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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 25 April 2024**

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# House of Commons

Thursday 25 April 2024

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Ministerial Code

1. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [902477]

2. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [902479]

9. **Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [902495]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen):** The Prime Minister is responsible for the ministerial code, and is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of Ministers, which are set out in that code. All Ministers are expected to uphold the principles of the code, as the Prime Minister has made clear.

**Christian Wakeford:** On 19 April, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister to report a breach of the rules by the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson in relation to a visit to Venezuela to meet President Maduro on behalf of the hedge fund Merlyn Advisors. Was the Cabinet Office aware of the visit in advance, and did the Deputy Prime Minister—the Secretary of State—or officials have a conversation with the Foreign Office about any tax-funded briefings that he may have received?

**John Glen:** The Government expect all former Ministers, including Prime Ministers, to abide by their obligations with regard to the business appointment rules set out in the ministerial code. The Cabinet Office is currently considering a letter on this matter from the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, and will respond in due course.

**Dr Huq:** In addition to Boris Johnson's hedge fund lobbying in Venezuela there is his *Daily Mail* column, as well as his lettuce PM successor's contravention of the

Radcliffe rules in betraying royal confidences in her book. The Minister has said that the Prime Minister is judge and jury in respect of the code. Is it not time for a more independent system, such as Labour's proposed ethics and integrity commission? If the Government will not do that, can they not just call a general election now?

**John Glen:** The seven principles on public life are very clear, and I have set out the Prime Minister's expectations, but let me draw the hon. Lady's attention to what was said by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2021, namely, that a single commission would "come with considerable disadvantages" and that "the concentration of such power to a body...does not sit well in our democratic system".

**Sir Chris Bryant:** It is fascinating to see four times as many Ministers as Conservative Back Benchers in the Chamber today.

Paragraph 1(3)(d) of the ministerial code says:

"Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament and the public",

and paragraph 1(3)(f) says:

"Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises, or appears to arise".

Why, then, are the Government still refusing to publish the details of the financial interests that the Foreign Secretary had before he was appointed to the House of Lords, why are they still refusing—despite numerous requests from newspapers and others—to publish the facts of whether or not the Foreign Secretary has had to recuse himself from certain elements of his job because of his previous involvement with the Chinese state, and why are they point-blank refusing to say which parts of his job he is recused from?

**John Glen:** According to the advice of the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, last published on 14 December 2023, following a previous publication on 17 July which updated advice issued on 19 April, the process of ministerial engagement with the register is ongoing, and is updated on an ongoing basis. When Ministers are appointed, they fill in an extensive form which their permanent secretaries then review, and there is a continuous process of updating that as interests evolve.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): In a letter to me, the Deputy Prime Minister said of Mr Johnson's recent trip to Venezuela that he was

"not acting on behalf of the Government, and the trip was not funded by the Government."

In a written parliamentary answer to me, we were told that Mr Johnson had only made a "courtesy call" to the British residence. Last week, however, the chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments made it clear that Mr Johnson was "in breach" of the Government's British appointment rules. We also know from Mr Johnson himself that he had been "extensively briefed" by the embassy. When will the Government come clean about what has actually gone on with Boris Johnson's Venezuela visit?

**John Glen:** I explained in an earlier answer where we are in terms of the Cabinet Office considering the letter from ACOBA. We do expect all Ministers, civil servants and special advisers to abide by those business appointment rules. They are contractual requirements for civil servants and are drawn to the attention of Ministers by the ministerial code. As was announced in the Government's response last July to the report from the Committee on Standards on Public Life, Mr Boardman's review and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, we are continuing to consider methods of strengthening the system and encouraging compliance with those rules. As for the specific case that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, I have said that the Cabinet Office is due to respond to that letter.

