

**Monday
25 March 2024**

**Volume 747
No. 73**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 25 March 2024

House of Commons

Monday 25 March 2024

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Before we come to questions to the Secretary of State for Defence, may I just say this to Minister Heappey: you will be missed and I am sorry you are stepping down. On a personal level, I thank you for your private briefings to ensure that the House was kept informed. You will be missed and I thank you for that service.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

RFA Sir Galahad

1. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of publishing all documents relating to the bombing of RFA Sir Galahad. [902161]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I recognise the substantial public and parliamentary interest in this matter. Consequently, I recently visited the National Archives at Kew to view the RFA Sir Galahad files. As a result, we are looking to release a further two files, subject to the Ministry of Defence's legal advisers confirming that individuals' rights under the Data Protection Act 2018 would not be contravened. In relation to the five files of witness statements, I want maximum transparency, subject to the Public Records Act 1958 and ensuring that personal data is protected. I shall provide a further update shortly.

Jessica Morden: On Saturday I attended the first remembrance and reunion event for the survivors and families of those who were lost in the attack on the Sir Galahad. I know that the Minister knows this—and I thank him for his earlier response—but it is deeply important that the remaining documents from the board of inquiry are released, so that we can get to the truth of what happened on 8 June 1982. He has told us what he might release, but, for those who have lived with this for 42 years, can he tell us when we will have those decisions?

Dr Murrison: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the tenacity with which she has pursued this. I have enjoyed our meeting to discuss the matter and also the meetings with the Welsh Guards. It is important that this is handled quickly. We are moving at pace to ensure that we can do so—with, of course, the caveats that I have just described.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I knew people who served in the Welsh Guards at the time—I was myself in the Scots Guards—and a number who did not come back. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on her question. My right hon. Friend says that he is moving at pace, but the key point is that it is now decades since this happened. There is now no question but that some kind of cover-up took place. When he comes to look at those documents again, can he please ensure that, on the balance of judgment, we err in favour of opening up so that, for those who have died and those whose reputations have been trashed, we can stand up and say proudly that it was not them?

Dr Murrison: The board of inquiry is quite clear about the attribution of blame, and the Welsh Guards were absolutely exonerated, and that is the Government's position. My position is always for transparency, and certainly that has been at the forefront of my mind when I have been looking at these documents.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, was at the event that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) attended at the weekend. I was there on behalf of my constituent Colin Silva. Many of those who did not come back were from the brave Welsh Guards. I have also visited Fitzroy and seen the location for myself. I was able to assure the people of the Falkland Islands of the united support from this House for their defence and security. May I press the Minister on the timing? Are we talking in terms of weeks, months or years, because time is moving on and we need these answers quickly.

Dr Murrison: I will not be drawn on precise times, but it will not be years.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My constituent Oliver Richardson, now the mayor of Deal, was just 21 when he survived the sinking of the Galahad. Forty years on, he says that there is no reason for this supposed secrecy and that many people neither were offered, nor wanted, confidentiality in relation to saying what they had seen. Our armed forces serve us all, and we must honour that service by giving them and the families of those lost and injured on the Galahad the answers they need. I urge the Minister to release all of the Falklands Galahad papers at pace.

Dr Murrison: The Government will do everything we can in the interests of transparency, but I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that we, like everybody else, are bound by the Data Protection Act.

Indo-Pacific

2. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific. [902162]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): The UK is committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific, and we are putting our regional approach on a long-term strategic footing. I returned this weekend from Australia, where we have been talking to our colleagues there, working hard on the Indo-Pacific programme.

Henry Smith: Stability in the Indo-Pacific has been largely aided by the military base presence on Diego Garcia. What assessment has the Defence Secretary made of the military base and the island of Diego Garcia remaining under full British sovereignty, so that we can help to counter the many threats of the modern world, whether that be China, Iran or others?

Grant Shapps: As I think my hon. Friend knows, I share the goal of ensuring that the base on Diego Garcia remains permanently available for our use, and for the United States. It is strategically positioned, it is absolutely vital and there is read-across to our military facilities elsewhere. It remains safe in our hands.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When assessing our ability to influence the stability of that region, or any other, has the Secretary of State conducted any kind of impact assessment of the reduction of our investment in international aid from 0.7% of GDP, or the fact that we have the smallest standing Army in the United Kingdom for 200 years?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that I look after the Defence budget, rather than the overseas development budget, but I think he will welcome the fact that, because of the Indo-Pacific tilt, we have ships with a permanent presence there—HMS Spey and HMS Tamar—and the littoral response group south, which operates in the Indo-Pacific. We have already sent the carrier strike group previously; it is going to the region again next year. That is in addition to the global combat air programme sixth-generation programme, and of course AUKUS, for which I was in Australia at the weekend. I think we can all agree that we are doing a lot more than ever before in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): As you did, Mr Speaker, I pay tribute to the Armed Forces Minister at his last Defence questions. Since the last election, we have had five Chancellors, four Foreign Secretaries, three Prime Ministers and two Defence Secretaries, but only one Armed Forces Minister. He has been a rare constant in the turmoil of Government, totally committed to defence. We thank him for that and wish him well.

On the Indo-Pacific, we welcome last week's updated defence agreement with Australia, further progress on AUKUS, and today's 10-year plan for Barrow to support AUKUS. This is our most important strategic alliance beyond NATO, so why has the Defence Secretary given the leadership of key parts of AUKUS to the most junior Minister in his Department?

Grant Shapps: As I explained, I have just been in Australia talking about AUKUS. I have previously been to Japan, I think at least twice but possibly three times, on AUKUS, and to Italy—sorry, not to Italy, obviously, on AUKUS; that was on GCAP, but with an Indo-Pacific tilt. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the Armed Forces Minister, but I am interested to hear his comments on the Indo-Pacific. Back in 2021, when the integrated review suggested a tilt to the Indo-Pacific, he called it a serious flaw in the programme, and urged us not to defocus from elsewhere in the world.

Support for Veterans

3. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent steps Veterans UK has taken to support veterans and their families. [902163]

4. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What recent steps Veterans UK has taken to support veterans and their families with the cost of living. [902164]

9. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [902169]

16. **Mrs Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): What recent steps Veterans UK has taken to support veterans and their families with the cost of living. [902177]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): With other Government Departments, the Ministry of Defence delivers a range of services to our brilliant veterans and their families. That includes the administration and payment of armed forces pensions and compensation, the provision of tailored advice and assistance through the veterans welfare service, defence transition services and the integrated personal commissioning for veterans.

Liz Twist: A new report from Northumbria University found that suicide among serving personnel and veterans could be reduced if there was better understanding within existing care provision of the specific challenges that they face. The report also found that military families felt unheard, misunderstood and not cared for during the most difficult periods of their lives, so what steps is the Minister taking, alongside our NHS, to deliver compassionate trauma-informed support for serving personnel and veterans?

Dr Murrison: I am glad that the hon. Lady has raised that issue. She will know that we have a defence suicide prevention strategy, which is reviewed regularly. She will also know that, overall, suicide in the armed forces is below what we might expect in the civilian population. There is a sub-group within that—young men—where it looks as if the rate is going up. We are looking very closely at that to better understand the reasons for it and how we can prevent it.

Kate Hollern: My constituent joined the Army in 1987 and served in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment until 1994. During a wrongful operation, he severed all the nerves in his feet. He is now 52 years old and suffers from several conditions that leave him in excruciating pain every day. He was on disability living allowance and then moved to personal independence payments, but 18 months ago he was told that he was no longer eligible. Is that really the way to treat our veterans?

Dr Murrison: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent. If she would like to write to me with the details, I will be more than happy to take up that case. As I said in my opening remarks, we work with other Departments, and it sounds as if this is not principally the responsibility of the MOD, but I would be more than happy to hear from her about her constituent.

Chris Clarkson: About a year ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) undertook an important and groundbreaking piece of work on behalf of female veterans and women in the armed forces. Following that, I had the honour of helping her to set up the all-party parliamentary group on women in defence, which has given a platform to female veterans and service personnel, as well as those who work in defence and the charitable sector, to talk to Members from across the House at every level. We are very much looking forward to the female veterans strategy. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government remain committed not just to equal treatment for women in the armed forces, but to an equally positive experience for everyone who chooses to serve?

Dr Murrison: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I pay tribute to him and to our hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) for all their hard work to improve the position of women in our armed forces. Women are absolutely central to the way in which defence will be going in the years ahead, as encapsulated in our target to have our armed forces be 30% female by 2030—a challenging and ambitious target. I should mention our improvements to uniform policies, mentoring, flexible service, wraparound childcare, and of course our zero tolerance for unacceptable sexual behaviour, as examples of things we have done recently to improve the lived experience of women in our armed forces.

Mrs Hamilton: At the last census, just over 17,000 veterans were living in Birmingham, 35% of whom were over the age of 80. Despite pledges to end veteran homelessness, Government figures show that it rose last year by 14%, and up to 180 veteran households across the UK are made newly homeless each month. Can the Minister tell me what he is doing to ensure that veterans in Birmingham and across the UK, who made enormous sacrifices for our safety and security, do not end up homeless?

Dr Murrison: It is plainly not right that anybody should be without a home, be they a veteran or not. We are doing everything in our power to ensure that people are set up well for civilian life as they transition out of the armed forces. The overwhelming majority of people who leave our armed forces are in precisely that position. By using measures such as the defence transition service for those who might have particular problems when they return to civilian life—as all members of the armed forces ultimately do—we are ensuring that we minimise the number of people who have served in our armed forces and are left without a home.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is the Minister aware of the excellent work of the Battle Back Centre in Lilleshall in my constituency, a successful collaboration between the Royal British Legion and Sport England? Would he, or perhaps the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, consider visiting the centre soon, given that it has treated more than 6,000 serving and ex-service personnel for all sorts of injuries? The staff there are fabulous and superb, and they deserve a visit.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the invitation, which I will most gladly take up. I pay tribute to Battle Back, which does a wonderful job, and to him for his work supporting it.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Veteran Roy Sagar, a familiar face to us all in Morley, recently passed away in his mid-90s. He did so much for veterans and the Royal British Legion locally, and was our parade marshal. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Roy and all our unsung hero veterans for all they do, and in sending thoughts and prayers to Roy's family?

Dr Murrison: Yes, I very much do so. Our veterans are a wonderful part of our communities and deserve all the support we can give them. I also pay tribute to the Royal British Legion, which is always there for our veterans when they need it—I speak as president of my local branch. The legion is a powerful institution—I know you have had a lot to do with it, Mr Speaker—and an important part of what and who we are, and I pay tribute to it, as well as to my hon. Friend's late constituent.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I appreciate the Minister's earlier answer, but when Royal British Legion Industries says that 6,000 veterans are homeless or in danger of becoming so, is there a need for more urgent intervention, or is the Minister for Veterans' Affairs right to hail getting 500 off the streets as a triumph?

Dr Murrison: I think that getting 500 off the streets is good—it is certainly a start—but one person without a home is one too many, whether they are a civilian or a veteran. The important thing is that we look at factors that might be peculiar to defence that predispose people to homelessness, because we have a particular duty to those people in accordance with the military covenant. In general, as the hon. Gentleman and I both know, people leaving the armed forces are much better placed for the balance of their lives in civilian life than their equivalents in civil society, but that is not the case for everyone. Some people fall through the cracks, and we must ensure that they are scooped up and looked after.

Armed Forces Readiness

5. **Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP):** What progress his Department has made on improving the readiness of the armed forces. [902165]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): Mr Speaker, thank you very much indeed for your words at the beginning of questions. I also thank the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). You were both very kind indeed to say what you said.

The UK armed forces are meeting all of their commitments, but there is no mistaking that they are very busy, as one would expect at such a turbulent geopolitical time. People across the Army, Navy, Air Force and strategic command are working incredibly hard, and we are very grateful to them and their families for their forbearance while they do so. The Government are investing £1.95 billion extra in our resilience and readiness, but more than investment is needed, which is why all three services are getting back into the business of being ready for warfighting. The 3rd (United Kingdom) Division recently exercised its combat service support echelons

for the first time in decades; the Royal Navy is operating concurrent task groups as well as forward presence, a test of our naval logistics; and the Royal Air Force is refining its abilities to disperse the force through its agile combat employment mechanism.

Ian Blackford: Of course, we commend the efforts of all those in our armed services, but the Defence Committee's "Ready for War?" report substantiates that our armed forces are constantly overstretched and are being deployed above their capacity. When are the Government going to respond appropriately to the scale of the geopolitical challenges by driving up recruitment and retention and making sure that we can face the challenges that we see ahead of us—that we can take them full-on, and are ready for whatever comes our way?

James Heapey: There is no escaping the fact that the world is incredibly complicated at the moment. In the Euro-Atlantic, we face the challenge of Russia; in the middle east, the challenge of Iran and its proxies; in the Indo-Pacific, the growing competition with China; and then across Africa and other parts of the world there remains the challenge of violent extremism. At a time of such crisis, one would expect the armed forces to be as busy as they are. That does not mean that we should take for granted the effort that they are putting in, but if we were not reaching for them as extensively as we are right now, we would have to question when on earth we would reach for them, given the demands on our nation.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for Armed Forces—I am very sad to hear that he is going. He talks of warfighting. As he knows, I am on the Defence Committee. I would challenge the idea that we are ready to fight a sustained war with the armed forces that we have, and bearing in mind all the threats that we face, that possibility has become very real. Bearing in mind that his collective responsibility is about to go, will he now stand at the Dispatch Box and say that we need to spend a lot more money on defence?

James Heapey: That will go soon, but not yet. Colleagues on both sides of the House will note that whenever I have been invited to respond to such a question, like all good Defence Ministers, I have never missed the opportunity to say yes, but the reality is that our armed forces remain fit. Yes, it is the job of this House and particularly my hon. Friend's Committee to scrutinise our readiness, as the Committee has done—and I commend the report to colleagues who have not already read it—but reinvestment is needed to sustain our armed forces at warfighting level. That is no scandal; that is the consequence of a peace dividend that rightly allowed successive Governments to disinvest in the resilience that kept our cold war force credible. However, as the Secretary of State so rightly said in his speech the other week, we are now in a "pre-war era", so it is the responsibility of this Government and those who follow to reinvest in the necessary warfighting capability.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Minister rightly points to the ability to sustain fighting. He knows that an exercise conducted with the Americans showed that the British Army would run out of munitions within

10 days. Battles in Ukraine showed very early on that this would be an artillery war. Why—I have asked this question of several Ministers, so I hope that he has the answer—did it take from March or April 2022 to July 2023 to place the orders for new munitions? We cannot afford this sort of delay in the Ministry of Defence.

James Heapey: The contract has now been placed, and it increases our supply of .155s significantly. I take issue with the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes: I am not aware of the exercise he referred to, but in exercises that I have seen, in which the UK has operated alongside the US, again and again the American senior commanders have held the UK force elements in the highest regard.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As I used to do my right hon. Friend's job, may I join the tributes to the outgoing, outstanding Armed Forces Minister?

The "Ready for War?" report just referenced identified problems with recruitment as one issue that impedes our ability to fight. The Defence Secretary himself has called our recruitment system "ludicrous", and he told *The Times* earlier this month that

"the 'Amazon' generation, which is used to getting things instantly, were not prepared to wait a year to join the army."

He is absolutely right, so when will the utterly ludicrous "Crapita" finally be sacked?

James Heapey: I am unable to answer my right hon. Friend's specific question, but he will be heartened to hear that as a consequence of all that is going on in the world, and the geopolitical uncertainty that requires us to use our armed forces so extensively, in recent months we have enjoyed record expressions of interest in joining His Majesty's armed forces. Obviously, we need to make sure that the time between expressing an interest and starting training is as short as possible; all colleagues on the Front Bench perceive the need for that.

Defence Jobs

6. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support defence jobs. [902166]

20. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support defence jobs. [902181]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): The most recent estimate shows that the Ministry of Defence supports about 209,000 jobs in industries across the UK. I am pleased to say that this figure will be boosted further by the confirmation last week that BAE Systems will partner with a firm in Australia to build its nuclear-powered submarines. That will support 7,000 additional British jobs across the programme's lifetime.

Selaine Saxby: Would my hon. Friend agree that MOD procurement from small British companies in rural areas such as North Devon can significantly increase defence-related jobs there, and enhance the local economy, especially when those jobs are in high-wage research and development and manufacturing industries? Will he commit to ensuring that the additional high-skilled jobs and economic benefits resulting from contracts are considered in future procurement decisions?

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent point from my hon. Friend, who is a champion of defence small and medium-sized enterprises in her constituency. As to procurement rules supporting SMEs such as those in North Devon, our new integrated procurement model will ensure that UK industrial capability and exportability considerations are included in procurement evaluation criteria for items such as the new medium helicopter. However, to ensure that we absolutely maximise opportunities for British industry, on Friday, I announced that we will undertake a rapid review of how Cabinet Office social value rules impact on the development of sovereign capability.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister will be aware of the successful export order for high-value naval electric propulsion technology manufactured by GE in my Rugby constituency. That order is going to Singapore, and it was achieved with the assistance of the MOD and the Department for Business and Trade. Does that not show that support for this world-leading British technology enables new business in a fast-developing part of the world, while providing significant, new, high-value jobs for my constituents?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. I welcome the valuable contribution of GE in his constituency in supplying high-tech motors, including for Royal Navy ships, such as Type 26 frigates and Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers. It is precisely because the Ministry of Defence recognises the importance of GE's Rugby facility that we were pleased to reach an agreement with the company in 2019 to ensure that those motors continued to be manufactured there. Finally, he is right about export. It is such a key part of our new integrated procurement model, because it boosts industrial resilience and prosperity in constituencies such as his, while strengthening international alliances, such as, in this case, with the people of Singapore and the Singapore navy.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that Huddersfield is a centre for defence industries; we have David Brown Gears and Reliance Precision, for example. I talk to them regularly. They say to me that one of the things that they miss is trained personnel. The Army, Navy and Air Force used to be the biggest trainer of personnel in the country. The diminished level of training in the armed services is reflected in the sector, which cannot get enough highly trained people to employ.

James Cartlidge: I am aware of those companies, which do an excellent job supporting the supply chain, particularly for our primes and for key programmes, especially naval programmes. I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of training. As he will be aware, defence is the biggest employer of apprentices in the country. We are doing everything we can to support that. The key is to have a close relationship with industry, and to bring it into our requirements early on, so that it can plan and deliver the supply signal, particularly for skills, to match our demand signal.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to build on the incisive question asked by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

More than 125,000 applicants to the British Army were rejected in the past five years. It has emerged that 70% of applicants were dropped or withdrew at the paperwork stage. More than 8,000 withdrew their applications, having waited for at least six months. What consequences will Capita face for this record, and when might the Army bring soldier and officer recruitment back in house?

James Cartlidge: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to direct questions about recruitment to the Minister for Defence People and Families. As to the company the hon. Gentleman talks about, my focus is on industry and supporting jobs, which the original question was about. I think we have a fantastic record, boosted by not only the exports I referred to earlier, but the ones that my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) was talking about.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Defence procurement can strengthen UK sovereignty, security and economic growth. We on the Opposition Benches believe that defence investment should be directed first to UK businesses, so that we make, buy and sell more in Britain. With that in mind, what steps is the Minister taking in his rapid review to ensure that social value considerations properly take into account the huge advantages to the UK economy of awarding more contracts to British businesses, so that we create more defence jobs here in the UK? That does not seem to happen at present.

James Cartlidge: I think there is considerable consensus, because I agree with the right hon. Lady about the importance of sovereign defence capability, and not just because of the economic benefits, although those are crucial. As we enter this era, which has been described as pre-war, it is vital that we have a UK sovereign industrial base. As the Ukrainians have learned, there are certain skills and capabilities that we will need in country, should we get to a hotter military situation, and that is why that is such a priority for us.

Armed Forces Personnel

7. **Keir Mather** (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): What steps he is taking to end the hollowing out of the armed forces. [902167]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): I refer the hon. Gentleman to much that I said in response to the readiness question earlier, but the key point on this issue of enablement is that it is the unglamorous stuff that needs to be invested in first. There is no point buying more tanks until we have more tank transporters. The Government are seized of that, and are doing exactly that. This is an opportunity to place on record, in addition to my gratitude to the armed forces, which I have mentioned, that tens of thousands of hard-working MOD civil servants in the MOD main building and around the wider enterprise are hard at work on this problem right now, and I am grateful to them for their efforts.

Keir Mather: Like other colleagues, I thank the Minister for his years of service. Since 2010, the size of our armed forces has decreased by over 43,000 personnel; the number of Royal Navy warships has decreased by a fifth; more than 200 aircraft have been removed from service in just the last five years; and recruitment targets are being missed year on year. Which of those legacies of 14 years of Conservative Government is the Minister most proud of? What actions could he undertake to do better?

James Heapey: The thing that I am most proud of, beyond the exceptional operational output of His Majesty's armed forces every time they are called on, is that the Government have increased the defence budget to more than £50 billion a year for the first time. The hon. Gentleman, whose interest in defence is very welcome indeed, should be enormously concerned about the shadow Chancellor's repeated refusal to commit to anything more than the 2% NATO floor for defence spending. If his concern for defence is to last, he should immediately be concerned about the fact that unless his party changes policy urgently, it will equal a £7 billion cut in defence spending on day one of a Labour Government.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The question of whether our armed forces are fit for purpose should centre on whether they can carry out the defence tasks set by the MOD, and I believe that they can. If I may carry on in the same vein as the previous response, does the Minister agree that Labour's failure to commit to spending more than 2% of GDP on defence presents a much bigger risk to UK security than any objective debate on this side of the House?

James Heapey: Absolutely. We should urgently achieve 2.5% of GDP; the fiscal situation is improving, and the Conservative party has made that commitment. As the Secretary of State rightly said in an interview the other day, both main parties should strongly consider a further increase in defence spending in the next Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): As the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), told the House last January, the Government have "hollowed out and underfunded" the UK military over the last 14 years. That is in large part due to their total failure on armed forces recruitment, and damning new figures show that over the last decade, 800,000 people who were willing to serve and defend their country simply gave up and withdrew their application. The current Defence Secretary says that the recruitment system is "ludicrous", and the organisation running it got called the wrong name by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), but where is the plan to fix this? It is not working.

James Heapey: The right hon. Lady is conflating two separate issues. The former Secretary of State for Defence and I, and everybody else who has served on the Government Front Bench since we have returned to the prospect of state-on-state war, have referred to a hollowing out of the force. That is a consequence of decisions made not just by this Government, but by

Governments since the fall of the Berlin wall, because the force that we maintained for the cold war and all its enablement was not necessary when we were fighting counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. That is what is meant by hollowing out. The sooner the right hon. Lady starts to deal with that issue, rather than conflating it with others to make political points, the sooner she will start to contribute to an important debate.

As far as recruitment goes, record interest has been shown in joining our nation's armed forces, and there is no hiding from the fact that we need to rapidly accelerate the time between expressing an interest and being in training.

Mr Speaker: Can we accelerate the questions, too?

Cyprus: Sovereign Base Areas

8. **Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** What assessment he has made of the security of the sovereign base areas and the armed forces in Cyprus. [902168]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): The UK continually assesses potential threats to our overseas territories, including the sovereign base areas on the island of Cyprus. British Forces Cyprus provides a permanent military presence, and we are investing in the SBAs to combat current and future threats, in order to ensure local, regional and global security.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for his response. The Secretary of State has said:

"We want to do everything possible to ensure the security of Cyprus".

Does the Minister agree that it would be appropriate to keep the Cypriot Government informed of all UK military operations conducted from their island? Should not that be an official obligation, for the security of Cyprus?

James Heapey: The SBAs are sovereign bases, so of course we reserve the right to operate from them as needed, based on the UK national interest. The hon. Gentleman will be reassured to hear that the Secretary of State, his predecessors, other Ministers in the MOD and I have very good relations with the Cypriots, and we seek to tell them as much as we can about operations that we mount from SBAs there.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I would like to add to the warm words said about my right hon. Friend. He has been particularly supportive of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces, and the armed forces parliamentary scheme, both of which I chair. Does he agree that the sovereign base areas in Cyprus have a particularly important role to play in our activities in the Red sea?

James Heapey: Cyprus is in an incredibly important strategic location, which means that it is of great use to our operations in the southern Red sea, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean, the western Balkans, central Asia and beyond. It is a vital mountain base for so much that the UK armed forces do. We are incredibly fortunate to have that facility.

Gaza: Humanitarian Aid

10. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to assist in the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza. [902170]

18. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to assist in the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza. [902179]

19. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps he is taking with the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to increase the number of aid shipments to the middle east. [902180]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): There is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support to Gaza. The UK, including the Ministry of Defence, is working collectively with allies, partners and international organisations to deliver desperately needed aid to the Gazan population.

David Simmonds: My constituents are rightly proud of the work that our armed forces are doing to facilitate the delivery of aid, to prevent a colossal humanitarian catastrophe. What further steps can be taken to ensure that British aid finds its way to civilians in need, rather than into the hands of Hamas fighters?

Grant Shapps: That is one of the greatest challenges in the current situation. We are working with the British Red Cross, UNICEF, the UN World Food Programme, the Egyptian Red Crescent and others to ensure that aid gets to the right places. That is extremely challenging, and has slowed down aid delivery.

Will Quince: The Israeli Government have said that they want to “flood” Gaza with aid. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that we will work with our partners globally to get more aid into the hands of civilians in Gaza, and will assist the Israelis to deliver on that pledge as soon as possible?

Grant Shapps: I inform my hon. Friend that we have already delivered 74 tonnes of humanitarian aid via the RAF, and 87 tonnes through the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. In addition, we are pursuing land, air and maritime routes.

Judith Cummins: With half of Gaza already starving and the rest teetering on the edge of famine, and the UN Security Council voting for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, access to humanitarian aid is crucial. This month, the Foreign Secretary stated that the UK would support the building of a temporary pier in Gaza to allow hundreds of extra daily truckloads of aid into the strip. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking, along with the Foreign Secretary, to ensure that the pier is constructed as quickly as possible?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that I have sent teams both to Tampa to work with US Central Command and to the region to help with planning and constructing that pier. In addition, right at the beginning of the conflict, I ensured that we did hydrographic research, to aid in exactly this kind of situation, when the conditions were right to get a pier built. This is not a trivial endeavour, but we are working to deliver the pier as quickly as possible; there is the potential to get 2.5 million meals a day to Gaza.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The UK Government’s ability to deliver humanitarian aid depends on the UK’s relationship with its middle eastern partners. What impact does the Secretary of State think that recent events and UK Government foreign policy decisions have had on that crucial relationship with those middle eastern partners?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have been very proactive in speaking to and making multiple visits to the region. I have visited the majority of countries in the middle east and Gulf region to discuss exactly the points that she has raised. There is now a large-scale programme of using a pier to get food in, in addition to the many other efforts made. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) pointed out, the issue is not just getting the aid there, but then distributing it; that is a great concern.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): When will the Government make a further public determination on Israel’s commitment to international humanitarian law, given the man-made famine unfolding in northern Gaza, which is compounded by Israeli moves to obstruct access to aid? If the UK finds, as the UN Secretary-General, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International did, that the Israeli Government and the Israel Defence Forces have violated international law, what steps will the UK Government take to prohibit further arms sales to Israel, pending a resolution of the situation? Given that the Security Council has just called for a ceasefire, what steps will the Government take through the defence sector to accelerate all available aid for civilians in Gaza?

Grant Shapps: It is a pity to ask all those questions without referencing the 100-plus hostages who are still being held by Hamas, who brutally slaughtered the population deliberately rather than as a by-product of war. The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions. I can tell him that on arms exports to Israel, an issue for which I am responsible, it is, to put it in proportion—I think, from the top of my head—just £48 million for the past year. The numbers are actually very small indeed. He will know that his latter question is one for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Defence Procurement

12. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the defence procurement system. [902172]

14. **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the defence procurement system. [902175]

15. **Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the defence procurement system. [902176]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): The Department uses a range of measures to assess the effectiveness of defence acquisition. We have reduced the

average time taken to deliver our projects and programmes, but we must go further to drive pace, so last month I announced our new integrated procurement model.

Nick Smith: The National Audit Office has previously highlighted MOD pilot training procurement failures, so is the RAF now meeting its pilot training quotas? Is the Minister satisfied with progress in that key area?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important question. Of course, training is fundamental to bringing in the next generation to man our capability. I recently had the pleasure of visiting RAF Valley, where I discussed the issue with the RAF. It was able to confirm to me that, for the first time in a long time, there were more students taking up their places rather than in holds. That is a key metric in which we are seeing significant progress, but yes we want to go further.

Stephanie Peacock: Last March, the Government said that they would have their Ajax scheme ready between October 2028 and September 2029. Given that only 25% of armoured vehicles have been produced, are the Government on target to meet that deadline?

James Cartlidge: Yes.

Mr Mahmood: Notwithstanding the waste of £5 billion in procurement since 2019, will the Minister join the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) in a campaign to make in Britain, ensuring our industry and economy move together to support not just our defence, but our economy? How will he achieve that given that Tata Steel—to which we have paid £500 million—is cutting down its blast furnace capacity? How will we be able to proceed with the AUKUS contract and other contracts without virgin steel?

James Cartlidge: On the important question of steel, we do not expect the closure of Port Talbot to have a significant impact on defence, but obviously we will continue to monitor that situation. I would just gently point out that in 2022-23, the last year for which we have figures available, 89% of spend by the MOD with industry was with British industry. It will be an awful lot harder to make that level of spend if Labour is unable to commit to matching our spending commitments. If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned, perhaps he will join other colleagues on the Labour Benches in insisting that the shadow Secretary of State confirms whether he will match 2.3% of GDP now and our target of 2.5% as soon as the economy supports it.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): May I take this opportunity to also place on record my thanks to the Minister for Armed Forces, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) for all the work he has done? It was a joy to work with him when I was in the Department.

I thank the Minister for Defence Procurement for his procurement review. It is an excellent document, moving forward in a pragmatic way. As part of that review, will he reassess where potential gaps might occur between old platforms being retired and new platforms being delayed? Does he agree that housing procurement—accommodation for our armed forces—is as much an operational capability as a tank?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He made a similar point in the debate on readiness last week about the importance of accommodation. I think we can all agree that there is a tendency in defence to focus on the big shiny platforms. Accommodation is a key priority; we are very committed to improving accommodation. We know that in the winter before this one performance was not satisfactory. That is why we put in extra investment of £400 million and announced a winter plan. I am pleased to say that we have made huge progress, for example in ensuring that thousands of properties have work achieved on damp and mould.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I am delighted that the MOD has confirmed the procurement of additional Chinooks, given that RAF Odiham, in my constituency, is the home of the Chinook force. However, it is also home to the fleet's frontline maintenance, second line engine repair, and in-depth upgrade and modification. Given that 85% of the Chinook fleet sustainment takes place in the UK today, can I have my hon. Friend's assurance that RAF Odiham will remain the home of the Chinook, and that there will be a similar, if not higher, level of maintenance of the new variants here and across Britain?

James Cartlidge: I greatly enjoyed my visit to Odiham, where my hon. Friend and I discussed a wide variety of issues. He is right to draw attention to our commitment to the procurement of 14 extended-range Chinooks—they have a huge range, of 1,000 miles—but there is also the industrial benefit to the UK and, of course, to my hon. Friend's constituency. I can confirm that not only has that procurement made us a £300 million saving, but it will contribute £150 million-worth of benefit to the UK's prosperity.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on progress made with UK-Ukraine defence manufacturing co-operation, especially with regard to removing the hurdles? Is there anything more that the Government should be doing?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend has championed this matter consistently. I am pleased to say that we held the first UK trade mission in December, and that there will be further such missions. I can confirm most importantly that, following that mission, UK defence companies and the Ukrainian Government have signed the following agreements. Babcock has been being awarded a three-year contract by the Ukraine ministry of defence to support and maintain two mine countermeasure vessels; BAE Systems and AMS Integrated Solutions have signed an agreement that will enable them to offer specialised artillery systems support directly to the Ukrainian armed forces; and Thales has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ukrainian drone company AeroDrone, which will bring together the best of Ukrainian and Northern Irish engineering to deliver new capability to Ukraine's forces.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Procurement of the new medium-lift helicopter has been characteristically suboptimal under the present Government, but this

particular Defence Procurement Minister has managed, with his inverse Midas touch, to ensure that costs have grown from about £1 billion to £1.3 billion, delivery forecasts have slipped six delayed years to 2031, and the number of assets to be received has fallen from 44 to 35. Given that the forecast will inevitably slip to the right, service personnel will be under-resourced and the budget will almost certainly grow, what possible confidence can anyone have in this Defence Procurement Minister?

James Cartledge: I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman, whose party has been unable even to procure a ferry. [HON. MEMBERS: “It says here!”] I know the subject, and I can confirm to him, because I am very proud of this, that at my insistence our competition for the new medium helicopter will involve a far greater emphasis both on supporting UK industry and on supporting exports. It is by supporting exports that we secure industrial resilience and support for prosperity across the United Kingdom. Of course it is a competition, but we have three very good entrants.

Topical Questions

T2. [902187] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Like others in the House, I pay tribute to the Minister for Armed Forces, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey)—soldier, MP, and Minister during almost the entire Parliament. His knowledge of this subject is matched only by his great passion for it, and we are all very grateful for his service.

Last week I was in Australia, signing an historic defence treaty to enhance our Indo-Pacific security, and meanwhile our trilateral AUKUS partnership with the United States is accelerating. As the House will know, ASC and BAE Systems have a multibillion-pound contract for the SSN-AUKUS. Earlier today the Prime Minister and I launched our very first nuclear defence Command Paper, which will set out the true benefit of this great enterprise, making it a wholly national effort.

Nigel Mills: I welcome the publication of the Command Paper, and in particular the important role played by Rolls-Royce in Derby, but does my right hon. Friend agree that for this to be a truly national enterprise, there must be a truly national supply chain and access to jobs for people throughout the country?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right about the extent of the supply chain. In addition to the very large investment in Rolls-Royce, to which the Australians contributed £2.4 billion last week, and all the work in Barrow that is described in the Command Paper, there are benefits for virtually every constituency in the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): We condemn the deadly terrorist attack in Moscow on Friday, and our thoughts are with all those affected, but the attack must not become a Kremlin cover for Putin’s illegal war in Ukraine. In recent days, we have seen multiple

Russian strikes on Ukrainian cities, yet the last UK air defence support was announced last year. When is the next one?

Grant Shapps: I join the right hon. Gentleman in sending our condolences following the horrific terror attack. He is absolutely right to say that we are aware of no connection whatsoever with Ukraine; indeed, ISIS has claimed responsibility. We must resist Putin’s efforts to try to link the two.

With regard to air defence, there have been much more recent attempts to aid our Ukrainian friends, including through the International Fund for Ukraine, which has laid 27 contracts. We have a £900 million fund, run by the UK on behalf of a large number of other countries.

John Healey: Of course, anything more recent was from the International Fund for Ukraine, not the UK, which is why we strongly welcomed the £2.5 billion of UK military support for 2024. However, for nearly three months since that announcement, Ministers have said that the first deliveries to Ukraine will not happen until Q1 of the new financial year. Wars do not follow financial years, so when will the UK move beyond this stop-start military aid and help Ukraine with the spring/summer offensive?

Grant Shapps: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we have a constant flow of foreign materiel that we are buying and sending into Ukraine. I recently announced £325 million for British-Ukrainian drones, and we have increased the overall amount of money going to Ukraine from the previous two years’ £2.3 billion to £2.5 billion. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman—this has been raised by a couple of my colleagues today—that he needs to explain how the Opposition would manage an increased budget for Ukraine, when their plan is to cut £7 billion from the overall defence budget.

T3. [902188] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): An Army non-serving partner says of her children’s mental health treatment:

“When you move, they close the case, and then you have to go all the way back through the system, which takes forever. By the time you get in, you are moving again.”

Can my right hon. Friend please give the House an update on recommendations 74, 75 and 76 of the “Living in our Shoes” report, which deal with this issue?

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and, as ever, pay tribute to him for the work he has done in this area. It is the case that when people move around the country, they are disadvantaged. We recognise that, which is why integrated care boards are now running a pilot scheme on how we can get around people losing their places on waiting lists when they travel around the country. Obviously, the issue involves other Government Departments too. Nevertheless, we have a responsibility, which we discharge in a number of ways. For example, HeadFIT is being adapted and adopted at the moment to ensure that our veterans and service families are able to access much of its content.

T5. [902190] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): The Government have previously refused to confirm or deny whether Israeli F-35s have been using RAF airbases

or, indeed, other military co-operation between the UK and Israel. Given the decision of the International Court of Justice, and now the decision of the UN Security Council to call for an immediate ceasefire, what are the operational or policy reasons that deny UK citizens the right to know whether their Government have been complicit in Israeli genocide in Gaza?

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): We do not comment on operational matters of that sort.

T4. [902189] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Qatar hosts Hamas's most senior leaders in Doha, and should have been applying far more pressure on the terror group to release the Israeli hostages and to surrender. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Qatar's malign activities bolster our adversaries and therefore weaken our own defence?

James Heappey: I am not entirely sure that I do agree. I will leave the Foreign Office to talk about the diplomatic angles that it is pursuing, but in my experience, Qatar has been an incredibly helpful partner across a whole load of things over the past few years. We enjoy the opportunity to strengthen that partnership, both through the sale of UK-built defence capabilities and through increasingly operating together in areas of mutual concern. It is a relationship on which the UK can build further, and has great potential.

T6. [902191] **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): HMS Albion is twinned with Chester, and we deeply value the ship and her company. Can the Secretary of State provide the next date on which HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark will be at sea, or will he just admit that he has mothballed them both?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady be pleased to know that I was on HMS Albion the other week and that she has not been mothballed. The other ship will be the first to sail—I do not know the timing, as that will depend on operational requirements—but they are both continuing in operation.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Like many colleagues across the House, I attended the all-party parliamentary group for UK-Israel and Friends of Israel event. We were joined by two released hostages and a delegation consisting of young siblings, sons, daughters, grandchildren and cousins of those being held hostage in Gaza. It is now five months since the hostages were taken, so will the Secretary of State ensure that those victims remain right at the front of his mind in all decisions that are taken on the middle east?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend can absolutely have that assurance. It is shocking to see what is happening in the region, but it is too often forgotten—including in this House today by some Opposition Members—that this all began with the taking of those hostages. We will never forget.

T7. [902193] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Pension justice is on everybody's lips just now, so can the Minister tell me what this Government

have done to support the 30,000 veterans who left service before 1975 and who have lost out on preserved pensions?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he knows very well, consecutive Governments have made it plain that we do not make changes to pensions retrospectively. As for pensions for the armed forces overall, Mr Speaker, you will know, as I do as a beneficiary, that they are equitable, fair and generous.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The 2016 better defence estate plans earmarked Fort Blockhouse in Gosport for disposal, yet eight years later after numerous delays, the site is still rotting at the taxpayer's expense. It is doing nothing for the local economy, the local community or the MOD. Will the Minister please update me on when can we will finally see some progress on that site?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartledge): I enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend's constituency, where we looked at a range of infrastructure and accommodation. I appreciate that she wants to see progress, but I stress that while we are engaging as closely as possible with Gosport Council on this and want to make progress, it is a complex site with significant defence events assets still in place relating to the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the Royal Navy. I am committed to looking at what more we can do and to engaging further with her.

T8. [902194] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Tens of thousands of pregnant women in Gaza are suffering from malnutrition and are at serious risk of delivering their babies unsafely and without healthcare. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking, along with the Foreign Secretary, to support the delivery of food and medical supplies to those particularly vulnerable women?

Grant Shapps: We are working to try to bring supplies to all the citizens of Gaza. I did not run through the list of provisions, but it does include provisions for those in medical need, particularly women who may be pregnant. As I mentioned, we are working on plans with the Americans in particular, but also with the Jordanians, to provide vastly greater amounts of aid into Gaza.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The terrible terrorist attack in Moscow reminds us that jihadi extremism has not disappeared. Given its ideology, its reach and its strength, does the Secretary of State agree that ISIS-K is just as much of a threat to the west as it is to Russia?

