamptonshire County Council, and best value inspector at Thurrock Council.

Margaret Lee (commissioner for finance) previously worked at Essex County Council where she held the posts of section 151 officer and executive director for corporate and customer services for 13 years. Margaret also has experience of interventions and best value roles, including as former finance commissioner at Slough Borough Council, finance lead on the London Borough of Croydon improvement and assurance panel, and best value inspector at Thurrock Council.

The commissioners have been appointed for two years, or such earlier or later time as the Secretary of State determines. The Secretary of State is clear that the

directions should operate for as long, and only as long, and only in the form, as necessary. The Secretary of State and I wish to again place on record the instrumental role the improvement and assurance board, under Sir Tony Redmond's leadership, has played in Nottingham City Council's improvement journey to date. Indeed, the current situation would be even more challenging without their dedication and sustained efforts over the past few years. Commissioners are today replacing the board with immediate effect. The Secretary of State and I are clear that we expect a managed transition from the improvement and assurance board to the commissioners and that momentum is not lost, particularly over the critical budget setting period for 2024-25. We are supportive of the commissioners drawing on reasonable support to facilitate this transition, including from the former board members, if they wish and in the terms they deem reasonable.

The commissioners will be asked to provide their first report within the next six months. Further reports will be provided every six months, or as agreed with the commissioners.

As with other interventions led by my Department, the council will be directed to meet the costs of the commissioners, along with such reasonable amenities and services and administrative support as the commissioners may reasonably require. The fees paid to individuals are published in appointment letters which are available separately on gov.uk. I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise that is being brought, and the scale of the challenge in councils requiring statutory intervention.

Slough Borough Council

Slough Borough Council has been in intervention, with commissioners appointed, since 1 December 2021, after an external assurance review found the council had failed to meet its best value duty. Following the commissioners' first report on 9 June 2022 the intervention was expanded on 1 September 2022. The intervention is due to end on 30 November 2024, though we have always been clear that the Secretary of State may decide to extend directions beyond this date, or that it may be appropriate to return functions before this time.

When I last updated the House on 14 September 2023 on the commissioners' third report, it was clear that while progress was being made and there was cautious optimism that the council was moving in the right direction, there were still significant challenges. It was vital that the council accelerated the pace of improvement to make substantial changes in the months ahead.

I am sorry to report that while the fourth report submitted to the Secretary of State on 17 January 2024 does record continued progress in some areas, including the political leadership, children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), procurement and contract management, the pace of improvement has been insufficient and inconsistent given the stage of the intervention, and there is still a lot to do before the council will meet its best value duty.

It is of concern that the council has not accelerated the pace of improvement, especially on tackling organisational transformation and developing a future operating model, and continued financial instability remains a concern. Commissioners are now of the opinion the Government need to consider the nature of the intervention beyond the current timelines. I have today written to commissioners to request a further

assessment of progress in April 2024 to allow the Secretary of State and I to decide whether further intervention is required beyond November 2024. That report will need to cover:

An assessment of continued best value failure including progress against each of the directions and against the best value themes published for consultation by DLUHC last summer;

A view on timeframes needed for the authority to deliver its best value duty;

Whether the current directions are sufficient and necessary for the authority to meet its best value duty.

In the immediate term, it is essential that the council demonstrates fresh resolve in implementing the changes required to deliver a sustainable council that the residents of Slough deserve.

I will update the House on further progress with the intervention and next steps at that time.

Birmingham City Council

The Government intervened in Birmingham City Council in October 2023, and in January the commissioners wrote to the Secretary of State to set out their initial findings and progress of the intervention. I am today publishing that letter. The financial challenges facing the council are acute and, while it is encouraging that commissioners have made early progress, the situation is worse than they had initially expected. It is vital that the council continues to listen to, and work with, commissioners to ensure their savings plans are delivered to achieve a balanced budget for 2024-25 and beyond. The financial implications of the failed implementation of the Oracle system and the potential equal pay liability also remain a significant challenge. Commissioners have my full support in taking whatever steps are necessary to drive the required improvements. I expect to see demonstrable progress from the council in the commissioners' first full report, which is due in the spring, and I will update the House on further progress with the intervention and next steps at that time.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge in today's announcement the work of the dedicated staff who deliver the important services of councils on which local residents depend. I also want to thank the commissioners for all they do. I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the appointment letters for the Tower Hamlets inspectors, the appointment letters for the Nottingham City Council commissioners together with the directions and accompanying explanatory memorandum, and the report and letter I have referred to, which are also being published on www.gov.uk today.

[HCWS280]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee International Partnerships Report: Government Response

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): On 5 December 2023, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published its report entitled "International Partnerships".

The UK's international intelligence alliances are fundamental to the work of the Government and we are grateful to the Committee for devoting time and attention to this subject. Today, the Government are publishing our response to this report.