### Cyber Threats to Public Institutions and Services

3. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to protect public institutions and services from cyber threats. [902480]

8. **John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to protect public institutions and services from cyber threats. [902493]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** The cyber threat facing the United Kingdom is intensifying. State and non-state actors have targeted our critical national infrastructure, our businesses and even our democratic institutions. The Government have introduced a new national cyber strategy, which takes a whole-of-society approach. We have set out high standards of cyber-protection for our critical industries and, with the help of our world-leading agencies, we are offering advice to institutions, businesses and individuals on protecting themselves online.

**Nick Smith:** Cyber-security is crucial not only to our defence sector but to others, including finance, energy and retail. Sector leaders have raised fears about the future supply of cyber professionals. There is some brilliant work taking place at Ebbw Vale College in my constituency—pioneering stuff is going on around cyber-security—but can the Deputy Prime Minister say what is being done to onshore these critical roles to protect our economy from attacks by hostile actors?

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have tremendous strengths in national cyber-security, and there are many relevant institutions around the country. I have visited universities in Wales that are churning out brilliant graduates. We need to do more at secondary school level to encourage more children to get involved in cyber-security, because the demand is only going to increase in the months and years ahead, and I have been engaging with the Education Secretary on precisely this point.

**John Cryer:** We have all seen in recent weeks how weak cyber-security can compromise elected representatives and lead to the extraction of often compromising information. Could the Minister update the House on what he is doing to provide support and technology specifically to elected representatives to make sure that this does not happen in the future?

**Oliver Dowden:** This is an important issue, which is why we established the National Cyber Security Centre. It brings together Government Communications Headquarters expertise with that of the Cabinet Office, the Foreign Office and others. Through the National Cyber Security Centre, we work with the House authorities and others to make sure that they have sufficient and appropriate advice, but also to advise on equipment and the general security of Members of Parliament. If they have concerns about their cyber-security, I would urge them either to get in contact directly with the National Security Cyber Centre or to do so through the relevant House authorities.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is right to say that the threat is intensifying. Late last year, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy urged the Government to offer more active support on cyber-security to local authorities. He may be aware that last month my own local authority, Leicester City Council, suffered a hugely sophisticated attack, which disrupted many local authority services and has hugely inconvenienced many of my constituents, who rely on those services. Given that we are seeing more of these ransomware group attacks on public institutions across the world and that he says, rightly, that the threat is intensifying, what urgent support and guidance is he offering local councils, such as mine in Leicester?

**Oliver Dowden:** Specifically in relation to the hon. Gentleman's local authority, I have been briefed by the National Cyber Security Centre on that incident. He is totally right to say it is a significant and serious incident, and we are working on remediation through the National Cyber Security Centre. To prevent this type of attack from happening in the first place, we invested £2.6 billion in the national cyber strategy, which is about improving cyber-resilience and reducing legacy technology. I have been quite open with the House in saying that the threat is intensifying because we see hostile states creating environments in which cyber-criminals can flourish, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of those hostile states. We are working through our intelligence agencies and the National Cyber Security Centre to continuously improve our performance.

### National Security

4. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen national security. [902482]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** Protecting national security is the Government's first duty. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister announced a fully funded plan to increase our defence spending by £75 billion over the next six years. As part of this uplift, we will bring forward a national defence and resilience plan, building on the resilience framework and integrated review to respond to the evolving threats we face. We are bringing our defence and civilian preparations together to reflect the interconnectedness of those threats. The Cabinet Office plays a central role in this endeavour, co-ordinating strategy through Cobra, resilience directorates and the National Security Council.

**Mike Amesbury:** In the past week, three people in Germany have been arrested on suspicion of spying for China and two have been charged in the UK. This comes on the back of the Intelligence and Security Committee report which concluded that the Government have no strategy or whole-system—whole-Government—approach to deal with this serious threat. When is the Minister going to get a grip on this serious threat to our democracy from China?