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a perception that Daesh has gone away. The Daesh core is cooped up in prisons in northern Syria, but Daesh affiliates are growing alarmingly quickly in other parts of the world. The attack in Moscow is a reminder to us all that we must continue to focus on the counter-terror threat as well as on the state threat.

T9. [902195] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I wish the Minister for the Armed Forces all the very best for his next posting? He will recall that on 1 February he made a commitment to reassess the Afghan relocations

and assistance policy eligibility, specifically for former members of the triples, and said that the process would take 12 weeks. Will he update the House on what progress has been made on that work to date?

James Heapey: It is disappointing to finish on a down note, but as the hon. Gentleman knows from a written answer that I gave him last week, it has taken longer than I wanted to establish an independent group of new casework assessors, and that 12 week period has therefore not yet begun. I was told by officials, when I reluctantly signed off the answer to him last week, that that process was nigh-on complete and that the 12-week period should therefore start imminently. He will not be surprised to learn that, pre-empting his question, I have encouraged them by suggesting that eight weeks would sound an awful lot better than 12, given the delay in getting started.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At Defence questions on 8 January, I asked the Defence Procurement Minister a very straightforward question about HMS Argyll—the type of question to which I would expect him to have an answer at his

fingertips. Instead he said, as quickly and as curtly as he could, that he would write to me with an answer. It is almost three months later, and I regret to inform you and the House that I have received no such information from the Defence Procurement Minister, and neither have I received an acknowledgment that he intends to write to me.

May I ask your advice, Mr Speaker? When right hon. and hon. Members have a slippery Minister on the hook and that Minister chooses to wriggle off it by promising to write, what recourse do we have when the Minister does not write?

Mr Speaker: First, I think we ought to choose our language when we want a response. I have a lot sympathy and, although the point of order does not relate to this Question Time, I will give you the benefit of the doubt because this is an important matter. As you are a senior Member of the SNP and have been its spokesperson, I expect you to get timely replies. I do not expect replies to take so long. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard, and I would expect a response to be sent rather quickly following this point of order.

Cyber-security and UK Democracy

3.36 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Oliver Dowden): With permission, I will make a statement about malicious cyber-activity targeting the United Kingdom by actors that we assess are affiliated to the Chinese state. I want to update the House on our assessment of this activity and to reassure it on the steps that the Government have taken to shore up our resilience and hold those actors to account.

I know that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber will recognise the seriousness of this issue, particularly in a year when so many democratic elections will be taking place around the world. Members will want to be reassured that the Government are taking steps to address the associated threat.

I can confirm today that Chinese state-affiliated actors were responsible for two malicious cyber-campaigns targeting both our democratic institutions and parliamentarians by, first, compromising the United Kingdom's Electoral Commission between 2021 and 2022, as was announced last summer, and secondly, by attempting reconnaissance activity against UK parliamentary accounts in a separate campaign in 2021.

Later today, a number of our international partners, including the United States, will issue similar statements to expose this activity and to hold China to account for the ongoing patterns of hostile activity targeting our collective democracies. Mr Speaker, you and parliamentary security have already been briefed on this activity. We want now to be as open as possible with the House and with the British public, because part of our defence is in calling out this behaviour.

This is the latest in a clear pattern of hostile activity originating in China, including the targeting of democratic institutions and parliamentarians in the United Kingdom and beyond. We have seen this in China's continued disregard for universal human rights and international commitments in Xinjiang, in China's erasure of dissenting voices and stifling of the opposition under the new national security law in Hong Kong, and in the disturbing reports of Chinese intimidation and aggressive behaviour in the South China sea. That is why this Government have investigated and called out so-called Chinese overseas police service stations and instructed the Chinese embassy to close them.

However, China's cumulative attempts to interfere with the UK's democracy have not succeeded. Last summer, the Electoral Commission stated that it had been a victim of a complex cyber-attack between 2021 and 2022. That was the work of Chinese state-affiliated actors who gained access to the Electoral Commission's email and file-sharing systems, which contain copies of the electoral register. As the Electoral Commission stated in 2023, when that attack was first made public, the compromise has "not affected" the security of elections. It will not impact how people register, vote or otherwise participate in democratic processes. I want to reassure people that the compromise of that information, although obviously concerning, typically does not create a risk to those affected. I want to further reassure the House that the commission has worked with security specialists to

investigate the incident and remove the threat from its systems, and has since taken further steps to increase the resilience of its systems.

In addition, the National Cyber Security Centre assesses that it is almost certain that the Chinese state-affiliated cyber-actor known as APT31 attempted to conduct reconnaissance activity against UK parliamentary accounts during a separate campaign in 2021. Hon. Members may recall that APT31 was one of several cyber-actors attributed to the Chinese Ministry of State Security by the UK and its allies in July 2021. That email campaign by APT31 was blocked by Parliament's cyber-security measures; in this case, it was entirely unsuccessful. However, any targeting of Members of this House by foreign state actors is completely unacceptable.

Taken together, the UK judges that those actions demonstrate a clear and persistent pattern of behaviour that signals hostile intent from China. That is why the UK has today sanctioned two individuals and one entity associated with the Chinese state-affiliated APT31 group for involvement in malicious cyber-activity targeting officials, Government entities and parliamentarians around the world. We are today acting to warn of the breadth of targeting emanating from Chinese state-affiliated actors such as APT31, to sanction those actors who attempt to threaten our democratic institutions, and to deter both China and all those who seek to do the same.

Last week, at the summit for democracy in Seoul, I said that we would call out malicious attempts to undermine our democracy wherever we find them. This is an important tool in our armoury and today we are doing just that. The UK does not accept that China's relationship with the UK is set on a predetermined course, but that depends on the choices China makes. That is why the Foreign Office will be summoning the Chinese ambassador to account for China's conduct in these incidents. The UK's policy towards China is anchored in our core national interests. We will engage with the Chinese Government where it is consistent with those interests, but we will not hesitate to take swift and robust actions wherever the Chinese Government threaten the UK's interests—we have done so today and previously. This Government will continue to hold China and other state actors accountable for their actions.

We will also take serious action to prevent this behaviour from affecting our security. The steps we have taken in recent years have made the UK a harder operating environment for foreign state actors seeking to target our values and our institutions. Through the National Security Act 2023, we now have, for the first time, a specific offence of foreign interference. That new offence will allow law enforcement to disrupt state-linked efforts to undermine our institutions, rights or political system.

Our National Security and Investment Act 2021 has overhauled our scrutiny of investment into the United Kingdom by giving the Government powers to block, unwind or put conditions on investments that could create national security risks. We have significantly reduced China's involvement in the UK's civil nuclear sector, taking ownership of the CGN stake in the Sizewell C nuclear power project and ensuring Chinese state-owned nuclear energy corporations will have no further role in the project.

We have put in place measures to prevent hostile infiltration of our universities, including protecting campuses from interference through the Higher Education

(Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. The Procurement Act 2023 includes national security devolvement provisions that allow us to act where we see malicious influence in our public procurement. I have taken steps to reduce the Government's exposure to Chinese operators, banning Hikvision and TikTok from Government buildings and devices. Through the national cyber-security strategy, we are investing £2.6 billion to increase the cyber-resilience of our critical national infrastructure by 2025, making the most important parts of our digital environment a harder target for state and non-state actors.

The Government are continuing to build the tools, expertise and knowledge to respond to the systemic challenge that China poses to the United Kingdom's security and its values. The integrated review refresh in 2023 took steps toward this, doubling funding for a Government-wide programme, including investment in Mandarin language training and deepening diplomatic expertise.

We must be clear that this is not a problem for the Government to solve alone. That is why we created the National Protective Security Authority within MI5 to help businesses and institutions play their part in protecting our security and prosperity. The NPSA will help organisations in the UK's most sensitive fields, including critical national infrastructure operators and world-leading science and tech sectors, to protect themselves against state threats. I set up the economic security public-private forum to ensure businesses and business leaders in crucial sectors understand the threat to the UK and what they can do to defeat it.

In Parliament, the National Cyber Security Centre has launched an opt-in service for Members of both Houses. This allows the NCSC to alert high-risk individuals if they identify evidence of malicious activity on their personal devices or account, and swiftly advise them on steps to take to protect their information. Today, the NCSC has published new guidance for political organisations, including political parties and think-tanks, which will help these organisations take effective action to protect their systems and their data. The NCSC is also working with all political parties to increase the uptake of their active cyber-defence services in the lead up to a general election. A key component of increasing our resilience is supporting the NCSC and parliamentary authorities by taking up that cyber-security offer. I urge all Members of this House to do so. I will be writing to colleagues later today, setting out again the steps that they can take.

At the summit for democracy, I was struck by the powerful strength of our collective voices when we work together to defend our democratic freedoms. The summit provided the United Kingdom Government with a platform to build international agreements on a new global Government compact on countering deceptive use of AI by foreign states in elections. It is important and welcome that our partners across the Five Eyes, as well as those in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, are standing in solidarity with our efforts to call out malicious cyber-activity. I pay tribute to the dedicated public servants, whose painstaking work has continued to expose the reality of the threat we face.

Our political processes and institutions have not been harmed by these attacks. The Government will continue to call out and condemn this kind of activity in the

strongest terms. We will continue to work with our allies to ensure that Chinese state-affiliated actors suffer the consequences of their behaviour. We will take preventive action to ensure these attempts do not succeed. The cyber-threat posed by China-affiliated actors is real and serious, but it is more than equalled by our determination and resolve to resist it. That is how we defend ourselves and our precious democracy, and I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This was an important statement, which is why it has run on quite a lot longer than the normal 10 minutes. I am sure everybody will agree that if the two Front-Bench speakers need a little extra time, we will be flexible in exactly the same way. I call the shadow Secretary of State, Pat McFadden.

3.50 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and for advance sight of it. It is a statement about which there has been significant briefing in the press over the past couple of days. On questions of national security, Labour will support the Government in efforts to counter attempts by China, or any other state, to interfere with or undermine the democratic process, or attempts to stop elected representatives going about their business, voicing their opinions, or casting their votes without fear or favour. With that in mind, I pay tribute to the efforts made every day by the intelligence and security services to protect the public, and to protect our democracy and way of life. The economic relationship between the United Kingdom and China can never mean compromising on national security or our democratic integrity.

The Deputy Prime Minister's statement touches on a number of issues, and I have some questions about them. Will he say more about the Government's assessment of Chinese motives? Does he believe, for example, that Beijing wants to disrupt our democratic process, or instead to gather data about our citizens for some other reason? On the specific issue of the Electoral Commission and the electoral register, why does he think that the Chinese Government hacked what is a publicly available database? Does he believe they were after the details of those who may not be on a public register for good reasons, for example because they might be employed in security-sensitive areas? Does he believe they were after details and the personal data of political donors, or was there some other motive?

The Deputy Prime Minister referred to the democratic electoral process, and with an election coming it is vital that people have confidence in their ability to register and to vote. Will he confirm that our electronic register to vote system is sufficiently well protected? He said that the attacks on parliamentary accounts were unsuccessful. Does he believe that China now wants to engage in the kind of hack and leak activity that we have in recent years associated with Russia, in order to compromise either individual politicians or the wider democratic process? On sanctions, only last week the Minister of State was reluctant to respond to the claim that the Foreign Office "indefinitely paused" targeted sanctions against Chinese officials late last year. Will the Deputy Prime Minister explain what has changed in the past week?

[Mr Pat McFadden]

We are grateful for the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, and the report it issued on China last year, which covered much of the same ground that the Deputy Prime Minister covered in his statement. When discussing individual politicians, paragraph 98 of that report stated:

“Targets are not necessarily limited to serving politicians either. They can include former political figures, if they are sufficiently high profile. For example, it is possible that David Cameron’s role as Vice President of a £1bn China–UK investment fund...was in some part engineered by the Chinese state to lend credibility to Chinese investment.”

What have the Government done to look into that allegation from the Intelligence and Security Committee? How can Ministers ensure that those leaving politics are not targeted in that way?

In that spirit, Mr Speaker, I have read reports that the Conservative Back-Bench 1922 committee is to be briefed on these matters later today. Given the importance of national and democratic security to all the parties in this House, is the Deputy Prime Minister intending to arrange a briefing for the Leader of the Opposition, the Intelligence and Security Committee and, indeed, the other political parties represented in the House?

Experts in this field have warned of China’s voracious appetite for data, and its potential uses as computing power improves—for example, as quantum computing develops. The UK’s record on data security is patchy, to put it mildly. What are the Government doing to protect complex and valuable datasets from being stolen now, possibly in order to be manipulated later by more powerful computers that are controlled by authoritarian adversaries?

Finally, Mr Speaker, on the broader issue, does the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister chose to make this statement today signal a fundamental reassessment of the overall threat? He referred to the United States and our allies. On 12 February, the US Administration warned Congress that the cyber-threat from China was changing. Previously, a threat that largely involved spying and influencing now looked like it was getting ready to disrupt critical American infrastructure—aviation, energy, healthcare and other sectors. Is it now the UK Government’s view that we should change our assessment of the threat in a similar way? If so, this is of the utmost importance, and we would need to know what corresponding improvements the Government would make to the preparedness of our critical infrastructure, because if the threat really has changed then so too should our response.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I shall seek to address as many of them as I can.

When it comes to Chinese motivations, ultimately, it is a matter for the Chinese to be able to justify their motivations, but the points that the right hon. Gentleman made were apposite. First, the Chinese look at successful democratic countries, such as the United Kingdom, Japan or the Republic of Korea where I was last week, and they want to seek to undermine them. It is no surprise therefore that they should seek to interfere in electoral processes, in the way that we have seen conduct from Russia that aligns with that. Indeed, the successful

democratic elections around the world right now stand in contrast to the sham elections that we saw in Russia last weekend.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the public record of the Electoral Commission, I think that that is the essence of what has happened here. These attacks and these attempts were ultimately pretty unsuccessful. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman and Members of this House that there was no infiltration of the closed register of the Electoral Commission, so the concerns that he raised have not arisen. On the further strengthening of the electoral register, that is precisely the work that the National Cyber Security Centre does in co-ordination with GCHQ, working with Government agencies, including the Electoral Commission.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to raise the risk of hack and leak. It is certainly something that we saw in previous elections, and I remain concerned. I also remain very concerned about artificial intelligence, deep fakes in particular, being used to disrupt elections, hence the work that I undertook at the conference last week and the progress that we are making with the accord on artificial intelligence use by malign states.

In relation to targeted sanctions, it is not the case that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office paused targeted sanctions. On the conduct of the former Foreign Secretary—[*Interruption.*] I am not sacking the Foreign Secretary from the Dispatch Box. On the conduct of the current Foreign Secretary, who sits in the other place, all appointments to Government are subject to the usual propriety and ethic processes. Lord Cameron is addressing the 1922 Committee in his capacity as Foreign Secretary in the usual way, addressing a wide range of issues. It is not a specific briefing on this issue, but if leaders of the principal Opposition parties wish to have a further briefing on this issue I am of course very happy to facilitate that, in the way that they know I have done in relation to other national security issues.

We are highly alert to the risks of hostile states hoovering up currently quantum-encrypted information that could subsequently be decoded with advances in quantum computing. We do extensive work with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Ministerial Cyber Board on critical national infrastructure to ensure that we guard ourselves against exactly that risk. On our relationship with China more broadly, Members of this House should take this moment very seriously. It is a grave moment, against a backdrop of an escalating threat from China, and we will take proportionate action in response to that escalating threat.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Tomorrow, it will be three years since parliamentarians here were sanctioned; your defence of us, Mr Speaker, has been remarkable. Although I welcome the two sanctions from the Government, it is a little bit like an elephant giving birth to a mouse. The reality is that in those three years the Chinese have trashed the Sino-British agreement and been committing murder, slave labour and genocide in Xinjiang. We have had broken churches, and, in Hong Kong, false court cases against Jimmy Lai. My question is: why two? America has sanctioned more than 40 people in Hong Kong; we have sanctioned none, and only three lowly officials in Xinjiang. Surely the integrated review should be changed. China is not an epoch-defining challenge, strange as

that may be, but it is surely a threat. Can the Government now correct that, so that we all know where we are with China?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend's views are well known to me, I genuinely welcome the constructive, at most times, debate that I have with him, but nobody should be in any doubt about the gravity of this matter. These are not the actions of a friendly state, and they require our serious attention. As he has described, this is an escalating situation. The measures that we have announced today are the first step, but the Government will respond proportionately at all times to the facts in front of us. No one should be in any doubt about the Government's determination to face down and deal with threats to our national security, from wherever they come.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and for advanced sight of it. In the statement, he said:

"I have taken steps to reduce the Government's exposure to Chinese operators, banning Hikvision and TikTok from Government buildings and devices",

but the reality is that the Hikvision ban extends only to sensitive sites, despite the fact that we have pushed him to ensure that it extends to all public buildings. Surely the majority of things that happen in government involve some sort of confidential information. Will he confirm whether he is extending the ban beyond sensitive sites to all Government sites, as we have been calling for for a number of years? The attacks on the Electoral Commission and parliamentary accounts happened nearly three years ago. Will we be sitting here in 2027 hearing about an attack that is happening right now? The EU is currently delivering €240 million for cyber-security to improve its collective resilience. Will the Government deliver an equivalent fund for these islands? Finally, without more action, can he give us real assurances that this year's general election will take place without international interference?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady is aware, we currently ban Hikvision, and indeed any other Chinese technology relating to CCTV. We continue to keep that under review. I do not rule out a further progression in the policy, but that is not the case right now.

On the time taken, it is essential that, before Ministers stand at the Dispatch Box and make assertions attributing such activity to a hostile state, we are absolutely sure of the basis on which we do so. That requires extensive work by our intelligence agencies, it requires fine judgments to be made, and it requires work to be done with our allies around the world—there will be comments from the United States shortly after my statement. I would rather we did this in the proper way.

We have invested £2.6 billion on cyber-security during this spending review. I can never be totally confident in relation to cyber-security—no Government Minister anywhere in the world can be; it is an environment in which the risks are escalating all the time and are turbocharged by artificial intelligence—but I can assure the hon. Lady and other Members that we are constantly increasing our activity and vigilance in the face of it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), I am rather underwhelmed by this statement. In the three years since seven parliamentarians were sanctioned, we have been subject to intimidation, impersonation and hacking, as have the families of exiles from China with whom we have associated. Today, the Deputy Prime Minister has described hostile actors' malign acts towards the integrity of our electoral system and parliamentary democracy—foreign interference—and sanctioned two individuals and one company employing 50 people with a turnover of £208,000. Does he think that that is proportionate, and can he confirm that the Government will put the whole of the Chinese Communist Government in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend may be aware that we are currently in the process of collective Government agreement in relation to the enhanced tier of the foreign interference registration scheme. Clearly, the conduct that I have described today will have a very strong bearing on the decision that we make in respect of it.

In relation to the sanctions, it is worth noting that this is the first time that the Government have imposed sanctions in respect of cyber-activity. I believe that they are proportionate and targeted, but they also sit in the context of actions that we have been taking with our international allies. They are a first step, and we remain totally open to taking further steps as the situation evolves. The path we are going on with this is clear.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): My first reaction is: "Is that it?" The spin was clearly not matched by this statement. The Deputy Prime Minister says that there is an issue around nuclear and higher education. That is because the Government encouraged China to invest in nuclear, and cut the budgets of our universities so they are reliant on Chinese students. The Deputy Prime Minister also ducked the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) about Lord Cameron. Will Lord Cameron publish all the money and interactions that he had with Chinese entities when he was out of government? The Deputy Prime Minister says that he is committed to the security services. Why, then, in the Budget on 6 March, was the security budget cut by £600 million next year? That is not a sign of a Government who are taking this issue seriously.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Foreign Secretary has provided a full declaration of all his interests—

Hon. Members: No he hasn't!

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will take lectures from Labour Members on action in relation to security threats with a pinch of salt. It was this Government who introduced the National Security and Investment Act 2021; it was this Government who passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023; it was this Government who passed the National Security Act 2023—none of which we saw from the Labour party during its years in office.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): We have seen reports of espionage on UK campuses, aggression on UK soil, massive cyber-attacks and hostile corporate takeovers. It is abundantly clear that China is a hostile state and poses an unprecedented threat to our national security. As Home Secretary, I oversaw the enactment of the National Security Act, which built the foreign influence registration scheme designed specifically to deal with such threats so that our authorities have the right powers to tackle them. Is there not a compelling case for China to be listed on that register, and if not now, when?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend for the work that she did—she and I worked closely together on many of those things. There is a strong case, and my right hon. and learned Friend will be aware of the process that we go through to determine that. It has to be agreed through a collective Government agreement.

On the point about hostile states, though, I disagree with my right hon. and learned Friend; it is not the case that any Five Eyes nation has designated China explicitly as a hostile state. The language I have used in relation to China reflects the complex situation of that state, but I want colleagues to be in no doubt about the direction that Government policy is taking, how gravely we take this issue, and the overall escalation of our stance on it.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I, too, am quite surprised at the difference between what was briefed and some of the information that the Deputy Prime Minister has given us today, and the sum of the action taken. He said that the Government had taken rapid and robust action when talking about things that happened three and four years ago, and the sanctioning of two individuals and a minor company does not seem to meet the definition of robust. How does he think that taking the tiny steps he has announced today will deter the Chinese from carrying on in the way they have been doing, as the Deputy Prime Minister has outlined and is very clear from the China report that the Intelligence and Security Committee was finally allowed to publish late?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First, in relation to briefings, I can categorically assure you, Mr Speaker, and Members of this House that there has been no briefing whatsoever from me or my Department in respect of this matter. As ever, I would say, “Don’t believe everything that you read in the newspapers.”

As for the overall direction of Government policy, it is clearly set. This is not just about offensive action, but the extensive defensive action we have taken to continuously increase the security of our Government systems. I make no apology for the time we have taken to properly call out China in this respect. I want to make sure that when I stand at the Dispatch Box, I am able to do so on a solid basis, painstakingly put together by our allies and our security agencies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Who shall we go to? A former Attorney General, no less.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The front page of *The Telegraph* today reports Whitehall sources saying that China, Russia and Iran are even fuelling disinformation about the Princess of Wales to destabilise the nation. Hostile states with leaders who fake their own elections and are hated by their own people are spreading wild conspiracy theories about the royal family, among many other things—our royal family who are hugely popular and much loved. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that British people will ignore that grotesque disinformation despite the pathetic attempts of those autocratic regimes?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for raising the issue, and extend my best wishes to members of the royal family at this very difficult time. The appalling speculation that we have seen over the past few weeks comes as a reminder to us all that it is important for us to ensure that we deal with valid and trusted information, and are appropriately sceptical about many online sources.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As one of the parliamentarians targeted, can I thank the security officials for the work they did to repel this attack? I am glad it was not successful.

However, I have to say that the Deputy Prime Minister has turned up at a gunfight with a wooden spoon. The attack that he stood up and announced at the Dispatch Box happened three years ago, but he comes to the House and calls this “swift”. He comes to the House and says he has taken robust action but, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned, the entity he has sanctioned has fewer than 50 employees and has a turnover of £200,000 a year. He has not sanctioned a single Chinese state official. He has not even told the House whether the Chinese ambassador has been summoned, after what he has come to the Dispatch Box to tell us today. [*Interruption.*] Forgive me, he says he has been summoned—my apologies.

Can I press the Deputy Prime Minister on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme? What possible good excuse could there be for not having China in that, and if we do not take more robust action and see a proper sea change in Government thinking, rather than this tinkering around the edges, will this not happen more and more and get worse and worse?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think everything about the hon. Gentleman’s question suggests that he did not actually listen to the statement I made. I said that there had been a *démarche*, and that is exactly what is happening. I have already set out the position in relation to the foreign influence registration system.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister knows that cyber-attacks on UK institutions come from a wide range of actors—states and criminals—as we saw in the recent big attack on the British Library, and it is important that our laws are up to date to protect against this. In 2022 the Government announced that they would update the Network and Information Systems Regulations 2018 to

“protect essential and digital services against increasingly sophisticated and frequent cyber attacks both now and in the future.”

In 2022 that was to be done as soon as parliamentary time allowed. Why has it not been done, and when will it be done?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The work is pretty much complete, and as soon as parliamentary time allows we will be bringing forward those measures.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry, but I find the Deputy Prime Minister today utterly unconvincing. The idea that “swift” means taking three years to publish something that has already been published by a Committee of this House is utterly preposterous. It means that if there were an attempt this year, we would hear about it long after the general election and possibly after another general election after that. The truth is that, if he actually thinks this is the sum total of all the Chinese state’s attempts to disrupt the British democratic system, he is wilfully blind and is therefore dangerous.

There are two things that the Government could do immediately to enhance confidence in this area: first, bring forward the motion to allow the Foreign Secretary to answer questions in this House from Members of the House of Commons; and secondly, publish the full unexpurgated Russia report.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am sorry that the hon. Member is not happy with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is sitting to my right, and who I think does an excellent job of answering questions in this House. On the time that this has taken, there is a difference between acknowledging, as the Electoral Commission did, the fact that an attack has taken place, and the process of attribution, which takes a longer period of time for the reasons I have set out repeatedly from this Dispatch Box.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I am proud to have the British Library at Boston Spa in my constituency, and I will be meeting it in a week’s time to talk about the cyber-attack. That is just one aspect of what has happened recently, but we are talking about the protection of democracy as well, and the timeframes on which we are moving on some issues does concern me. One of the big concerns will be deepfake news profiles—with people alleged to have said things, and videos of people allegedly doing things—at the next election. I urge my right hon. Friend to work now to try to establish procedures so that everybody across this House will be able to call out efficiently the fake news that may be used to try to influence the election. As he has said, people should be careful what they believe, but what can people believe in unless there are robust systems to call out what is absolutely fake?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We are working with tech companies on, for example, the watermarking of images to ensure that people have a sense of whether they are real. However, this cannot just be action from the UK Government; we have to work internationally, which is why at the global summit for democracy we launched the global Government compact on countering the deceptive use of AI by foreign states in elections. That is the United Kingdom leading across nations around the world to ensure that we can act in co-ordination

to address this issue. Moreover, everyone in this rapidly evolving technological world needs to be mindful of the fact that information cannot be trusted in the way it used to be just a few years ago.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Deputy Prime Minister talked in his statement about “the powerful strength of our collective voices”.

We can contrast the sanctions that have been announced this afternoon with those that followed the Novichok poisoning in 2018. On that occasion, 130 Russian diplomats were expelled from more than 25 countries, and the EU ambassador to Moscow was withdrawn. What steps are the Government taking to co-ordinate a robust response to this alleged attack on democracy by working with our democratic allies?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is exactly what we are doing. I raised the issue with opposite numbers in Japan and Korea when I was there, and I have raised it with the United States, with whom we have been co-ordinating exceptionally closely. The US will be making a statement on its actions shortly, if not currently. We have proceeded in this way precisely to ensure that we act not alone but with like-minded states. Interestingly, that is in relation not just to the Five Eyes but to European partners and international partners, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. This issue requires that kind of co-ordinated action, at a time when our democratic institutions not just here, but around the world, are under increased threat. It is important that democratic nations work together in concert, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to all those who do so much in the UK intelligence community? Will he join me in reassuring those on the shadow Front Bench that Lord Cameron in the other place oversees GCHQ and the Secret Intelligence Service, and he is probably in a good place to know what is going on? Reference has been made to the China report published in July 2023—I was one of the co-authors, with one or two others in this Chamber. Page 198 of that report referred to the UK security services facing “a formidable challenge”. I welcome the fact that the Government have played catch-up—that was another criticism—and have caught up to a certain extent. I particularly welcome the £2.6 billion over the past three years going to cyber-protection for our critical national infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: We were going to finish because, in fairness to the Deputy Prime Minister, he indicated that he wanted to finish early because of other things happening around the world. If he is happy to continue, then so I am.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am happy to continue.

Mr Speaker: In which case, let us carry on.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am sure that I will regret saying that, Mr Speaker.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to our intelligence agencies. I see their work at first hand, day in, day out. We are one of a very small number of countries that have intelligence agencies of this standard. It enables us all to be more secure.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the tone of vigilance, which is in stark contrast to the nonchalance shown by the Johnson Government over earlier Russian interference in our elections and the Brexit referendum. Why should we believe the Government's honest intentions when they still have not implemented all the recommendations of the Russia report?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will have seen the conduct of the Government and, for example, the further sanctions we imposed on Russia just a few months ago. We have not hesitated in taking robust action in relation to Russia, just as we will continue to do with any threats from China.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Bearing in mind all that my right hon. Friend has said, he may be concerned to hear what we have heard in the Defence Committee. English Ministry of Defence companies are having a nightmare in employing those with specialist AI skills from university, because they are all Chinese. Is he aware of that, and what will he do to counter this potential threat to our security?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Clearly, anyone employed by a relevant defence company or in the UK Government will be subject to advanced vetting, which would likely preclude a number of the individuals my hon. Friend described. The main thing that we have got to do is increase our skills in this country, which is why we are investing in science, technology, engineering and maths. We are very fortunate in having three or four of the top 10 universities in the world in the United Kingdom—wherever I go in the world, people look at that with envy—which is a base from which both our intelligence agencies and industry can draw.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): These cyber-attacks occurred in 2021 and 2022, so we really must ask how it has taken the Government so long to make this statement. We should reflect on the Deputy Prime Minister saying that these actors

“gained access to the Electoral Commission's email and file-sharing systems, which contain copies of the electoral register.”

This is an election year, and it should put fear into the hearts of all of us that the Chinese have access to the UK's electoral register, at a time like this when we are already worried about bad actors, about cyber-attacks taking place and about the use of AI.

The Deputy Prime Minister talked about taking robust action—good grief: two individuals are being sanctioned. Reference has been made to what happened over Novichok, when we swiftly took action to expel diplomats from this country and around the world. I hope that when the Chinese ambassador meets the Deputy Prime Minister, he will be told that diplomats will be expelled. Will the Deputy Prime Minister come back to the House tomorrow and tell us about the robust action that he should be taking?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): You are confusing shouting with robustness.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will answer the question slightly less aggressively than how it was put; I will make my point in my own way. First, as the Electoral Commission said in its statement, the data contained in electoral

registers is limited, and much of it is already in the public domain. The Electoral Commission had already declared the fact of the attack. What is different today is that, contrary to some speculation at the time, we are announcing that it was in relation to Chinese-related actors. That is what has changed. On our overall approach, I have set out a direction. These are grave threats, which we take seriously. We are taking proportionate action now, and we will continue to take steps as required.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A successful deterrent requires the capability and the will to retaliate. Have we got either?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, we do, on both fronts. My right hon. Friend will be well aware of our National Cyber Force, but I do not comment on the conduct of that from the Dispatch Box.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In January 2023, Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton—prior to his appointment as Foreign Secretary, of course—went to Sri Lanka to drum up investment for Port City Colombo, which is a belt and road project launched by President Xi, which many believe will become a military base for the Chinese navy. Following Lord Cameron's appointment as Foreign Secretary, many freedom of information requests have been submitted to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to try to shed some light on his visit to Sri Lanka, including who he met and what sort of conversations took place, but to date not a single one of those FOI requests has been complied with by the FCDO. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that that is a matter of the highest public interest and that sunlight is the best form of disinfectant, and therefore the FCDO should comply with those FOI requests as a matter of urgency?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office always deals with FOI requests in the proper way. I have to say that trying to link Chinese cyber-attacks to our current Foreign Secretary is pretty desperate stuff. It just does not wash.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is absolutely right that we call out these malicious actions, because otherwise they will become normalised. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that when it comes to our security, and indeed our economic interests, there is an important parity between the digital space and our physical terrain, and that that should be reflected in defence spending? Does he also agree that Beijing is watching today's events and will no doubt retaliate? Should we brace ourselves for further individual sanctions against British personnel?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for investment. That is precisely why, in the last spending review period, we put £2.6 billion into our wider cyber-defences. I am confident that we will be able to deal with any retaliatory action by Beijing effectively.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We should be worried about Chinese influence in various areas of Government. Graham Barrow, the Companies House expert, has been warning for quite some time about dubious company incorporations that have originated in China. He believes that they are being created using

an algorithm, and there is evidence that companies are being incorporated using stolen UK credentials, from UK addresses, streets at a time. What conversations has the Deputy Prime Minister had with Companies House, and would he be willing to meet Graham Barrow to hear his conclusions?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I, or another Minister, will be happy to meet him. That is precisely why we set up the National Cyber Security Centre, which uses GCHQ expertise to inform our approach to cyber, and engages with businesses and individuals. That approach is renowned and admired around the world, because we can give high-quality advice through the National Cyber Security Centre. Week after week, I receive delegations from around the world who want to see what we have done with the National Cyber Security Centre.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The £2.6 billion in additional money to counter cyber threats is very welcome. This field is constantly evolving, and those who wish us harm are innovating further. I accept that my right hon. Friend will not comment on the exact detail, but will he at least assure the House that the £2.6 billion outguns what those who wish us harm spend on new threats?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The amount of spending compares extremely favourably with that spent in similar G7 countries around the world. I am confident that we have world-leading expertise, and we are constantly evolving our capabilities in this space.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement and his answers. I had occasion just five weeks ago to see Mr Speaker about an incident. The Deputy Prime Minister may be aware—if not, he will be shortly—that the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, had its website hacked, and the text that questioned human rights violations by China was removed. I reported it to Mr Speaker and made him aware of what took place. It is clear that nothing whatsoever is sacred to the Chinese. The work of the elected Members of this House is not treated with respect. Will the Deputy Prime Minister commit to stop handling the Chinese oversteps—for want of a better description—with kid gloves, and instead handle them with authority, and help China to understand that it will not trample over democracy in this place, or elsewhere, without being held accountable in the very strictest terms?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We will certainly hold China to account in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes. I will happily make sure that the parliamentary authorities and the National Cyber Security Centre are in touch with him about the attack that he described.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): We know that legacy IT systems are most likely to be cyber-attacked. Has the Deputy Prime Minister ordered an inventory of all Government IT equipment, to see where particular vulnerabilities lie?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes. My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The first step is to properly understand where those vulnerabilities lie. We have undertaken

extensive work to ensure that we know where risks lie, and we are putting in place measures to remediate those risks.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): This is too little, too late. It is reactive, not proactive. Two lowly officials get sanctioned when half the UK population's data and electoral roll get cyber-attacked. I do not feel that the issue is being taken seriously enough. Let me remind the House how serious this is: in October last year, MI5 warned of the “epic scale” of Chinese espionage, and reported that more than 20,000 people in the UK had been covertly approached online by Chinese spies. Our Commons Intelligence and Security Committee said that China was “prolifically and aggressively” targeting the UK, and had managed successfully to penetrate every sector of the UK's economy. My question is simple: how can any of us here, or outside in society, trust this UK Government, when they are far too late, and do very little of what needs to be done?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I simply do not accept that characterisation, given that it was this Government who set up the NCSC, this Government who set up the ministerial cyber board, and this Government who invested £2.6 billion in our cyber-defences. I have consistently warned, time and again, about the cyber-threats facing the United Kingdom, and we are taking steps to address them.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Every time the Deputy Prime Minister comes to the House, he lays out his plans eloquently, and is more assertive; he says, “We are doing this new thing, and that new thing, to react to the threat.” Do we not still need much greater coherence across all Government Departments in how we deal with the threat, whether the issue is students, the protection of Hong Kong citizens, intellectual property or cyber-attacks?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I pay tribute to the work that he has done in this space, and I have discussed the issue with him on many occasions. He is right that the UK Government, in common with the US Government and others around the world, have evolved enormously in their approach to China. The sort of China we had hoped for even a decade ago is not the China we have now, whether we are talking about Hong Kong, Xinjiang or elsewhere. We continue to increase our efforts on the matters that he describes. That is precisely why we set up the defending democracy taskforce, led by the Minister for Security.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Deputy Prime Minister is right to address these issues and, as he said, call them out, but just calling them out does not really cut the mustard. There is certainly no appearance of urgency. There is a worrying sense of “nothing to see here” in some of his responses. He referenced human rights. We know well the issues there, including the horrific forced labour and worse faced by the Uyghur population. The action he is outlining on all those fronts is very underwhelming, and actually a bit baffling. Does he think that the large number of Members across the House who are obviously very much underwhelmed by his statement are all wrong, or is it possible that his statement somehow misses the mark?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First of all, it is important to remember that ultimately—I want to reassure the House and the public—these attempts were unsuccessful. I am not being complacent; I am setting out the facts. As for the risk, at CYBERUK in Belfast last year, I warned that cyber-threats continue to come from the usual suspects—Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. In the Government security conference, I called out Russian state interference, and we created Secure by Design. We have not hesitated to take action, and we will continue to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Democracy is not perfect, but the right to choose who makes the laws that govern us is really precious, and it is really scary to hear that a foreign power might be trying to intervene in that. Mr Deputy Speaker, as one of the few women who has spoken during this statement, I want to remind you again how concerned I am about the threats and harassment that women get when standing for Parliament, especially as we get closer to an election. As well as cyber-security, I am very concerned about physical security. Two and a half years ago, my Essex neighbour was murdered at his constituency surgery. Last Friday, at my constituency surgery, the security operatives recommended by this Parliament failed to show up for the second time this year. I am very grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister for recently putting extra money into security for both parliamentarians and candidates, but will he look again at the workings of this House, and at how our security is governed, because that funding is not getting to those of us on the frontline?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes a concerning allegation, which I will take up for the Government, working with the House authorities. As she will be aware, we take the threat exceptionally seriously, which is why we agreed an unprecedented increase in protective security for Members of this House and other elected representatives. We should all take that threat very seriously, not least in the light of the two appalling murders of parliamentarians that I have seen in my time in this House.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When it comes to matters of national security such as this, my inclination is to work on a cross-party basis, and for us to show a unified face, but does the Deputy Prime Minister not understand that the relative weakness of the response to this terrible series of attacks, combined with his evasiveness over questions about the financial interests of the Foreign Secretary, is bound to increase people's concerns? It is understood that Lord Cameron still has close links with the Chinese state in respect of numerous business ventures, and it was reported last week that the Government had secretly softened their policy against Chinese businesses implicated in human rights abuses. Will the Deputy Prime Minister strengthen his response, and demonstrate by his actions and through transparency that this soft-peddling is nothing suspicious?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says that we should have a cross-party approach, and then immediately seeks, on political grounds, to denigrate the Foreign Secretary and turn this into a party political matter. I am afraid that he will have to choose one approach or the other.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): When we think ahead to the election, we should bear in mind the point raised today about artificial intelligence and the threat to democracy. We often talk about the concept of deepfake news—which used to be just fake news—but this is not just about deepfakes. It is also about the risk of rumour bombs to dissuade people from going to the polls on the day, and about voice clones; people are telephoned by someone pretending to be a daughter or other family member, who says, “Do not go and vote today.” There are many risks of which we may not even be aware, and the data that we are talking about today may be used in conjunction with data from Facebook and other sources to enable people to pretend that they are something they are not. Along with the work taking place in Government and with tech companies, could there be an education campaign, to let the public know that there are better ways to become aware of the risks that they may face during the election?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important point. At a time of rapidly evolving technology, particularly artificial intelligence, there will always be limits to the ability of agencies, or companies, to call this stuff out. There needs to be greater awareness among the public of the risks, and of the need to treat images of this kind with much more scepticism, and I will take that up with my colleague the Education Secretary.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Professor Jim Saker, the president of the Institute of the Motor Industry, has warned about the threat that Chinese-manufactured electric vehicles could pose, in giving China access to big data and personal information. He has said that

“connected electric vehicles flooding the country could be the most effective Trojan Horse that the Chinese establishment has”

to impact the UK. What consideration has the Deputy Prime Minister given to the threat posed by those vehicles?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That too is an important point. Obviously, any new technology or cars put on the UK market will have to meet our safety standards, and that will include an assessment of the threats to which the hon. Lady has referred. Under the National Security and Investment Act 2021, I can decide to block or impose conditions on any investments or transactions, from whichever state, and whichever company, in any country. That is another tool in our weaponry that we did not have previously.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My right hon. Friend will no doubt be aware that the Electoral Commission failed a National Cyber Security Centre cyber essentials audit at about the time when these breaches occurred. Among the failings identified was the fact that staff laptops and smartphones were running outdated systems—including Windows 10 Enterprise, which, at the time, was no longer receiving security updates. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that these failings look awfully like extraordinary negligence on the part of the Electoral Commission, and how satisfied is he that the commission has done everything necessary to regularise its procedures?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that issue. It is precisely because of those concerns that we have ensured that the Electoral Commission is working closely with the National Cyber Security Centre to achieve a significant step up in its capabilities and its cyber resilience. It was essential for that work to be undertaken, and it has been undertaken.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): In May this year, Rotherham will hold a local election, like other places throughout the country. At the last local election, in 2021, Labour kept control of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council by a margin of only 54 electors. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that when people cast their votes for the Conservatives in Rotherham, those votes to end 50 years of Labour rule are secure?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I trust and hope that we will achieve that outcome. I would like to assure Members that we have every confidence in the integrity of the elections. Through the defending democracy taskforce and the action taken by the Minister responsible for local government, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who has written to all local authorities in the past week, we are ensuring that the integrity of those important elections is preserved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement today, and for responding to questions for over an hour.