Copies of the Government response have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS284]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

UK-Related Domain Name Registries Consultation: Policy Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Saqib Bhatti): In July 2023, the Government launched a consultation in relation to internet domain name registries and domain name abuse. This consultation asked for views on the Government's proposals for regulations defining prescribed practices and requirements, which are to be introduced following sections 19 to 21 of the Digital Economy Act 2010 coming into force. Specifically, the consultation asked for views from the relevant parties on the draft list of misuses and unfair uses of domain names in scope, and proposed principles which will underpin the prescribed dispute resolution procedure.

It is important we undertake this work to ensure that the UK will continue to meet international best practice on governance of country code top level domains in line with our key global trading partners and our future global trading commitments.

As outlined in a previous statement of 20 July 2023, the DEA 2010 sets out the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology's powers of intervention in the event that any UK-related domain name registry fails to address serious, relevant abuses of their domain names, posing significant risk to the UK electronic communications networks and its users.

We received 39 responses to the consultation, which closed in August 2023. In November 2023, the Government published a summary of the responses received and have since been analysing the responses, consulting with technical and industry experts to develop our policy response.

We have today published the Government policy response to the consultation. A copy of both this document and the summary of responses will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

We will now set out in secondary legislation the list of misuses and unfair uses of domain names that registries in scope must take action to mitigate and deal with, alongside the registry's arrangements for dealing with complaints in connection with the domain names in scope. This will provide additional certainty for UK users that appropriate procedures will continue to be in place to help address abuse of UK-related domain names.

[HCWS276]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 22 February 2024

TREASURY

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Treasury questions on 6 February 2024.

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

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Eighty-five per cent of the funds recovered from the loan charge so far—about £3.9 billion in total

—have come from the employees, therefore those who were running those schemes, so the hon. Lady is mischaracterising where we have gone so far. There has been one criminal conviction so far; others are in place. I repeat what I said to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), earlier: if they were that concerned about ensuring we go after the wrongdoers, they would have voted with us last night in the Finance Bill.

[Official Report, 6 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 117.]

Letter of correction from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) :

Errors have been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey).

The correct response should have been:

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): About 80% of the funds recovered so far from settlement of disguised remuneration schemes including the loan charge—about £3.9 billion in total—have come from the employees, therefore those who were running those schemes, so the hon. Lady is mischaracterising where we have gone so far. There has been one criminal conviction so far; others are in place. I repeat what I said to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), earlier: if they were that concerned about ensuring we go after the wrongdoers, they would have voted with us last night in the Finance Bill.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 22 February 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	834	CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Asylum Seekers.....	836	Gala Bingo Hall: Kettering.....	822
Clergy: Same-sex Relationships.....	837	Gambling: Consultation.....	822
Theft: Security of Church Buildings.....	834	Leisure Centre Closures: North Shropshire.....	823
World Watch List.....	839	Multi-sport Grassroots Facilities.....	827
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	819	Short-term Lets: National Registration.....	820
AI: Creative Industries.....	824	Topical Questions.....	828
BBC Mid-term Review.....	819	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	838
Charities: Cost of Living.....	824	Members' Productivity: Digital Tools.....	838
Charity Lotteries: Annual Sales Limits.....	826	Protection for Members of Parliament.....	833

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 22 February 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	53WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	59WS
Serious Fraud Office: Contingencies Fund		Baby Loss Certificates.....	59WS
Advance.....	53WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND	
BUSINESS AND TRADE	53WS	COMMUNITIES	59WS
Post Office: Proposed Legislation and Financial		Local Government Stewardship Update.....	59WS
Redress.....	53WS	PRIME MINISTER	64WS
Ukraine War: Trade and Business Support.....	55WS	Intelligence and Security Committee International	
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	57WS	Partnerships Report: Government Response.....	64WS
Energy Charter Treaty: UK Withdrawal.....	57WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	65WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		UK-Related Domain Name Registries	
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	57WS	Consultation: Policy Response.....	65WS
UK Sanctions Strategy.....	57WS		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 22 February 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	11MC
Topical Questions.....	11MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 29 February 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 22 February 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 819] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission

Post Office Horizon Scandal [Col. 841]

Answer to urgent question—(Kevin Hollinrake)

Inter Faith Network Closure [Col. 851]

Answer to urgent question—(Felicity Buchan)

Business of the House [Col. 857]

Statement—(Leader of the House)

Ukraine [Col. 886]

Statement—(Grant Shapps)

Royal Assent to Act passed [Col. 895]

UK Accession to CPTPP [Col. 898]

Select Committee Statement—(Liam Byrne)

Backbench Business

Civil Nuclear Road Map [Col. 904]

Motion—(Damian Collins)—agreed to

Heart and Circulatory Diseases: Premature Deaths [Col. 927]

Motion—(Dean Russell)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 945]

Mole Valley Local Plan [Col. 946]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Coastal Tourism and Hospitality: Fiscal Support [Col. 329WH]

General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 53WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 11MC]