**Oliver Dowden:** I totally disagree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation. We dealt explicitly with this in both the integrated review and the integrated review refresh, which set out a co-ordinated approach and are clear about the threats we face from hostile states—Russia, North Korea, Iran and indeed China. We are very clear about the threats China poses to our economic security and our democratic institutions, and that is why we have taken a range of actions, including for the first time directly attributing attacks to China and imposing sanctions in respect of them.

**Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** With local and national elections on the horizon, it is vital that voters can have full confidence in the integrity of our electoral system. With that in mind, what assessment has the Department made of the risks posed by deepfakes and misinformation in the upcoming elections?

**Oliver Dowden:** I have considerable concerns about deepfakes being used in the upcoming elections. We have seen hack and leak being used as a tactic by hostile states in previous elections, and we have to take into account deepfake capabilities, particularly enhanced by artificial intelligence. That is why we are developing our strategy through the Defending Democracy Taskforce and undertaking exercises right now to enhance our capabilities. It is, however, a challenge to all citizens not necessarily to take images to be true on first sight, because of adversaries' enhanced capability.

### Female Veterans

5. **Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** What steps he is taking to improve support for female veterans. [902486]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** The Office for Veterans' Affairs has provided £445,000 for research into the lived experiences of women veterans and for development of further support. With my hon. Friend making valuable contributions, we are developing the Government's first women's strategy, which will celebrate the success of women veterans but also look at the specific challenges they face, so as to better address their needs.

**Sarah Atherton:** I am one of the estimated 250,000 female veterans, and I have spent the last four years raising awareness of this hidden community. I am pleased to have worked with the Minister on establishing the first female veterans strategy. I have been chair of the advisory board; the evidence gathering has ended and the recommendations have been made. Will the Minister let me know whether the term, "female military sexual trauma" will be acknowledged and included, and the date on which the strategy will be published?

**Johnny Mercer:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been a passionate advocate of this cause. She is the first woman from the ranks to be elected to this place, and she should be incredibly proud of all she has done over her many years of work on this issue. As I have said before from this Dispatch Box, I recognise the unique challenges around sexual trauma in the military—of course I do. The strategy will be published before the summer recess. I know my hon. Friend is waiting for it, and I am determined to get it out before the recess. I am hopeful that it will meet all the demands and all the hurt in that community that has been unmet for too long.

**Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op):** I have had the pleasure of meeting many female veterans in my constituency and of working with fantastic organisations such as Woody's Lodge, the Royal British Legion, and of course Welsh Veterans Partnership. What is the Minister doing to work with the Welsh Government and local authorities across the whole of the UK to ensure that women veterans get the support that is rightly being asked for?

**Johnny Mercer:** We meet the devolved authorities regularly to make sure that all our strategies are in sync. Obviously, a lot of these policy areas, whether health, housing or education, are devolved, but we are clear that, both nationally and internationally, we want the Office for Veterans' Affairs to set the standard. We have great relationships internationally now in terms of setting the pace on that, and I want to make sure it is concomitant with what we are doing with the devolved authorities: we have regular meetings with the Welsh Government and the Scottish, and indeed we are going over to Northern Ireland again in two weeks.

### Nominations for Honours: Scrutiny

6. **Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's processes for scrutinising nominations for honours. [902491]

10. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's processes for scrutinising nominations for honours. [902497]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** It looks like the Member who tabled No. 10 is not out of bed.

A validation process is carried out to assess the strength and credibility of each nomination. We protect the integrity of the honours system by carrying out probity checks with a number of Government Departments before the Prime Minister submits names to His Majesty the King for approval.

**Ruth Cadbury:** The Prime Minister previously backed calls for Horizon victim and campaigner Alan Bates to receive an honour, yet his name was absent from the Prime Minister's surprise honours list last month. However, Russia-linked Mohamed Mansour's name was on that list. What was it about the multi-millionaire, generous Conservative party donor that attracted the Prime Minister to the idea of giving him a knighthood?