Women's State Pension Age

4.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): With permission, I would like to make a statement to provide an interim update on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's investigation into the way that changes to the state pension age were communicated to women born in the 1950s. I am grateful to the ombudsman for conducting this investigation.

I recognise the strength of feeling on this issue, and it is important to set out the wider context and our initial understanding of the report itself. The fact that it has taken over five years for the ombudsman to produce the final report reflects the complexity of this matter. The period that the investigation considers spans around 30 years, dating back to the decision that Parliament took in 1995 to equalise the state pension age for men and women gradually from 2010. Since then, changes have been made through a series of Acts of Parliament introduced by successive Governments, which resulted in the state pension age for women rising to 65 by November 2018, and then to 66 by October 2020.

The announcement in 1993 about equalising the state pension age addressed a long-standing inequality between men and women. The changes were about maintaining the right balance between the sustainability of the state pension, fairness between generations and ensuring a dignified retirement in later life. Women retiring today can still expect to receive the state pension for more than 21 years on average—over two years longer than for men. Had the Government not equalised the state pension age, women would have been retiring today at 60, and they could have spent, on average, over 40% of their adult lives in receipt of the state pension. That would have been unfair, because, by the 1990s, life expectancy had significantly increased compared with 1948, when the state pension age for women was set at 60.

Turning to the investigation itself, it is important to be clear about what the ombudsman has not said, particularly following some of the inaccurate and misleading commentary since the report was published. The ombudsman has looked not at the decision to equalise the state pension age, but at how that decision was communicated by the Department for Work and Pensions. The report hinges on the Department's decisions over a narrow period between 2005 and 2007, and on the effect of those decisions on individual notifications. The ombudsman has not found that women have directly lost out financially as a result of DWP's actions. The report states:

“We do not find that it”—

meaning DWP's communication—resulted in the complainants

“suffering direct financial loss”.

The final report has not said that all women born in the 1950s will have been adversely impacted, as many women were aware that the state pension age had changed.

In his stage 1 report, the ombudsman found that “between 1995 and 2004, DWP's communication of changes to State Pension age reflected the standards we would expect it to meet.” The report also confirms that accurate information about changes to the state pension age was publicly available in leaflets, through DWP's pension education

[Mel Stride]

campaigns, through DWP's agencies, and on its website. However, when considering the DWP's actions between August 2005 and December 2007, the ombudsman came to the view that those actions resulted in 1950s-born women receiving individual notice later than they might, had different decisions been made.

It is important to remember that during the course of the ombudsman's investigation, the state pension age changes were considered by the courts. In 2019 and 2020, the High Court and the Court of Appeal respectively found no fault with the actions of the DWP. The courts made it clear that under successive Governments dating back to 1995, the action taken was entirely lawful and did not discriminate on any grounds. During these proceedings, the Court of Appeal held that the High Court was entitled to conclude as a fact that there had been

"adequate and reasonable notification given by the publicity campaigns implemented by the Department over a number of years."

The ombudsman has taken five years to produce his final report. As the chief executive of the ombudsman herself has set out, the DWP has fully co-operated with the ombudsman's investigation throughout this time and provided thousands of pages of detailed evidence. We continue to take the work of the ombudsman very seriously, and it is only right that we now fully and properly consider the findings and details of what is a substantial document. The ombudsman has noted in his report the challenges and complexities of this issue. In laying the report before Parliament, the ombudsman has brought matters to the attention of the House, and we will provide a further update to the House once we have considered the report's findings.

This Government have a strong track record of supporting all pensioners. In 2023-24, we will spend over £151 billion on support for pensioners. That is 5.5% of GDP, and includes around £124 billion for the state pension. We are committed to ensuring that the state pension remains the foundation of income in retirement now and for future generations. That is why we are honouring the triple lock by increasing the basic and new state pensions by 8.5% from next month. This sees the full rate of the new state pension rise by £900 a year and it follows last year's rise of 10.1%.

We now have 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty after housing costs than there were in 2010. Our sustained commitment to the triple lock demonstrates our determination to continue to combat pensioner poverty in the future. That is why we have reformed the state pension as well as workplace pensions, improving the retirement outcomes for many women. Our commitment to pensioners is why we introduced automatic enrolment, which has seen millions more women saving into a workplace pension.

This Government are committed to supporting pensioners in a sustainable way, providing them with a dignified retirement while also being fair to them and to taxpayers. I have set out our strong track record of backing our pensioners. I have also set out our commitment to the full and proper consideration of the ombudsman's report. I note that the ombudsman has laid his final report on this issue before Parliament, and of course I can assure the House that the Government will continue to engage fully and constructively with Parliament, as we have done with the ombudsman.

4.53 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, and thank the ombudsman and his staff for all their hard work. This is a serious report that requires serious consideration. The ombudsman has rightly said that it is for the Government to respond but that Parliament should also consider its findings. Labour Members will look carefully at the report too, and continue to listen respectfully to those involved, as we have done from the start.

The Secretary of State says that he will provide a further update to the House on this matter. When will he do so after the House returns from its Easter recess? This has been going on for years. He rightly says that issues around the changes to the state pension age have spanned multiple Parliaments, but those of us who have been around a little while will remember that the turning point that sparked the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign was the Pensions Act 2011, in which the then Chancellor, George Osborne decided to accelerate the state pension age increases with very little notice. His comment that this

"probably saved more money than anything else we've done"

understandably angered many women. At the time, Labour tabled amendments that would have ensured proper notice was given so that women could plan for their retirement, which would have gone some way towards dealing with this problem.

The ombudsman began investigating how changes to the state pension age were communicated in 2019. In the same year, the High Court ruled that the ombudsman could not recommend changes to the state pension age itself or the reimbursement of lost pensions, because that had been decided by Parliament.

The ombudsman's final report, published last week, says that, in 2004, internal research from the Department for Work and Pensions found that around 40% of the women affected knew about the changes to the state pension age. Does that remain the Government's assessment? What is their assessment of the total number of women who would receive compensation based on the ombudsman's different options? How many of them are the poorest pensioners on pension credit? How many are already retired or have, sadly, passed away? Given the Department already knew there were problems with communicating changes to the state pension age, why did the Government press ahead with the changes in the 2011 Act in the way they did, and in the way that sparked the WASPI campaign?

The Government are currently committed to providing 10 years' notice of future changes to the state pension age, but Labour's 2005 pension commission called for 15 years' notice. Have the Government considered the merits of a longer timeframe, and how they would improve communications in future? Labour is fully committed to guaranteeing that information about any future changes to the state pension age is provided in a timely and targeted way that is, wherever possible, tailored to individual needs. Will the Government now do the same?

Crucially, the Secretary of State omitted to say that the ombudsman took the rare decision to ask Parliament to intervene on this issue because the ombudsman strongly doubts that the Department will provide a remedy. In the light of these concerns, and in order to

aid Parliament in its work, will the Secretary of State now commit to laying all the relevant information about this issue, including all impact assessments and related correspondence, in the House of Commons Library so that lessons can be learned and so that Members across the House can properly do their job? Our current and future pensioners deserve nothing less.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her response, not least on the apparent points of agreement between us. We accept that there are strong feelings about these complex issues, and she is right to say that they must be given serious consideration and that we should listen respectfully to all those affected. She asks when the Government will return to the House with a further update, and I can assure her that there will be no undue delay.

The hon. Lady made a slightly political point about the 2011 Act, and I gently remind her that the ombudsman's report focuses on the period between 2005 and 2007, when her party was in government.

The hon. Lady asked a series of questions about various assessments based on the findings in the report. Of course, that goes to the heart of my response, which is—and I think she agrees with this—that we should look closely at the report in order to make those assessments.

On the hon. Lady's specific point about notice of changes to state pension age, it has always been the position that that should be adequate. Indeed, in the last review that I undertook of it, there was a delay in the decision to increase the state pension age to 68 into the next Parliament. Among other reasons, that was to allow for just that point to be addressed.

What is particularly important now is that we will fully engage with Parliament, as we did with the ombudsman. On the hon. Lady's point about the ombudsman, its chief executive stated on Sky News on Thursday, the day the report was published:

"The Government, the DWP, completely co-operated with our report, with our investigation, and over the period of time we have been working they have provided us with the evidence that we asked for."

That is our record in this particular matter, but may I once again assure the House that the Government will continue to engage fully and constructively with Parliament, as we have done with the ombudsman?

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's comments and his emphasis that this is a complex matter—of course it is. However, the WASPI women have been waiting five years for the outcome of the ombudsman's report. In his report and subsequent to it, when he wrote to various Select Committee Chairs from across the House, he gently encouraged us to keep a weather eye on how quickly the Government come forward with a solution. I recognise that this is an interim update, but I gently press my right hon. Friend: the WASPI women have been waiting five years for the ombudsman and they will not want to wait for a Select Committee inquiry into this report in order to see action from the Government.

Mel Stride: I welcome my right hon. Friend's question. Let me reassure her, as I have just reassured the House, that there will be no undue delay in our approach to this matter. We engaged fully with the ombudsman—

that included more than 1,000 pages of evidence and a full commentary in respect of the previous interim report that it published. This report is more than 100 pages in length and it is very detailed, so it is only right that we do, in an appropriate manner, give it the due attention that it deserves.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The timid response from the Labour party is truly shocking. Regardless of what we have just heard, WASPI women have at long last been vindicated, after five long years, by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report. Some 3.8 million women were impacted, of whom 270,000 have died without ever receiving their rightful pension.

Despite what the Secretary of State says, the verdict of the ombudsman's report on the Department for Work and Pensions is damning and unequivocal, and weasel words will not change that. Women born in the 1950s had their pension age raised with little or no notice, and there have been failings at every turn by successive UK Governments. The report states that these women are owed compensation; that the DWP has refused to comply and must be held accountable for doing so; and that there was a failure to adequately inform women of the state pension age change. Those failures have had a devastating impact on lives, retirements and the financial and emotional wellbeing of WASPI women. Many have been reduced to poverty after being robbed of tens of thousands of pounds of pension, and that suffering has been caused by and is the responsibility of this broken Westminster system and this cosy Westminster consensus.

Financial redress is vital for these women and is in the interests of justice. Clearly Labour is not interested in that, but what we need from the Government is a commitment to prompt compensation for these women—with no barriers erected to prevent access to it—that recognises their financial loss and distress. We cannot have a situation where WASPI women have their campaign for justice vindicated and yet continue to be ignored. Any attempt to do that will rightfully result in a backlash.

We in the SNP stand shoulder to shoulder with these women, who have been abandoned and betrayed by the UK Government and the future Labour Government. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what it will take to compensate these women? Do we need another TV drama to embarrass and shame the Government into doing the right thing? These women are not going away but the longer this injustice is left unresolved, the greater the number of WASPI women who will die without seeing their pension—shame on this place.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady refers to "doing the right thing". Doing the right thing by the people the hon. Lady describes is to look very closely, carefully and diligently at the report. It has been five years in gestation. It is detailed, runs to 100 pages and draws upon a vast reservoir of evidence. It is only right and proper, given that the report was published on Thursday and today is Monday, for all of us to have time to properly consider its findings. [*Interruption.*]

The hon. Lady refers to the general situation of pensioners. All I can say is that I am pleased and reassured that pensions generally are a reserved matter. We have been able to increase the state pension, last year by 10.1% and this coming year by 8.5%. We have

[*Mel Stride*]

pressed hard on promoting pension credit for poorer pensioners. We had a cost of living payment. Because it is a reserved matter, this Government were able to provide £300 to pensioners last November, alongside their winter fuel payments. As a consequence of that—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The hon. Lady has asked a question. Please listen to the answer.

Mel Stride: I was merely pointing out the fact that we stand four-square behind pensioners across the United Kingdom to support them. That is why under this Government there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in poverty, after housing costs, than there were in 2010.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): WASPI women across my Stroud constituency have campaigned consistently and constructively. I have grown very fond of them as we have discussed the subject over the years. As the Secretary of State knows, at the heart of the issue are women saying that they were left unable to plan or that their plans for the future were scuppered, so the focus should be on laying out a timetable as soon as possible. The issue of compensation is key to many of these women, who will have read the report. It is right that the Secretary of State and his Department look through the report in detail, but will he lay out a timetable, tell these women what is and is not possible, and manage their expectations as soon as possible, because they have waited?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee and I welcome her question. I reassure her that there will be no undue delay. I thank her for recognising that we need to look at these matters with great care. That does not mean coming forward with some of the things that the Scottish National party may wish us to do on a Monday, given that the report landed with us only last Thursday.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, as I do, that those affected should not have to wait for the outcome of a Select Committee inquiry before learning the Government's response? The equalisation of the state pension age was legislated for in 1995, giving 15 years' notice to those affected. The 2011 changes, which accelerated the process, gave much less than 10 years' notice to those affected. Is one of the lessons about what has gone wrong that we must ensure major changes of this kind provide at least 10 years' notice, or preferably 15 years' notice, before those changes take effect?

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman raises the potential role of Select Committees in these matters. As the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, he would have the authority to implement such ideas, if he were minded to do so. However, it is important that I and my Department seriously consider the findings in the report before we come to our conclusions, and that we then come to the House to present those conclusions. That is the most important point.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Having seen the report, I think this issue has gone on long enough and we now need to choose a compensation scheme and get it finished. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will have made their mind up before the autumn fiscal event, so that we can see it set out by that date and know how much the costs will be?

Mel Stride: Whether there will be an autumn statement at all, and the date thereof, is not within my remit—indeed, I am not certain whether an autumn statement is pencilled in for any particular date, or otherwise. The most important thing is that we recognise—this message should go out loud and clear from the Dispatch Box today—that there should be no undue delay in coming to the appropriate conclusions on this matter.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The WASPI scandal has been a huge injustice for millions of women, including women in my constituency. The Secretary of State has said that he wants to continue to look in detail at the findings of the report, but surely he should be able to make an unambiguous commitment to compensation for these women. The ombudsman had to take the rare step of laying this before Parliament, due to the Department for Work and Pensions refusing to comply. Will the Secretary of State today set out a timeline for when he will come back to this House and say how he intends to ensure that these women are compensated fully?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is attempting to draw me into coming to premature conclusions on some of the findings in the report, which I am afraid I not going to do for the reasons I have already given. Once again on the issue of timing, there will be no undue delay.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for his statement. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is itself WASPI, having been conceived in the 1950s. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a failure by Government to comply with its recommendations would be almost completely unprecedented over the past 70 years, and would in effect drive a coach and horses through an integral part of our system of democratic checks and balances? With that in mind, will he confirm that his Department will work in full haste with Parliament to agree a mechanism for remedy? Will he outline the work he is carrying out to address further concerns that have been raised over systematic failure by the DWP over several decades to properly communicate future pension changes?

Mel Stride: At the heart of this matter is the imperative to ensure that we fully and carefully examine the findings contained in the report. I will not be drawn today on where we may end up in respect of those findings, but I assure my hon. Friend that we will engage fully and constructively with Parliament on these matters.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Women born in the 1950s entered into a contract with the state, but the coalition Government reneged on that, denying them their pensions. In their fight for justice, thousands

have died. Since the ombudsman's report, over 100 have passed away, and many continue to live in poverty. Shamefully, the Government are now delaying action on the ombudsman's findings, and today have remained silent about proper compensation. Will the Secretary of State apologise for their long wait for justice?

Mel Stride: On the Pensions Act 2011, as the hon. Lady will know from the report, the window that has been particularly examined and on which these considerations turn is 2005 to 2007—a time when the Labour party was in office. But on a general and non-partisan point, my view is that we owe it to all women who were born in the 1950s to properly look at the report in detail, as I have described, and at the same time to engage with Parliament in an appropriate way.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My right hon. Friend is correct to refer to the complexity of this situation. One aspect of that complexity is that these women have suffered the loss of an opportunity to plan appropriately for their futures. That is the consequence of the maladministration that the ombudsman has identified, and it will, of course, be different for each individual. Can he say anything about the work that his Department will now do to think about the appropriate remedy in such diverse circumstances? Will he also say, in supporting what my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) put to him, that maladministration must have consequences and therefore it is important for the Government to recognise, on behalf of previous Governments, that that maladministration must lead to some form of remedy?

Mel Stride: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to refer, as I have done, to the complexities around this issue. He is understandably attempting to draw me into past comments on some of the findings in the report, which, for the reasons I have given, I will not be doing this afternoon. I reassure him that, whatever the conclusions or findings in the report, as I said in my statement, when these matters went to the Court of Appeal, the conclusion was that the High Court could treat as a matter of fact that

“there has been adequate and reasonable notification given by the...Department over a number of years.”

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Returning to maladministration, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's stage 1 report found clear maladministration in 2021 in the way that the DWP communicated those changes and that it did not pay attention to its own research showing that 1950s-born women did not know about the changes. Almost three years on, the DWP has not publicly accepted those findings. Will the Minister finally admit to the DWP's failings that short-changed hundreds of thousands of 1950s WASPI women?

Mel Stride: Without being drawn into too much detail around the report, there is clearly an important distinction between those matters that have been found to be maladministration and those that have found to be maladministration and led to injustice. Setting that apart, as I have said previously, I do not think it is right for me today to start dissecting elements of the report and some of the conclusions that have been arrived at. We will go away and look very carefully at these matters and then engage with Parliament appropriately.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the clarity with which he has set out the history of this issue. He will understand that my constituents who were affected wish, quite reasonably, to have a similar degree of clarity on the next steps and the timescale, and it is my job to communicate to him today their strength of feeling on that. I understand that he will not be able to set out that timescale today, but can he reassure the House that he has in his mind a timescale for these next steps?

Mel Stride: As I have said, there should be no undue delay, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that clarity is what is required. That is why I am stressing the point that clarity comes with careful consideration.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I pay tribute to all WASPI campaigners and stand in solidarity with them. I need also to declare that I am somebody who was born in the 1950s. The treatment of the 1950s-born women in relation to changes in women's state pension has led to great hardship for many. One woman in my constituency struggled to feed herself and had to sell her home as a result. The impact has been devastating. It is estimated that some 270,000 WASPI women have died since the start of the campaign in 2015 and that another dies every 13 minutes. I note the Minister's comments that there will be no undue delay. Will he return to this House immediately after recess with a firm commitment to fast and fair compensation?

Mel Stride: I think we owe it to all of those to whom the hon. Lady refers to act without undue delay—that is a commitment that I have made—and to look at these matters extremely carefully and make sure that we allow time to do that effectively.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I welcome today's statement, and am very grateful for it. I know that the Secretary of State is under pressure this afternoon, but having received a lot of correspondence from my Bracknell constituents, as other Members have from theirs, let me ask a very objective question: does he have a personal message for those seeking a definitive outcome?

Mel Stride: I think my statement is the message. We recognise that these are complicated issues. We have collaborated fully with the inquiry, to the satisfaction of the chief executive officer of the ombudsman. We will study the report's findings very carefully, and engage with Parliament constructively, as we have done with the ombudsman.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Royal Society for the Relief of Indigent Gentlewomen of Scotland sounds entirely otherworldly and quite funny, but that was not the case for the WASPI woman who came to my surgery in 2016. She retired expecting to get her state pension at 60, and had to apply to the society for relief. She had to sell her home because she could not afford her retirement, as she did not receive her pension. What remedies for compensation do the Government consider suitable for that constituent, and others of mine, and when will they receive them? The DWP has known about the issue for years and years.

Mel Stride: The example that the hon. Lady gives once again underlines in my mind the importance of proceeding with great diligence and looking at the findings

[*Mel Stride*]

of the report in great detail. As we all know, we received that report on Thursday; it is now Monday. Given its length, and the complexity of the issues under consideration, it is not unreasonable for us to take the time to look closely at its conclusions.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I add my voice to those calling for an urgent announcement of a redress scheme in response to the report. The Secretary of State rightly pointed out that the actions between 2005 and 2007 did not happen on his watch, or under any Conservative Government, but if he delays, he will stop being part of the solution and start to become part of the problem. When he introduces his redress scheme, he will need all the understanding and good will on both sides of the House that he can muster to deal with the undoubted complexities of distinguishing between the different kinds and levels of indirect loss in the report, so speed is vital.

Mel Stride: As my hon. Friend points out, the timing is important. I have made the commitment that we will proceed without undue delay.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Millions of women have suffered an injustice, including more than 200,000 in Wales and 4,000 in my constituency of Cynon Valley. While much of the ombudsman's report is welcome, the compensation remedy is insufficient—indeed, it is insulting. In 2019, the Labour party pledged an average payment of £15,500. It is affordable, and the Government have saved in the region of £200 billion since the equalisation of the state pension age, yet they still have not pledged anything at all. Will the Minister please set a specific timeline so that we can have an urgent parliamentary process for MPs to set a compensation scheme that will give fair, appropriate and fast compensation to these women?

Mel Stride: On the timing, I have now given this reply from the Dispatch Box on several occasions: there will be no undue delay. On the specific matter that the hon. Lady raises relating to remedy, that is one of the findings within the report that, along with all the others, we will of course consider very carefully.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to highlight the commitment to the triple lock, that the state pension will raise by some £900 this year, that there are fewer people in pensioner poverty than ever before, and that, predictably, the failures here happened under a previous Government. Nevertheless, does he accept that hardship in principle has been caused, both to WASPI women on the Isle of Wight and nationally, and that a solution, while it clearly needs to be affordable, is needed to right a wrong that has taken place?

Mel Stride: Reaching the clarity that my hon. Friend would like requires us to have a close and careful look at the report, as I have been setting out. We will do that as quickly as we can—we will not introduce any undue delays—and consult Parliament in an appropriate manner, as we did with the ombudsman.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is not that difficult. The WASPI women have been screwed over by the state and made to wait for years. I understand that the ombudsman process had to be undertaken because the Government made that happen, but they could have faced up to the reality much sooner. Can the Secretary of State guarantee the 6,500 WASPI women in my constituency and those across the UK that he will not kick the can down the road past the next election and pass the buck to the Labour party, which cannot make a promise about this matter either? It is not good enough to stand in solidarity but take no action.

Mel Stride: On the question of time, I have made the position extremely clear. On the question of the report having had to gestate for five years, there was a delay of around two years because of the judicial review that went on in the middle of that process, so to suggest that the Government have in any way been holding things up is not fair or accurate. Indeed, as I have said the ombudsman chief executive has highlighted the good level of co-operation that there has been with my Department.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming so swiftly to the House in the wake of the ombudsman's important report, which, as other hon. Members have said, requires a response. I pay tribute to the 4,000 WASPI women in my constituency who have been affected by the change. Although I welcome the important pension reforms that outlined, of which we can be proud, it is worth remembering that 68% of women born in the 1950s have relied on the state pension, as opposed to 44% of their male counterparts, because of baked-in inequalities that they experienced in much younger years: they started work before equalities legislation; they were not able to join pension schemes back in the day; and they made very definite choices about their caring responsibilities. For all those reasons, I see real injustice in this case. When he talks us through how this will be dealt with in Parliament, I hope to hear that there will be a role for individual MPs who have worked closely with their WASPI women to make representations on their behalf.

Mel Stride: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to engage closely with Parliament, as we have done to date and with the ombudsman. She quite reasonably raises gender pension gaps. This Government have brought in and encouraged automatic enrolment—we have consulted on further changes that we are considering—which has led to a narrowing of that gap as it relates to private pensions. There is always more to do, but we are definitely serious about making further progress.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): The WASPI women in Slough and across our country have been campaigning courageously and consistently for their rights for years. It is the Government's duty to set out exactly how they will help those women and deliver justice. Given that someone's entitlement to the state pension depends on how many years they have paid national insurance contributions, what will happen, under the Chancellor's plans to abolish NICs, to those who are yet to retire? Will they still receive the state pension to which they have been contributing, or will their entitlements change?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is a very assiduous and sensible person, and will know that party politics are at play in this issue. The Chancellor has been extremely clear that it is an aspiration to further bring down the level of national insurance across time—across several years, maybe even going beyond the next Parliament. He is quite right to say that, because we are a party that fundamentally believes in low tax.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Given the demographics in North Norfolk, I probably have one of the most impacted constituencies in the country: over 5,000 WASPI women have been impacted there. We need to be sensible. We all recognise the financial climate that we are dealing with in this country, but the Secretary of State is a very decent man, and this weekend, the Prime Minister intimated that we have always tried to right injustices in this country. WASPI women will be watching this debate; can the Secretary of State at least throw them a lifeline from the Dispatch Box, and give some sort of commitment that we in this country will do everything we possibly can to support as many WASPI women who have been impacted as we can?

Mel Stride: The important point is that we must carefully consider the report in its entirety—not just one aspect of it, but all aspects. I have undertaken to the House to do that without undue delay.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The ombudsperson was established to decide when things were not necessarily illegal, but had been done in a way that involved malpractice and was wrong, and to decide when a person in the middle needed to come forward and say, “You need to sort this out.” That is exactly what the ombudsperson has now said: their judgment is clear that maladministration happened. There was a question as to whether what was done was illegal or not; in the event, it was not. Rather than hiding behind court judgments, will the Minister apologise on behalf of the Department for the maladministration? Also, will he at least commit to a remedy? I am not saying what that remedy has to be, but will he give reassurance that a remedy will be found? Those are two easy things that he should be able to do now.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman suggests that we are hiding behind the court cases. I have explained the relevance of those cases and the conclusions to which both the High Court and the Court of Appeal came in 2019 and 2020. We are not hiding behind anything; in fact, as the hon. Gentleman knows, because I read out the quote earlier, on Thursday 21 March—last Thursday—the chief executive of the ombudsman said on Sky News:

“The Government, the DWP, completely co-operated with our report, with our investigation, and over the period of time we have been working they have provided us with the evidence that we asked for.”

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): WASPI women in my constituency have campaigned relentlessly for many years, and I pay tribute to all of them, particularly Rosie Dickson, who has done so much at various events around Glasgow, and who came down to London to put her case directly in Parliament. WASPI women are watching this debate, and when the Minister says that the Government will carefully consider things, they hear, “More delay.” What they hear is that they will

not get the money to which they are entitled, and that too many more women will die before they see a penny from this Government. When will they receive their money?

Mel Stride: Given that the report was published as recently as last Thursday, it is a bit of a stretch to suggest that I should have come to this Dispatch Box with a fully formed set of proposals of the sort that the hon. Lady may wish for. I think that what her constituents and others want is a Government who look at the report very carefully, give great consideration to the complex issues involved and the report's findings, and engage closely with Parliament, exactly as we did with the ombudsman.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming to even acknowledge the injustice done to thousands of innocent postmasters. This, too, is an incredible injustice. Millions of women born in the 1950s have been betrayed. Some 3.5 million women have been affected; one dies every 13 minutes, and we have been in this Chamber for an hour. Some 28,000 people have signed the letter from the WASPI campaign to the Leader of the House asking for an urgent debate and series of votes on compensation options, including that proposed by the all-party parliamentary group on this issue. This injustice cannot carry on any longer.

The Secretary of State has sought to avoid answering the question of when a decision will be made. “In due course” is not good enough, and neither is “without undue delay”. When will it happen? When will we get a debate on the issue, and a vote on proper compensation packages?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that he should not ask me questions at the Dispatch Box about when debates may or may not occur; those matters are typically handled by the usual channels, including those in his party and mine. It is quite extraordinary that he should try to get me to set out a timetable for debates. Many of these things will be a matter for Parliament, rather than the Government. However, he is right to raise Horizon, and I am very proud of the fact that this Government have acted at speed on that, and brought forward legislation to make sure that people get the moneys and reparations that they deserve.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): At the beginning of the Secretary of State's statement, he said something that is clearly wrong. He said that women clearly had not “lost out”. They have. Thousands in my constituency have lost out financially, through no fault of their own. They planned for their retirement on the basis of out-of-date information. They were then in effect penalised for taking on caring responsibilities—for providing the best kind of childcare for their grandchildren, and allowing their children to work and pay taxes. All that was disrupted by the collective failure of the state. As has been said, many have died before justice was delivered.

For years, those of us who sought justice for the WASPI women have met the same response, which was that we had to wait for the ombudsman's report. We now have the report, so will the Secretary of State now comply, apologise to the women, and pay compensation to them, as recommended in the report?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman refers to my mention of there having been no direct loss; that was a conclusion drawn by the ombudsman in his report. As to how quickly we can proceed, I simply remind him that the report was published on Thursday, and it is Monday afternoon. These are complex matters, and it is right and proper that they be considered in detail very carefully, and that there be appropriate engagement with Parliament, exactly as there was with the ombudsman.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): In my constituency of Birmingham, Hall Green, I have 4,760 WASPI women, who have been campaigning tirelessly for pension justice. Given that the report has now been published, will the Secretary of State commit to a timeline that will make sure that they are adequately and swiftly compensated for the harms that they have suffered?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, that is a question that in various forms has now been asked a dozen or more times. The answer will always be consistent: there is no desire to delay matters, and there will be no undue delays in our deliberations.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): There cannot be a Member of this House who has not met women affected by the issue or WASPI campaigners, and who has not been moved by their awful stories, and the pain that they have been through as a result of the maladministration by successive Governments. Anyone watching this lengthy, convoluted statement from the Secretary of State will be left confused about what will happen now. Could he tell us, in words of one syllable, when women who are victims of this maladministration can receive the compensation that they deserve?

Mel Stride: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, that is just another version of the same question about timing, and I have given a very clear answer on that.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have heard many Ministers say from the Dispatch Box that they are working at pace, or that there will be no undue delay in dealing with scandals. This is a real opportunity for Parliament. The ombudsman laid this report before Parliament for a very good reason: he did not think that the Department for Work and Pensions would accept the recommendations on maladministration. If a Back Bencher tabled an amendment to a Government Bill that sought to implement the ombudsman's recommendations, the Government would support it, wouldn't they?

Mel Stride: It would be a little bit of a stretch to comment on, let alone support, an unknown amendment to an unknown Bill.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The WASPI campaign has asked me to emphasise its annoyance about how often Government Ministers, when talking about these issues, attempt to muddy the waters by referring back to the unsuccessful litigation to reverse the increase to the state pension age, or to claim direct discrimination. That was not litigation by the official WASPI campaign, and I am sure that its members were annoyed to hear a senior Labour Front Bencher doing the same thing on the radio last night. Will the Minister

take this chance to assure the WASPI campaigners from the Dispatch Box that going forward, Government Ministers will not attempt to muddy the waters by referring back to now irrelevant litigation, and will instead focus on how to implement the ombudsman's recommendations?

Mel Stride: The hon. and learned Lady will know about legal matters. I do not think that I can accept that the litigation, particularly in the High Court and the Court of Appeal, is just not relevant, especially as it pertained to the matters under debate.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As the Secretary of State rightly pointed out, this report has been five years in the offing. His Department has known that it was coming for an awful long time. It must also have known that it was possible that compensation would be recommended. I am sure that he runs his Department in a prudent fashion, and will have set aside contingency funding for that eventuality. Can he tell us how much?

Mel Stride: Once again, the hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me into forming conclusions prematurely about a complex report that needs a great deal of study and consideration. That is what we will give it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): These 1950s women have been shockingly let down by Westminster. They have fought on this issue for years and years. Instead of the Secretary of State properly acknowledging the failings that the ombudsman highlighted and doing "the right thing", as the ombudsman's chief executive officer says, it feels as though he has come here today with precisely nothing to say. It feels as though he is trying to gaslight the WASPI women. It is a disgrace, and shame on the Labour party for going along with this charade. This terrible, protracted injustice has devastated the lives of so many women. It is time to give them the justice that they deserve. Give them their compensation now, before many more of them die waiting.

Mel Stride: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have taken this entire situation extremely seriously. The House will have heard the remarks by the ombudsman's CEO about the quality of my Department's engagement with the ombudsman. I have also said that we provided more than 1,000 pages of evidence to the investigation. I have reassured the House that we will carefully consider the findings of the report, will not unduly delay our response, and will engage appropriately with Parliament, exactly as we have done with the ombudsman.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I must first declare my interest as a 1950s woman. The Secretary of State absolutely knows that real hardship was caused for some women in this age group in 2011 when the former Chancellor, George Osborne—backed by Conservative and Lib Dem Members—fast-forwarded the changes. As the ombudsman said, maladministration in the communication of the state pension age resulted in claimants losing opportunities to prepare. Women affected will be very disappointed by the Secretary of State's statement, especially as the first stage of the ombudsman's report in 2021 highlighted DWP failings. Can he please be more precise than saying "no undue delay"? In which month can we expect a proper Government response?

Mel Stride: That is once again a question about the timing, and I have given a clear response on that. I have given an assurance to the House that there will be no undue delay in our approach to these matters. That is the answer to the hon. Lady's question.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I say to the Secretary of State that he needs to read the room? Let us remember that the ombudsman has said there has been maladministration. There is consensus across the Chamber that compensation should be paid. This is about women who paid national insurance in anticipation of receiving a pension, who were hit with the bombshell that their pension was being deferred—in some cases, by up to six years—with only 15 months' written notice. Can we imagine what would happen in this place if it was announced that private sector pensions were being put back by six years? Rightly, there would be outrage, and there should be outrage about what happened to the WASPI women.

This was an entitlement taken away from women, who had a reasonable expectation of retiring denied to them. The Government should have recognised the failings and should have compensated those 3.8 million women years ago. Now that we have the determination of maladministration, let us ensure that this is not another Horizon or contaminated blood story and that the Government come back at pace with firm proposals that the House can discuss after the Easter recess.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Can people focus on their questions, please? That would be really useful.

Mel Stride: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, I am fully aware of the reports' findings. As he will know, they raise many questions, which we need to look at carefully. We will not delay in so doing, but that is why I have come to assure the House that we will do exactly that and engage with Parliament in an appropriate way.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): This interim statement felt like a non-statement. It spoke about clarity but offered none at all to WASPI women or Members of the House. I repeat what many across the Chamber have said: on what day and in what month can we expect a full statement? WASPI women up and down the country expect that full statement.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raised the question to which by now I have probably responded two dozen times. The answer remains the same: we will look at these matters extremely carefully and diligently, which is what everybody who has an interest in them would expect us to do. The report was published as recently as Thursday, and it is now Monday. We will look at these issues very carefully indeed, and there will be no undue delay. We will ensure that we interact with Parliament in an appropriate fashion, as we did with the ombudsman.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about time, but it is nearly a decade since the start of the WASPI campaign, which has included rallies, protests, court cases, thousands of meetings to lobby MPs, and 273,000 women dying. Those who remain can perhaps see some light at the end of the tunnel. I say "some light", because the ombudsman

should have gone further both on the impact that DWP malpractice has had and on the recommended compensation. However, it looks like that light is actually a train, with the Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor in control. After all that those women—that includes my constituent, who was one of the test cases in the report and at times has treated the campaign like a full-time job—have gone through, is the Secretary of State really going to ask them to wait just a little longer and then break convention and ignore the ombudsman's findings?

Mel Stride: Given that we have not yet responded to the findings of the ombudsman, for the reasons that I gave—this needs to be done in a diligent and careful manner—I am not sure that the hon. Member's assertion holds water. The report was five years in the making. It covers highly complex matters, and many questions are raised as a consequence. We will look at those questions and those findings extremely carefully and come to the House without undue delay while engaging with the House in an appropriate way, which is what we did with the ombudsman.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The report's central finding of fact is that women born in the 1950s could not make informed decisions about their finances and that their sense of "personal autonomy and financial control" was "diminished", with tens of thousands plunged into poverty. The issue now is not whether those women faced injustice, because the report makes it clear that they did, that they are entitled to urgent compensation from the Government, and that Parliament must "identify a mechanism" for providing appropriate redress. Will the Secretary of State allay my concerns that he is not proposing to question the ombudsman's findings and that, rather, after the Easter recess, he will return to set out appropriate mechanisms for redress that we can debate in the House?

Mel Stride: We are considering the findings, which need to be considered in their entirety in order to come to a view.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I pay tribute to the WASPI campaigners in Glasgow whom I met on International Women's Day at the Mary Barbour statue, including the great Kathy McDonald, a fantastic constituent. Surely, the Secretary of State accepts that it is unacceptable in 2024 that women continue to experience inequality in lifetime savings. Women would need to work an additional 19 years to have the same pension savings as men. Inequalities in lifetime savings, a gender pension gap and maladministration of state pension age changes: this is a triple whammy for 1950s-born women. When will they get justice and equal treatment?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman concludes by asking the same question that has been asked many times. There will be no undue delay. We will look at the issues, including some of the points that he has raised, in the round, looking at the entirety of the report and all its points and conclusions. He will know that we have taken many steps to help to increase the pension amounts received by the women involved, including the auto-enrolment reforms that we have brought forward. In the private pension space, the reforms have shown a dramatic improvement in the level of pension provision for women up and down the country.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The report is absolutely clear that the DWP's systemic failure is that it did not even draw upon and learn from its own research into the failure of communication with those women. In addition, it did not investigate properly and respond to the complaints. That is straightforward in the report. Perhaps as a warning, I say to the Secretary of State that the anger out there will be not that he has not come up with a scheme immediately, but that he has not even acknowledged the failings of his own Department. That is why the report recommends that Parliament deal with this matter. Members of this House share the same feelings as the ombudsman and the WASPI women: we have no confidence in the Department for Work and Pensions to resolve its basic failure of decades ago.

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman refers to one part of the report's findings, where the ombudsman found maladministration but did not find injustice. The point that I have made to others in the House is that we need to look at this report properly. It is a report of 100 pages, to which my Department provided 1,000 pages of evidence, and which we received on Thursday. The only thing I can do responsibly is come to the House and make it clear that we will act without undue delay and interact with Parliament in an appropriate manner, exactly as we did with the ombudsman.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Incredibly sadly, Margaret Meikle and Morag Syne are just two of a significant number of women in my constituency and elsewhere who have died while enduring years of prevarication and inaction by successive Governments in relation to the maladministration of their pensions. It is estimated that 40,000 women have died each year who may have been eligible for compensation. Nationally, 270,000 women have died without ever receiving an apology, justice or compensation. Will the Secretary of State commit to giving due consideration to compensating not only eligible women still living, but the relatives of those who have died while awaiting justice, when this comes back to the House?

Mel Stride: I listened to the hon. Gentleman extremely carefully, and I think we owe it to all those to whom he referred and those who may be in a similar situation to take this matter extremely seriously. We will look at it very carefully, and we will come to appropriate conclusions while ensuring that we interact with Parliament in an appropriate way, very much as we did in our interactions with the ombudsman.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I am not sure why the Secretary of State has come to this House to tell us and WASPI women nothing apart from that he is considering the report. He keeps talking about its complexities, but one simple finding at its heart is that this Government and this Parliament must remedy the grave injustices against the thousands of WASPI women in my constituency, and up and down this country. Hon. Members from across this House have asked the Secretary of State quite reasonably for a timescale, but he refuses to commit and uses the words "undue delay." Will he at least accept that every time a Minister stands up and says "undue delay" or "due process" they really mean that they have no intention of addressing the problem, and are saving face and kicking the can down the road?