**Alex Burghart:** The gentleman whose name has just been mentioned is a very successful businessman and philanthropist, and I am sure those qualities were very much in the Prime Minister's mind when he was put forward for an honour. Extremely distinguished names from the world of artificial intelligence and the creative industries were also recognised for their contribution to our country.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** One.

**Alex Burghart:** I advise the hon. Gentleman to go back and check the list because, not for the first time in this House, he is wrong.

**Mr Dhesi:** The Prime Minister recently announced an extraordinary round of honours, which many described as lacking integrity and bringing the system into disrepute. It included a donor who had donated £5 million to the Conservative party, and four Conservative MPs loyal to the Prime Minister. In the run-up to a general election that he is widely tipped to lose, what could possibly be the justification for the Prime Minister announcing and recommending a round of honours outside of the traditional King's birthday list?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. It would have been easier if you had been here for the beginning of the question. Stretching the question is testing my patience and the patience of the Government Front Bench.

**Alex Burghart:** I thank the hon. Member for Slough for turning up. I refer him to the answer I gave a few moments ago.

### Veterans: Cost of Living

7. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support veterans with the cost of living. [902492]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** The Government have successfully reduced inflation by more than half, making the cost of living more affordable for veterans, along with every other resident of the UK. Veterans in employment within six months of leaving service is at an all-time high—89%—and our recently launched Operation Prosper employment pathway will help veterans and their families to secure well-paying jobs in key sectors.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Here are some facts. Veteran homelessness has risen by 14% over the last year. Seventeen per cent of veterans, and their families, are living in food insecure households. Over 80,000 veterans are having to claim universal credit just to get by. Despite the Minister's claims of making the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran, it isn't, is it?

**Johnny Mercer:** The hon. Lady says, "Here are some facts," before reading out a load of things that are not correct. It does not change the facts of those situations. Last Christmas, under a programme designed by this Government, not a single veteran slept rough because of a lack of provision. The shadow Veterans Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve

McCabe), has not even turned up to ask questions this morning, so I will take no lessons from Labour on veterans.

Going into this election, veterans are deeply nervous about what Labour's offer might be. Again, these banal quotes about statistics are not correct. This is not a game. These are serious people who deserve the nation's respect, and I encourage the Labour party to align with that.

### Infected Blood Inquiry: Second Interim Report

11. **Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab):** What progress he has made on considering the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry. [902498]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen):** In January, I appointed an expert group to provide technical advice on the inquiry's recommendations on compensation. The Government will provide an update on next steps regarding those recommendations as soon as possible following the publication of the final report on 20 May.

**Gerald Jones:** Justice is long, long overdue on this issue. A constituent affected by this issue told me what they had been through, which included a liver transplant, many antiviral regimes, ongoing health impacts and dealing with the fact that many of their peers—the children they spent time with when they were growing up—are no longer with us. There is simply no financial or political price high enough to cover the stress and impact on their mental wellbeing. This House has shown its will on this issue, so why are we still waiting and, importantly, when will people start to receive the compensation, given that on average one person dies every four days as a result of this scandal?

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman makes absolutely the right points and I agree with his call for urgency. As I set out in my response to the urgent question a few days ago, my absolute priority is delivering this as quickly as possible. The legislation to set up the infected blood compensation authority is in the other place and will be debated next Tuesday. We announced on 17 April what we are doing on interim payments to the estates of the deceased infected. Further work is going on and I am engaging with the community over the first 10 days of May—so before 20 May, when the report will be published. His representation on urgency is heard by me and I am working on it as quickly as I can.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** The amendment that was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and passed by this House at the end of last year was to set up a compensation scheme within a strict time limit of three months. That time limit must remain in the Bill and victims need concrete action. Will the Paymaster General tell us when the Treasury will set out its detailed costings for the scheme? Secondly, and most importantly, when can victims expect their final compensation payments?

**John Glen:** The costings will be a responsibility of the Treasury, but a joint team between the Cabinet Office and the Treasury is working to give advice to the Prime Minister so that we can make decisions in a timely way as soon as possible from 20 May. I am conscious of the fact that across all the different communities of infected and affected as much clarity is needed as possible. They have had to wait too long, so I am making sure that, as far as we can, when those final decisions are made there will be not only a headline decision, but clarity on process thereafter. It is those details I am working on now and I hope that a decision can be made as soon as possible from 20 May.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** Having a child with a rare condition who continues to get sicker despite treatment is every parent's worst nightmare. Recent revelations that children as young as three were immorally used as guinea pigs and given infected blood are truly horrific. Without payouts of compensation, how can any parent have faith that the UK Government will ensure accountability and that they will take real responsibility for this scandal?

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. She refers to what has come out in the press in the past few weeks. I am anticipating that on 20 May Sir Brian Langstaff's final report will reveal in harrowing detail not only the allegations and what happened a long time ago, but the consequences, which have been profound and life-changing for so many people in this country. I listened to her and the advice she gave me after the last oral questions, and I will be visiting Scotland and working with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we have a United Kingdom approach.

### Armed Forces Veterans

12. **Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD):** What steps he is taking to support armed forces veterans. [902500]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** The Government continue to take unprecedented action to support those who served us: through Operation Fortitude, we are ending veterans' rough sleeping; through Operation Restore and Operation Courage, we are supporting their health and wellbeing; and Operation Prosper is an employment pathway to help veterans secure high-value jobs. We are also planning to publish the UK's first draft veterans Bill, representing another step forward in our journey to make this the best country in the world in which to be a veteran.

**Sarah Dyke:** The Wincanton armed forces breakfast club, held at the Balsam centre in my constituency, offers veterans a place to catch up, where they can have peer support and enjoy a social, hearty breakfast. What efforts is the Minister making to support community-focused initiatives such as that for veterans across the UK?

**Johnny Mercer:** I pay tribute to the Wincanton armed forces and veterans breakfast club. Like many breakfast clubs, including those in my own constituency, it does an amazing job bringing together veterans and tackling

isolation and loneliness, particularly among the older generation. I encourage all Members of the House to visit. The clubs do not just happen, so I pay tribute to the volunteers and those who turn up every week to administrate them. Those people do not just talk a good game on veterans; they get in there, volunteer, spend their time and really care, so I pay tribute to all of them.

**Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con):** Today is Anzac Day, when we remember Australians and New Zealanders who gave so much. In an increasingly dangerous world, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to veterans in Australia, New Zealand, here in the UK and right across the Commonwealth, to whom we owe so much?

**Johnny Mercer:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising the question. Anzac Day is an incredibly important day. I was in Australia only a few months ago. We are only as strong as our relationships with our allies. They have made an extraordinary contribution to world peace, particularly during the world wars. I pay tribute to veterans across the globe. It is not easy fighting wars, particularly wars of choice that are not global conflicts, and then coming back and reintegrating into society. Veterans can be incredibly proud of their service. People like me and my counterparts in Australia and elsewhere will continue to strive night and day to improve their lot in civil society when they return.

**Mr Speaker:** I will be laying a wreath on behalf of the House.

### Public Sector Procurement: Digital Goods and Services

13. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of public sector procurement of digital goods and services. [902501]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** The Government recognise how vital digital products and services are for delivering public services. The digital, data and technology playbook provides best practice guidance for the procurement of digital products and services. The playbook is updated annually, most recently in June 2023. Departments are responsible for ensuring that public services delivered by the private sector represent value for money.

**Chi Onwurah:** Digital services procurement should be a win, win, win: the British public get better services, businesses get a good and reliable customer, and public services are reduced in cost. However, that is not the case under this Government. Departments are locked into single-source providers and dependent on legacy systems. The National Audit Office itself said that procurement was not competitive enough. As an example of that, can the Minister say how competitive cloud service provision is across his Government? Will he set out how he is using open source to boost competitiveness in digital services procurement?