Mel Stride: No, I do not accept that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. The ombudsman's report has made recommendations based on maladministration. The 1950s women were misled and not notified of their rights. That is a serious issue. Many people have contacted me; one told me that nearly 300,000 women have passed away already. Women continue to pass away each day without seeing a single penny. Let us not forget those who suffer physical and mental disabilities after a lifetime of work and childrearing. Many grandmothers have gone on to care for elderly parents or provide unpaid support so that their daughters and sons can return to work in support of the UK economy. Time is not on the side of the WASPI women. They need restitution, apologies and compensation. Does the Secretary of State agree with my constituent's suggestion that the Government agree urgently to pay a reasonable lump sum, followed by an increase in their pension payments until the deficit is recouped, thereby making it easier to balance the public purse?

Mel Stride: I certainly accept that we need to proceed in a manner that does not delay matters, for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has given. We owe it to the people to whom he referred to proceed without undue delay, by very carefully considering the report in its entirety, looking very closely at its findings. I am satisfied, as is the chief executive officer of the ombudsman, that the engagement between my Department and the ombudsman was full and complete. We will continue to proceed on that basis, working closely with Parliament in the same spirit that we worked with the ombudsman.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): To say the Secretary of State will have disappointed the 5,000 WASPI women in my constituency and the many tens of thousands across the north-east would be an understatement. Frankly, the Minister's response is shameful. I take issue with what he said about the complexity of the report. He said that it has only been five days since the 100-page report was published. I am not a speed reader, but I reckon that is 20 pages a day. The issues raised are not bolts out of the blue; the WASPI women have been actively campaigning for more than 10 years, highlighting the issues and the potential remedies. The response we have had will not wash with the country. The Secretary of State says that there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in poverty, but 270,000 WASPI women have died waiting for justice. How many more will die before he finally comes along and implements those recommendations in full?

Mel Stride: The answer on timing is the same one that I have given consistently throughout this statement. I have been asked that probably three dozen times, and the answer remains the same. This is a complex report—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member will allow me to continue, that is not, as far as I am aware, a matter of dispute, even between the Government and the Opposition. We both accept that it is a complex report and that we need to look very carefully at the findings in order to come to conclusions. That is exactly what we will do.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Despite how the Minister might wish to spin it, the ombudsman's report was absolutely damning, totally vindicating the WASPI women and their campaign. Too many people

thought—indeed, fervently hoped—that they would give up and go away, but they picked the wrong fight with the wrong women. I congratulate Ann Greer and the Argyll & Isles WASPI women on never giving up the fight. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has a private Member's Bill that would require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a compensation scheme for WASPI women. The vehicle is there, Minister. Will the Government now work with my hon. Friend and support his private Member's Bill, so we can bring this matter to a conclusion as swiftly as possible?

Mel Stride: I am not familiar with all the details of the private Member's Bill to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Whether the Government decide to support a particular Bill is clearly a matter for the usual channels and Government business managers, not for me at the Dispatch Box at this time.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The WASPI website has a grim counter of affected women's deaths and of money saved by the Treasury. The current figures are 273,000-plus women and well over £4 billion. They are rising by the minute. How far have the consequences of the Government's 2022 disastrous mini-Budget affected their thinking on this matter? If the Secretary of State will not commit to full level 6 compensation, as the ombudsman recommends, what does he have to offer Linda Gregory, my constituent born in 1953? She "did the right thing," as he said. She did her sums, got her forecasts and was repeatedly assured by the DWP and HMRC that she had contributions to retire at 60 in order to look after her ailing mum—before this surprise was sprung on her, which has so far cost her £40,000.

Mel Stride: With great respect to the hon. Lady, her question perfectly exemplifies why it is important to look at the detail of the report. She refers to the ombudsman recommending the full level 6 compensation, but it is actually level 4, the range between £1,000 and £2,950. I am afraid that that piece of information was simply inaccurate.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Sadly, we have had a reprise of known facts, not the resolution of a manifest wrong. Governments frequently have to address the faults and failings of their predecessors, of whatever political hue. That is called the responsibility of being in office and it is part of the privilege of governing. Equally, we have to remember that when there is an institutional failure that goes across political parties and Government institutions, we have independent bodies, such as an ombudsman, to address it. In those circumstances, will the Minister first of all accept that there has been a manifest wrong and injustice, and secondly, will he commit that he will not, under any circumstances, seek to undermine the decision of the ombudsman or the direction of travel he has embarked upon?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a very specific purpose for an ombudsman, as indeed there is for this ombudsman. What I think is unreasonable is to take the step in logic from that to saying that one should just simply, within a matter of hours, stand up and accept everything the ombudsman has put forward. What we have quite rightly said, and what I am saying at the Dispatch Box today, is that we

will consider these matters, the findings, the circumstances and so on in very great detail, in order to come to the appropriate decision.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): WASPI women in my constituency simply cannot wait. In fact, as we have heard across the House, there is not a single constituency where WASPI women can wait. There is a simple reason for that: 40,000 of them are dying every year. Over a quarter of a million have died over the 10-year campaign. Not once have they had an apology or received any justice—and they have certainly received no compensation. When the PHSO report was published, both the UK Government and the Labour party deliberately failed to answer and fully guarantee that full justice and full compensation would be delivered to the WASPI women. The simple question, which the Secretary of State has failed to answer so far, is this: can he give us a timeframe by which he will deliver an apology, justice and compensation, and can it be before the next general election?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has been in the Chamber, I think, since the beginning of the statement—I am sure he has; he heard the statement, hence he is asking a question—and he will know that the question he asked has been asked now probably a couple of dozen times. The answer is the same. *[Interruption.]* He chunters from a sedentary position, but the answer is just the same, which is that the responsible thing to do is to look at this highly complex matter. The report was published on Thursday. It is now Monday, early evening. It is not unreasonable to expect the Government—and indeed Parliament, because of the way the report has been laid before Parliament—to look at the detail of the report. As a Department, we gave around 1,000 pages of evidence that informed the report. There are some very important findings within it and to do it justice, we need to look at it carefully.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Some 6,900 WASPI women in my constituency, some of whom have lost out by as much as £60,000 and many of them in dire need of compensation, will have found little encouragement in the Minister's statement. Is it this Government's policy to dither, delay and deny justice until the 1950s-born women have died off?

Mel Stride: I can give a very short answer to that: absolutely not.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The WASPI campaign has been conducted with great dignity. They have lobbied and informed all of us. Will the outgoing Government and the incoming Government show these women the respect they are due and commit to paying compensation? I am not even asking for a timetable—just a commitment to paying compensation. Before the Minister says, "I only got the report last Thursday," I point out that if he had listened to the PHSO evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, he would have known that the writing was clearly on the wall and that compensation was going to be in the report.

Mel Stride: What I am not really clear about is why the hon. Gentleman is urging me and the Government to draw a premature conclusion on the basis of—*[Interruption.]* No, it would be premature. As he points out,

[Mel Stride]

the report arrived on Thursday. It is now Monday, very early evening. It is complicated, so it is absolutely right and proper that we look at it very carefully and in great detail. It is only right and proper that we do that for the people who are concerned with this matter. That is precisely what we will do. We will act without undue delay. We will make sure that we engage with this House in an appropriate fashion, as we did with the ombudsman himself.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The expression “Justice delayed is justice denied” has never seemed more appropriate, with so many thousands of WASPI women waiting for justice to be delivered and dying in the process. It is not just the five years waiting for the ombudsman’s report, but the years before that jumping through the hoops of the DWP complaints process and the independent case examiner. As well as delivering swift compensation, will the Secretary of State’s Government look at fixing the system that has delayed, for the best part of a decade, the delivery of justice for WASPI women?

Mel Stride: We will look closely at the report and we will, no doubt, draw many conclusions as a result of that process of careful examination of the findings and the points made within the report. My commitment to the House is that we will do that without undue delay and that we will also engage appropriately with Parliament as part of that approach.

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

[Relevant Documents: Correspondence between the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Home Secretary, on the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, reported to the House on 6 March and 22 March.]

New Clause 1

REPORT ON THE PRIME MINISTER’S ENGAGEMENT WITH
THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE

“After section 240 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 insert—
“240A Report on the Prime Minister’s engagement with the
Intelligence and Security Committee

- (1) The Secretary of State must publish a report about the Prime Minister’s engagement with the Intelligence and Security Committee in relation to the investigatory powers regime and lay the report before Parliament.
- (2) The report must be published within six months of the passage of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024, and annually thereafter.”—(Dan Jarvis.)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish a report on the engagement between the Prime Minister and the Intelligence and Security Committee, including any meeting held, in relation to the investigatory powers regime.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.8 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Requirement for the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on technology-enabled serious and organised crime and technology-enabled threats to national security*—

“After section 234 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, insert—

“234A Requirement for the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on technology-enabled serious and organised crime and technology-enabled threats to national security

- (1) The Secretary of State must publish a report on technology-assisted crime insofar as it relates to measures set out in this Act and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.
- (2) The report must be published within one year of the passing of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024, and annually thereafter.”

This new clause would ensure the Secretary of State publishes an annual report on technology-enabled serious and organised crime and technology-enabled threats to national security insofar as it relates to measures set out in this Act and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

New clause 3—*Prevention of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*—

“(1) The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is amended as follows.

(2) Before section 260 (and the cross-heading before that section), insert—

“Prevention of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment 259A Prevention of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

No public authority may take any action, whether retention, examination, disclosure, handing over to any overseas authority or any other action authorised by this or any other enactment, in relation to material obtained in accordance with the provisions of this Act if the public authority knows or believes that action—

- (a) would result in torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or
- (b) presents a real risk of resulting in torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.”

New clause 4—*Members of Parliament: interception and examination of communications and equipment interference*—

“(1) The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 26 (targeted interception warrants and targeted examination warrants: Members of Parliament etc.), after subsection (2), insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State may not issue the warrant if it relates to communications sent by, or intended for, a member of the House of Commons.”

(3) In section 111 (targeted equipment interference warrants: Members of Parliament etc.), after subsection (7), insert—

“(7A) A warrant may not be issued under this section if it relates to—

- (a) communications sent by, or intended for, a member of the House of Commons, or
- (b) a member of the House of Commons’s private information.”

This new clause would remove the ability of the Secretary of State to authorise the interception of the communications of, or the obtaining of communications intended for, or private information belonging to, Members of Parliament.

New clause 5—*Interception notification for Members of Parliament etc.*—

“After section 26 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (Members of Parliament etc.) insert—

“26A *Interception notification for Members of Parliament etc.*

(1) Upon completion of conduct authorised by a warrant under section 26, or the cancellation of a warrant issued under that section, a Judicial Commissioner must notify the subject of the warrant, in writing, of—

- (a) the conduct that has taken place, and
- (b) the provisions under which the conduct has taken place.

(2) The notification under subsection (1) must be sent within thirty days of the completion of the conduct or cancellation of the warrant.

(3) A Judicial Commissioner may postpone the notification under subsection (1) beyond the time limit under subsection (2) if the Judicial Commissioner assesses that notification may defeat the purposes of an ongoing serious crime or national security investigation relating to the subject of the warrant.

(4) A Judicial Commissioner must consult the person who applied for the warrant in order to fulfil an assessment under subsection (3).”

This new clause would require members of a relevant legislature who are targets of interception to be notified after the fact, as long as it does not compromise any ongoing investigation.

Amendment 7, page 3, line 9, leave out clause 2.

Amendment 8, in clause 2, page 3, line 17, leave out “, or only a low,”.

Amendment 24, page 3, line 18, at end insert—

“(1A) This section does not apply to a bulk personal dataset unless it has been published in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.”

This probing amendment would mean that individual and category authorisations for bulk personal datasets would not apply to bulk personal datasets unless they had been published in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) set out in the Data Protection Act 2018.

Amendment 9, page 3, line 34, at end insert—

“(4) By way of example, bulk datasets of images obtained by CCTV and bulk datasets of Facebook posts are not to be considered datasets where the individuals to whom the data relates could have no, or only a low, reasonable expectation of privacy.”

This is a probing amendment regarding the scope of “low or no reasonable expectation of privacy”.

Amendment 10, page 5, line 7, leave out “any dataset that falls” and insert “all datasets that fall”.

This amendment would clarify that all the datasets covered by a category authorisation must be “low or no privacy” and not just some of them.

Amendment 11, page 11, line 2, at end insert—

“226DZA *Notification and review of bulk personal datasets retained under category authorisations*

(1) This section applies where a category authorisation has been approved by a Judicial Commissioner under section 226BB.

(2) The head of an intelligence service, or a person acting on their behalf, must notify the Judicial Commissioner within 28 days of a bulk personal dataset being retained or retained and examined under the category authorisation.

(3) The notification under subsection (2) must include a description of the dataset and the data it includes, the purpose for which it is being used and the number of individuals whose data is contained in the dataset.

(4) The Judicial Commissioner, on reviewing any notifications received under subsection (2), must cancel the category authorisation if the Commissioner considers that section 226A no longer applies to any dataset that falls within the category of datasets described in the authorisation.

(5) The Judicial Commissioner, on reviewing any notifications received under subsection (2), must cancel the relevant individual authorisation if the Commissioner considers that the condition in section 226B(4) is not met in relation to that bulk personal dataset.”

This amendment would provide for ex-post facto judicial oversight of the use of category authorisations, including the conditions for individual authorisations made under them.

Amendment 13, in clause 12, page 34, leave out lines 5 and 6 and insert—

“(e) where the communications data has been made publicly or commercially available by the telecommunications operator or postal operator”.

This amendment would align the new provisions with existing Communication Data Codes of Practice.

Amendment 12, page 34, leave out lines 5 and 6.

This amendment would remove one of the example cases where a relevant person has lawful authority to obtain communications data from a telecommunications operator or postal operator, being where the data has been “published”.

Government amendments 3 to 6.

Amendment 14, page 36, line 2, leave out clause 15.

Amendment 15, to clause 15, page 36, line 35, at end insert—

“(c) the Investigatory Powers Commissioner agrees with the judgment of the officer made in accordance with paragraph (b)”.

This amendment would ensure that all use of new powers in relation to Internet Connection Records was subject to oversight by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner.

Amendment 16, page 38, line 11, leave out clause 18.

Amendment 17, page 44, line 39, leave out clause 21.

Amendment 18, in clause 21, page 45, line 3, at the beginning insert “Subject to subsection (1A),”.

This amendment is consequential on amendment 19.

Amendment 19, page 45, line 6, at end insert—

“(1A) The Secretary of State may not give a relevant operator a notice under this section unless the notice has been approved by a Judicial Commissioner.

(1B) In deciding whether to approve a notice under this section, a Judicial Commissioner must review the conclusions of the Secretary of State as to the matters referred to in subsections (5) and (6)”.

This amendment would introduce judicial oversight of new powers to issue communications providers with notices requiring them to notify the Secretary of State of relevant changes to the service.

Amendment 25, page 47, line 28, leave out clause 22.

This amendment is consequential on NC4.

Amendment 20, in clause 22, page 48, line 13, leave out

“has the necessary operational awareness to decide whether”

and insert

“is either required in their routine duties to issue warrants under section 19 or section 102 or has the necessary operational experience”.

This amendment would permit the Prime Minister to nominate a Secretary of State to act for the Prime Minister under this section if they are required in their routine duties to issue warrants under section 19 or section 102 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 or if they have the necessary operational experience.

Amendment 21, page 48, line 14, at end insert—

“(2DA) The Prime Minister must be notified of the individual’s decision as soon as it is reasonably practicable to do so.”.

This amendment would require the Prime Minister to be notified of the decision of the designated Secretary of State as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Amendment 27, page 48, line 21, at end insert—

“(2G) The Prime Minister may not give approval under this section unless it has been authorised by a judge of the Supreme Court.”.

This amendment would require the authorisation of a judge of the Supreme Court before the Prime Minister could approve the interception of the communications of a Member of Parliament.

Amendment 26, page 48, line 22, leave out clause 23.

This amendment is consequential on NC4.

Amendment 22, in clause 23, page 49, line 13, leave out

“has the necessary operational awareness to decide whether”

and insert

“is required in their routine duties to issue warrants under section 19 or section 102 or has the necessary operational experience”.

This amendment would permit the Prime Minister to nominate a Secretary of State to act for the Prime Minister under this section if they are required in their routine duties to issue warrants under section 19 or section 102 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 or if they have the necessary operational experience.

Amendment 23, page 49, line 14, at end insert—

“(7DA) The Prime Minister must be notified of the individual’s decision as soon as it is reasonably practicable to do so.”.

This amendment would require the Prime Minister to be notified of the decision of the designated Secretary of State as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Amendment 28, page 49, line 18, at end insert—

“(7F) The Prime Minister may not give approval under this section unless it has been authorised by a judge of the Supreme Court.”.

This amendment would require the authorisation of a judge of the Supreme Court before the Prime Minister could approve the obtaining of communications intended for, or private information belonging to, a Member of Parliament.

Dan Jarvis: It is a privilege to open debate on Report of this important Bill. At the outset, it is worth reiterating that Labour supports the Bill, which updates aspects of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. That is because it is imperative that legal frameworks are updated to ensure that our police and security services keep up with changes to communications technology. Doing so ensures that they are always one step ahead of criminals and malign forces who seek to harm us and undermine our national security.

I hope the Minister, and all Members who were present in Committee, agree with me that we had a constructive debate, testing the Bill’s proportionality and robustness. Some matters relating to third-party bulk personal datasets and the oversight process for the addition of new BPDs to existing category authorisations have been largely resolved to the satisfaction of Labour Members, but other important matters still need to be addressed. I will speak first about the new clauses and amendments that stand in my name, before dealing with some of those tabled by other Members.

New clause 1 seeks to ensure that the Secretary of State publishes an annual report on the engagement between the Prime Minister and the Intelligence and Security Committee regarding the investigatory powers regime. A very similar amendment was tabled in Committee, but was withdrawn after a lengthy debate on the ISC oversight arrangements did not make any meaningful progress despite helpful contributions from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). We tabled this new clause because the Government must recognise that the ISC has a vital role to play in the democratic oversight of some of the most powerful measures that the state has at its disposal to keep us safe, to intercept communications and to interfere with equipment.

The ISC is and should be the only Committee of Parliament that can appropriately hold a Prime Minister to account on investigatory powers. There must be accountability at the highest level, and the Prime Minister is no exception. However, many Members, not least members of the ISC, know that this important mechanism is not just broken but has stopped working altogether. Not since 2014 has a Prime Minister appeared before the Committee, but, when asked about successive Prime Ministers’ lack of appearance, the Minister said that such decisions were above his pay grade. That might well be true, at least for now, so if the Minister cannot commit himself to reinstating the convention of Prime Ministers’ appearing before the Committee, the new clause would, at the very minimum, ensure that this new convention of non-attendance is reviewed annually, and scrutinised by this House and the other place. I therefore give notice of our intention to push the new clause to a vote.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not above the Minister’s pay grade to be able to confirm that the conventions and arrangements

that give the ISC a particular constitutional place in the way our system works ought to operate, even if they have not done so for the last 10 years? Does he, like me, look forward to being able to hear the Minister—rather than dismissing this important concern about the dereliction of a constitutional duty—give us an assurance that this will be the case in the future?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend has made an important point, and one with which I suspect the overwhelming majority of Members would agree.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I was the Minister who took through the House the Bill that created the ISC. At the time, the intention was that it would evolve to become a very powerful Committee, but it did not absolve the entire House from some responsibility. Two elements are involved here. One has just been mentioned by the hon. Gentleman—the Prime Minister's appearance before the Committee—and the other is minimal redaction of the reports that the Committee creates. One of the problems we have encountered in recent years is excessive redaction of those reports. Has the hon. Gentleman any views on that?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman has made two important points, both of which I agree with, about redaction and about the attendance of the Prime Minister. I do not think it unreasonable to expect that once a year the Prime Minister should seek to meet what is a very important cross-party Committee of this House. I should be happy to give way to the Minister should he wish to add his own views on this matter, but given the basis of my sense of where the House is and given previous debates, I think most Members will agree that it is not unreasonable to ask the Prime Minister to turn up once a year.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman's point is made more potent by the fact that the matters the ISC considers are not typically—in fact, not at all—partisan. It operates on a non-partisan basis, although of course its members are drawn from both sides of the House, and the material that it studies is not seen through a party-political prism in any way; this Minister has engaged in sensible and meaningful discussion with members of the ISC in exactly that spirit during the passage of this legislation. Similarly, a meeting with the Prime Minister would be conducted in a way to which I think no Prime Minister could reasonably object.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman speaks about these matters with a great deal of authority, not just as a member of the Committee but as a former Security Minister, and I think he has described the situation very well. I hope the Prime Minister is listening; I hope the Prime Minister accepts what I consider to be the reasonable and constructive invitation that has just been extended to him by the right hon. Gentleman; and I hope the Prime Minister does take the opportunity in the near future to sit down with the ISC and discuss what are, after all, very important matters.

New clause 2 would ensure that an annual report was published on measures in the Bill, and in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, to defeat and disrupt technology-enabled serious organised crime and technology-enabled threats to our national security. We tabled the new clause

because we must ensure that the law is always one step ahead of those who seek to harm us. The police and the security services are not best able to protect us today with the laws to counter the threats of yesterday, which is why we support this Bill to update the 2016 Act, which is now eight years old, but there is an opportunity to go further. The annual report proposed in the new clause would help to ensure that any changes required to primary legislation relating to investigatory powers were identified and implemented as quickly as possible. That would strengthen our legislative framework on national security, and weaken the capability and resolve of criminals and our adversaries.

I think that this is a genuine opportunity for the Government to work better with, and to constructively challenge, telecommunications operators and the wider communications technology industry on the requirements to use investigatory powers—a process that would be separate from the new notices regime included in part 4. A statutory requirement to produce an annual report on investigatory powers to counter threats to our security and safety would strengthen national security, as well as strengthening the oversight and safeguarding of measures to keep us safe. Those are two principles that guide this Bill and the 2016 Act, and that is why we will seek to push the new clause to a vote later this evening.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I hope that this evening will end with a measure of agreement. On the subject of the tech companies, I understand from information I have received that Apple, techUK, the Information Technology Industry Council and the Computer & Communications Industry Association have expressed concerns. Is the shadow Minister aware of their concerns and what this means for their ability to administrate and do their work, and does he agree that what we have tonight is a consensus that protects not just them but ordinary members of society?

Dan Jarvis: I know that the hon. Member takes these matters incredibly seriously, and he has raised an important point. To be absolutely fair to the Minister and to his Department, I know that this is a matter that the Government have considered very carefully, and that there has been an extensive process of consultation with a range of tech companies—I have met a number of them myself—but I think it only fair to conclude that while of course there are important contributions to be made by tech companies to this debate, these are ultimately matters for the Government and the House to determine. Having said that, new clause 2 would provide a helpful and constructive mechanism for the Government, and we have tabled it in a genuine attempt to be helpful and to monitor very closely the significant challenges that our national security faces from serious and organised crime as a consequence of rapid developments in technology.

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the spirit in which he has addressed this issue, and he deserves a proper response. There is a valid concern that this is a process of engagement with tech companies, and there needs to be a partnership. I will be frank with him: I do not support new clause 2, for the very simple reason that the way in which this interaction takes place has evolved a lot, even in the two years that I have been in post. I suspect that during the

[Tom Tugendhat]

four or five years that this House will supervise the Bill, under the next Government and in the five years beyond that, the interaction will evolve again.

What concerns me is that we could write into law a system of oversight and regulation that does not properly address the way in which tech companies are involved in this area. Therefore, the best answer is to have a more iterative process, which I have no doubt the fantastic civil servants with whom I have the privilege to work will adapt. Whoever takes over from me in 20 or 30 years' time will no doubt want to iterate that as well.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Minister for clarification on the response to new clause 2. He understands that we have tabled it because we genuinely think that it is a mechanism that—let us be honest about it—would not be particularly onerous for the Government, and would be helpful in focusing minds across Government. I completely agree with the point he made about his civil servants, who have been excellent throughout the passage of the Bill. We just happen to differ on this issue, because the Opposition think that the new clause would provide a useful forum for the Government to consider the challenges. He is absolutely right about the rapid evolution of technology, and we think it would be no bad thing to condense Government thinking into a report that would be issued on an annual basis.

Sir David Davis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. May I address the iterative issue that the Minister and he both raised? It is not just the development of technology that is important here; it is also about the development of other countries' security systems. For example, the Germans are putting in place laws that require end-to-end encryption—the very thing that we were worried about—so we will have to manoeuvre over the course of the coming years to make sure that what we do fits not just with the technology companies, but with what our allies are doing.

Dan Jarvis: That is a very important point, and I completely agree. These are complex and difficult matters of public policy, and I completely understand that none of this is easy from the Minister's perspective. However, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind my saying so, his point strengthens the case for new clause 2, because we think it would provide a useful mechanism for the Government to track the development of these important matters, but also provide a mechanism for Members of this House to hold the Government to account on them. I am very grateful for the points he has made.

Before turning to amendment 24 on BPDs, which stands in my name, I would be very grateful if the Minister could say whether any progress has been made on arrangements to notify the Investigatory Powers Commissioner when adding new BPDs to existing category authorisations. It might not be in the Bill, but we think that even a reference to it in the IPC's annual inspection would be helpful progress on this matter. The Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham and I have discussed that, and I would be grateful if the Minister could say something about it.

I acknowledge the amendments on BPDs that were tabled by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). Both of

our parties have concerns about the definition of “low or no expectation of privacy” for BPDs, which we debated in a pretty constructive fashion on Second Reading and in Committee. However, Labour does not oppose the concept of “low or no expectation of privacy” for BPDs, which is why we will not support amendment 7, which was tabled by the SNP spokesman. Instead, amendment 24, which stands in my name, seeks further clarification on how “low or no expectation of privacy” will be applied to BPDs, with the aim that the parameters must be as clear as possible for the House to understand.

In Committee, the Minister used the Panama papers as an example of leaked and widely republished material being defined as a BPD with a low or no expectation of privacy. I understand why the Minister chose to use that example, but most other leaked documents containing personal information do not attract anywhere near the same level of media attention. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister took this opportunity to provide another example of information from a leak without widescale press coverage that would be suitable for the designation of a bulk personal data set with a low or no expectation of privacy.

Tom Tugendhat: As always, the hon. Gentleman is quite right to highlight the areas I touched on. The important thing about the Panama papers was that they changed. They would have enjoyed a high level of privacy, but with republication they became “low/no”. It would not be right to say that any leaked document enjoys “low/no”, but the law should reflect the reality of the data that is currently being held. When data goes from being secret to being effectively public, it would be absurd to hold the intelligence services to a different standard from that which would apply to any of us, who would be able to access it on a website.

Dan Jarvis: That is a very useful clarification, and I thank the Minister for it.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I accept what the Minister has just said, but where is the threshold for publicity? As he said, the Panama papers were widely distributed in the public domain, but somebody's Facebook feed might be put into the public domain. If it gets into the national newspapers and on the internet, or it is shared by a certain number of people, do we then determine that it is in the public domain? We need to be very careful about this.

Dan Jarvis: My right hon. Friend is undoubtedly right: we do need to be very careful. In the end, the Government have to take a view about where they draw the line. These are very difficult decisions that have to be made. We had really useful and constructive debates in Committee about where the line should be drawn, but the issue will no doubt continue to be debated in the future.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, I will briefly speak to other amendments on the Order Paper, including those tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham, other members of the ISC, and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis). We support amendment 23, which stands in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham. It is very similar to the amendments we proposed in Committee regarding the Prime Minister's delegation to a Secretary of State to issue a warrant to interfere with

equipment relating to a Member. The amendment sets out that the Prime Minister must be informed of a decision taken by a designated Secretary of State on their behalf as soon as the circumstances that prevented the Prime Minister from approving a warrant in the first place have passed.

We believe that the Prime Minister's overall involvement in those warrants must be retained, even if it is retrospective in designated cases, so it was a positive step that the Minister said he would look into including such a provision in the statutory guidance, in response to the very sensible points made by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings. However, we believe this does not go far enough, when this important notification arrangement should be on the face of the Bill.

This House should consider as many scenarios as possible when it comes to arrangements for prime ministerial power delegation on investigatory powers, even if scenarios of Cabinet members desperately trying to undermine the Prime Minister by any means possible perhaps belong more appropriately in "House of Cards" or "The Thick of It". *[Interruption.]* I am sure that Conservative Members would have no idea about those kinds of activities; I am happy to take their word for that. But these are important matters, and we must seek to legislate carefully. The amendments tabled by the ISC are thoughtful and constructive, and I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government will consider accepting them.

6.30 pm

I will move on briefly to new clause 3, which stands in the name of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden. I first want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to his long-standing work on these incredibly important matters. Some Members will know that I have occasionally worked with him on challenging the UK Government on the use of intelligence in foreign countries that has resulted in torture. Britain's role in the world to lead by example is defined by our actions, and we therefore think that new clause 3 raises important issues of accountability when sharing intelligence with foreign Governments that could result in torture, not least in relation to the parameters of the decision-making process by Foreign Secretaries.

New clause 3 also raises important questions about the sufficiency of the Fulford principles to ensure that there is not merely a presumption that these decisions are taken in accordance with the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights. The Government will always need to carefully consider the nuances and the risk of inaction when there is a clear and credible threat to life. We hope that they will reflect carefully on the important principles put forward in new clause 3, and I hope that the Minister will consider coming back to the House with their conclusions.

To conclude, this important Bill has demanded strong and careful scrutiny through its journey in the other place and in this House. Our personal liberties and our national security depend on it. It is in the national interest to get it right and to ensure that legislation like this is both appropriate and proportionate in its scope. It must also be effective in maintaining the powers that our police and security services already have to disrupt and defeat criminals and malign actors who seek to harm us and undermine our way of life. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the points made by

Opposition Members and to the other right hon. and hon. Members speaking after me, all of whom will be working in the national interest and wanting to ensure that the Bill protects both our safety and our liberty.

Sir David Davis: I start from the perspective that we are highly likely to regret some elements of this Bill within the next 10 years, and I will come back to that in a moment. I will also start by commending the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for his approach. It has not always been like this. The real precursor of this Bill was the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014, all stages of which was taken in one day because the Government of the day claimed it as an emergency, even though they had spent three months thinking about it and even though they took nine months to implement it afterwards, such was the emergency. As a result, I challenged it in the High Court, and it was struck down. The Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which this Bill amends, was in effect the replacement for that. It was not a terrific improvement, but it was an improvement. As I say, the Minister's approach to this Bill has been much more democratic, much more open and much more valuable.

Sir John Hayes: I said that we are not going to be partisan in this debate, and the shadow Minister started in that vein, but my right hon. Friend has been highly contentious about the Bill that I took through the House. Bear in mind that it had pre-legislative scrutiny with a Committee of both Houses, it had at least three reports in advance of being considered by this House, and it was debated in this House at length, in the same spirit that I mentioned earlier, and many amendments were tabled, many of which were accepted by the Government. I have described the pretty full consideration and scrutiny that it received, which is why it is such an essential piece of legislation, as the Minister will confirm, and is used by the security services and the police every day.

Sir David Davis: I will not go over it again, but the High Court and the Court of Appeal came to a different view from that of my right hon. Friend, I am afraid, and that is why the legislation was struck down.

Some of the elements of this Bill are not very wise. The Opposition have agreed that the pre-notification of tech companies will act to drive business away from our shores. That is, as I said earlier, the opposite of what the German Government are doing, and we are going to have to modify our approach to deal with some of our allies along the way.

I also have serious concerns about the bulk collection of data, which the Scottish National party has tabled an amendment on. I think it was Stalin who once said that, at a certain point, quantity has a quality all of its own. That is certainly true of information technology and bulk data. It was interesting to listen to the earlier brief debate on so-called "no expectation" and "low expectation of privacy", by the way. Those are completely different things. They sound similar but they are completely different, as will become clear, I suspect, when the SNP spokesperson speaks to that amendment. Even today, "low expectation of privacy" data can tell a Government with quite primitive software vast amounts about our lives and about what we are doing every minute of every day,

[*Sir David Davis*]

but with artificial intelligence that is going to be multiplied many times and become much more powerful than before.

To give colleagues a feel for how this might work, let us look back to the covid period, which in some senses was almost Orwellian. The Government had three different disinformation units of various sorts that looked at everybody's comments. If someone commented on flaws in the modelling of the virus, questioned where the virus came from or quite properly stated that the vaccine did not stop transmission—it stopped deaths, but it did not stop transmission—this would lead to all their low or zero expectation of privacy documentation and all their online stuff being monitored by the Government. A number of Members of this House were monitored on that basis—in my view, entirely wrongly. That was all within the law as it stood then, so it was not massively important, but it nevertheless demonstrates the mindset of Whitehall when dealing with these things.

Today, however, nine out of 10 of us—if not more—carry a smartphone. That makes it easy to access our shopping habits, our purchase history, our bank records, our automatic number plate recognition records, and on and on and on. Do we really want the agencies of Government to be able to peer into all that data? It belongs to people who are, remember, entirely innocent of any crime. Our entire approach to law and order in this country has been to focus on people against whom there is a reasonable expectation or a reasonable suspicion, not to monitor everybody. It seems to me that this intrusive surveillance is a dangerous route to take and, as I say, I think we might regret it within 10 years, because the power of artificial intelligence will make this bulk data much more informative than we are conscious of today. I worry about it. I did not put an amendment down on it because others have done so, but it is something that we must concern ourselves with in the longer run.

One of my two principal concerns today is how the Bill relates to the expansion of powers around the surveillance of Members of this House. Until 2015, it was widely understood that the Wilson doctrine protected MPs' communications from interception. This protection was repeated in unequivocal terms by successive Prime Ministers—even Tony Blair, who is not someone with a great reputation for worrying about Members' civil liberties. Despite clear and unambiguous statements that MPs and peers would not be placed under surveillance, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal held in 2015 that the doctrine had been unilaterally rescinded by the Government.

In an attempt to ease concerns, the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 created a regime—the one we have now—whereby a Secretary of State must first secure the approval of the Prime Minister and a judicial commissioner before authorising the interception of an MP's communications. Frankly, I have served under nine Prime Ministers as a Member of Parliament, and I cannot say I am happy that all of them would have taken a very responsible approach to exercising this power. This is an almost judicial power that is given to a person whom it is our job to challenge and hold to account every day.

The Bill seeks to expand the list of people who can sign off on the surveillance of MPs way beyond that, from the Prime Minister to effectively five Secretaries of State.

There was a long argument in the Lords and in Committee about introducing words such as “unable” or “unavailable.” I think they had in mind that Boris Johnson was sick and laid up for a month or so and perhaps could not act in that capacity. Even by that logic, we do not need five Secretaries of State to be able to deputise, unless we are imagining a mass-casualty event in the Cabinet. Frankly, this seems far more like a precursor to a general loosening of the policy than a serious and sensible protection of the ability to sign this off. I worry about that, and I do not like it at all.

I do not like the idea of the surveillance of MPs except under incredibly strict circumstances. I am not casually asking for MPs to be somehow above the law, not at all. This protection is vital to safeguarding what we do. We are here to hold the Government to account, not the other way round. The relationship between constituents and their elected representatives is sacrosanct. It is the bedrock upon which our representative democracy stands, and constituents expect that, as they should. But it is not just constituents who rely on the sanctity of their communications with Members.

It is truer and more obvious today than at almost any time in my 30-odd years in this House that, in doing our job, we deal with campaigners—think of the sub-postmasters—journalists, whistleblowers, victims of injustice who may be terrified of being identified and, of course, other Members of Parliament, and that is just a few. They all trust us to keep what they tell us absolutely rock solid, private and confidential.

This Bill will do nothing but further undermine people's trust in bringing serious matters to our attention. The Horizon scandal, Mid Staffs, sweetheart tax deals with large companies, the mistreatment of prisoners by the British Army, involvement in rendition and torture, and dishonest briefings for immoral wars—every single one of them was brought to our attention by a whistleblower who, in many cases, faced criminal prosecution if they were discovered. Are people likely to continue blowing the whistle with a loosening of the Wilson doctrine? I do not think so.

If I had my way, I would amend the Investigatory Powers Act to prevent communications to and from Members of Parliament from being intercepted at all. At the very least, I would change this proposal to require that the Prime Minister secures the approval of a Supreme Court judge before signing off on any warrant permitting the interception of a Member's communications. That would take the process completely outside the normal approach under which the Investigatory Powers Tribunal and all the machinery around it routinely says yes to requests, day in and day out. Calling for, allowing or permitting the interception of the communications of a Member of this House or the other place ought to be something clearly extraordinary in the life of a Prime Minister. A Supreme Court judge is far more likely also to have the authority required to face down poorly justified demands, which has not always happened in the past. The Executive should not wield the power to order the surveillance of Members of this House at their sole discretion. The very senior judiciary should provide a vital check on that power.

6.45 pm

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) highlighted another concern, which is torture. Successive British Governments—this is evidenced, so it is not an

assertion—have acquiesced in the abuse of political detainees by foreign regimes. This must stop. It has been asserted that Jagtar Singh Johal was recently detained and tortured by Indian authorities as a result of British intelligence, which, if true, is harrowing, but the story is depressingly similar to stories that we know are true. During the so-called war on terror, countless prisoners were tortured by foreign Governments after the British Government provided them with information. The 2018 ISC report on detainee mistreatment and rendition found:

“The Agencies also suggested, planned or agreed to rendition operations proposed by others in 28 cases. We have seen a further 22 cases where SIS or M15 provided intelligence to enable a rendition operation to take place; and 23 cases where they failed to take action to prevent a rendition”.

I suspect this includes the Binyam Mohamed case, the Rangzieb Ahmed case and the Abdel Hakim Belhaj case, for which the Prime Minister had to apologise. We should be ashamed of all these things. I am afraid that, each year, we are seeing more cases in which the UK seeks to share intelligence despite a real risk of torture.

There is no doubt that our intelligence agencies do a difficult and sometimes dangerous job, but getting mixed up in torture does nothing to keep us safe. It undermines the civilised values that we stand for, and we are in a battle of values in the so-called war on terror. It is incredibly important that we maintain the high values that we expect.

My new clause 3 would prevent the repeat of such travesties, as no public authority would be able to hand over information to an overseas authority where, as a result, there is a possibility of

“torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”.

The Conservative party has a proud legacy of standing up against torture, going back to Margaret Thatcher. Under her, we passed the Criminal Justice Act 1988, which made torture, anywhere in the world, an offence under the law.

The Minister has a difficult job; there are no two ways about it. The task faced by the Home Office, and indeed the agencies, in dealing with the threats to this country is incredibly difficult but, from time to time, we have historically slipped from the standards we view as essential to our national character—a proper understanding and belief in the rule of law, and abiding by that rule of law almost irrespective of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The first test—the first criterion—when considering a Bill such as this should be, “Do we always obey the rule of law? Does the Bill encourage Governments always to obey the rule of law, whether they are dealing with suspects abroad or with subjects at home?”

Mr Kevan Jones: First, let me put on record the apologies of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who chairs the Intelligence and Security Committee. Unfortunately, he is attending Lord Cormack’s funeral, and I thought it was important to put the reason why he is not here on the record.

First, let me refer to new clause 1, which stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and say that it is disappointing that we have to have this debate. I am the longest serving member of the ISC, having been on it for nearly eight years. It is a serious Committee; its members take its work seriously and work collegiately. We work on the basis that we support the work of our security services,

recognising the difficult job they sometimes have and the dangerous work they do, but that we are also there to provide scrutiny and oversight. If anyone cares to look at our reports over the years, they will see that they are not only thorough, but forensic in their approach. So it is disappointing that the current Government and the previous few have downplayed the Committee’s role.

On Second Reading, I referred to the scrutiny of our intelligence services being a bit like a three-legged stool, as we have the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the tribunal and the ISC. Together, we should be an effective mechanism to reassure the public that there is oversight of our security services. This is important because the work they do cannot be discussed in open session, and that mechanism gives the confidence that in a parliamentary democracy, where we take freedom of speech and democracy seriously, we have that oversight. The problem with the Government is that, for whatever reason, they have set out their course to undermine our work—I put that on the record.