**Alex Burghart:** We have a highly successful commercial function in Government, which is driving up value for money across all our commercial arrangements. It monitors

contracts, before, during and after they have been in place, to ensure that we reduce the chances of issues such as lock-in. I strongly advise the hon. Lady to go and read the commercial function documentation—

**Chi Onwurah:** I have.

**Alex Burghart:** I am sure she has not. She should read the commercial function documentation that comes out of the Cabinet Office, because she will see, as has been shown successively, that it saves billions of pounds for the British taxpayer.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902502] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** The Cabinet Office continues to play a central co-ordinating role in protecting our national and economic security. Last week, we published the response to the call for evidence on the National Security and Investment Act 2021, and I set out the steps we will take to fine-tune that system, including honing our approach to export controls, outward investment and providing more support to business.

Later, I will be convening a round table of university vice-chancellors to brief them on the security risks in research and academia, and to discuss how we address those. All of that complements our plans for a generational £75 billion uplift in defence spending, including a new national defence and resilience plan, setting out a cross-Government approach to security, preparedness and resilience as a nation.

**Christine Jardine:** It is often claimed by critics that the continual stream of ineffective and incompetent legislation we see from Holyrood is evidence of the need for a second, democratically elected Chamber to scrutinise properly. We have such an effective Chamber here and this week we have seen how important it can be in legislation. Would that Chamber's position not have been strengthened by being a democratically elected second revising Chamber? Does the Secretary of State agree that the time has come when we need to look again at how we reform the House of Lords to make it more relevant to the 21st century and more democratic?

**Oliver Dowden:** I am afraid that I completely disagree with the hon. Lady about having an elected second Chamber. This is the democratic Chamber for our nation. It is the principal voice of the nation. We do not need a second Chamber in conflict with this one, further burdening and complexing legislative processes.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): The very welcome Windsor framework demonstrated a strong commitment to human and animal health by extending Northern Ireland's access to veterinary medicines until 2025. I welcome the establishment of the veterinary medicines working group by the Cabinet Office and the Northern Ireland Minister of State. I am pleased to be part of that group, which is working hard to find a permanent solution to this matter. Can my right hon.

Friend, the Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office, reassure the House that the Government will continue to strain every sinew in discussions with the EU to protect both animal health and public health in Northern Ireland and right across the UK with a permanent solution for access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker, I can so assure my hon. Friend. I am very grateful to him for bringing his professional expertise to bear within the working group. We have met twice and we intend to report at the end of June. We will then have a consistent and coherent position with which we can go forward to blend a combination of adaptation and, I hope, productive negotiations with the EU to deliver a long-lasting, permanent solution to safeguard both animal and human health on the island of Ireland. I am determined that we should do that in a coherent and professional manner, and I look forward to working with him to do so.

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

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): May I begin with a moment of unity? The Deputy Prime Minister and I are both pushing for an early general election as soon as possible. I very much welcome his recognition that there is absolutely no point in this Conservative Government carrying on in office a moment longer.

Further to the question a little earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), this week two people were charged in this country, under the Official Secrets Act, with spying for China, one of whom worked for politicians in this House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I must stop the right hon. Gentleman. It seems to me that he is about to go down a road on a matter that is sub judice, which cannot be discussed here in this Chamber. The Speaker made a statement at the beginning of business earlier this week, asking Members not to refer to this matter, because it is sub judice. Can the right hon. Gentleman ask his general question in a different way, and not refer to that specific issue?

**Mr McFadden:** Thank you for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall ask a policy question.

The Government recently awarded a contract for a supercomputer to Lenovo, a China-headquartered firm that has been the subject of enforcement action by the United States on security grounds. This supercomputer will be used by critical Government bodies such as the UK Atomic Energy Authority. How will Ministers safeguard the public against any possible misuse of sensitive Government data as a result of the awarding of the contract?