The new clause will say that the Prime Minister should attend our meetings. It should not be necessary to include such a provision—I believe you served on the ISC at one stage, Madam Deputy Speaker, and so you understand the work we do—but we have a situation where it seems this is seen as not important. The only one in recent times who offered a meeting was the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), but that was because she was looking for friends in the last dying days of her Administration, so I do not think it counts. Again, I do not understand the reason behind this. The walls on the way into our office have various photographs of the Committee—you are on one of them, Madam Deputy Speaker—with various Prime Ministers of the day. But this is not about that; it is about the Prime Minister of the day knowing exactly what we are doing and our being able to raise things directly in our secure setting, which we do. That is important, but there is also a wider point to be made about how we scrutinise our security services and give the public that opportunity.

The amendments I have tabled also stand in the names of five other members of the Committee, and we support this Bill. Will we be back in a few years’ time with another Bill? Yes, we will, because, as was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central, technology is changing very fast and we will have to react to it. When the original Bill was taken through by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), he recognised that it would not be set in tablets of stone and that this new Bill would be required. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) is right to say that AI will set some other tests that we have not perhaps thought about yet and those might have to be covered by future legislation. Are we reactive as a Parliament? We always are reactive, but this Bill is important because it will give our security services the abilities to react to the ever-changing world that we face.

I wish to refer to two pairs of amendments that relate to clauses 22 and 23, which go to the issue associated with the triple lock and the authorisations—

Sir David Davis: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves on, I wish to pick up on his point about the need for continually keeping up with the changing technology.

[*Sir David Davis*]

One thing that was expected when the ISC was created was that it would become, if not quite a grandees Committee, a Committee of people who knew exactly what they were doing and took very seriously the issues before them, including the confidentiality of what they do. At least one of the Chairmen of the ISC has complained in the past about the level of redaction of ISC reports. That matters in the context of keeping up with the times because the only way the House of Commons has of understanding the ISC's opinions is by reading its reports, and if Members are reading a lot of blank or black lines, they will not learn very much.

Mr Jones: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's frustration, but, as Madam Deputy Speaker knows, there are good reasons for those redactions. The Committee does not just agree to everything being redacted; a thorough process takes place and we have some long arguments with the agencies. I would not want anyone to go away thinking that the members of the ISC are a pushover on redacting information. A lot of attention was given to why certain things were redacted from the Russia report. I am comfortable in the knowledge that the things redacted in that report could not have been put in the public domain. The main reason for this is not to save embarrassment for government or any of the individuals; it is about the ability to protect the tradecraft of our services. If we did put certain things in the public domain, our adversaries who want to do us harm would be able to work certain things out. I assure the House that we push back hard and some redactions that have been put forward over the years have been silly, as other ISC members in the Chamber tonight will recognise.

Let me get back to the issue about the triple lock, which is important. The issue is sensitive because it relates to intrusion into the communications of Members of this House and of devolved Administrations. We are talking about what is commonly known as the Wilson doctrine, but, it is like a lot of things in this age; it was announced in 1966, when it was about telecommunications and picking phones up, but we are in a different world now, as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden said. We now have smartphones, and God knows what is going to be invented in the next few years in terms of how we communicate. As with a lot of things, the convention was thought to be the way forward, but clearly in 2015 it was found that the devolved Administrations were not covered by it and neither were MEPs. The Investigatory Powers Tribunal found that it had no legal enforcement at all, so it was credit to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 that a formal process was put in place for it—that is important.

Currently, the 2016 Act has three layers of safeguards: the Secretary of State who asks for the warrant; a judicial commissioner who examines the communication that is the target of interception and the type of equipment involved, if it relates to a member of a relevant legislature; and, thirdly, the Prime Minister, who, as the final stop, has to agree this.

The Bill will allow the Prime Minister to designate “up to five” Secretaries of State who can approve the warrants in the event that he or she is unable to be available. As has been raised, the obvious example was when

Boris Johnson was incapacitated through covid. When we think about the issue, this measure makes sense. The ISC recognised other unique situations when a Prime Minister may not be available, for example if they were abroad and secure communications were not possible. The ISC was keen that the circumstances needed to be exceptional, but we accept that there is a need for the requirement.

7 pm

The ISC seeks to ensure that the measures do not undermine any safeguards. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden outlined, those safeguards are important. It is not being pompous or saying that we want to be outside the law, but the ISC receives information and discusses sensitive issues that can have an impact on people, especially those who may have been done a disservice by the state or by others. The original Bill was quite loose and any Secretary of State could have approved the warrants, so it was important that Admiral Lord West's ISC amendment was accepted. I was in the House of Lords on the night it was accepted, and he had to get the smelling salts because it was the first time he had ever had an amendment accepted.

The circumstances in which the Secretary of State may approve a warrant on behalf of the Prime Minister—if the Prime Minister is incapacitated or does not have access to secure communications—are now in the Bill. Importantly, there is also a limit on the number of Secretaries of State who may be appointed for the purpose. Only five Secretaries of State may be designated, and only those who have a responsibility for authorising equipment interference or target interceptions. However, amendments 20 and 22 have been proposed because the Bill as drafted says that a Secretary of State who has “the necessary operational awareness” can be designated to make such decisions on behalf of the Prime Minister. What is “operational awareness”? Does it relate to somebody who has had a briefing? Do they know what they are doing? I am sure a lot of Secretaries of State, as well as junior Ministers, know about and are aware of the warrants.

It was disappointing that it took some time to get the draft code of practice. For the benefit of civil servants, let me put on the record that it is important that any codes of practice attached to a Bill are laid before Parliament with the Bill. We cannot have a situation where Bills are discussed and we are then told later that certain measures will be in the code of practice and thought of later. I am sorry, but the Bill and any codes of practice need to be laid together, so that this House and the other place have an opportunity to look at the codes of practice in detail.

The ISC finally received the draft code of practice last Tuesday, following the meeting I had on Monday with the Minister for Security. That code of practice defines those who had “the necessary operational awareness” as people who had received briefings on operational matters and of warrant process and legal requirements. We in the ISC think that definition is entirely inadequate, because it does not prevent completely unrelated and inappropriate Secretaries of State from fulfilling such a serious role.

Amendments 20 and 22 in my name and fellow members of the ISC ensure that only those Secretaries of State with the necessary operational experience, such

as those required to issue warrants as part of their routine duties under the relevant sections of the Act are permitted to be designated by the Prime Minister under the triple lock. That is important, because it ensures that they are people who not only understand the system but have experience of it. That would provide the flexibility the Government require and ensure that this important power is given to Secretaries of State who have experience of warranting.

I and the ISC have danced around the head of a pin on this issue with the Minister and civil servants, and hon. Members may ask why it is so important. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden has said, the situation in which this provision is used is unique. I cannot speak about any examples in open session, but credit to the agencies that have told us how the measure is used. As a member of the ISC, am I reassured that it is being used appropriately in the cases we saw? I am. However, not to downgrade that fact, the amendments provide reassurance to Members of this House, Members of devolved Parliaments and Assemblies, and others that the measure is being used proportionately and in the correct way.

Amendments 21 and 23 get to one of those points that irritates me. It is like a war of attrition with this Government—they cannot be seen to back down on anything or allow anyone else any victory, no matter how small. The code of practice says that once the designated Secretary of State has authorised something, the Prime Minister “should” be informed of any decision made under the alternative approval process as soon as reasonably practicable. It does not say “will” be.

Tom Tugendhat: I very much hope the right hon. Gentleman has brought Lord West’s smelling salts with him, because I would like to clarify the concession that Lord West got in the Lords here in the Commons. I can happily commit to strengthening the language on notification requirements in the code of practice, when it is formally brought forward in due course, to require that the Prime Minister “will” be notified of any decisions under the alternative process, rather than “should” be.

Mr Jones: I welcome that, but can I hear it again and pin the Minister down a little more? I am sure it is a massive victory, but is he giving a solemn pledge to the House that the code of practice will remove the word “should” and insert the word “will”? Is that what he is agreeing to?

Tom Tugendhat: Yes.

Mr Jones: Victory at last—there is such power in changing one word. The Minister has given a solemn undertaking on the Floor of the House that the code of practice will change the word “should” to “will”. A small victory for the ISC, but I am sure my colleagues will take it in the spirit in which it is offered. I say to the Minister gently that we could have agreed that the other day when we met, but no doubt the issue that we will be voting on tonight was concentrating his mind.

With that great victory under my belt and those of the members of the ISC, I turn to other amendments. New clause 3, in the name of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, deals with “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment”.

I understand why he has proposed the new clause. It is always worthwhile debating the issues, which run through the entire Bill. Am I assured that there are processes in place that protect our civil liberties? Yes, I am. However, there are occasions when things can go wrong or people ignore them. I think they have been strengthened greatly, but the right hon. Gentleman refers to an important point. I was on the Committee in 2017 when we did the inquiry into detention and rendition. That took a long time, but it was a good report given where it got to. It unearthed things that were not pleasant but had been done in our names as a democracy.

One conclusion the Committee came to was that in its view the UK tolerated actions and took others that were regarded as inexcusable. Well, they were inexcusable, because as the report outlined, we passed on information to allies who then used it. I think things have changed, and to give Members an example of how the ISC can improve things, we called for a review of the consolidated guidance surrounding the way that security operatives should operate regarding issues of rendition or torture. That led to the Fulford principles, which I think have moved on and tightened up the rules and guidance for members of our security services. That was a big movement forward.

I do not think the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden will push the new clause to a vote, but it reinforces the point that if we have a situation whereby, again, we get information that is passed to one of our allies, we must ensure that those principles are upheld. Am I confident that they are upheld now? I think I am, but how did we get to that pretty damning report in 2017? We got there because those principles and the guidance in place were not followed. We must be vigilant about that, and over the years the right hon. Gentleman has done not only this House but the country a service through his tenacity on these subjects.

Sir David Davis: I will not press new clause 3 to a vote, but I tabled it because in 2010-11 David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, made a promise that there would be a review and that the issue would be investigated properly, but that never happened. The implicit undertaking was that we would not do it again, and we did it again—over and over again. That is why at some point we needed to put our foot down. The problem is that whenever we put our foot down and make an absolute requirement, somebody says, for example “What about the Russians, with the terrorist attack in the last few days?” I am afraid there comes a point where we say, “We are not going to provide information if you torture people.” If we are clear about that, it helps the country and probably also helps the international battle with terrorism.

Mr Jones: I agree totally with the right hon. Gentleman, and I think that is where we are as a Government. Certainly those are the Fulford principles—that we do not share information. Again, some of the people who perhaps do not understand what our security services do, and those who want to malign their great work on our behalf sometimes say, “They are doing x, y and z.” Well as I know from seeing some examples, there are occasions where we deliberately do not pass on information to our allies because of the fear that the right hon. Gentleman set out. The detention and rendition report raised that issue, and the Fulford principles now give us

[Mr Kevan Jones]

strong guidance. Those principles have been put into being and sewn into the DNA of all new officers. As a result of a huge training programme, not just for existing officers but for new entrants into the service, officers now see that as an important part of their work. That is how it must be done, but it is always important to have this debate.

7.15 pm

New clause 5 would

“require members of a relevant legislature who are targets of interception to be notified after the fact, as long as it does not compromise any ongoing investigation.”

I understand where the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is coming from but—I must be careful what I say—I do not agree, because this is not about the security services wanting to see what someone has ordered on Amazon Prime or put in their Tesco basket this weekend. There are occasions when Members of Parliament will be brought into investigations not because they have done anything wrong, but because they have been targeted. For example, we had a statement today about MPs being targets. Should they know about it? In the right circumstances, yes, so that they can take reactive measures against it.

There may be situations regarding Members of Parliament and warranting powers in which they are not the main target, but they may be a target themselves, so such a measure would be difficult. Again, I will not say too much, but I think this provision is used more often than we think for those reasons. It is not because Members of Parliament, or Members of the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh or Northern Ireland Assemblies are doing things wrong, but because increasingly those who want to harm us are targeting our communications.

Sir David Davis: Again I do not intend to press the matter, but if the ISC discusses this issue in the future, I point the right hon. Gentleman to the German model. They look at something and do not always release information if it is operationally sensitive.

Mr Jones: I agree, but that then places an unnecessary burden on the system. The current process with the Secretary of State, the judicial commissioner and the Prime Minister is robust enough to ensure that people are not doing this to find out what someone ordered on Amazon Prime this weekend or to look at their Tesco account, so I think those assurances are fine.

New clause 4 would

“remove the ability of the Secretary of State to authorise the interception of the communications of, or the obtaining of communications intended for, or private information belonging to, Members of Parliament.”

Again, it is good to have this debate, but I would support such a measure for the reasons I have outlined.

The other change in the Bill concerns bulk data. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings covered the original investigatory powers in detail, but there are now big data sets held not only by public authorities but by others, and that has made it more important that our security services are able to access them. Whenever we do this, however, it means more intrusion, so let me deal with the issue of oversight in

the Bill, and with the broader, more intrusive powers to obtain internet connection records for the discovery of targets.

Again, that is something that I and other ISC members totally support, but the authorisation process is internal. One stance that the ISC has taken throughout all this is that if we are to give more powers to our security services, there must be a balance. There will not be a situation whereby what people have seen can be identified, but this power will drag in a lot of people who, as the right hon. Gentleman said earlier, are completely innocent. As I said, there is a need for such a power, but we thought there should be more oversight from the Investigatory Powers Commissioner. Therefore, the points I made about amendment 15 are important.

The Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office does a great job of ensuring public support for what we do, but, again, there is an issue around bulk datasets. Some of the examples that were given to ISC members—thanks must go to the Minister, who arranged a meeting for the Committee to be briefed on this—make sense when it comes to the issue of low or no reasonable expectation of privacy. It is burdensome, for example, to access the electoral register, but today the Government have said that somehow that is a secret document. Well, that is not the case under this Bill, in which case it is important that the security services should be able to use it, rather than having to go through the warrant process. That goes to the point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central raised earlier on, about the definition of “low expectation”.

Another perfectly legitimate reason that the security services need these measures is related to testing new AI models of learning. They need access to these new big datasets, which are out there and which companies use, and the Bill will allow them to have it without going through the warrant system. If intelligence is going to be on the front foot when it comes to AI, we will have to have these big datasets that will teach the systems how to do it.

The problem comes back my hon. Friend’s question of what is deemed a low or no reasonable expectation of privacy. That is something we have considered throughout this process. One thing the ISC has considered is adding to the existing categories. One suggestion we put forward was that, when the agencies do this, they should have to email the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to notify them that they have done it.

Tom Tugendhat *rose*—

Mr Jones: I hope the Minister is not going to intervene again. My legs might get wobbly if I have to sit down again. I might even need some smelling salts. He has explained the internal system, which I am quite satisfied with, but as I said to him and his civil servants—I think other members of the ISC have also said this—it is not us that he has to convince, but the public.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. I just want to assure him that I have taken on board his points. I went back to the agencies and assured myself of the challenge that he had raised and found what I think is a better answer than the one we looked at when we were chatting. I wrote to Sir Brian Leveson and I am delighted to say that he responded, confirming that he will pay specific oversight to this

regime in the early years until he is content that it operates in the way that the ISC, the Government and the British public would expect. IPCO has taken on this responsibility, which, I think, answers the question more succinctly than it would be if it were included in the Bill.

Mr Jones: Well, I shall take that as half a victory.

Tom Tugendhat: Take them where you can get them!

Mr Jones: May I just get some clarity? That is a perfectly legitimate way of doing it, and it will mean not interfering with the existing system, which was the concern of both the services and the Minister. I understand that this not as simple as an email being sent. Will that mean that there will be a section looking at this issue in the first annual report? If that is the case, we could at least say to the public that it is actually being considered and the promise is being followed up.

Tom Tugendhat: The right hon. Member will understand that IPCO is operationally independent, so I will not instruct the office or speak for Sir Brian, who has been unbelievably rapid and helpful in his response today. I am sure that he will have heard the comments that the right hon. Member made and, no doubt, will want to draw attention to any areas where he has any doubts at all.

Mr Jones: That would be helpful. That would give reassurance to the public and provide a test of how the system works. As I have said, I am comfortable with the process of authorisation, but the public must be comfortable with it as well.

Sir John Hayes: I note the right hon. Gentleman's proper consideration of the balance between privacy and security, which lies at the heart of the Bill, but I also recognise the Minister's concern that we must not make the process too unwieldy and bureaucratic. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman might invite the Minister to commit to a regular report going to IPCO as authorisations are made. That might be monthly, but it would at least mean that there was some iterative process of a kind that might reassure the right hon. Gentleman, me and others about that balance.

Mr Jones: I understand where the right hon. Gentleman is coming from. Our original idea about having an email was explained when I met the Minister and his civil servants. I think that that would really cut across some of the processes that we have in place. The suggestion that has been made would be one way of doing it, but IPCO already has the powers to look at such things. The only problem with doing that is that we would then have to set up someone in the agencies to produce another report. I do not want to do anything that holds up their work, and I think that that might do it.

Possibly the Minister's suggestion of how Sir Brian Leveson is going to do it will give the public some reassurance. Let us not forget that Sir Brian has the power to take action if things are not being done correctly. If we read his reports, we can see that he is not fearful of doing these things. A fair compromise has been put forward. I think we have one and a half victories so far—

Tom Tugendhat: I think it's two.

Mr Jones: No, I would not quite say it is two. Hopefully, I might get another one on my other amendment, and then we can all go home happy.

Sir John Hayes: Is this an example of my being more hardline than the right hon. Gentleman? It seems like it to me, but perhaps not.

Mr Jones: I would not have thought that the right hon. Gentleman could be seen as hardline on anything, pussycat that he normally is. He portrays himself as hardline, but I know from working with him very closely on the ISC that he cares about this information. He has referred to the Investigatory Powers Act as his baby. It has grown up a little bit and is now being brought into the modern age. I should put on the record again his dedication and work as a Minister to bring in the original Act, which was groundbreaking for this country. It has stood the test of time. We know that we will be back here, so the measures will change. I have no problem with that. It is just that, as technology changes, things will change.

May I finish by thanking the members of our security services for the work that they do? I also thank them for the way that they have engaged with the ISC on the Bill. Hopefully, with the changes that have been brought forward, we can reach agreement on the Bill and our security services will have the ability to face up to the challenge that is coming forward: the ever growing use of larger datasets, and the more sophisticated way in which state actors and non-state actors have access to technology. That will enable the security services to do what we all want to do, which is to keep individual citizens and, just as importantly, our democracy safe.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who is a fellow member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. As he mentioned, we work collegiately, and one of the many advantages of that collegiate approach is that I do not need to repeat everything that he has just said; I need only say that I agree with him. I realise that that is a radical approach in this place, but I will not say it all again. I will simply say that I agree with him; he is absolutely right. His point is that, when it comes to the consideration of warrants to authorise the interception of, or interference with, the communications of Members of Parliament, there is huge significance to such a decision. That is the reason the Prime Minister has had to be involved in it, and it is the reason we should not widen too far the pool of deputies who, for sensible and understandable reasons, as the right hon. Member explained, we now need to provide for.

That is why I hope that the next concession that the Minister will make will relate to the pool of deputies, and that in the language the ISC suggests that he adopts we ensure that it is a controlled group, based on either current responsibilities or previous experience. I am sure that we can discuss with him any changes to the wording that he thinks are necessary, but as the right hon. Member for North Durham explained, the current provisions allow for only one restriction: that the member of the Cabinet in question should receive a briefing on how to conduct their warrantry responsibilities. We do not think that that is restrictive enough, given the significance of this decision-making process. I am grateful to the

[*Sir Jeremy Wright*]

Minister for what he has already said about notification of the Prime Minister in the process. That is a sensible change, which I welcome.

7.30 pm

I will say a few words about part 4 of the Bill, which has not yet been mentioned. I know that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who speaks for the Scottish National party, will want to say something about that part of the Bill, which deals specifically with product notification notices and product suspension pending the review of those notices in clauses 21 and 18. There is a balance to be struck here. We of course need to avoid product changes that undermine security protections. It would therefore be wrong to remove the provisions altogether, as I know the hon. Gentleman will shortly advocate, but I invite the Minister to think very carefully about those clauses. They have had relatively little discussion in the consideration of the Bill, but there is some danger that we overstep the mark in these parts of the Bill.

I invite the Minister to consider that if the powers contained in part 4 are to be used, they are very significant restrictions on commercial freedoms. If we are going to use them, it seems to me we should require three things. First, there should be a materiality threshold in the use of those powers, so that any change would not be sufficient to cause these significant infringements on commercial freedom. It should be a material change only. Secondly, there should be no indefinite hold on product development because, as I say, that is a significant infringement on commercial freedom. Thirdly, there should be a way to appeal a decision to prevent the development or roll-out of a new product.

It seems to me that, were we to have those restrictions, that would not inhibit the Government's perfectly reasonable ability to stop people developing products that stop us applying the security controls that we all want to see to keep us safe, and would strike the balance better between the powers that the Government must have and the ability that we need commercial manufacturers and developers to have to develop new products that benefit consumers. I hope that the Minister will consider that point when he comes to think about the development of the legislation, but in view of what the right hon. Member for North Durham said, that is all I need to say.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), and to take part in what has already been a very thoughtful debate. We also had a very constructive Committee stage, so the amendments in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) are designed first to pose some further questions to the Minister, particularly in relation to the offence of unlawfully obtaining communications data, which we discussed in Committee. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, we again seek to remedy some of the serious concerns that we continue to have about the Bill extending powers beyond what we regard as necessary and proportionate, and the absence of sufficient judicial oversight where such judicial oversight is really required.

First, and briefly, our amendment 13 builds on the discussion in Committee about the offence created by the 2016 Act that will be amended by clause 12. We argued in Committee that the so-called example of "lawful authority" for obtaining communications data in proposed new subsection (3A)(e) of the 2016 Act was an extension of the power rather than a restatement of it. The Minister countered that he was actually seeking only to put existing codes of practice into statute. There is obviously a line of argument that codes of practice do not always necessarily comply with the law, but having gone away to look at the codes of practice it seems that there is a difference between what is currently in the codes of practice and what is currently in the Bill. The wording of amendment 13 reflects the code; the wording of proposed new paragraph (e) seems potentially broader than that. The question for the Minister is why the wording is so different, and whether he can assure us that it is not meant to be interpreted any more broadly than the existing exception in the codes of practice.

The remaining amendments set out our more fundamental concerns with the Bill. In particular, there are three areas where we question the strength of the oversight regime: in relation to bulk personal datasets, internet connection records, and Government notices to companies under clause 21. We regard advanced judicial oversight as important and reassuring not just for members of the public but for those who are exercising the powers. Clause 2 on bulk personal datasets is the first example of where we believe that oversight is being unnecessarily watered down. We are told that the system of advanced judicial authorisation is causing delays and stifling operational flexibility, but to us the answer is to fix those logjams in the oversight system, not to water that system of oversight down. The case for a lighter-touch system of category authorisations has not been made to our satisfaction. That is why we tabled amendment 7, which would take out clause 2.

At the very minimum, why not strengthen the ex post facto oversight beyond annual reviews and reports? Amendment 11 highlights one way to do that, so that the judicial commissioners are reviewing whether what is being done under category authorisations is lawful, cancelling authorisations where that is not found to be the case, and ensuring therefore that we have a clear picture of how the new powers are being used. I noted with interest what the Minister said about the role of IPCO, which we absolutely regard as helpful. However, it would be insufficient, and certainly less robust than our proposal in amendment 11.

Sir Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman set out, amendment 11 would strengthen the hand of the judicial commissioner, and I have some sympathy with that. My concern is that his proposed new subsection (4) says:

"The Judicial Commissioner, on reviewing any notifications received under subsection (2), must cancel the category authorisation if the Commissioner considers that section 226A no longer applies to any dataset that falls within the category of datasets".

I wonder why he thinks that the wrongful inclusion of one individual dataset in the category would invalidate the category as a whole, because that seems to me to be the effect of what that part of his amendment would do.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for that intervention. He possibly makes a fair point. If I recall correctly, the wording of

that proposed new subsection was borrowed from another part of the Bill. I might be wrong about that; I need to go away and have a look. I suppose the argument would simply be that if a category authorisation is to any extent being abused, it is right that the category authorisation is cancelled, and if somebody wants to come back with something similar, they can do so. However, I am not without sympathy to his point. I take it in the spirit in which it was intended, and will reflect upon it.

Let me move on from the question of oversight in relation to bulk personal datasets to the issue of “no” or “low” expectations of privacy in relation to such datasets, and how that test will operate in practice. Throughout the passage of the Bill, we have been repeatedly given some very easy examples of so-called “low/no” bulk personal datasets. For example, we have spoken about phone books, academic papers, public and official records, and other data that many people would have access to routinely. It was helpful that, in relation to what is now our amendment 9, the Minister said in Committee that Facebook posts and CCTV pictures would be considered sensitive and would not be caught by these provisions. It is very helpful to have that on the record.

None the less, it would to be useful to have greater precision in the Bill. Amendment 8 would take out reference to “low” expectations of privacy altogether, so that only “no” expectations would be covered by the new provisions. To us, “low” is such a difficult question to adjudicate—low expectations in particular. That is especially the case when we are dealing with datasets of potentially huge numbers of very different people with very different reasons for having very different expectations of privacy, particularly in how that would relate to different organisations. We cannot think of a single dataset example provided during the passage of the Bill that would not be adequately covered by “no reasonable expectation of privacy”. If that is the case, if that is really all the Bill will be used for, why not just accept the amendment? It would be useful to have an understanding of what “low” expectation of privacy is designed to cover.

Amendment 15 brings us to internet connection records. In 2016, the Government emphasised the very targeted nature of the ICR powers, but here we are being asked to incrementally expand those powers so that they are slightly less targeted. To us, that means that the independent assessment of proportionality and necessity is pivotal, so we think that it should be subject to advance judicial oversight. Even the explanatory notes accept that there are difficulties in formulating sufficiently targeted queries, noting that

“such queries are highly susceptible to imprecise construction”
and that “additional safeguards” are required.

For us, the required additional safeguard is judicial oversight. We were led to believe that the powers would be used only exceptionally, so it is hard to see how a judicial authorisation requirement would cause any significant problem. The Government argue that there may be times when warrants are needed on an emergency basis, but that could be dealt with by having emergency processes or very limited exceptions—it is not an argument against a general rule of advance judicial oversight.

I turn to the impact on technology companies of the Bill’s various provisions relating to notices—although the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam probably made more sensible and eloquent

points than those I am about to make. The written evidence that the Bill Committee received shows that tech companies, academics and human rights and privacy campaigners are still a million miles away from the Government in their understanding of how the provisions will work and of the impact that they will have on products and services. Apple wrote to the Committee that these provisions

“would dramatically disrupt the global market for security technologies, putting users in the UK and around the world at greater risk.”

It is frustrating and disappointing that we did not have the opportunity to explore those differences in detail through witness testimony. The Minister did his best to reassure us, and he made some important arguments about extraterritoriality and conflicts of laws, but given the serious concerns that have been raised, it is worth again asking the Minister to explain why those witnesses are wrong and he is correct. In particular, the Government’s explanation that the new pre-notification requirement in clause 21 is

“not intended as an approval mechanism”

has not dampened concerns. Apple argued in evidence to the Committee that

“Once a company is compelled to provide notice of a new security technology to the SoS, the SoS can immediately seek a Technical Capability Notice to block the technology.”

Other provisions in the Bill around maintaining the status quo during notice review periods work in tandem with these provisions to deliver what Apple and others see as a de facto block on adoption of new technology—that is the risk that they are highlighting, and it is what the Minister must address in his speech. It is why we have tabled amendments to take out some of those provisions. It is also why we have tabled amendment 19: an alternative that would introduce advance judicial oversight and, hopefully, a degree of reassurance that the new notification notice regime under clause 21 will not deliver the unintended effects that many fear.

Finally, I put on the record our support for the amendments tabled by members of the Intelligence and Security Committee, whose work on the Bill has been as helpful as ever—I congratulate them on their one-and-a-half victories so far. As is often the case when it comes to Bills of this type, we also put on record our support for several of the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), some of which are similar to amendments that we tabled in Committee, while others are similar to amendments that we supported during the passage of other Bills, including the National Security Act 2023. In particular, new clause 3, which is designed to place an absolute prohibition on the UK sharing intelligence with foreign Governments where there is a real risk of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, is long overdue and would close a serious gap in the law. For us, that is self-evidently the right thing to do.

Sir John Hayes: As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, and as other Members have made reference to, I was the Minister who took the original Bill, which this Bill amends, through the House—indeed, it became the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

The purpose of that legislation was both to draw together a number of the capabilities of the agencies necessary for them to keep us safe, and to put in place a

[*Sir John Hayes*]

series of mechanisms to ensure that there was proper scrutiny and accountability for those powers. We introduced the principle of a double lock, whereby both politicians and judicial commissioners were necessary to authorise some of those very powers. They matter because of the threats we face. Those threats are, as has been said by a number of contributors, metamorphosing. They were bound to do so, and we anticipated that when the original Act was considered in this place.

I accept the argument used by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), that that does not end here tonight. Those threats will continue to change, and it will be necessary to update the legislation to reflect those changes, for our security services and police need two things to do the job that we expect them to do on our behalf: capacity—namely, skills and resources—and capability, which includes legislative powers.

7.45 pm

What they face is extraordinary, both in its degree and its character. It is the kind of evil that none of us is likely to encounter head-on in the way in which they are bound to do because of their job, but we could, we might, and, indeed, our former colleagues Jo Cox and David Amess did face that kind of evil. Tolerance of evil is evil itself—I think Thomas Mann said that—because if we were to, in any sense, give quarter to those who seek to do us harm, in the interests of being fair minded and open, as we are in our society, and if consequently we undermine the forces of law, we do no service to the British people because we jeopardise their safety.

I welcome the spirit in which the provisions that we are considering have been debated so far by both sides of the House and by members of the ISC. Like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), I do not wish to add unduly to that consideration, except to say two or three things. The first is that the Minister has engaged with the ISC formally and with members of the ISC informally in an effort to improve the legislation. It is right that he should do that—it has always been the spirit in which these kinds of measures have been considered—and I did so myself when in his shoes, I worked closely with my then shadow, who now, as Leader of the Opposition, aspires to be Prime Minister, and built a relationship with him accordingly, based on trust and a shared determination to do right by the right intelligence and security services and the police, because we wanted to do right by the British people.

The second thing is that I must press the Minister to go further in five particular ways. Well, actually, four, because he has already satisfied one of my requirements in response to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whom I thank for his contribution and his generous remarks. [*Interruption.*] He has come back into the Chamber to hear my appreciation I see. We work closely together on the Committee, on which we both serve. It is serious, and sometimes onerous, work, but it is enjoyable because we know that it is important. In this place, what could be better than that?

So, there are perhaps four matters on which I would like to press the Minister. I am hopeful that, given what I just said about him, we may be able to make progress.

The first is the matter of the extension of what has become known as the triple lock. The right hon. Member for North Durham referred to it, as did the former Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam.

In considering delegating prime ministerial authority to other Ministers, we have had discussion at length. It seemed sensible to me that, in doing so, we might say that other Ministers could perform the role of Prime Minister in respect of authorisations if they had operational experience or responsibility. That would be a reasonable way of narrowing the number of Ministers involved to people who had salient understanding and experience. That marriage of either being responsible or having been responsible would perhaps be the best way forward, although I appreciate that the Minister has made a case that the number of Ministers involved needs to be broadened because the Prime Minister may be incapacitated in some way or another. There is a case for what the Government are trying to do, with the caveat I have introduced.

Turning to communications data and the way that will be dealt with, and the additional bodies that will have access to some powers that have previously only been in the hands of a very few, could the Minister clarify that in respect of local authorities, this will not be a permissive power? There are times when local government in its regulatory role will be working with the police, dealing with very serious and organised crime—I am thinking of licensing, trading standards and so on, for example. Where serious criminals can be involved in matters that pertain to the functions of local authorities, I accept that there are some cases in which they should have those quite extensive powers, but one would not want to think that every parish council in the land would enjoy the same legal powers as the SIS or MI5.

Tom Tugendhat *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: The Minister is going to satisfy me immediately, it seems.

Tom Tugendhat: I will satisfy my right hon. Friend immediately and, I hope, save him time in his speech. Local authority trading standards teams are responsible for a range of legislation where enforcement requires investigation and may need to draw on communications data. The idea is that the powers in this Bill will be in keeping with those powers, not for them to be expansive, so my right hon. Friend is right: it is for serious crimes, as has already been set out.

Sir John Hayes: That is excellent—it helps, because the schedule associated with that part of the Bill does not make that explicit. I hope that the Minister, having given that binding assurance to the House, will reinforce it in the explanatory notes associated with the Act and in the code attached to it.

Tom Tugendhat *indicated assent.*

Sir John Hayes: I am seeing the Minister nodding. He might want to say a word or two more when he sums up.

Mr Kevan Jones: May I gently suggest that the right hon. Gentleman goes back to the Minister now, just to pin down exactly what he is agreeing to? We on the ISC

have no problem with the idea of our security services having these powers, and I do not think the public would either. They would be less comfortable, as I and the right hon. Gentleman are, with other organisations having them.

Sir John Hayes: The Minister may want to intervene on me again to do exactly what the right hon. Gentleman has suggested.

Tom Tugendhat: On the grounds that it will save me time when I wrap up at the end of the debate, I will make it clear now. His Majesty's Treasury is responsible for civil enforcement of financial sanctions regulations, and some information that is essential to carrying out its civil enforcement functions is now communications data, such as the timestamp on online banking transactions. His Majesty's Treasury cannot currently use its information powers to compel that information to be provided by a telecoms operator, so to go back to the statement I made earlier, local authority trading standards teams are responsible for a range for legislation where enforcement requires investigation and may need to draw on communications data.

Sir John Hayes: That is very helpful and, I think, goes a fair way towards what I want to achieve. The Minister has therefore made clear that the power will not be permissive. If he uses those very words—forgive me for putting them into his mouth, Madam Deputy Speaker—that would also help. These are going to be rarely used, particular powers associated with regulatory or legal functions of local authorities, not permissively available to those local authorities at their whim. That is clear as crystal, is it not?

Tom Tugendhat: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will use the words I am using. Those powers will be used as infrequently as we all hope they will be, but they will be used in keeping with the law as described. If the frequency increases, it will be because of the need to act; I am very cautious about saying that these crimes will disappear, and therefore the frequency will change. I am not willing to predict that criminality now.

Sir John Hayes: I entirely understand. I used the example myself of trading standards: in Lincolnshire, we have an issue with the sale of illegal cigarettes that has become not a trivial matter, but one of organised crime. It is not restricted to my county or locality: it is a national problem, and it is of course an example of where a local authority, working closely with the police, might well need to use those powers. By the way, those local authorities will be working with other agencies too: because money laundering is involved, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs might be involved, and so on and so forth. That is a good example of where those powers might be useful in catching very serious criminals indeed, but the word I wanted the Minister to use is that these powers are not permissive. He will understand what I mean by that, and I cannot see why that would present any problem at all, given the reasonable, sensible man he is.

Tom Tugendhat: I apologise to my right hon. Friend. These powers are not permissive in the sense that they are expansive: they are permissive only in the sense applied to them by this law, with the restriction of the

powers that local authorities already have. They are not to be used in any way other than as set out very clearly in the Bill.

Sir John Hayes: I think that is helpful. The Minister will remember that when we debated the original Bill that became the Investigatory Powers Act, one or two newspapers used the term “the snoopers’ charter”, and images were used of local authorities using those powers to investigate people’s rubbish to make sure they were recycling properly, for example. I do not want to add unnecessary levity to our consideration tonight, because we are dealing with very serious matters indeed, but the Minister will understand how that kind of misunderstanding—indeed, misinformation—could do far more harm than good.

Tom Tugendhat: Again, just to clarify for my right hon. Friend, this Bill offers no greater expansion than his own Bill did in 2016. In the same way he ensured that Bill was no snoopers’ charter, I assure him that this one is not either.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I was going to say that I have done this matter to death, but I can see that the right hon. Gentleman wants to intervene.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think the Minister is getting another “dancing on the head of a pin” award for his explanation. What I think the right hon. Gentleman is trying to get on the record—perhaps not for the benefit of people in this House who understand this Bill, but for the wider public—is that the way the Bill will be used is that it will include, for example, a local authority when an investigation is being driven by a security issue, such as in his example of organised crime in cigarette smuggling.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, exactly. The right hon. Gentleman has put it very clearly, and the sense of what the Minister has said has reassured me that it is not the Government’s intention to extend those powers beyond the very strict legal limits associated with the kind of organised crime that he and I have both cited. For me, that is considerable progress. The right hon. Gentleman spoke earlier about half a win; I think that is three quarters of a win, at least. For that reason, I feel that I can move on to my next request of the Minister.

We spoke earlier about IPCO, and its role and association with Government. As the Minister will know and as the right hon. Member for North Durham referred to, this legislation provides for a report to be made available to the ISC on an annual basis. There has been some concern that that report might be rather different from the one that is made available to Ministers and others, and my anxiety is that it should not be different. All that it should exclude is current operational matters; nothing else should be excluded from what my Committee considers, and clearly, it needs to be the same as what IPCO gets. We cannot have three or four different reports.

Tom Tugendhat: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance.

Sir John Hayes: That is a 100% win. It is not half a win or three quarters of a win; it is just a win. So we are making huge progress tonight, partly due to the diligence

[*Sir John Hayes*]

of the members of the ISC and other Members of this House, including the official Opposition, but largely due to the reasonableness of the Minister. He is a listening figure, and he is growing in stature and reputation as a result. I am delighted that the Minister has agreed to the fourth of my requirements.

8 pm

I did have a fifth request, however, and I was inspired to make it by none other than the shadow Minister. That will come as a surprise, perhaps including to the shadow Minister himself, but he made a very strong point when moving his new clause 1 about finding some way of formalising the expectation that this legislation would be regularly reviewed and, when necessary, updated. I do not imagine that the Minister will rush to accept such an amendment in the name of the official Opposition—it would certainly be unconventional were he so to do—but it is worthy of further consideration by the Government.

This is going to be a challenging business for whoever the Security Minister is, but recognising the dynamism of the threat we face and therefore the necessity of an equally dynamic response is of great significance and value. I hope the Minister, when he sums up, might find some words that will allow him to recognise the sensible suggestion made by the shadow Minister, and the spirit in which it was made. That would be further evidence of the Minister's stature, of which I am an advocate at the moment, but I am seeking further adherents to my cause.

With those few remarks and endorsing much of what has already been said, I will draw my speech to a conclusion with this thought. I spoke earlier about Thomas Mann and his description of tolerance and evil, but perhaps Chesterton put this most succinctly when he said:

“Unless a man becomes the enemy of an evil, he will not even become its slave but rather its champion.”

Every time we have doubt and fear when facing the wicked people who seek to do us harm and who took the lives of our dear colleagues, we give them solace. Every time we stand firm, and do what is necessary to defend our nation and its people, we do what is right. The Minister has the great privilege of leading that effort tonight, and in doing so he should have the support of all men and women of good will across this House.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), and indeed all the fellow members of the ISC who have spoken on both sides of the House in our debate on seeking to improve this important piece of legislation. I must say that it is very rare, when one is called towards the end of a debate, for there to have been concessions on most of the areas at issue, leaving very little else to say. It makes me happy that I did not write my speech in advance, since I would have had to rip most of it up following the Security Minister's very welcome concessions on a range of issues during our debate. They are on the record, and they are indeed extremely welcome.

However, there is one area of detail that I want to comment on, which is about the triple lock amendment—amendment 22—on the qualifications and experience of the Secretaries of State who, under the widening of

the triple lock, could if the Prime Minister of the day is incapacitated for some reason, be drawn into making a warrant to intercept the communications of a Member of this Parliament, or indeed a Member of any of the devolved legislatures in the UK. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) was very explicit about why that particular protection should be in existence, and I completely agree with his analysis. One of the ways we defend our democracy is by allowing Members of Parliament to do their unique jobs without interference unless it is for an exceptional and a very good reason, and has been authorised at the highest level.

There has been a lot of to-ing and fro-ing while the Bill has been going through its parliamentary stages about precisely how this widening of the power to make such a warrant away from the Prime Minister, if he or she is indisposed or unable to be near secure communications, should actually be defined. We have got down to the stage where everybody agrees that to make the system robust there should be an expansion, and we have even come up with a number of Secretaries of State—five—who should be authorised in such exceptional circumstances to make that warrant.

We are now down to the last piece of disagreement between the ISC and the Minister, which is about what the qualifications of those Secretaries of State should be. In seeking to try to draw out precisely what the Government mean, we have asked as a Committee that the relevant Secretaries of State who may be down to do this duty ought already to be responsible for warrantry, or have had previous responsibility for it. Thus far, however, the Government and the Minister have been unwilling to be that deliberate in the arrangements they have made.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said in his contribution to the debate, the only qualification apart from being a Secretary of State that the Government appear to have admitted is that the person standing in for the Prime Minister ought to have had a 20-minute security briefing about warrantry.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that this is so important, because the Secretary of State will be acting as the Prime Minister at that time? Once that decision has been taken—even though we now have the commitment from the Minister that the Prime Minister will be told, not should be told—they will not be able to overturn or review it in any way, so that person is acting as the Prime Minister at that stage.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, and it is clearly important that there is a reassurance that the Secretary of State who is picked to do that job in these exceptional circumstances will either have previous experience of being responsible for warrantry and issuing warrants, or have current experience. I do not see why the Security Minister cannot concede that that is where we should be. I do not understand why, over all of the parliamentary time spent on this Bill, the Government have not been able to give us that assurance, which just shores up the important nature of the commitment to widening the triple lock.

Clearly, the Minister's very welcome decision to make the concession on amendment 23, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has just

pointed out, strengthens the situation, because that means the Prime Minister will have to be notified of such a warrant. However, my right hon. Friend is also correct in pointing out that the warrant cannot be rescinded if it has already been granted. I therefore gently ask the Security Minister whether he will not take the opportunity, in responding to the debate, to give the ISC members and the public we all represent the reassurance that the Secretaries of State who may have this power delegated to them either will already be responsible for warranting, or will have previously had responsibility for warranting. I do not understand why he cannot just get up and give us that final assurance. If he does, I think we will have done extremely well on Report and in Committee. I am rather disappointed that the Minister is not leaping to his feet, since he has been leaping to his feet a lot while my colleagues have been making their speeches. I see no such flicker in him as I am making mine. I suspect and hope that that is because he is just thinking about how he will wind up the debate and give us that final assurance that we need.

Mr Kevan Jones: The measure is doable, because we are not asking for something in the Bill; it could be done in the guidance. The Minister has already agreed on changing the “should” to “will”, so this measure could be reflected in the guidance that goes alongside the Bill.

Dame Angela Eagle: I can see that the Minister is looking pensive, so I hope that means he is thinking of some way to reassure us on this final, important point with respect to the triple lock and the widening of those powers to other Ministers who are not the Prime Minister.

The whole debate around the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill demonstrates that when threats evolve, the requirement to meet them also has to evolve. We know that this area is rapidly developing, and we know also that we will probably be back in the not-too-distant future to see how these powers can be changed again to defend our democracy and meet some of the threats of serious organised crime and terrorism, which our security forces help us deal with day in, day out. We also know that if our citizens are to give us effective permission and consent to take some of these powers, any increase in powers has to be accompanied by an increase in proper oversight, to reassure them that democracy is being defended, not undermined. That includes oversight by the ISC, which is why I am a big supporter of new clause 1 as tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). It is important that that can be an ongoing reassurance.

I do not want to repeat a lot of the arguments made by colleagues, and it is important now to listen to what the Minister has to say. I thank him for the concessions he has made, and I hope he can make just a slight move towards us on the warranting issue in the instance of the triple lock, so that we can be even more content than we are now.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I rise to speak to amendments 15, 20 and 22, and Government amendments 3 and 6. I highlight that the investments declared in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests include a data company.

The intelligence services carry out vital work in keeping us safe in a dangerous world, as we have heard from many colleagues this evening. The secrecy that surrounds

what the agencies do inevitably means that the majority of people who work for them will never receive public praise or recognition, so I take this opportunity to thank them for their brave and dedicated efforts on our behalf. This Bill provides important updates to the law to enable them to operate effectively and to adapt to fast-moving technological change and innovation. This kind of update to legislation will be essential again and again in years to come to enable our intelligence services to keep ahead of those who would seek to do us harm. For example—this is at the heart of what we are doing today—it makes no sense to require, as the current law does, that the intelligence services undertake the full range of actions designed for holding sensitive, confidential and private information when dealing with datasets that are readily available to the public or to commercial users and over which there is little or no expectation of privacy.

8.15 pm

I welcome the Bill, and my purpose this evening is just to seek to ensure that the extension of powers that the Government propose to give to the intelligence services is accompanied by the appropriate extension of scrutiny. We have one of the most rigorous and comprehensive legal frameworks in the world to provide democratic control and oversight of intelligence work, including, as we have heard, a significant role for the ISC, of which I am a member. That Committee has expressed a number of concerns about the Bill, and I welcome the changes that have been made in the other place and this evening by the Minister to respond to the concerns expressed by members of the ISC.

For instance, it is good to see that Government amendments 3 and 6 provide additional certainty on which organisations will be able to use new intrusive powers and how they will be constrained in their use. Controversial examples of past local authority deployment of such powers were debated at length in relation to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. It would have been worrying for this Bill to reach the statute book without further clarity on that point.

I welcome the tightening up of the provisions in the Bill on the triple lock, which determines the very rare circumstances when the communications of a legislator can be intercepted. That includes amendments in the other place specifying that only five designated Secretaries of State may sign off on these warrants in place of the Prime Minister, and only when the Prime Minister is unable to do so because of incapacity or an inability to access secure communications.

Like others, including the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), whom I am privileged to follow in this debate, I think the Government still have some work to do on the matters raised in amendments 21 and 22, which were tabled by my colleagues on the ISC, to provide confidence that this highly sensitive task will be carried out responsibly and lawfully. We need to ensure that the designated Secretary of State is someone whose routine duties include signing warrants or who has relevant operational experience of doing so. As someone who scrutinised and signed intercept warrants for nearly four years as Northern Ireland Secretary, I know how important that practical understanding and awareness is. Having said that, I very much welcome the statements that have been made on how the code of practice will operate in this area and on ensuring that the Prime Minister is notified of any warrants agreed on his behalf.

Lastly, I want to consider amendment 15 on internet connection records. The current rules mean that to lawfully access an internet connection record, the intelligence services must know the precise service accessed and the time it was accessed. Clause 16 would extend that power to identify individuals using one or more specified internet services for a specified period. In the Bill, there is simply no limit on the number of services or the length of period specified. There is nothing in clause 15 to confine the new power to sites that are inherently suspicious. The intelligence services, for example, might reasonably want to collect information on access to uncontroversial, widely used sites by people who are of concern to them, but the disadvantage of that is that it means routine online activity by many entirely innocent people could also be scooped up.

I acknowledge that we are talking about only communications data—that is, the who, when, where of online activity—and not the content of the communication. I also concede that the general needs on necessity and proportionality provide an important constraint, as will the commitment to delete data collected relating to people not of interest to the security services. However, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said on Second Reading, the fact that data is not retained does not mean that it is not intrusive to collect it. I think that there is a credible case for inserting a requirement to seek the permission of a judicial commissioner, rather than letting decisions be made internally by the intelligence agencies.

This is an important Bill, which I very much hope the House will pass this evening, but there remain real concerns about clause 15 and the width of intrusion that it would involve. I therefore urge the Minister once more to consider additional safeguards to govern the exercise of these new powers to access internet connection records, so that we guarantee proper scrutiny and public confidence and ensure that the regulation of our intelligence services continues to be world leading.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing him a very happy birthday.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Jim Shannon: You are most kind, Madam Deputy Speaker. When you get to my age, you do not count the years, but you make the years count.

It is an absolute honour and pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). May I put on the record my thanks to her for her time as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? We appreciate her commitment and efforts over those years. Her intelligence about and interest in Northern Ireland have not dissipated because she is no longer the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; indeed, they have added to the occasion.

It is a pleasure to speak on the Bill, which, as the Minister will know, I have done on numerous occasions. I am aware of the complexity of the issue and of the need to give privacy its rightful place in our national security.

As others have done, I put on the record my thanks to all the security and intelligence services for all that they have done and still do. We owe them a great debt.

During the previous debate, I asked the Minister for his assurances regarding whether the right balance had been struck, yet I have still been contacted by constituents who continue to express their concerns. I will not detain the House for long—about five minutes—but will highlight again the concern that my constituents continue to express, to give them one last chance to receive assurances on the Floor of the House.

My constituents' remaining concerns relate to something that we in this place have much cognisance of and that we treasure: the freedom within a democratic society to live our lives in peace as long as we are not adversely affecting the lives of others. That is a precious right, and one that none of us in the House wants to remove. I will refer to clauses 1 and 2 and highlight four companies that have expressed concerns to get the Minister's response. My constituents have highlighted the following:

“In addition to the concerns of civil society, I would like to draw your attention to some of the comments submitted in evidence to the Bill's Committee from the tech industry.

Apple: ‘In addition to impacting the safety of billions of users around the world who rely on security technologies developed by Apple and other companies, the Bill in its current form would undermine fundamental human rights. In fact, just this year, the European Court of Human Rights held that requiring a company to provide a means to decrypt all encrypted communications on its platform violated the right of privacy in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.’

TechUK: ‘This could impede the ability of TechUK members to modify products and services over time to protect users from active security threats, to innovate, and enhance their services for their users.’

Information Technology Industry Council: ‘We strongly encourage greater scrutiny of these implications so that the Bill will not have a chilling effect on a company's ability to conduct business or in current or future innovations, and that it will serve to further international efforts on shared goals around trust and security.’

Computer and Communications Industry Association: ‘Over time, this will push tech firms to refocus product development away from addressing the priorities of UK consumers, towards Government demands for access. The obstacles the new regime creates will be a drag on innovation and therefore undermine the quality of digital services on offer.’”

Sir John Hayes: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech, not least because it is his birthday. Let me put it to him in this fashion. I think that the public have as much to fear from those corporate organisations as they do from any democratically elected Government. I am much more concerned about the way that they gather and sell data, and, dealing with the matter of expectation, the vast majority of people do not know that they are doing it. Rather than more a more permissive attitude towards those organisations, I want to see a less permissive one.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I share those concerns, but I wish to put on the record my concern for my constituents in relation to how the changes are interpreted and how they will affect people.

I will give the last sentence of the quotation from the Computer & Communications Industry Association:

“They could risk deterring investment in improving service for UK consumers and contribute to a sense that the UK is not a safe market in which to invest.”

Those are the four tech companies, and the questions are on the record—I put them in *Hansard*—so that perhaps the Minister can give me an answer. Will he outline what mitigations are in place for the matters affecting those four companies in order to secure the tech industry’s place in the fabric of our lives in the United Kingdom?

I am pleased that the Minister has accepted amendment 23, which was tabled by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The Democratic Unionist party was minded to support that amendment, but, because it has been accepted, we will not need to do so.

While I am aware of valid concerns, I am also aware of the need for this Bill, which the gallant Minister will know about better than most in the House. He served in Northern Ireland, so he understands the implications for us in Northern Ireland and the lives that we have led for some years. I was a part-time soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment and in the Territorial Army for 14 and a half years. I have been a recipient of security intelligence and know how it can save lives. I am here today because of intelligence, which found out what the IRA’s intentions were. That is a fact. That has affected not just me; over the years, the intelligence services have saved the lives of other hon. and gallant Members. I have many friends who served and who are alive today because of the intelligence service or the Security Service. I had many other friends who unfortunately are not alive today; I remember them as well, so I do.

We must remember that the whole objective of the Bill is to keep us safe, to keep us secure and to ensure that our lives with our families can continue. I do hope that a balance has been struck, as the Minister outlined, because freedom is a prize worthy of getting it right. I know that the Minister wants to get it right, and I want it to be right. Madam Deputy Speaker, you want it to be right as well. Let us do it and get it right tonight.

Tom Tugendhat: Right hon. and hon. Members will be delighted to hear that, having answered colleagues as we went along, I have only a few short words to conclude. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I know how to keep them happy.

Amendments 3 to 6 to clause 14 concern the restoration of specified public authorities’ general information powers to secure the disclosure of communications data from a telecommunications operator by compulsion. I pay tribute and thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). I hope that Members will have noticed that I have listened carefully to Members across the House, and I believe that this Bill has been pulled together carefully alongside the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is a slight shame I cannot thank the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) in person, who is sadly at a funeral today. He has played an important role in contributing to and leading the engagement of which I have had the advantage in preparing this Bill.

Let me quickly touch on one or two points. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) spoke about notices. It is important to note that the notices do not block innovation. They do not stop a technical patch or infringe on companies’ ability to update their systems.

All they do is make sure that the existing level of access remains while that is being looked at. That is a reasonable element to ensure that the British people are kept safe by the British law enforcement authorities.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I understand what my right hon. Friend is saying, but the practical consequence of issuing such a notice is that the development of the product about which concern has been expressed has to stop. Therefore, the infringement on commercial liberty, in practice, is exactly what I have described, is it not?

Tom Tugendhat: If my right hon. and learned Friend will forgive me, I will be able to discuss that in a more secure environment, but I can only say, “Not necessarily.” I will be able to describe why that is in a different environment, but I cannot do it here.

The reason for not accepting amendments 22 and 23—I understand the points made by right hon. and hon. Friends and Members across the House—is that we are talking about a very limited number of people. One Secretary of State is already used to do the initial request. The second person on the triple lock is a judicial commissioner—a judge. The third therefore has to be one of the four Secretaries of State left. Therefore, it is important that we make sure that it is somebody in whom the Prime Minister has confidence. Given that we are about to have a new Government—I hope the new Conservative Government, but still a new one—it is entirely possible that there will be a new Cabinet and that the routine explanation will not be satisfactory. As routine duties do not have legal clarity, we will not use them.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Minister has used that argument before about new Secretaries of State, and it is complete nonsense, is it not? It would not happen on day one unless the Prime Minister suddenly got covid or was indisposed. By the time this came in, those three people would be there anyway. His argument is pretty weak.

Tom Tugendhat: The right hon. Member has made his point and I have made mine; I am afraid I will leave it there rather than continue. The ways in which we have been able to engage on the Bill has been incredibly supportive and helpful.

The removal of clause 15 from the Bill would prevent the intelligence agencies and the National Crime Agency from detecting some national security and serious crime threats, and those intent on committing child sexual exploitation and abuse. Given the robust oversight of the regime in general, and the internet connection records in particular, we simply do not believe that this is in the best interests of the British public. Removal would benefit only those who threaten our safety and serve to make the work of the intelligence services and the NCA significantly harder as they seek to protect us and bring paedophiles to justice. The Investigatory Powers Commissioner already has the necessary powers to inspect and report on all parts of the CD regime. If the Investigatory Powers Commissioner wishes to focus attention on condition D of the internet connection record, they have the power to do so. With those clarifications, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 171, Noes 265.

Division No. 113]

[8.32 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hollern, Kate
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMorris, Anna
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Owen, Sarah
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and
Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishty, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Docherty, Leo
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark

Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark

Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
Tellers for the Noes:
**Mr Gagan Mohindra and
Suzanne Webb**

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 2

REQUIREMENT FOR THE SECRETARY OF STATE TO
 PUBLISH AN ANNUAL REPORT ON TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED
 SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME AND TECHNOLOGY-
 ENABLED THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

“After section 234 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, insert—

“234A Requirement for the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on technology-enabled serious and organised crime and technology-enabled threats to national security

- (1) The Secretary of State must publish a report on technology-assisted crime insofar as it relates to measures set out in this Act and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.
- (2) The report must be published within one year of the passing of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024, and annually thereafter.”—(*Dan Jarvis.*)

This new clause would ensure the Secretary of State publishes an annual report on technology-enabled serious and organised crime and technology-enabled threats to national security insofar as it relates to measures set out in this Act and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 171, Noes 265.

Division No. 114]

[8.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet

Dalton, Ashley
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hollern, Kate
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain

McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Owen, Sarah
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Wilson, Munira

Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Ayes:

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline

**Mary Glindon and
 Colleen Fletcher**

NOES

Dines, Miss Sarah
 Docherty, Leo
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul

Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John

Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
**Mr Gagan Mohindra and
 Suzanne Webb**

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 2

LOW OR NO REASONABLE EXPECTATION OF PRIVACY

*Amendment proposed: 7, Page 3, line 9, leave out
 Clause 2.—(Stuart C. McDonald.)*

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 39, Noes 257.

Division No. 115]

[8.58 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
 MacAskill, Kenny
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
vote cast by Marion
Fellows*)
Tellers for the Ayes:
**Peter Grant and
 Kirsty Blackman**

NOES

Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims

Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Docherty, Leo
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee

Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wigg, Sir Bill
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
Tellers for the Noes:
**Mr Gagan Mohindra and
Suzanne Webb**

Question accordingly negated.

9.9 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 20 March).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Clause 14

POWERS TO OBTAIN COMMUNICATIONS DATA

Amendments made: 3, page 35, line 5, after “exercise” insert “by a specified public authority”

This amendment and Amendments 4, 5 and 6 restrict the class of public authorities whose powers to secure disclosures of communications data are affected by this Clause.

Amendment 4, page 35, line 17, at end insert—

“(5A) After subsection (5) insert—

“(5A) In this section “specified public authority” means a public authority which is—

(a) listed in Schedule 2A, or

(b) listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 4.

(5B) The Secretary of State or the Treasury may by regulations modify Schedule 2A by—

(a) adding a public authority to, or

(b) removing a public authority from, the list in that Schedule.”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3.

Amendment 5, page 35, line 35, at end insert—

“(6A) In section 267 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (regulations), in subsection (5), after paragraph (a) insert—

“(a) regulations under section 12(5B).”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3.

Amendment 6, page 35, line 35, at end insert—

“(6B) In the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, after Schedule 2 insert—

“Schedule 2A

Specified public authorities for the purposes of section 12

1 The Treasury.

2 A local authority.

In this Schedule “local authority” has the same meaning as in Part 3 (see section 86).” —(*Tom Tugendhat.*)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3

Third Reading

9.10 pm

Tom Tugendhat: I beg to move, That the Bill be read the Third time.

I pay huge tribute to all the contributions from across this House, and particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who whipped this through in exemplary fashion and will be delighted that since my appointment he has not had to take a Minister’s place on a Bill. He will also be grateful, along with me, to Lord Sharpe in the other place who has led on this Bill brilliantly, and taken us through with exemplary speed. I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who has been a great friend for many years. We have now completed a Bill together, which really does bring us that bit closer. I also say an enormous thanks to Phoebe, Fintan, Francesca, James, Emer, Lucy x 2, Megan, Sophie, and Tom Ball, whose exemplary work in the Bill Committee has been fantastic.

9.11 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: It is gratifying that we will get this Bill on the statute book, because it will give our security services the necessary powers to keep us all safe. I add my thanks to the staff of the Committee on which I and other Members served, and like the Minister I thank the civil servants who I have engaged with throughout the passage of the Bill. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his engagement on the Bill. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) would have liked to have been here today. He has played an integral part not just in speaking about the Bill, but in his work on the ISC. As I said earlier, unfortunately he is at the funeral of Lord Cormack; the House will understand his reason.

As I said, the Bill will improve our abilities. Perhaps the Minister would also like to put on record his thanks to the ISC, which he forgot to do. It might have been a painful process at times, but can I give him some advice, possibly for the future? He may well have been able to solve some of these issues earlier in our discussions, and avoided keeping his colleagues here on a Monday night—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities says from a sedentary position that that was impossible, but the Minister has agreed to our amendments.

Tom Tugendhat: I was going to do so!

Mr Jones: The Minister says that he was going to, but if he had done that last week we could perhaps have had very short discussions tonight.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Some of us should take yes for an answer.

Mr Jones: Well some of us do, but if the amendments had been agreed to last week, we could have had a shorter debate today and the Minister’s colleagues would not have been kept here for so long.

Finally, the biggest thanks we need to give is to the men and women of our security services who, as the Minister said in his earlier contribution, do not get any recognition publicly. They do their work day in, day out, some in very dangerous circumstances, to keep us all safe.

9.14 pm

Stuart C. McDonald: I, too, thank all colleagues who have taken part in the proceedings today, in Committee stage and before, especially members of the ISC whose expertise really does benefit our scrutiny processes. I also thank all the various organisations that have provided written evidence and briefings, both in support of, and in opposition to, the Bill. Finally, may I also thank the Committee staff and the Clerks of the House for helping us through what has in some ways been quite a technical Bill?

The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 set out a detailed framework for use of investigatory powers. The existence of such a legislative framework was welcome, as were some aspects of the framework itself. We worked hard to try to improve that framework, but, ultimately, believed that it fell short of what was required and so we voted against that Bill on Third Reading. We are in much the same place today. We get the motivations for this Bill; they are understood and we are sympathetic with some of what the Bill seeks to achieve. However, we are not convinced that all the powers are shown to have been necessary and proportionate and that there are not other ways to get to where those seeking the new powers need to be.

At the same time, with more extensive powers and more extensive use of those powers, there should come greater oversight. In our view, the Bill heads us in the opposite direction, watering down or failing to put into place necessary advanced judicial oversight. Such oversight, we believe, is of benefit in providing reassurance not only to members of the public concerned with implications for their private lives, but to the very people who need to navigate these powers—members of our security and intelligence services and other public bodies. Instead, they are left to make difficult almost impossible judgments as to their lawful use, necessity and proportionality. Therefore, we do not take this step lightly, but for those reasons we will be voting against Third Reading tonight.

9.15 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I rise to confirm that we on these Benches support the Third Reading of this Bill. It is the first duty of every Government to keep their people safe. It is right that we take the opportunity to pay tribute to the exceptional men and women who serve in our police and security services, often in the shadows and often without recognition, working tirelessly to keep our country safe. We owe them all a debt of gratitude. We also owe it to them, as Members of this House, to provide them with the powers they need to discharge their duties. The Bill does that, in part, because it has been the product of constructive cross-party efforts both in this House and in the other place.

[Dan Jarvis]

I wish to take the opportunity to thank the Minister for his work on the Bill. I wish him well with future endeavours. I also thank the SNP and all those Members who have contributed to this process, particularly those members of the ISC, who have made an outstanding contribution to proceedings.

On behalf of the whole House, I express our thanks to the civil servants working in the Home Office who have done an exceptional job, as have the Clerks of this House, who have worked very hard on what is after all a technical Bill.

It is always welcome when collegiate, cross-party working takes place in this House. I am very grateful that, on this occasion, we have been able to work together on getting this important Bill right.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 257, Noes 38.

Division No. 116]

[9.17 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Burns, rh Sir Conor
Butler, Rob
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, rh Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris

Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Docherty, Leo
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Sir Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie

Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heapey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
Mackrory, Cheryl
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie

Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McVey, rh Esther
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Norman, rh Jesse
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stewart, Iain
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, rh Michael

Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather

Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Williams, rh Craig
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Mr Gagan Mohindra and
Suzanne Webb**

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
Blackford, rh Ian
Bonnar, Steven
Brock, Deidre
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Edwards, Jonathan
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, rh Stewart
Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)

MacAskill, Kenny
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
Monaghan, Carol
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
Smith, Alyn
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
vote cast by Marion
Fellows*)

Tellers for the Noes:
**Peter Grant and
Kirsty Blackman**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Acting Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

[Relevant Documents: Written evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on Pre-appointment Hearing: The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, reported to the House on 21 March 2024, HC 558.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will appoint Rebecca Hilsenrath to the offices of acting Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and acting Health Service Commissioner for England, in accordance with section 3A of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 and paragraph 2 of Schedule 1 to the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993.—(*Alex Burghart.*)

9.29 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): At this juncture of the evening, at the risk of making myself even more unpopular with colleagues, I intend to speak briefly to the motion. I was prepared to allow the Minister at least five minutes for an exposition of why we are in this situation and to happily take the remaining 85, but I might be more charitable for the sake of colleagues.

The motion as it appears on the Order Paper is seemingly innocuous, but behind it there is a short story to be told—one that very few are aware of. The saga, if I may call it that, of the appointment of a new Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman for England began in the summer of last year. An appointments panel was assembled, of which I was a member. The second permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care, an independent member and the former president of the International Ombudsman Institute were also members, and the panel was ably chaired by Philippa Helme, late of this parish—as many of us will remember, she was a senior Clerk. We went about our business diligently, sifting through an initial 52 applications for the role, longlisting and shortlisting. We then took on a day's interviewing during which we interviewed four candidates. We judged three of them to be appointable, and put forward a recommended name to the Prime Minister.

I am sure we are all aware, but I shall repeat it to refresh our memory, that “The Cabinet Manual” makes it very clear in paragraph 5.40 that

“The Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, known as the Parliamentary Ombudsman, is an officer of the House of Commons appointed by the Crown and is independent of the Government. In recognition of the Ombudsman's relationship with Parliament, the House now leads on the recruitment to the role.”

Unfortunately, the name put forward—I am not going to say that person's name, so as to protect their privacy at this juncture—has seemingly been declined by No. 10. Given that No. 10 was notified of the name in January and it is now March, some time has elapsed, during which it would surely have been possible to confer that seal of approval.

Clearly, things are now more topical, given last week's report from the ombudsman on the women's stage pension age. Maybe that has sharpened the focus, but in winding up the debate—if we can call it that—might my very able hon. Friend the Minister for the constitution, in whose hands the constitution of this country is

[Mr William Wragg]

always safe and sound, be able to elaborate on what has happened? Why is there the need to appoint a temporary ombudsman? I have absolutely no problem at all with Rebecca Hilsenrath, who is the chief executive of the organisation; I am sure she will do a splendid job. None the less, it is somewhat irregular that after a recruitment process lasting several months in which proper procedures have been followed, it seems that No. 10 is not prepared to recognise the recommended name from the recruitment panel. Could my hon. Friend explain?

9.33 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for his introduction, and we look forward to more information coming forward.

We support the motion to appoint an acting Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. The post of the PHSO combines the two statutory roles of parliamentary commissioner for administration and health service commissioner for England. As Members of this House, we all know the important role that the ombudsman plays in our system to provide an independent complaint handling service. The PHSO makes final decisions after complaints that Government Departments, a range of other public bodies in the UK or the NHS in England have not acted properly or fairly, or have provided a poor service. The findings from the PHSO's casework are shared with Parliament to help its scrutiny of public service providers and, more widely, to help drive improvements in public services.

I put on record my thanks to Philippa Helme, the recruitment lead and chair of the recruitment panel, and her panel for their work in identifying and interviewing candidates. The whole House will want to wish the acting ombudsman, Rebecca Hilsenrath, who is also the chief executive officer of the PHSO, well while the search for her new boss is finalised.

I know that Members on both sides will want to send their thanks and best wishes to Rob Behrens, the outgoing ombudsman, for his sterling work leading the PHSO since 2017. I remember him at Coventry Polytechnic back in the day. Rob has an outstanding record of public service, investigating suspected failures in our public services and helping people seek redress. We only have to read his recent interview with *The Guardian* to appreciate his dedication to the families and victims of public maladministration, particularly in the NHS. In it, he raised concerns about a "cover-up culture" in the NHS that leads to avoidable deaths and families being denied the truth about their loved ones, arguing that whistleblowers are being victimised and that Ministers and NHS leaders are doing too little to change the organisation's culture.

The ombudsman has also been in the news this last week, because he has published his final report into communication about changes in the state pension age for women born in the 1950s, which meant that some women born in the 1950s had very little notice of an increase in their state pension age, and therefore fewer years to prepare and plan. This is a serious report that requires serious consideration. The PHSO has rightly said that it is for the Government to respond, and we will continue to press them to do so.

These recent news stories highlight the high-profile work of the ombudsman, but we know that Members refer cases to the service day in and day out, trying to get redress for problems with our public services that have affected our constituents' lives. The ombudsman is an important and vital tool for people across our country who are trying to get answers and recourse. I hope that we will soon debate a motion on the permanent replacement for Mr Behrens, and I look forward to the House panel completing its work.

9.37 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): At the outset, I would like to pay tribute to the outgoing ombudsman, Rob Behrens CBE, who steps down at the end of this month after serving the statutory maximum term of seven years. I would like to thank him for the great work he has done to transform the PHSO. For example, he has improved complaint handling, established an independent expert advisory panel to inform decision making, and set up Europe's first ombudsman academy to build capability. He has also introduced new ways of working, including mediation in casework. On this House's behalf, I praise Rob for his achievements and wish him all the very best for the future.

The campaign to recruit a new ombudsman commenced at the beginning of October 2023. The House-appointed recruitment panel made a recommendation to the Prime Minister in January, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) said a few moments ago. This is an important and high-profile role, so it is very important that the process takes as long as is necessary to appoint the right person. Until then, and to ensure continuity for the PHSO, it is necessary to appoint an acting commissioner. Mr Behrens had reached the end of the statutory maximum term of seven years, so it is necessary for us to have an acting commissioner before a final appointment is made.

The Government very much support Rebecca Hilsenrath's appointment to this role, as we believe she has the ability and experience to lead the PHSO until a new ombudsman is appointed. She joined the PHSO as director of external affairs, strategy and communications in 2021, and she was appointed its chief executive officer in July 2023.

Mr Wragg: The question for my hon. Friend is: will the Prime Minister sign off on the name that was put to him by the recruitment panel in January?

Alex Burghart: That will be a matter for the Prime Minister. As my hon. Friend will have heard me say a few moments ago, it is very important that this process is followed thoroughly and diligently to make sure that the correct appointment is made.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I also want to put on the record my thanks to Mr Rob Behrens, not least for the way he supported one of my constituents. However, my concern is that the Minister and the Prime Minister have had plenty of time to review the appointment. By putting an interim person in place, there will be disruption when a new person comes into place. Does the Minister not also recognise that there is much work to be done in reducing the number of complaints and addressing the real needs of our constituents, who need redress for the serious issues they are raising?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that this is an extremely important role. That is why, in looking for a temporary head, we have chosen someone with an enormous amount of experience within the ombudsman itself. There will be no disruption; there will be great continuity. She points to the amount of time it is taking to sign off the role. While I appreciate that she would like to have it now, looking back, the appointment of Mr Behrens seven years ago took almost a year, so it is not unusual for appointments to take more than a couple of months. With that said, in accordance with section 3A of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 and paragraph 2 of schedule 1 to the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993, I commend Rebecca Hilsenrath to the House for the role of acting commissioner.

Question put and agreed to.

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Ordered,

That, further to the Orders of 30 January, 23 February and 26 October 2023, paragraphs (1) and (2) of the Order of 19 December 2022 relating to the appointment of Sir Roger Gale as Deputy Speaker and to the exercise of the functions of the Chairman of Ways and Means shall continue to have effect up to and including 23 July 2024.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

WESTMINSTER HALL: SITTING TIMES

Ordered,

(1) That, with effect from 15 April, the following amendment to Standing Orders be made:

In Standing Order No. 10 (Sittings in Westminster Hall), paragraph (1)(c), leave out “1.30 pm” and insert “12.30 pm”.

(2) That this amendment shall have effect for the remainder of this Parliament.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

PETITIONS

9.41 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I remind Members presenting petitions that they are restricted to reading out the material allegations contained in the petition, the prayer of the petition and a very short statement on the parties from whom it comes.

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the people of Newport West, many of whom have been in touch with me in recent weeks and months to express their justifiable rage at the contaminated blood scandal. I particularly acknowledge Mrs Hazel Jones and Ms Shirley Newnham, two strong local women who have signed this petition. I also acknowledge my indefatigable and brilliant right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who has demonstrated such leadership on this issue.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Newport West,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited for too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002940]

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of all those in my constituency of Weaver Vale affected by the contaminated blood scandal. I commend all campaigners, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). My constituent Michael was infected with hepatitis C from an NHS treatment. I have raised Michael’s case since I was elected to Parliament in 2017. He said:

“I felt my life was left in tatters.”

This petition urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry without delay.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Weaver Vale

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002941]

UNRWA Funding

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk in relation to United Nations Relief and Works Agency funding. My constituents have been deeply troubled by the scenes emerging from Gaza, where unprecedented levels of human suffering have been witnessed. Tens of thousands of innocent women, children and civilians have already been killed, and a quarter of Gazans are at risk of death from starvation and destitution. Humanitarian aid is now beyond critical. I think it worth pointing out that the petition was prepared prior to Israel’s refusal to allow UNRWA aid into the north—effectively a death sentence for many.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to help protect the rights and lives of those affected by the War in Gaza by reallocating funds to the UNRWA to ensure the immediate deliverance of humanitarian assistance to address the adverse threat to life of Palestinians.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the crisis in Gaza has already resulted in thousands of deaths and shows no sign of a resolution; further declares that UNRWA has warned that not enough aid is entering the besieged Gaza strip, and that a quarter of the Gazan population has been determined as an IPC Stage 5 crisis, which means that they are under immediate

[*Martyn Day*]

threat of death from starvation and destitution; notes that whilst the allegations against the 12 employees of the UNRWA are serious and must be investigated thoroughly, the UNRWA operates in the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan as well as Gaza, and the UK government punishing civilians in these places by pausing funding will have significant humanitarian repercussions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to help protect the rights and lives of those affected by the War in Gaza by reallocating funds to the UNRWA to ensure the immediate deliverance of humanitarian assistance to address the adverse threat to life of Palestinians.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002942]

Bank Closures in Paisley and Renfrewshire North

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my Paisley and Renfrewshire North constituents. Six years ago, almost to the day, I presented a petition about the Royal Bank of Scotland closing its Renfrew branch, leaving one RBS branch for the entire constituency. Since then, both Santander and TSB have also closed, leaving only the Bank of Scotland. Having completely modernised that branch, we had hoped that it would have been around for a wee while at least, but sadly not as Lloyds has decided to close the Renfrew and Bridge of Weir Bank of Scotland branches, thus leaving a growing town of 26,000 and a village where doing anything without a car is already difficult without a bank.

Nearly 800 people have signed my petition in a short space of time to stop the branch closure. Thanks to Good Food, Card Box, The Co-op in Bridge of Weir and Katie's Kitchen for helping to collect signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North,

Declares that the closure of two Bank of Scotland branches in Paisley and Renfrewshire North constituency will have a detrimental impact on the local community; notes that the decision will leave 70,000 constituents with access to just two bank branches; further notes that the removal of high street branches exacerbates the inequality of certain groups, such as those in lower incomes, people with disabilities, rural communities, senior citizens and small business owners; and further declares that all banking groups have a duty to communities to provide in person services thus alleviating barriers to access.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that residents in Renfrew and Bridge of Weir have access to a local banking provision.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002944]

Warwickshire Hunt

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of Warwickshire. Locally, there has been a separate petition signed by some 2,000 residents related to this same issue: the matter of Warwickshire police and the Warwickshire hunt agreeing a secret protocol, following an alleged crime by the Warwickshire hunt in December 2022. Residents have raised their concerns over the relationship between Warwickshire police and the police and crime commissioner, who is understood to be a member of the Countryside Alliance—an organisation that campaigns for foxhunting.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to require that Warwickshire Police publish the contents of the protocol.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Warwickshire,

Declares that on Wednesday December 14th 2022, Warwickshire Police issued a Community Protection Notice (CPN) to the Warwickshire Hunt Limited after repeated anti-social use of public roads in Warwickshire; notes that the hunt put in an appeal meaning the CPN was unenforceable until the appeal had been heard; further notes that the CPN would have been a sensible and reasonable solution to keep the community safe on the roads; further notes that days before it was due in court, Warwickshire Police dropped the CPN, replacing it with a non-legally binding 'protocol'; further notes that Warwickshire Police are refusing to publish the contents of this secret agreement they now have with the Warwickshire Hunt; further notes that it has been reported that Warwickshire's Police and Crime Commissioner is a membership of Countryside Alliance which campaigns for fox hunting; and further declares that it would be in the best interests of the public and police to bring full transparency to this issue and make the protocol public.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to require that Warwickshire Police publish the contents of the protocol.

And the petitioners remain etc.]

[P002945]

Taiwan Strait

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

9.48 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I begin by saying the obvious: it has been a busy day for me, my good friend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) as we contend with China, the biggest threat and policy challenge that we face and obviously central to this Adjournment debate on Taiwan. Before I get fully into those remarks, I want to put on record my thanks to the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China secretariat, in particular Luke de Pulford, which does so much work for me and parliamentarians across the House on all our issues relating to China. The support it has given me for this debate is no different.

It is entirely right to start the debate on Taiwan by congratulating its new President-elect, Lai Ching-te, on his stunning victory in the recent presidential elections. I also pay tribute to the outgoing President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in late 2022 in Taipei. It has been said that the US President is the leader of the free world, but these days we could all agree that that burden is shared beyond the Oval Office by some others who are willing to stand up to authoritarianism and stand in defence of the democratic open society against the authoritarian closed alternative. Taiwan's outgoing President, along with others such as Ukraine's President Zelensky or Estonia's Prime Minister Kallas, is such a leader. Those of us in the House who believe in open society and the international rules-based system owe a great debt to those such as President Tsai Ing-wen for her public service.

Since the recent presidential elections in January, the context of cross-strait relations has changed. Beijing has sought to establish a new normal through an increased campaign of intimidation and grey zone aggression against Taiwan. China has responded to the outcome of the election by snatching a diplomatic ally, Nauru. It has altered an air route in the Taiwan strait and it is growing increasingly aggressive in its controls of Taiwan's Kinmen Islands. Reference to a "peaceful reunification" have been dropped entirely, and China's defence spending now stands at 7.2% of GDP—more than double what it was a decade ago.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On the hon. Gentleman's birthday no less, I continue the tradition of giving way to him.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. I think it would be in order for me to say for the benefit of *Hansard* that I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and others in this Chamber for their courageous stand, undiminished as they are. Does the hon. Gentleman

agree that the treatment of Taiwan exemplifies the attitude shown by the Chinese to democracy and freedom? It is also shown in their disgraceful behaviour towards the personal privacy of the hon. Gentleman and others and in hacking websites. Does he agree that steps must be taken to show that western democracy will not stand idly by while democratic decisions are overturned and China rules not by agreement but by aggression?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts much of my speech. I agree with every word he said.

China continues its aggressive sabre-rattling in the Taiwan strait by sending warships and planes across the median line of the Taiwan strait and air defence identification zone. It continues its enormous campaign of cyber-aggression against Taiwan's public and private institutions, including its critical infrastructure. Earlier this month a report by Taiwan's Defence Ministry described Beijing as having launched "multi-front saturated grey-zone" tactics to harass Taiwan. The previous report in September 2023 noted that China had

"increased the scale, frequency and intensity of drills and exercises against Taiwan"

in order to strengthen its operational preparation for a future invasion.

China is also deploying civilian assets to press its claims, dispatching civil aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles and weather balloons to fly close to and over Taiwan. It is using marine survey vessels and hydrographic survey ships as a cover for its military. It is also deploying a maritime militia, the largest fleet ever put to sea, to advance geopolitical objectives. Those moves are exactly what I mean by trying to establish a new normal, unilaterally changing the status quo across the Taiwan strait and escalating tensions in a region where China's expansionist behaviour has seen it employ nearly 80 grey zone tactics against neighbouring states. Our inability to deter that kind of aggression is what is emboldening Beijing and its strategic partners Russia and Iran, undermining our security and international security further.

At this point, it is important to consider what the people of Taiwan think. What does Taiwanese public opinion tell us? It is important to stress the value that people in Taiwan clearly place on having an open and democratic way of life. Some 67% of people identify primarily as Taiwanese. Only 3% identify as Chinese. Nearly half support formal independence. That rises to two-thirds if maintaining the status quo were not possible. Only one in 10 want unification with China, but that should not be misread as wanting unification under Communist party rule. That all stands in stark contrast to the view in mainland China, where more than half the population back a full-scale war to take control of Taiwan. It is also important to stress that China has never—never—ruled Taiwan, which is a democracy of 24 million people. When the Minister responds, will she state that the Government are committed to the principle of self-determination, which applies to the people of Taiwan?

Although the UK position continues to be defined by the one-China policy and the maintenance of the status quo, the one-China policy does not equate to, and has never equated to, an acceptance of Beijing's one-China principle that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China,

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

despite what Beijing might say. It is merely a recognition that Beijing makes such a claim. By its actions, China has unilaterally and consciously changed the status quo, and is seeking to create the new normal I have outlined. It has consistently done so along its border, over the Senkaku islands and in the South China sea. My question to the Minister is: why do the Government keep repeating that it is the UK position to maintain the status quo, as the status quo itself is being unilaterally changed and eroded by China?

Part of the reason I wanted to bring the debate forward is the importance of Taiwan to the global economy, as well as our own economy. In a recent report earlier this year, Bloomberg Economics estimated that the first-year price tag of a war in the Taiwan strait would sit at around \$10 trillion, equal to about 10% of global GDP, while a blockade would equate to about 5% of the global economy. One company, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, makes two in three semiconductors and 90% of the world's most advanced chips.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The TSMC makes a massive proportion of silicon chips. While the UK has niche strengths in semiconductor design and compound conductors, does the hon. Gentleman share the view that Britain will remain dependent on Taiwan for silicon chips for a long time to come?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. And this is not just a uniquely British issue; this is an issue for the entire western and democratic world. Chips are just one area of a great number where that overreliance is a threat to our economic and security interests. The total market cap of TSMC's 20 customers is worth around \$7.4 trillion. To put that in context, that is over twice the size of the British economy.

Taiwan sits at the nexus of shipping lanes that connects the world to China, South Korea and Japan. Together, they account for 40% of global manufacturing output. Half the global container fleet passes through the straits each year, dwarfing the traffic that passes through the Suez canal. With all that in mind, and given that it is the stated objective of the CCP to unify Taiwan with the mainland—either by force or by some other form of coercion—may I ask the Minister what modelling the Government have done of the impact of a war, or a blockade of Taiwan, on the UK economy? May I also ask her what industries and sectors would be most at risk? Is there a strategy for de-risking, and what engagement has there been with industry on a potential shock in the Taiwan strait?

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is about five years since I opened an Adjournment debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I hope you will forgive me for forgetting the rules.

Let me return to my questions to the Minister about de-risking. May I ask what engagement is taking place with public institutions, not least the devolved Governments

with responsibility for universities—just one part of our society that is hugely dependent on cash from China?

I suppose those questions can be boiled down to this: what is being done to build the economic resilience that is needed to prepare us for what would be an economic shock bigger than the financial crisis and the covid pandemic combined, or—I asked this question earlier, following the Government's response to the news of Chinese espionage—are we again going to turn up to a gunfight with a wooden spoon?

Let me turn to the UK's relations with Taiwan. The UK is Taiwan's third biggest trading partner in Europe and the 21st largest overall, with bilateral trade totalling £8.6 billion in 2022. I should also say, to be fair to the Government, that the enhanced trade partnership arrangement that the UK signed with Taiwan last November promises further growth, and is a good model for other European countries to follow. In response, as was expected, Beijing has demanded that the UK stop using trade to improve relations with Taiwan. Promoting cultural exchanges and people-to-people contact is obviously a good thing and we want to see more of it, but yet again Beijing has sought to stop Taiwan doing the same. It is persecuting artists and cultural figures, which is, of course, creating a chilling effect within Taiwan's creative industries.

I want to say something about Taiwan's resilience to hostile disinformation, not least in the context of its experience of dealing with such disinformation from China during the recent elections. I suggest to the Government that we should work with Taiwan and learn from its experience. During the elections we saw disinformation attacks on a previously unknown scale, including the sponsorship of conspiracies with the aim of undermining trust in the electoral process and in public institutions. There is much that we can learn from the way in which Taiwan deals with that. Its experience of hostile disinformation attacks is extraordinary, and it would be negligent of us not to seek to learn from it.

On relations more broadly, there are opportunities for the building of new partnerships, new exchanges and new relationships, but may I ask the Government to consider reviewing the status of the Taipei Representative Office, as appropriate, given the importance to the UK of Taiwan both as a trading partner and as a country with which we share a common interest and common values?

Today's age of geopolitical insecurity and competition is one that cannot be sat out. Gramsci described an "interregnum" in which "the old is dying" and the new is struggling to be born. Our old ways of thinking on China—on Taiwan—are indeed old, and we need new ideas fit for the modern age and the challenges that come with it. The China challenge that we must all confront is not, as some think, a faraway foreign policy issue, but the confluence of foreign and domestic policy that touches every aspect of our society: economics, technology, democracy, energy security, trade, and so much more. Taiwan is central to that challenge, and the competition between an open society and a closed society is represented as well as it is in Taiwan in only a few places. Just like our friends in Ukraine, our friends in Taiwan want to live in an open and free society, so we must continue to offer them our full support and our full solidarity—not in words, but in actions.

I ask the Minister genuinely to seek new ways to upgrade and modernise our relationship with Taiwan—new partnerships, new institutions, new collaborations, and new and positive opportunities. We should do that with confidence and a sense of purpose, but in the full knowledge that, in standing with Taiwan, we will be on the right side of history.

10.5 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing the debate, and I thank him and other hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. I will do my best to respond to all the points that have been raised.

Taiwan is a thriving economy of over 23 million people, with whom the UK shares both values and deep ties, and Members of this House will be familiar with the unique nature of our relationship. Although we have no diplomatic relations, we have strong unofficial links built on many shared interests, including security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, trade, innovation, climate action and global health. Our engagement on these important issues is supported by the British Office Taipei and the Taipei Representative Office in London.

The UK and Taiwan share a thriving £8 billion trade and investment relationship, which encompasses a wide range of goods and services, not least the UK's export of over £340 million-worth of Scotch whisky to Taiwan last year alone—always a good statistic. Our enhanced trade partnership, which we announced last year, will further strengthen this trade relationship. Meanwhile, as the hon. Gentleman highlighted, Taiwan produces most of the high-performance semiconductors that drive our global digital economy. It therefore has a critical role in the technology supply chains that underpin global markets, and it invests heavily in research innovation.

Richard Foord: The European Union currently has a 9% market share in semiconductors globally, and has set an ambition for 20% by the year 2030. Will the Minister enlighten us on the UK's ambition for semiconductor manufacture?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I do not have the figures to hand, but we want to see our flourishing science and technology co-operation continue to grow. That was set out in the Government's national semiconductor strategy that we published last year, to which I would point the hon. Gentleman.

We hold regular expert-level talks with Taiwan on a range of important issues, especially energy and health. We are close partners on climate action, and are increasingly sharing our expertise on offshore wind and multi-use port development. Our enhanced trade partnership, which is a really important developing area, will further deepen our mutual co-operation on net zero technologies, which are vital to both energy security and our shared imperative to keep global temperatures from rising even more perilously.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South eloquently stated that the UK's long-standing position is that we believe the Taiwan issue should be settled peacefully by people on both sides of the strait, without the threat or use of force or coercion. The UK and the wider world have a clear interest in enduring peace and stability in

the strait and throughout the Indo-Pacific, because a conflict across the strait would have a tragic human cost, but it would also be a tragedy for livelihoods across the region and have a wider global impact. Taiwan and the Taiwan strait are vital links in the global economy, driving prosperity and innovation. As the hon. Gentleman highlighted, a conflict could destroy world trade by up to 10% of the global economy, according to Bloomberg analysis. No country, whether high, middle or low income, could possibly shield itself from the economic repercussions of such a crisis, including China. That is why this Government are clear that we do not support any unilateral attempts to alter the status quo of the Taiwan strait.

I would like to assure Members that we are continually working to strengthen the UK's contingency planning across a range of international challenges, including threats to global supply chains. I hope that Members will be aware of the recently launched critical imports and supply chain strategy, published by the Department for Business and Trade, which tackles some of these issues in greater depth than I will set out this evening.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Of course we would all agree with the Minister that none of us wants to see change to the status quo—certainly not a violent change to the status quo—in cross-strait relations, but there is a change, and China is creating this new normal as we speak. It has been doing so for some time now and the strategy of the Government and our western partners is clearly not deterring that, so what changes will we see from the Minister and from our western partners? On the issue of the Bloomberg analysis, is there also Government analysis and will she publish it?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We have a great deal of work ongoing, as the hon. Gentleman would expect, and in due course I am sure we will bring it to the House. Importantly, he has stated clearly—I know he speaks for all Members even though there are only a few of us here this evening—that the UK Government's position is one that is held by all Members of the House and that it should be clearly heard in support of that Taiwan status quo.

The hon. Member mentioned that Taiwan held its presidential and legislative elections just a few weeks ago. As my noble Friend the Foreign Secretary said at the time, those elections are testament to Taiwan's incredibly vibrant democracy, and I join him in offering warm congratulations to William Lai and his party on his successful election. However, this comes at a time when China's actions are threatening to undermine peace and stability in the strait. China is refusing to renounce the use of force in pursuit of its objectives. It is deploying economic power to coerce countries with which it disagrees over Taiwan, as it did with Lithuania just recently, and it continually takes assertive actions near Taiwan, including military flights, which are escalating tensions. This is not the conduct of a responsible international actor, and it is not conducive to ensuring peace and stability across the strait.

That is why the UK continues to work with our international partners to underscore the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan strait, as we did most recently in our statement by G7 leaders in December. The Foreign Secretary reiterated this in his statement

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

following the election that I have just mentioned. That is why the UK continues to support Taiwan's inclusion internationally, where that is clearly in the global public interest. This Government believe that the people of Taiwan have a valuable contribution to make on many issues of global concern, and that the international community should be able to benefit from Taiwanese expertise in a range of areas. We therefore continue to work hard with our partners to support Taiwan's participation in international organisations, as a member where statehood is not a prerequisite and as an observer or guest where it is. For example, we continue to make the case for Taiwan's participation at the World Health Assembly, as its inclusion benefits global health, including through its expert participation in technical meetings and information exchanges.

To conclude, the Government continue the UK's long-standing approach to relations across the Taiwan strait. We continue to engage with Taiwan within the bounds of our unofficial relationship, which brings many benefits to both of us. We continue to work closely with our international partners to advocate for peace and stability and to discourage any activity that undermines the status quo. We continue to advocate for Taiwan's meaningful international participation. Through these channels, the UK has an important role to play in supporting continued peace and stability in the strait, and we can only benefit from that continued engagement with Taiwan as a thriving democracy and an important economic partner.

Question put and agreed to.

10.14 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 25 March 2024

[GORDON HENDERSON *in the Chair*]

James Bulger Murder: Public Inquiry

4.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 206851 relating to a public inquiry into the James Bulger murder case.

I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank the Petitions Committee for granting this opportunity to debate the petition, which refers to the concerns that people, particularly James Bulger's family, have about what has taken place since James's brutal murder on 12 February 1993 and their belief that there have been failures in the system.

The petition, signed by 213,624 people, over 8,000 of whom are from Knowsley, was in place in 2018, but has been subject to a lengthy delay because of a Parole Board hearing in relation to further offences committed by one of James's killers, known at the time as Jon Venables, which was judged to render any debate on the subject sub judice. Now that the Parole Board has rejected Jon Venables's application for parole, I am grateful that this debate can now take place.

I intend to begin by reiterating the sickening and tragic circumstances of James's murder. I apologise in advance that those listening will find it harrowing to hear this account of what happened, but it is necessary to remind ourselves why this matter is so visceral, and consequently there are questions, the answers to which are long overdue.

Jon Venables, then aged 10, together with another child of a similar age, abducted two-year-old James, took him to a railway line and savagely murdered him. Denise Fergus, James's mother, described in her book "I Let Him Go" what occurred on the shopping trip to the Strand shopping centre in Bootle on the day that James was abducted. She said:

"The shopping centre was packed full... James couldn't believe his luck that for once he was in among the crowd. I held on to his hand but inevitably he would run a yard or so ahead of me, always where I could see him."

The shopping trip concluded with one last stop, a butcher's, which is where the abduction took place. In her own words, she describes in the book what then occurred:

"There has been so much written about what happened... and so many opinions given, but I want to make one thing clear: I absolutely did not leave my baby outside the butchers on his own—I would never have done that. He was with me and holding my hand as we went inside. The only time I let go of his hand was to pay for the chops I had bought, and he was standing right beside me. I picked out the meat I wanted and took my bag from my shoulder, got my purse out, opened it to count the... money and, when I looked down, James was gone."

She goes on:

"There were rumours that circulated afterwards that I had been shoplifting with my mum. Firstly, I have never stolen anything in my life and, secondly, my mum wasn't even with me on that day. If extra proof was needed, my whole shopping trip was captured and examined frame by frame once the police went through

edited CCTV footage. It clearly shows that before 3.39pm I was shopping and after 3.39 my world came crashing down as I frantically tried to find my boy."

Two days passed, with James's family understandably in extreme distress as the police and family members searched for James, having found additional CCTV footage that showed he had been taken away by two older boys. On the Sunday following James's abduction, Denise was called to attend a police station. After an agonising 40-minute wait, one of the police officers investigating the case, Geoff McDonald, told her, "We've found him, and it's not good news."

As the MP for the area, I was as appalled as everyone else locally, but the wave of public horror was nothing compared with the trauma experienced by James's family. To lose a child at any time goes against the natural order and against the expectations of any parent, but to do so in such harrowing circumstances is indescribable.

Subsequently, the two boys who had abducted and killed James, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, were arrested, prosecuted and found guilty. During the ensuing years, many questions and frustrations about how matters have since been dealt with have been raised. I will refer to some of those questions later. In the meantime, I want to place on record a statement that Denise has helpfully provided me with:

"Honourable Members, I ask you with a mother's heart to consider the questions and the pleas I have laid before you. Try to understand that no mother can simply accept that errors were made or that crucial facts were brushed under the carpet in the case of my child's murder. For 31 years, I have fought tirelessly—not because it will bring my precious James back, but because he, and every child like him, still deserves justice.

This isn't just about the past; it's about the future. It's about ensuring that no other family has to endure a similar ordeal, that no other child's life is undervalued by the justice system. We have the power to make changes, to right the wrongs, and to honour the memory of those we've lost by protecting the innocent.

Please, I beseech you, take these matters to heart. Consider the impact of these errors and omissions, not just on my family, but on the integrity of our justice system. James's voice was silenced too soon, but through your actions, his legacy can be one of change and hope."

As I mentioned earlier, I have some questions for the Minister, and look forward to his response. First, why was the evidence gathered by Merseyside police indicating that Thompson and Venables sexually assaulted James prior to killing him not presented at the trial at Preston Crown court, or to the Parole Board when Venables was released in 2001 and again in 2013? Who made those decisions?

Secondly, Venables's 2010 conviction for possession of extreme child pornography proves his sexual interest in children. Was that sexual interest in children missed by all the experts, or was it known? Thirdly, was proper consideration given to the attempted abduction of another child earlier on the day that James was murdered—indicating premeditation—at the trial and, later, at the parole hearings? Fourthly, were Thompson and Venables pronounced rehabilitated in order to avoid them entering adult custody, without proper regard to the potential risk posed to children? What representations did Lord Chief Justice Woolf make to the Parole Board?

Before I conclude, I would like to cover a couple of points. First, although not directly related to the petition, a few comments in some of the media coverage of events at the time of James's murder and since have been

[*Sir George Howarth*]

unacceptably intrusive in respect of family members. At the time, in breach of the guidance from the then Press Complaints Commission, the intrusion into private grief was callous and cruel. In principle, there is a remedy available by means of a formal complaint on those grounds. However, many people affected are understandably wary of using that, as a published apology in print is usually small, hidden and accompanied by a repetition of the original intrusion. Breaches should incur heavy penalties on media outlets.

Secondly, the question I referred to earlier exposed the fact that the initial response, whether judicial or on the part of Departments, often becomes increasingly opaque and confusing as new information comes to light. A good example of that problem can be found in the Government's response to the petition, which unfortunately is both overly defensive and vague about how the transparency of Parole Board decision making could be increased and how its decisions could be challenged.

In February 2010 Jon Venables was recalled into custody, following which Sir David Omand was commissioned to conduct a review into the handling of the Jon Venables case between 2001 and 2010. Sir David concluded that the case management of Jon Venables's case more than met the national standards laid down for the supervision of serious offenders in level 3 multi-agency public protection arrangements. He further concluded with reference to the further serious offence:

“Events classed as low probability do unfortunately... happen despite everyone's best efforts—that is the difference between low risk and no risk.” I should say that I know Sir David personally and have great respect for his public service over the years. His conclusions, however, inevitably reflect the narrow terms of reference that he was set. As the helpful House of Commons Library debate pack points out, for example, the terms of reference “did not extend to Venables' time at the Red Bank secure unit”, and the review “did not, therefore, examine allegations reported in the press” that Venables had had an inappropriate relationship “with a female member of staff at the unit”.

The petition calls for a public inquiry to best address the issues that remain to be cleared up. On the basis of the Government's response to the petition, regrettably, it seems unlikely that a public inquiry will be granted. If I am correct in that assumption, I would ask the Minister to consider what alternative might be appropriate. I do not expect that he will be in a position to do so today, but I urge him to give the matter serious consideration, because it is important that those questions and concerns are answered as fully and comprehensively as possible.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Before I call Members to speak, I remind them that there is a court injunction regarding the release of information related to James Bulger's murderers, including information about their current identity and whereabouts, and I ask Members to be mindful of that.

4.43 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): For the bulk of my time I am going to dedicate my voice, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth)

also did in part, to the voice of Denise Fergus, James's mother. Like my right hon. Friend, I have a statement from her with me:

“Honourable Members of the House of Commons, my name is Denise Fergus, and I am present today as a mother whose heart has been shattered and whose life has been forever darkened by the loss of my dear son, James. For over 30 years, I have carried the unbearable weight of his absence, a void that can never be filled, a pain that never subsides.

When James was so cruelly taken from us, the justice system promised retribution and rehabilitation for his killers. Yet the sentences they received meant they would never face the reality of an adult prison, never undergo the rigorous rehabilitation that such a heinous crime demands. As time passed, I learned more about the circumstances of my son's case, details that, had they been considered, could have significantly altered the course of justice.

I was in the depths of despair, unable to attend the trial, feeling as though I had been cast adrift in an endless night. The world around me was devoid of light, and even if I had been present in the courtroom, the words would have passed through me, leaving no mark, for I was consumed by grief.

The repeated reoffending of one of James's killers, the last time being six years ago, reignited my fight for justice. I had always feared he posed a threat to society, and my worst fears were confirmed when he was convicted once more. It was then that I requested the full details of the post-mortem report, bracing myself for the truth I had long suspected—that my little boy had suffered injuries of a sexual nature. The confirmation left me numb, yet it also steeled my resolve to fight harder than ever to ensure that such a person would never walk free to endanger another child, another family.

There are so many unanswered questions that haunt me. Why were critical aspects of my son's case overlooked? Why did it seem as though the most damning evidence was swept aside? Why? In the hope that I would never seek the truth? Why was the attempted abduction charge not given to the jury to consider? I am here to say that I will never stop fighting for James. He cannot stand up for himself, so it is my duty as his mother to be his voice, his champion.

I implore you, Members of the House, to hear my plea. We must scrutinise the errors that were made, the sentencing that fell short, the conduct at Red Bank House, and the reports that were omitted from the Ormand review—reports that Sir David Ormand knew of but did not disclose. I read these omissions with a heavy heart, knowing that they represent a failure in the pursuit of justice for my son.

No parent should endure what I have. The loss of a child is an unspeakable tragedy, but to know that justice has not been fully served deepens the wound. I ask you to stand with me, to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated, and to uphold the principle that every child's life is precious and deserving of justice. Thank you for listening to a mother's enduring love and her unyielding quest for truth.”

Those are Denise's words. I have got to know Denise personally over the last weeks and months, and I seek to lend my voice to her campaign for getting to the truth and accessing justice. It is one thing for us all to read about Jon Venables being recalled to prison in the newspapers; it is a completely different thing to live every single day in fear, waiting for the next piece of news. That is what is written on Denise's face when I sit opposite her.

In 2018, my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley tabled a parliamentary question about breaches by Thompson and Venables between 2001 and 2018. A copy of that question is provided in the very helpful debate pack that was collated by the House of Commons Library before this debate. The answer to that question revealed that 70 breaches of their life orders had been found in the 17 years between 2001 and 2018.

Denise tells me that the issues that should be considered include how the Omand review's terms of reference did not include the time when Venables is alleged to have had sexual relations with somebody who was meant to be in charge of him, which my right hon. Friend highlighted, and the previous abduction. She also tells me that when breaches have occurred, she has not been told about them in the manner promised to her by all sorts of standards set out for victims. Actually, when Venables was last recalled, Denise was not informed until a week later, and that was only because it had been in the press. The standard of communication that should have been afforded to her and the rest of James's family in this case has not been met.

I have dealt with many family members of people who suffered murder. When a person suffers such a heinous crime, each and every time that the state does not live up to an obligation that it promised the victim it would fulfil, the belief that the case was handled well in the first place is eroded a bit. Each and every time something has gone wrong in this case, over the last however many decades, it is a reminder that things were missed, that things were not covered in the court case, that things did not happen. We then wonder why families call for a public inquiry. It is because things got missed. We all know from the many cases that we have handled that things get missed, and when things get missed once, they get missed again in the future. In that future, since James's death, things have been missed in this case.

The glare of all the media is on this case. I handle cases where nobody knows the name of the little boy or girl who was killed, and I suspect that Denise Fergus is getting a better service than most. The point of having a public inquiry and truth and justice-seeking reviews is not just to get retribution, or to satisfy and tick a box for a grieving family. It is to ensure that our systems are correct. My own child is sat in this room with us today. I want to know that when I am not with him, systems are in place to ensure that the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed. For so many years, James's mother has felt that she was the last to know, that she was not informed, and that she had to find out, years after the fact, about the sexual violence. It is no wonder then that we end up at a point where a public inquiry is requested. It is the very least that they deserve.

4.53 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Henderson. I thank my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), for bringing forward this debate today, as well as the thousands of constituents who signed the petition to have this debate heard.

The horrific abduction, torture and subsequent murder of James Bulger over 31 years ago shocked the nation, particularly my home city of Liverpool where it took place. It remains an act of unimaginable evil and something that continues to horrify the people of my city and beyond. I commend the bravery and persistence of James's mum, Denise Fergus, and her husband, Stuart, in keeping their son's legacy alive in their campaign for truth, justice and transparency.

I am not legally trained in criminal law, but as a human, a citizen and a mother myself, I cannot help but assert that it is in the interest of the public and their

safety, particularly that of young children, that Jon Venables should remain behind bars. I welcome the decision of the Parole Board late last year to refuse Venables's release, which said he could not be trusted outside of jail. While there is no doubt the same issue will rear its ugly head in a couple of years' time, I hope that common sense will once again prevail. Let us not forget that Venables is indeed a danger to the public, having been found to have reoffended not once, but twice. I am a firm believer in rehabilitation, but I also acknowledge that not everyone can be rehabilitated, and I think that this is a case in point.

Kym Morris, the chair of the James Bulger Memorial Trust, summarises the demands of the campaign effectively when she says that

“Victim families should have full access to all of the transcripts, evidence, everything. If you went to a trial, you would have access to all of this, so what difference does a parole hearing have? That's what we should do going forward.”

I know that the Ministry of Justice is in some ways alive to that call. Since 2022, allowing victims some access to observe an offender's hearing has been trialled, with a view to rolling out the scheme more widely in the future. I urge the MOJ to continue moving at pace in overseeing the delivery of the “Parole Board Strategy and Business Plan 2023-2025”, which specifically sets out the Parole Board's aims in relation to openness and transparency for the next two years and for the next five years. For the next two years, the following steps are outlined:

“Victims able to observe parole hearings with greater ease across the country... Panels are trained and have the necessary guidance to ensure victim observed hearings are effective... Support evidence-based research and analysis of both our current operating model and impact of reforms”.

Then, for the next five years—a period that is crucial for securing lasting change—these steps are set out:

“A more court like operating model”,

and

“Redacted release decisions published in all cases by the secretariat under delegated authority.”

However, that is not what happened last year, when the Parole Board denied a public hearing into Venables's parole decision. That was hugely disappointing, given that many people believe that the necessary adjustments could have been made to comply with the original High Court injunction regarding Venables's identity. Of course I respect the independence of the Parole Board, but I have no doubt that wholesale cultural and operational shift at the political level is needed to deliver the changes that are required to give confidence and reassurance to victims and their families.

The historical failings in the system with regard to Venables are clear, and retrospective transparency can and must be applied. The Omand review in 2010 did little to generate confidence in the original decision in 2001 regarding Venables's release. The mitigating circumstances leading up to his release and any potential influence of others at Red Bank who allegedly engaged in gross misconduct must call into question the original decision. Why did experts consider Jon Venables to have been rehabilitated? I make no personal judgment on that decision, but I find it staggering to assert that, by denying a public inquiry, lessons cannot be learned.

I support a public inquiry. Those in power trot out the usual lines—“It's too expensive, time-consuming and resource-intensive. There's nothing to see here.” Even after

[*Paula Barker*]

events like Hillsborough, the penny does not seem to have dropped that victims might—just might—refrain from calling for such inquiries if the system and public sector agencies afforded victims transparency in the first place. If there is “nothing to see here,” let us have all the facts laid bare. The number of signatures on this petition demonstrates the clear strength of feeling on this matter, with more than 3,000 signatories from my Liverpool, Wavertree constituency alone.

Our city of Liverpool remembers James, with fondness for the beautiful little boy he was, and with sadness for the fact that he did not get to live a life that was full and happy or to fulfil his ambitions and potential. That potential was sadly taken away from him and his family in the most unimaginable and horrific of ways. To lose a child in such circumstances should never happen; for his family to still be fighting for justice 31 years later should never have happened and is unbelievably cruel. I hope that Ministers listen today. Once again I pay tribute to the bravery and persistence of Denise and Stuart Fergus and their wider family, as they fight for justice in memory of James.

4.59 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall, and James’s family for initiating this petition, signed by 213,000 people, of whom 5,000 are in my constituency. The New Strand shopping centre in my constituency is where James was abducted from; he was subsequently abused and murdered. The case still resonates with my constituents, as it does across the country, but particularly in Merseyside. I pay tribute to James’s family for their bravery in coming here today and thank them for that.

I do not have a great deal to add to what has been said by my right hon. Friend and by my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker). They are, as ever, eloquent in outlining clearly and unambiguously what should happen. They have set out the context and they have set the scene; I really hope that the Minister will listen.

I will not take up much time, as I do not want to dilute what has already been said. The Inquiries Act 2005 is in place and provides the capacity for inquiries to be set up, because in the past, we did not have enough inquiries into the challenges to justice that people have. Whatever that inquiry is, we are here to ensure that people get justice. In that regard, the Inquiries Act enables us as a society to consider and respond to events of major public concern. Some 213,000 people signing a petition, including, as I said, 5,000 people in my constituency, indicates the public concern about this case.

In 2017, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee expressed concern about the ability of Parliament—hon. Members—to influence, potentially, when a public inquiry is called, and to some extent our oversight of it. That is our job, and we are here today to ask, demand, insist—whatever term we use—that the Government set up a public inquiry.

It is for a public inquiry to consider all the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley and my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley and for Liverpool, Wavertree, so I will not prejudge. We have heard a list of issues that such an inquiry should look into, and I wholeheartedly agree. My job is to back up my colleagues and say that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has asked for this. The House of Lords has also asked for a more significant ability to intervene in relation to calling for public inquiries, as has the Institute for Government. Those bodies do not throw such recommendations and suggestions around for the fun of it, but because of our experience in this country, time after time, of a lack of justice for victims.

I therefore wholeheartedly support the call of my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley for this public inquiry; I also absolutely and unequivocally support the right of the family to call for—to demand—this inquiry; and I support my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley and for Liverpool, Wavertree, who are absolutely fantastic in their pursuit of such issues. I thank them too.

5.3 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) for leading the e-petition debate calling for a public inquiry into the conduct and management of those responsible for the death of young James Bulger, as well as, of course, the case management itself.

The abduction and murder of James shocked the nation to its very core. Many of us can still visualise the CCTV film of his abduction and the shattering events that took place 31 years ago, in 1993. I know that I speak for the Opposition and the whole House in saying that the crimes of Jon Venables and Robert Thompson were absolutely horrifying. It is impossible, as a dad and grandad, to even come close to imagining the pain, suffering and trauma that Denise Fergus and Ralph Bulger have had to go through and will continue to go through for the rest of their lives. Our thoughts and most sincere sympathies remain with them and their wider family. We have considerable respect for the dignity shown in their grief.

The way that Venables’s case was handled continues to be of interest and concern to the public at large. The e-petition was signed by 213,000 people and was in place in 2018, as referenced by my right hon. Friend, but has been subject to delay because of a Parole Board hearing, which rendered any debate on it sub judice. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the way he spoke with sympathy and empathy while demanding answers to a series of precise and sensitive questions. Denise was able to speak directly through him and through my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips).

As we have heard, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson were 10 years old at the time of the murder. They were sentenced to detention during Her Majesty’s pleasure, a life sentence for children who commit murder. The case was subject to early scrutiny about the length of the tariff; eventually, in October 2000, the Lord Chief Justice

ruled that the tariff should expire immediately, noting that any decision on when Thompson and Venables should be released would be for the Parole Board.

Venables was held in a secure children's unit, Red Bank community home, until his release under licence in 2001. As Denise said in her statement, he had not by then served time in an adult prison. He was then granted a new identity and a lifetime High Court injunction was issued to restrict the publication of information about the new identity. But Venables, as we have heard, was recalled to custody in February 2010 and convicted in July that year of the possession of indecent images of children. His crimes and convictions led to all manner of questions about how he had been managed and supervised. Both the probation service and the Parole Board operate on two basic principles: public safety and public trust. They exist to keep us safe, to protect us from dangerous criminals and to ensure that the public, especially victims, have faith in the justice system.

In response, the Justice Secretary commissioned Sir David Omand to review the Venables case from 2001 to 2010. The review's terms of reference did not extend to Venables's time at the Red Bank secure unit. It did not, therefore, examine allegations reported in the press—as we have already heard—that Venables had a relationship with a female member of staff at the unit. The Omand review concluded that the case was managed “appropriately” by the relevant authorities. He said,

“I have established that despite the continuing low underlying risk assessment significant resources were applied by the probation service and Home Office (and then by the Ministry of Justice after the machinery of government changes in 2007) to this case, allowing case management to much more than meet the national standards laid down for the supervision of serious offenders at the MAPPA 3 level.”

He further concluded that the professional assessments were appropriate, given the evidence available at the time. He said that Venables

“did go on to commit a further serious offence, but that does not in itself mean that the assessments made throughout the case of the low risk he posed to the public were wrong headed. I conclude that they were the correct professional assessment on the evidence then available. Events classed as low probability do unfortunately sometimes happen despite everyone's best efforts—that is the difference between low risk and no risk.”

Venables was again released under licence in August 2013, but was recalled to custody a second time in November 2017 for the same offence. He received a 40-month period of imprisonment and remains in prison, having been refused parole at private hearings held in September 2020 and December 2023.

The e-petition mentions specific concerns around why Venables was judged to have been rehabilitated. While the probation and Parole Board documents are not in the public domain, it is clear that the public would question how the decision was made, especially in 2013 when Venables was again released from prison, only to be recalled. Where possible, the Government should be transparent about the decision-making process, especially the adequacy of the risk assessments carried out; how a judgment was reached about his rehabilitation; and, equally, how the judgment of rehabilitation was challenged and cross-examined.

Although we had the Omand review in 2010, which looked in detail at how Venables was managed and overseen on his first release, we have not had a similar review about his release in 2013 or subsequent recall

to prison. That is why a number of questions remain outstanding, including about how the judgment was made in 2013 that it was safe to release him. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley highlighted the dozens of other breaches of Venables's licence conditions. Were they not a sign that this guy should not have been released?

The probation service has a vital duty and role to play in public protection, especially for those being released from prison having committed the most serious offences, such as murder. Although I am not commenting on the specific nature of Venables's recall in 2017, we on the Opposition side of the House have long been concerned about the gaps in our criminal justice system, which mean that dangerous offenders are being released, are not being properly monitored or assessed by the probation service, and are going on to commit further serious offences. That poses a huge risk to public safety and undermines faith and confidence in our justice system.

We know that our probation service has been through shake-up after shake-up over the last 14 years, including privatisation in 2014; the cutting of senior and experienced staff; and record-high workloads for the staff. In the Minister's response, I hope that he can outline what action the Government are taking to ensure that our probation service and its staff are equipped, trained and supported to manage high-risk offenders better and how we can ensure that the public, especially victims and their families, can have faith in them.

As hon. Members know, the Parole Board rejected an application for Jon Venables to be released from prison last year. The Parole Board operates independently of the Government and cited a number of factors when it rejected his application to be released. I note that in reporting that decision, the Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), mentioned the Government's continued commitment to reforming the Parole Board. The Parole Board needs to ensure that it protects the safety of the public and that the public, especially victims and their family members, have faith in its decisions. For that reason, we have long supported and called for a mechanism whereby the Secretary of State can query a Parole Board decision, with an independent court acting as a backstop. We believe that that is a fair and practical reform that will build trust in the Parole Board and equally allow for the continued separation between elected politicians and our judiciary.

I conclude by reiterating the complex and sensitive nature of what we are here to discuss, and I look forward to the Minister shining further light on the case following the questions posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley and by the family through my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley, for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd). As was said in Denise's statement, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley put on record, this is about ensuring that no other family has to endure a similar ordeal. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.13 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Henderson. At the outset, may I join right hon. and hon. Members in acknowledging the dedication and determination of Mrs Denise Fergus, James's mother,

[*Edward Argar*]

in campaigning on this petition and successfully securing a debate on this hugely important matter through the Petitions Committee? Sadly, in this Chamber and in the main Chamber we are, on occasion, called upon to debate deeply sombre, traumatic and saddening matters, but it is right that we do so and that we cast that light upon them. I am grateful for the tone adopted by all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken; it is appropriate that this debate has been conducted in that manner.

I pay tribute to Denise Fergus for her and her family's tireless and dignified campaign to obtain justice for her son James, who was so cruelly taken from her in February 1993 when he was just two years old. We have heard from the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) about the circumstances, which to this day remain shocking and harrowing. No one can fail to be shaken by them still, even after the passage of time.

The murder of James was a crime that rightly shocked the nation and continues to do so. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), highlighted the harrowing images on CCTV. I recall seeing those images when I was still at school, many years ago. I recall the dreadful inhumanity—the evil—that we all realised had taken place. I remember not just the horrendous events themselves, but the shock that they were carried out by two 10-year-old boys.

I am grateful for the recognition in the course of this debate that many of the decisions made in the context of the case were made by independent bodies: the Crown Prosecution Service, the sentencing judge and the Parole Board. I will turn to that point in a moment. As has been said, Thompson and Venables were released in 2001 on the recommendation of the Parole Board, subject to a lifelong anonymity order granted by Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, to which you quite rightly drew our attention, Mr Henderson.

Thompson has remained in the community on life licence without further offence. However, Venables has twice been recalled to custody and subsequently convicted of further offences involving the possession and sharing of illegal images of children: first in 2010, when he was sentenced to 24 months' imprisonment, and then, having been re-released on the direction of the Parole Board in 2013, again in 2018, when he was sentenced to 40 months' imprisonment. Since Venables became eligible to be considered for release on life licence, following recall, the Parole Board has found on three successive occasions, most recently in December last year, that it remains necessary on the grounds of public protection that he remain confined to custody.

Against that background, I think anyone could well understand the concerns surrounding the first release decision in 2001 and, specifically, understand and appreciate the call for a public inquiry. However, although I fully appreciate the significant concerns that have been expressed and the strength and sincerity of feelings on the issue, I am afraid that I am not today in a position to announce a public inquiry. I appreciate that that will be disappointing to those in the Public Gallery, as well as to Opposition Members. If the right hon. Member for Knowsley considers it helpful, I am open to meeting him and his hon. Friends to have a further conversation about the matters that we are debating.

As hon. Members have highlighted, the then Government commissioned the Omand review, which was published on 23 November 2010. The review did not question the decision that the Parole Board made in recommending Venables's release in 2001, based on the evidence at that time. The review looked in considerable detail at the management of Venables and made detailed recommendations to address the shortcomings in supervision that had marked some of that period. The subsequent period of supervision, from 2013 to 2017, was consistently tight; in fact, it was the means by which the further offending came to light and a successful prosecution could subsequently be mounted.

I fully understand why the nature of that further offending gives rise to significant concerns as to whether the decisions to release Venables were defective. It may be helpful if I briefly provide a little more explanation about how the Parole Board determines whether prisoners serving life or other indeterminate sentences are released. For any offender sentenced to life imprisonment, a minimum period for that imprisonment is set for the purposes of punishment and deterrence. After the minimum term has been served, by law the prisoner may continue to be detained in custody only so long as their risk requires it—in other words, unless the prisoner's risk can be effectively mitigated and managed in the community by means of the obligations and restrictions of a post-release licence.

Where it issues a release direction, the Parole Board is concluding that the probation service and partner agencies, taking account of the powers that arise from a post-release licence, have the means to mitigate remaining risks and so prevent the public from being exposed to undue risk. Obviously any such decision involves a judgment, and regrettably the Parole Board can never be completely certain that any prisoner it releases will not reoffend. When the Parole Board determined in 2001 that Thompson and Venables were safe to be released, it took account of risk assessments and reports provided by various professionals. By the time of their release, each had completed their minimum term.

When Venables was recalled to custody in 2010, the then Secretary of State for Justice, Jack Straw, asked Sir David Omand, the former permanent secretary to the Home Office, to undertake a comprehensive review of the management of Venables and set the terms of reference for that review. A version of the review was published in November 2010; I say "version" because, as hon. Members will be aware, it was redacted to comply with the terms of the court anonymity order. The redacted version is available on gov.uk.

In his review Sir David noted that Venables had been detained at Red Bank secure unit, run by St Helens Borough Council. During his time at Red Bank, an allegation was made about an incident involving Venables. I am aware of the press reports speculating about the nature of that incident, but I have seen no contemporaneous official account of it. I appreciate that this will potentially be frustrating for those listening, but I therefore believe that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the basis of the press reports alone.

Jess Phillips: I do not think anybody here would expect that; we are not judge and jury in this building. However, as the Minister said, Jack Straw was the last person to ask for a review. If, as the Minister has outlined,

he cannot commit to a full public inquiry, is there not a case for another review to look into not only Red Bank, but the period of further mistakes since 2010? All we have currently is a review covering 2001 to 2010. Surely there were errors made post that period that need some transparency.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. At the risk of potentially damaging her reputation, let me say that I have huge respect for her; I did a lot of work with her when I was the victims Minister and she held the role of shadow safeguarding Minister. I appreciate her point. Without prejudice to any decision made, I have made the offer to meet with the right hon. Member for Knowsley. I am happy to have a conversation; I hope the hon. Lady knows from our previous interactions that I do not like to raise expectations that I cannot meet, so I do not intend to do that, but I will have a conversation with the right hon. Gentleman.

The Home Office asked an experienced former prison governor, Arthur de Frisching, to look into the incident at Red Bank. It appears, some years after the event, that no formal reason was found to publish a report into the incident at the time. St Helens Borough Council observed in a public comment that all allegations had been thoroughly investigated, but no copy of that could be found in the archives of either the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. While the terms of reference for the review began with the preparations for the release of Venables, Sir David stated that he had found nothing in the material that he considered to cast doubt on the fundamental judgments made by the Parole Board at the time that the statutory release test was deemed to be satisfied.

Venables was recalled when police officers, having arrived to escort him to a new address on account of concerns for his safety, caught him trying to remove the hard drive from his computer. That led to an investigation, which resulted in his first conviction for downloading and sharing illegal images of children. In Sir David's report, he made a number of recommendations designed to strengthen the future management of Venables and indeed of Thompson. Those recommendations recognised that the primary responsibility for supervising Venables lay with the probation service, working closely with the police and other relevant agencies under the statutory MAPPA arrangements. In Venables's case, that meant the key actions to manage his risks being discussed and agreed at formal meetings attended by senior representatives of the probation service and police services, as well as other highly qualified specialists such as psychiatrists.

When Venables was re-released in 2013 at the direction of the Parole Board, the board set the robust licence conditions that it considered necessary to enable the probation service and its MAPPA partners to manage him effectively, mitigate his risk and help to protect the public. There was now a clear difference between the way he had been managed in the period from 2001 to 2010, as covered by the Omand review, and the way he would be managed from 2013 onwards.

It is deeply regrettable that Venables was discovered in 2017 to have been once again downloading and sharing illegal images of children. However, unlike in 2010, his offences were quickly discovered as a direct result of the monitoring and supervision that had been put in place, and there were immediate consequences,

with his return to custody. As I have set out, the Parole Board has now concluded three times that Venables remains too high-risk to be released on life licence. For his most recent review, my right hon. and learned Friend the Justice Secretary submitted an overarching Secretary of State view recommending that Venables remain in prison on account of substantial concerns over his risk of reoffending and the risk of harm to the public.

I will endeavour to respond to the specific questions from the right hon. Member for Knowsley with as much information as I can, because I believe that that is important. Before I do so, I note that the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd) have highlighted, in their different ways, the impact that such matters can have on victims' trust in the system. As a former victims Minister working with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley and others, I saw that at first hand. That transparency, that trust and that engagement are central to building the confidence of those who are or have been victims of crimes in the system.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley talked about notifications—or the lack thereof—of breaches. My understanding is that the supervising agencies concluded, based on a number of those breaches, that the threshold for recall to custody was not met; a recall therefore did not take place. The notification comes where a recall takes place, so because the probation officers and others did not deem the threshold for recall to have been met, there would not have been a notification. However, I am happy to take that point away and reflect on it further. The hon. Lady and I were on a Bill Committee in which we looked at the victims code, notifications and victim liaison officers; I am very happy to have another reflection on that.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will answer two further points and then give way to the shadow Minister.

On transparency, we have made progress since the original Parole Board hearings and the original case. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree for highlighting the steps forward. Victims may now apply for a summary of a board decision; they can also apply for the hearing to be held in public. Discretion still rests with the chair of the Parole Board, who takes into account a range of factors, but there is now the opportunity for a public hearing to be requested and potentially granted in the interests of transparency.

On the shadow Minister's point about the powers to challenge decisions and suchlike, in July 2019 the Parole Board rules were changed to allow the Secretary of State to apply for the reconsideration of a release decision. Victims of crime and the families of victims of crime can also now make representations to the Secretary of State as to why they should put forward an overarching Secretary of State view calling for the Parole Board to reconsider or not release.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the Minister for giving way and for answering the point I raised. I want to go back to the 70 referrals. I accept that they were referrals, rather than confirmed breaches. However, even if 10 or 15 of those referrals were considered to be breaches of his licence, although they may well have been minor, do they not have

[*Alex Cunningham*]

a roll-up effect, where he is constantly breaching or being referred for breaches, and therefore more serious consideration should have been taken?

Edward Argar: The context in which I addressed that was the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley about notifications and thresholds. Those previous breaches—where, cumulatively, there is a breach and another breach—may not bring about a recall, but a probation officer managing the case will look at all those cumulatively in judging whether, when a further breach occurs or anything along those lines, there is a pattern of behaviour. I am wary of speculating on the individual decision making of an individual probation officer, because I will not know what factors they will have taken into account in an individual case, but they do consider those matters.

There were five specific questions raised by the right hon. Member for Knowsley. I will try, in so far as I can, to give him some answers, or more information than perhaps is already out there. First, he asked about the evidence presented at the trial. The police and Crown Prosecution Service, which are independent of Government, will have put all relevant evidence to Preston Crown court that they believed was material to securing a conviction when Venables and Thompson were tried for James's murder.

The specific question of whether particular pieces of evidence should have been presented to the court, and what was or was not is, I am afraid, a matter for the police and ultimately for the prosecution lawyers in building that case on how they determined what evidence to present to secure the conviction they wanted to secure. That would be a matter for the CPS. With the caveat that I recognise and put on the record the independence of the CPS's decision making and how it conducts the case, I am of course happy to highlight the points made here today to the Attorney General and the Solicitor General, who, as hon. Members will be aware, have oversight of the CPS.

Jess Phillips: Will the Minister give way?

Sir George Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will give way to the hon. Lady and then the right hon. Gentleman.

Jess Phillips: I apologise if this was what my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley was going to say. We all know the CPS has to build the best case for getting a conviction, and some things will get left out and some things will not. But when the sexual element is left out in a court case, how can the public be certain that it is taken account of in a parole hearing? If the sexual crimes had definitely featured in the court case, the sexual crime element would have been part of the consideration in parole; that is the disconnect that we are concerned about.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. As I say, the decisions on what to include are ultimately down to the prosecuting counsel and prosecuting lawyers from the CPS, but I will touch on those aspects when addressing a further question posed by the right hon. Member for Knowsley in a moment.

Sir George Howarth: The point my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) was making is that, had that information been available at the time and during the trial, subsequent decisions that had to be made would have taken on a whole new light. She accepts and I accept—I think we all accept—that the judiciary is independent and that prosecutors should be able to decide what evidence they use, but in this particular case that omission could have led, and probably did lead, to decisions being made in later years that would otherwise have been different.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I will come on to address, to a degree, that specific point. Notwithstanding how the CPS and how the case itself was conducted and what evidence was used, when recommending the release in 2001, I am advised that the Parole Board would have been given all relevant information. However, I will undertake further inquiries to see whether it is possible to ascertain this far down the line and within what I can reveal publicly, what that might have constituted. In 2013, the Parole Board did of course have full details of Venables's conviction for downloading and possessing illegal images of children, and it was therefore able to take that into consideration when considering the risk of sexual harm that he presented to children.

In the second question from the right hon. Member for Knowsley—he is always welcome to correct me if I miss one of his questions out—he asked whether Venables's sexual interest in children was missed by all the experts, or whether it was known. Again, having discussed it with my officials, my understanding is that prior to his recall in connection to possessing illegal images of children in 2010, the supervising agencies were not aware of Venables's sexual interest in children. However, they were aware of his broader risk to children, obviously arising in large part from the horrendous events of the murder of James, and that risk was then central to their ongoing management of him.

The third question posed by the right hon. Gentleman was whether proper consideration was given at the trial and at later parole hearings to the attempted abduction of another child earlier on the day that James was tragically murdered. Premeditation is relevant when it comes to any conviction for murder, as a necessity for securing the conviction. As hon. Members would expect, it falls to the CPS and the sentencing judge to consider that factor. I understand that the parole reviews in 2001 and 2013 proceeded on the basis that Venables had been lawfully convicted of murder and of the premeditation and planning involved in that. The Parole Board release decision in 2013 records the board's awareness and consideration of attempted abductions earlier in the day.

As to the question of whether Thompson and Venables were pronounced to be rehabilitated in order to avoid them entering adult custody, I should clarify for hon. and right hon. Members that it is not the role of the Parole Board to pronounce an offender rehabilitated. Instead, it is constrained to applying the statutory release test when considering whether someone should be released—that is, whether it is necessary on the grounds of public protection for the offender to remain confined in custody, based on available evidence.

I appreciate that that may appear to be a legal splitting of hairs, but there is a slight and subtle difference in the statutory release test about whether there is a necessity

on public protection grounds for someone to remain in custody or whether they are deemed to be rehabilitated and a reformed citizen. There is a legal differentiation there. Therefore, in recommending their release in 2001, the Parole Board determined, on the basis of its judgment, that the risks that Thompson and Venables presented were capable of being managed effectively in the community through the restrictions and prohibitions available through the life licence.

Finally, the right hon. Member for Knowsley asked whether representations were made by Lord Chief Justice Woolf to the Parole Board. I asked my officials to look into that and advise, and I can advise all hon. Members that I am not aware that any representations were made by the Lord Chief Justice to the Parole Board. At the time, Thompson and Venables were sentenced to life imprisonment. It fell to the Home Secretary of the day to set their tariff, or how long they would serve, taking account of a recommendation made by the Lord Chief Justice. Therefore, any recommendations from the Lord Chief Justice regarding the tariff would have been made to the Home Secretary. In respect of the parole question, having asked again and looked into it, I am not aware that any such representations were made—I caveat that by saying that I have answered to the extent of my knowledge.

I will end my contribution by again paying tribute to Mrs Fergus for not only her tireless campaigning for James, but her determination, as reflected in the statements read out by various right hon. and hon. Members, to make a difference in the future, to help people to learn the lessons and to support young people by setting up the James Bulger Memorial Trust, which provides holidays and respite for families of disadvantaged young people who have been the victims of crime, hatred or bullying, and those who have made a positive contribution to the welfare of others or society in general. The charity's motto is "For James", as Denise rightly wants him to be remembered positively as

"the beautiful little boy with the big sparkling smile",
and not for how his short life ended.

I conclude this sombre debate by once again paying tribute to the dignity and the courage of Denise and her family, to the right hon. Member for Knowsley for securing this debate and approaching it in his typically measured, courteous and appropriate tone, and indeed to all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken. This debate is a testimony to Denise's resilience and determination, and above all to her abiding love for James.

I hope I will be able to continue the conversations around this matter with the right hon. Gentleman and others.

5.40 pm

Sir George Howarth: I will be brief, because a lot of ground has been covered in this debate. First, I thank Denise Fergus for initiating the petition, for the briefing she gave and for the inspiration that she has given many of us. Well done. Secondly, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for contributing to the debate in their own distinctive but important ways. They have helped to make it a much better debate than it would have been with just me and those on the Front Bench. I thank my hon. Friend on the Front Bench, the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for the way he listened to and responded to what people had to say, and for the sensitivity he showed in his speech.

Finally, I am grateful to the Minister for the constructive way in which he responded to the debate, and would be happy to take him up on his offer of a meeting to discuss the matter further. I am sure that family members will want to be present. I do hope, though, that that constructive spirit continues. My fear—and this is not a criticism of the Minister—is that there have been so many false dawns in the past that this could become another one. I hope that we can agree on a process that will resolve all those issues. It will not bring James back, but, as his mother said in her statement, it could at least help to prevent anything similar from happening to another child in the future.

I look forward to meeting with the Minister, who I hope will reflect further on my suggestion regarding the public inquiry—by the way, I think there should be a public inquiry, but, if that gets ruled out, there needs to be some alternative way to consider these issues. I am sure the Minister will give thoughtful consideration to that matter so that we can have a meaningful discussion about to proceed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 206851 relating to a public inquiry into the James Bulger murder case.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 25 March 2024

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telegraph Media Group: Anticipated Acquisition

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): On 19 March, I confirmed to Parliament that, on the basis of assessments by the Competition and Markets Authority and by Ofcom, I am minded to refer the anticipated acquisition of Telegraph Media Group Ltd by RB Investco Ltd to a phase 2 investigation on the grounds of the need for accurate presentation of news and free expression of opinion in newspapers.

I set a deadline of 9 am on Monday 25 March 2024 to allow the parties the opportunity to make representations to me before I reach a final decision.

Further to a request from one of the parties, I have confirmed an extension to that deadline, which will now be 9 am on Tuesday 2 April 2024.

[HCWS374]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Ocean Leadership

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Climate, Environment and Energy (Lord Benyon) has today made the following statement:

“This statement provides an update on UK leadership and engagement on current international ocean issues.

The 2021 integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy and its 2023 refresh set out the UK’s vision that by 2030 the ocean will be effectively governed, clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse, linking resilient and prosperous coastal communities around the world, and supporting sustainable economic growth for the UK, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies. Fundamental to this is an absolute commitment to upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in all its dimensions, as an essential enabler of global prosperity, security and a healthy planet.

The UK played a significant and proactive role in negotiating the landmark agreement under UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, known as the BBNJ Agreement. The UK was one of the first to sign the agreement on 20 September 2023 and is keen to see it enter into force as quickly as possible. 60 States or regional economic integration organisations must become party to the agreement before it enters into force. To date the agreement has gained 88 signatures and two ratifications.

The agreement was laid before Parliament for scrutiny on 16 October 2023. Before the UK can ratify international agreements, legislation needs to be in place to ensure that new obligations can be complied with.

Work is continuing at pace to prepare UK legislation and the aim is to be able to implement and ratify in time for the UN ocean conference in June 2025, an ambitious target date shared by other likeminded countries. The UK intends to play an active part in the first conference of the parties that will meet within the first year after the agreement enters into force, and in the preparatory commission to be established by the United Nations to prepare for that conference. The planned timeline for UK legislation to enable ratification will ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of states working to effectively protect the ocean.

The provisions in the agreement on marine genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits require a clear legislative framework, including substantive provisions in primary legislation. They create new obligations for UK business—in particular the pharmaceutical, nutraceutical, agricultural-technology, cosmetic and chemical sectors—and science and research, and thorough engagement with key stakeholders is underway to help to ensure that implementation is effective and avoids any unintended consequences.

The UK will continue to be proactive at the international level, in supporting other, particularly developing countries, with their implementation and ratification plans. A project has recently been agreed with the Commonwealth secretariat to support smaller member countries with their implementation work. The UK is also launching work to develop a shortlist of potential Area

Based management tools that could be proposed once the agreement is in force.

More broadly, the UK is also fully engaged in negotiations to discuss the development of deep sea mining exploitation regulations, currently taking place at the International Seabed Authority (ISA) in Kingston, Jamaica from 18-29 March. On 30 October 2023, the UK announced that it supports a moratorium on the granting of exploitation licences for deep sea mining projects by the ISA and has been driving the need for strong enforceable environmental regulations, standards and guidelines to be developed by the ISA and put in place before any mining commences.

As a founding member of the high ambition coalition to end plastic pollution, the UK is committed to achieving an ambitious treaty by the end of 2024, with the aim of ending plastic pollution by 2040, including by restraining and reducing plastic production and consumption to sustainable levels, promoting a circular economy for plastic and to manage plastic waste in an environmentally sound and safe manner.

The UK overseas territories are home to around 90% of the UK’s biodiversity and host a huge range of unique and endangered species, some of which are found nowhere else on earth. The UK-funded Blue Belt Programme—the largest of its kind in the world—protects 4.4 million square kilometres of ocean around the overseas territories, underpinning the UK’s commitment to protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030. This flagship programme has been central to the UK Government ambition of leading action to tackle the serious global problems of overfishing, species extinction and climate change.

The UK continues to chair the global ocean alliance of 77 countries and is ocean champion on the International Steering Committee of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature & People. Through these positions we are supporting implementation of the global biodiversity framework in the ocean, in particular the target to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. The UK is already delivering on this target within its own waters. 38% of UK waters are included in a comprehensive network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and within the UK overseas territories, over 60% of waters are protected and sustainably managed within the blue belt.

The UK will continue to play a leading role in the many organisations and initiatives that work to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of the ocean and in continuing to protect and promote the blue belt.”

[HCWS382]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Community Ownership Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): I am delighted to announce the outcome of round 3 window 3 of the £150 million community ownership fund, which will see over £33.5 million awarded to 83 projects across the United Kingdom. This additional funding takes our funding total to around £103.1 million for 333 projects.

This investment will ensure that important parts of our social fabric, such as pubs, sports clubs, theatres, and post office buildings, can continue to play a central role in towns and villages across the UK.

The community ownership fund is helping to reduce geographical disparities across the United Kingdom. To this end, the funding provided in round 3 window 3 will see over £3.8 million awarded to projects in Scotland, over £3.1 million to Wales and over £2.8 million to Northern Ireland. This, so far, brings the total funding awarded across Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to over £32.1 million collectively, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having exceeded their minimum allocation across the duration of the fund.

The funding provided in round 3 window 3 will also see over £23.6 million awarded to projects in England. This brings the total funding awarded across English regions to over £70.9 million collectively.

The community ownership fund is already supporting 250 projects across the UK such as Keighley & Worth Valley Railway's historic railway bridge, in Bradford, England; the Vale of Aeron pub, a favourite haunt of the poet Dylan Thomas in Ceredigion, Wales; the King's Theatre in Edinburgh, one of Scotland's most historic and significant theatres; and Glens digital hub in Causeway Coast and Glens, Northern Ireland, which has been transformed into a vibrant community digital hub. These projects are making a genuine difference to their communities.

With the additional investment awarded in this bidding window, I am delighted to be supporting many more small but mighty local assets across the United Kingdom, levelling up the places we love and cherish.

Round 4 will be the final round of the Community Ownership Fund. Recognising that there is limited funding available yet to be allocated to meet the high demand we have experienced, we will seek to hold two final bidding windows to allocate this funding. Round 4 window 1 will open today—25 March 2024—and close on 10 April 2024. Voluntary and community organisations, and parish, town and community councils can apply for up to £2 million in capital funding, to rescue treasured local institutions.

[HCWS379]

DEFENCE

Nuclear Defence

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I am today laying before the House the Defence Nuclear Enterprise Command Paper, "Delivering the UK's Nuclear Deterrent: A National Endeavour".

The Command Paper establishes the UK's nuclear programme as a critical "national endeavour" that is vital for our long-term security and prosperity. It details for the first time the full breadth of activity required to sustain and modernise the infrastructure and activities that deliver the UK's continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent—a cornerstone of national and global security for more than 55 years.

The Command Paper underlines the importance of our partnerships with the communities, businesses and international allies that underpin the deterrent and protect our way of life. It articulates how, in response to the evolving security environment, we will deliver the

capabilities and programmes necessary to maintain and sustain our independent nuclear deterrent. It does not represent a change in long-standing nuclear doctrine or our ongoing commitment to our disarmament and non-proliferation treaty obligations.

To deliver the required skilled workforce needed to meet our requirement, the civil and defence nuclear sectors will invest at least £763 million in skills, jobs and education, and will see 40,000 additional jobs created by 2030. The Government and industry have come together to launch a nuclear skills plan to create more than 5,000 new apprentices, and double the number of graduates over the next 4 years. This plan will also create more than 400 specialist PhDs over the same period. This collaborative approach will be enshrined in a nuclear skills charter between Government and industry.

In parallel, we are announcing a plan for Barrow, a new partnership between national and local government, BAE Systems and the local community that will oversee investment and development in Barrow-in-Furness, the home of submarine building in the UK for the past 100 years. This aims to ensure that it is the kind of attractive place to live and work that will sustain the skilled workforce required in the decades to come. The initial commitment will be for a Barrow transformation fund, a 10-year endowment-style funding settlement of £20 million a year over the next decade, providing the multi-year certainty and stability needed to support and regenerate the town. This fund will be administered through DLUHC, working with the new Barrow delivery board and other Government Departments to deliver it. DLUHC will make a further announcement on the appointment of the Barrow delivery board chair in due course.

[HCWS377]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Managing Covid-19: Updated Guidance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On 21 February 2022, the Government published the "Covid-19 Response: Living with Covid-19" guidance, which set out a plan to live with covid-19, while protecting people at higher risk of serious illness. In March 2023, the Government announced further changes towards managing covid-19 like other respiratory illnesses. New changes from 1 April 2024 are the next stage in delivering this approach.

The latest changes are an important milestone in our journey to living with covid-19. After several years of dedicated resources and focus, covid-19 is now recognised as an established and ongoing health issue in the UK, and the approach to managing it will now be even further aligned with other established respiratory pathogens. Protecting people at higher risk remains the Government's priority.

Vaccines for those at higher risk of serious outcomes from covid-19 remain central to the Government's approach. Last autumn's covid-19 vaccination campaign saw over 70% of all people aged over 65 years living in England receive a covid-19 booster. In care homes, over 80% of residents received a booster, providing vital protection over the winter months. Today, due to a combination of immunity acquired from natural infection or vaccination, covid-19 is now a relatively mild disease for the vast majority of people.

This spring, a covid-19 vaccine will again be offered to those most at risk of serious illness, in line with advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. The NHS will also offer more people access to covid-19 treatments, expanding the eligible cohort from the existing 3.9 million people to an additional 1.4 million people at the highest risk of severe illness.

The continued effectiveness of vaccines and treatments to protect people at high risk means that we can transition to an approach where covid-19 is managed in line with other respiratory illnesses, such as flu. From 1 April 2024, changes will be made to covid-19 testing to align with other respiratory infectious diseases.

Testing from 1 April 2024

While the virus causing covid-19 continues to evolve, new variants have not required a return to large-scale public testing. Given the high levels of vaccination among groups at higher risk, wider access to treatments and the reduced impact of outbreaks, the Government are now able to remove some of the highly targeted testing that remains in place from the height of the pandemic.

From 1 April 2024, routine provision of free covid-19 lateral flow device (LFD) tests for the management of outbreaks in higher risk settings will come to an end in England. However, free testing to determine the cause of an acute respiratory infection outbreak, where deemed appropriate by a local UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) health protection team, in higher risk settings will remain to test for a wide range of respiratory viruses.

Routine asymptomatic covid-19 LFD testing on discharge from hospital into care or hospice settings will also end to align with the approach for other respiratory illnesses, though NHS trusts will have local discretion to re-introduce this or other forms of testing as clinically appropriate following risk assessment, involving local authority public health teams, UKHSA health protection teams and care providers as necessary in decision making.

Acute health providers should have trusted processes in place with local care home and hospice providers to facilitate safe discharges, as set out in the hospital discharge and community support guidance. Together with the care home or hospice, hospitals should assess the risk in the period before planned discharge, seeking advice on proposed changes to testing arrangements from local authority public health teams or UKHSA health protection teams if needed.

Care providers and hospices will also continue to have the ability to discuss and raise any concerns about discharge arrangements through existing local mechanisms. Where a care provider or hospice is providing services commissioned by a local authority or the NHS and has concerns about a planned discharge that cannot be resolved with the acute hospital provider, this includes the ability to contact the relevant commissioner.

Limited testing, including symptomatic testing of staff working on in-patient wards focused on treating profoundly immuno-compromised individuals, will continue in line with locally derived protocols to protect those most at risk. Symptomatic testing of patient-facing hospice staff who work closely with people who are at high risk from severe outcomes if suffering from covid-19 will also continue as outlined in guidance, in line with similar NHS settings.

The cohort of people eligible for covid-19 treatments can continue to access free covid-19 LFDs from their local pharmacy. These people, who are at highest risk of becoming seriously ill, are encouraged to test in order to gain timely access to treatments. A full list of those who are eligible, and information on how to access tests, is available on the NHS website.

Guidance on a range of infection prevention and control measures in adult social care has now been combined with acute respiratory infection guidance and has been updated to reflect these changes. This guidance, as well as guidance for hospices and other non-clinical settings, has been updated to reflect the latest evidence and expert consensus. It is technical guidance to support settings in operationalising the changes to the services they are directly responsible for from 1 April 2024.

Guidance published on 1 April 2022 for individuals in the community with symptoms of covid-19 or respiratory illness continues to set out the actions we can all take to help reduce the risk of catching covid-19 and passing it on to others.

The future approach to pandemic preparedness

The covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the public health and economic risks posed by pandemics. The Government are continuing to work closely with partners to reduce the impact of a future pandemic. Together, UKHSA and the Department of Health and Social Care are developing plans to prevent and/or respond efficiently and effectively in the event of a pandemic.

These plans will build on learning from covid-19, and the findings of the covid-19 inquiry, once published. The exact nature of a future pandemic may vary, and so preparedness is considering all modes of transmission and tackling “Disease X” in readiness for unknown future threats.

The Government have already taken steps to prepare and develop capacity to respond, including through the Moderna-UK strategic partnership and the Vaccines Development and Evaluation Centre. Through UKHSA, we retain strong surveillance systems, world-leading genomic sequencing capabilities, and stronger baseline data and analysis functions that will help detect and characterise pandemic threats.

[HCWS376]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Angiolini Inquiry: Recommendations

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): On 29 February 2024, a report on part 1 of the independent Angiolini inquiry was published. The inquiry was established following the horrific murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 by then serving Metropolitan Police Service officer Wayne Couzens.

On the same day, I gave a statement to the House to acknowledge the inquiry’s findings.

Part 1 examined the previous career and conduct of Couzens and found a number of red flags and missed opportunities. Based on these findings, the Chair made a total of 16 recommendations, summarily to improve the policing response to sexual offences, such as indecent exposure, to strengthen police recruitment and vetting practices, and to address toxic police cultures.

Today I can confirm acceptance of all three of the recommendations made to the Government, which the Home Office will now work to deliver at pace. These recommendations are that the Home Office, in collaboration with partners, should conduct a fundamental review of the way masturbatory indecent exposure is treated within the criminal justice system; commission research to establish if there is an evidence-based link between masturbatory indecent exposure and subsequent offending; and launch a campaign to raise awareness that indecent exposure and sending unsolicited photographs of genitals amounts to criminality and boost victims' confidence to report such crimes.

Further recommendations on police vetting, recruitment and culture were made directly to police forces, the National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing, who have also today accepted all recommendations made to policing. I will work closely with policing to ensure that they drive this work forward promptly.

Tackling violence against women and girls is one of my top priorities. I am confident that our strong partnership and shared commitment with the National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing will lead to concerted, swift action.

I will provide a further update to Parliament on progress made in implementing the recommendations before summer recess.

I am grateful to Lady Elish and her team for their crucial and continued work, which will ensure that policing continues to make improvements necessary to rebuild the confidence of everyone they serve. I await the inquiry's further findings from part 2, which is examining broader national issues such as vetting, recruitment and culture, as well as the safety of women in public spaces.

[HCWS378]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 requires the Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force—as of 29 February 2024	2
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 29 February 2024	1
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices expired—during reporting period	0
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	1
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period	2

The TPIM Review Group keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were convened on 8 and 13 February 2024.

[HCWS375]

TRANSPORT

Network North Plans: Northern Powerhouse Rail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): On 4 October 2023 the Government announced Network North—a new, £36 billion plan to improve our country's transport. In addition to this, we confirmed £12 billion of investment to enable Northern Powerhouse Rail to proceed in line with previous plans to better connect Liverpool and Manchester. As promised in the Network North announcement, the Rail Minister and I have engaged extensively with local leaders to ensure that this plan was right for them and to understand whether they wished to suggest alternative ways to achieve the objectives with that funding.

We have heard from these stakeholders in favour of continuing to serve Warrington Bank Quay and Manchester airport and using broadly the current route towards Manchester as part of our Northern Powerhouse Rail plans. There is also interest from local leaders in exploring further options for station design at Manchester Piccadilly and for routings into Liverpool including station options. Government remain open to considering these issues, subject, as usual, to affordability within the funding envelope, standard business case approvals, and demonstrating value for taxpayers' money. I look forward to continuing discussions on these points.

Recognising the consensus reached, I am today confirming that this will represent the basis for the next stage of development. As with any major scheme, delivery will be subject to securing consents and the approval of future business cases. Further, while the consensus reached will form the primary option that we work from, Government will continue to assess alternatives which meet the objectives of NPR, in line with standard requirements for business case approvals. Any scheme must be affordable and demonstrate value for money for the taxpayer, while seeking to support the rail capacity needs of central Manchester and deliver faster journey times and better connectivity across the Pennines.

On this basis, I will be continuing to promote the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill as the fastest possible means of consenting the first part of that route into Manchester. Subject to the will of the House, the Government will seek to adapt the Bill to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail only, removing scope south of the parish of Millington and Rostherne, which was included only for HS2. The adaptation of the Bill from HS2 to NPR and removal of HS2 scope from the Bill would prompt a further environmental assessment to be produced which would include revised construction impacts with a view to reducing impacts where possible.

In line with these plans, HS2 phase 2b safeguarding will be amended by summer 2024, to allow for any safeguarding needed for Northern Powerhouse Rail.

[HCWS380]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions Dashboard

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): The success of automatic enrolment has led to record numbers of people saving for retirement. Pensions dashboards will allow individuals to view information about their pensions, including their state pension, for free, in one place online. This will help individuals' awareness and understanding of their pension information and estimated income in retirement, building a greater sense of individual control and ownership.

Since the reset was initiated last year, the pensions dashboards programme has made significant progress on building and testing the system that will enable pensions dashboards to work. Subject to satisfactory testing, the programme plans to begin the process of connecting the organisations building a direct connection, including the Department for Work and Pensions state

pension, from August 2024. Connection testing will then continue to ensure readiness to support wider industry connection from early 2025.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will today publish guidance setting out a staged timetable for connection. This will help smooth the process of connecting the approximately 3,000 pension schemes and providers in scope by the connection deadline of 31 October 2026. The timetable prioritises connection of the largest pension schemes and providers, so that crucial user testing can quickly take place at scale, with the first cohort expected to have completed connection by the end of April 2025. While the timetable is not mandatory, it is a legal requirement that trustees or managers of occupational pension schemes and providers of personal and stakeholder pensions have regard to this guidance.

The Government are absolutely committed to delivering pensions dashboards safely and securely to the public at the earliest opportunity. The publication of the connection timetable marks a significant milestone towards launching pensions dashboards, and takes us closer to introducing a service that has the potential to transform how individuals plan for retirement.

[HCWS381]

Petition

Monday 25 March 2024

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Standing charges on energy bills

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that in a time of soaring energy costs and a crisis in the cost of living, the high standing charges imposed by utility companies represent a significant burden on household finances; further that Scottish households bear some of the highest electricity standing charges in the UK, with households in Linlithgow and East Falkirk currently paying 62.1p per day on direct debit, and 69.2p per day on standard credit; and notes that the result of high standing charges is that lower energy users can save proportionally less money by reducing usage, thus disempowering these households and offering no incentive to reduce energy usage at a time when energy efficiency and environmental sustainability is so vital.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider abolishing standing charges, to alleviate the financial pressure upon households in the cost of living crisis, and to encourage responsible energy use for the good of our planet.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Martyn Day*, Official Report, 23 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 270.]

[P002894]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway):

The Government recognise the challenges posed by cost of living pressures, including the impact of energy bills, and are already providing extensive financial support to households. This includes a package of support to assist households and individuals with rising costs of living that will total over £104 billion, or £3,700 per household on average, over 2022 to 2025. From 1 April, energy prices will drop to their lowest level since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, with the energy price cap falling by £238 on average.

Standing charges are a commercial matter for suppliers, although Ofgem regulates standing charges for domestic customers as it does with other elements of billing. This includes setting a cap on standing charges as part of the overall default tariff cap. The cost varies by region, and it is more costly to operate networks in less densely populated and remote areas.

Removing standing charges completely would move the costs recently recovered through them to another part of people's energy bills, likely via unit costs. Any risk of under-recovery of costs to suppliers could potentially drive costs up overall.

Standing charges recover the cost of installing and maintaining Great Britain's electricity transmission, distribution and offshore networks, and some fixed supplier operating costs such as billing and metering. A small proportion of the standing charge also goes towards Government initiatives that help vulnerable households and reduce carbon emissions. This has led to consumers benefiting from lower energy usage and greater energy security whilst ensuring protections for vulnerable consumers. Funding these initiatives is important to ensuring there is a well-functioning energy system in Great Britain.

Recognising the significant public interest in the issue of standing charges, Ofgem launched a call for input in November 2023, looking at how standing charges are applied to energy bills, and what alternatives could be considered.

Ofgem is currently reviewing responses to the call for input and further engagement will inform any further policy development. Further information may be found online at:

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/standing-charges-call-input>

Ofgem's call for input illustrated the complexity of moving costs currently recovered through standing charges on to the unit cost. Ofgem found that shifting some or all standing charges to volumetric unit rates would reflect how much energy customers use and would benefit some low-income households overall, but that a significant number of customers could be made worse off. This would include some vulnerable consumers who are reliant on medical equipment, or those with poorly insulated homes—often private renters or those in rural areas. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to analysis of the distributional impacts when considering reforming standing charges.

Following the call for input, the Secretary of State and I recently wrote to the chief executive officer of Ofgem to underline the importance of this issue and reiterate the need to ensure protection for vulnerable consumers while minimising bills for customers. The Government will continue to work closely with Ofgem on the issue.

The Government are helping energy consumers improve energy efficiency and reduce their energy use through a range of measures including:

- the Great British insulation scheme, which enables eligible consumers to get free or cheaper insulation to reduce their home's energy bills;

- the boiler upgrade scheme, which enables eligible consumers to get a grant to cover part of the cost of replacing fossil fuel heating systems with a heat pump or biomass boiler—this grant was recently increased to up to £7,500; and,

- the "Welcome Home" campaign, which encourages consumers to identify energy-efficient upgrades, such as heat pumps and insulation measures, that will make their home warmer and help save money over the long term.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 25 March 2024

EDUCATION

Education Questions

The following are extracts from Education questions on 11 March 2024.

Mr Perkins:...The Minister talks powerfully about apprenticeships, but why does he think that young people are now half as likely to be on an SME apprenticeship than they were when the levy was introduced?

Robert Halfon: I hugely respect the hon. Gentleman. I know he is a bruiser, but I had been looking forward to his question. I thought he would celebrate the 13,000 apprentices in Chesterfield since May 2010, the 11,270 apprentices at levels 2 and 3, or the £19.5 million investment in Chesterfield College.

[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 10.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins).

The correct response is:

Robert Halfon: I hugely respect the hon. Gentleman. I know he is a bruiser, but I had been looking forward to his question. I thought he would celebrate the 13,000 apprentices in Chesterfield since May 2010, the **11,720** apprentices at levels 2 and 3, or the £19.5 million investment in Chesterfield College.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just that level 2 and 3 apprenticeship starts have plummeted by over 50% since the levy was introduced, but that 16 to 18-year-old apprenticeship starts are down by 41%. Research by the Sutton Trust and the London School of Economics further shows that, by 2020, the proportion of apprenticeship starts by those from poorer backgrounds had dropped significantly. Opportunities for all our young people to earn and learn expanded every year under Labour. Is it not now painfully clear that the biggest barrier to opportunity is this Tory Government?

Robert Halfon: As always, Labour Front Benchers are obsessed with quantity over quality. We have transformed the quality of apprenticeships. Seventy per cent of occupations are covered by over 680 apprenticeship standards.

[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 11.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra).

The correct response is:

Robert Halfon: As always, Labour Front Benchers are obsessed with quantity over quality. We have transformed the quality of apprenticeships. **Nearly 70%** of occupations are covered by **apprenticeships, and there are** over 680 apprenticeship standards.

Jane Hunt: Homefield College, based in Mountsorrel and Sibley in my constituency, is a community-based independent specialist college that offers education, training and independent living skills for people with learning disabilities and communication difficulties. What steps are being taken by the Department to promote and support such excellent FE colleges, and to help create opportunities for work experience, life skills and development for students, so that they may go on to live happy and fulfilling lives as an integral part of their local community?

Robert Halfon: I was pleased to visit Loughborough not so long ago with my hon. Friend. She is passionate about FE and skills. I know Homefield College well; it is a brilliant college and I am glad it was recently allocated £95,000 for capital spend. We have the £80 million supported internship scheme for those with special educational needs; an FE bursary scheme for special needs teachers; **specialist National Careers Service advice** for young people; and the SEND code of practice to prepare young people for adulthood.

[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 15.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon):

An error has been identified in the response given to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt).

The correct response is:

Robert Halfon: I was pleased to visit Loughborough not so long ago with my hon. Friend. She is passionate about FE and skills. I know Homefield College well; it is a brilliant college and I am glad it was recently allocated £95,000 for capital spend. We have the £80 million supported internship scheme for those with special educational needs; an FE bursary scheme for special needs teachers; **National Careers Service advice** for young people; and the SEND code of practice to prepare young people for adulthood.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): At Cambridge University, a barbaric vandal wearing a £1,000 Mulberry backpack was so full of hate for Jews that she felt Lord Balfour's letter of 1917 gave her the moral superiority to destroy a valuable and historic painting of him. This shines a light on the pernicious atmosphere faced by Jewish students at universities across the country, with calls for "Zionists off our campus" now shamefully normalised, and "Zionists" really meaning Jews. What steps does my right hon. Friend propose to take to convey to university heads that they have a legal and a moral obligation to stamp out antisemitism?

Robert Halfon:...We have announced a £7 million package to give to Jewish student groups, including the University Jewish Chaplaincy, to try to stop antisemitism on campus.

[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 22.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon):

An error has been identified in the response given to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis).

The correct response is:

Robert Halfon:...We have announced a £7 million package to give to **student groups, such as** the University Jewish Chaplaincy, to try to stop antisemitism on campus.

TRANSPORT

Transport Questions

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 21 March 2024.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Good morning, Mr Speaker. Passenger watchdog Transport Focus published a report last week, which found huge regional variation in bus passenger satisfaction across the country, with large numbers of passengers “being let down”. Under the Tories’ deregulation of the bus sector, passenger satisfaction with some of our operators is miles below the average of 80%, with some as low as a dismal 66%. In places such as West Yorkshire, Labour Mayors are not standing for it any longer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) said, Tracy Brabin has announced her intention to pursue franchising to reverse decades of Tory decline. But the vast majority of local authorities do not have those powers, so will the Minister adopt Labour’s plan to give every local transport authority the same powers to take back control of their bus services?

Guy Opperman: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I was at the launch of the said report and have read it. He will be aware that, for example, one reason for the complications is that the number of people working from home has increased by 40%. We have a plan to tackle that with the record investment that is being made to Mayors.

[Official Report, 21 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 1032.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood).

The correct response is:

Guy Opperman: I have read the report. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, for example, one reason for the complications is that the number of people working from home has increased by 40%. We have a plan to tackle that with the record investment that is being made to Mayors.

Chi Onwurah: Walking and cycling prevent 1,500 serious long-term health conditions on Tyneside every year, according to the walking and cycling index, and they bring in £400 million in economic benefits, so it is no wonder that half of Tynesiders want to walk or wheel more, and that two fifths want to cycle more, but if they are to do that, the streets need to be made safer. What is the Minister doing, apart from undermining low traffic neighbourhoods, to make our streets safer for walking, wheeling and cycling?

Guy Opperman: With great respect to the hon. Lady, she knows full well that her council attempted to have an active travel scheme in Jesmond, and it so messed it up that it had to scrap the scheme. The LTN was scrapped, and there were 23,000 **objections** and a considerable waste of money. With due respect, active travel is doing a great job, and we support it, but councils have to take local communities with them.

[Official Report, 21 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 1038.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah).

The correct response is:

Guy Opperman: With great respect to the hon. Lady, she knows full well that her council attempted to have an active travel scheme in Jesmond, and it so messed it up that it had to scrap the scheme. The LTN was scrapped, and there were 23,000 **responses** and a considerable waste of money. With due respect, active travel is doing a great job, and we support it, but councils have to take local communities with them.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 25 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1239	DEFENCE—continued	
Armed Forces Personnel	1248	Gaza: Humanitarian Aid	1251
Armed Forces Readiness	1244	Indo-Pacific	1240
Cyprus: Sovereign Base Areas.....	1250	RFA Sir Galahad.....	1239
Defence Jobs	1246	Support for Veterans.....	1242
Defence Procurement	1252	Topical Questions	1255

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 25 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	67WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	72WS
Telegraph Media Group: Anticipated Acquisition	67WS	Angiolini Inquiry: Recommendations	72WS
		Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures .	73WS
DEFENCE	69WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	68WS
Nuclear Defence	69WS	Community Ownership Fund	68WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	67WS	TRANSPORT	74WS
UK Ocean Leadership	67WS	Network North Plans: Northern Powerhouse Rail.	74WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	70WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	75WS
Managing Covid-19: Updated Guidance.....	70WS	Pensions Dashboard	75WS

PETITION

Monday 25 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	19P	
Standing charges on energy bills	19P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 25 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	11MC	TRANSPORT	13MC
Education Questions	11MC	Transport Questions.....	13MC

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
Monday 1 April 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

Monday 25 March 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1239] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Defence

Cyber-security and UK Democracy [Col. 1261]
Statement—(Oliver Dowden)

Women's State Pension Age [Col. 1280]
Statement—(Mel Stride)

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [Lords] [Col. 1302]
As amended, considered
Read the Third time and passed

Acting Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman [Col. 1356]
Motion—(Alex Burghart)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 1359]

Taiwan Strait [Col. 1363]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
James Bulger Murder: Public Inquiry [Col. 403WH]
e-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 67WS]

Petition [Col. 19P]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 11MC]