**Oliver Dowden:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has also written to me regarding that topic. I can assure him that we will be working with the National Cyber Security Centre and the National Security Secretariat to ensure that full checks and measures are put in place to prevent such abuse from occurring.



The right hon. Gentleman referred to his role as general election co-ordinator for the Labour party. I understand that he sits on the quad, which determines Labour policy, so perhaps he could clear up, for the benefit of us all, this question on an issue of national security. Does the Labour party support our £75 billion increase in defence spending? If he cares about these things, the answer should be plainly, “Yes, we do”.

**Mr McFadden:** When we announce a policy, we ensure that it is properly costed and funded, which I recommend to the Deputy Prime Minister. One other cyber-threat that modern states are facing is prepositioning: the planting of destructive software in critical infrastructure that can then be activated at a later date. The director of the FBI said that prepositioning of the Volt Typhoon type discovered in American infrastructure was “the defining threat of our generation”.

America’s cyber-defence agency said that Five Eyes allies were also likely to have been targeted. Have the Government looked for or found Volt-Typhoon-type infiltration of any parts of our critical national IT infrastructure, and if so what action is being taken to remove it?

**Oliver Dowden:** The right hon. Gentleman has been around this place long enough to know that he is delivering a non-answer on Labour’s support for defence spending. The whole House will have noted that, although he raises an important issue in respect of prepositioning. He will appreciate that there are limits to what I can say from the Dispatch Box given that some of this relates to high-side intelligence, but I assure him that we are working with our Five Eyes allies, in particular the United States, since the US and the UK have exceptional capability in these areas, to ensure that we both have adequate knowledge and understanding of such prepositioning, and take effective steps in respect of it.

**Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con):** Eight weeks ago, on 29 February, at first order questions, I asked the Minister without Portfolio what the Government would do to assist people who are adversely affected by the statute of limitations as a result of having been injured by covid-19 vaccines. My right hon. Friend said in response that she had taken the issue to the permanent secretary. Will she update us on what has happened with the permanent secretary over the past eight weeks?

**The Minister without Portfolio (Esther McVey):** I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question. He is a tireless campaigner on this matter, on which he has met with me and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. As I said to my hon. Friend, I am dealing with this matter with the permanent secretary; he will know that we have a new permanent secretary in the Department, and we are working at pace to resolve it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** Last year, the UK Government promised to relocate hundreds of civil service posts to the north-east of Scotland. It has now been confirmed that the total number will be 35.

Given the billions generated in energy revenues and the unparalleled potential of our area in powering our green future, can the Minister please explain to the people of the north-east of Scotland how hundreds and 35 are now the same thing?

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen):** I think the hon. Lady is referring to the second headquarters of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in Aberdeen, which I visited just before Christmas. I think that there was a misunderstanding about the numbers that were quoted in the paper. Some 18,283 jobs have moved out of London as a consequence of the places for growth programme. I will examine the number that have moved to Scotland, and write to her to clarify the Government’s position.

T2. [902504] **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** I recently met with Emma Howard Boyd to discuss the interim findings of the Mayor of London’s climate resilience review, which she has been leading on. It involves the work of many different Government Departments at a national level. Will the Minister update us on whether we are conducting a similar exercise? The review is looking at what the impact would be of a similar heat-wave to the one we had a couple of years ago, flash flooding and all sorts of things. It is not just the responsibility of DESNZ or the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; it covers many Departments, so it is a Cabinet Office responsibility.

**Oliver Dowden:** It is an important question. We are doing exactly that. Extreme heat is something that we have to increasingly plan against. That is why last year, for the first time, we introduced an alert system for extreme heat that matches the alert system for extreme cold. I disagree, though, with the Mayor of London that the way to deal with this is to start imposing 20 mph speed limits everywhere and an ultra low emission zone. I hope that the people of London will take the opportunity to vote against that next week.

**Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** Earlier we heard a number of statements from the Opposition questioning ministerial integrity, but perhaps they should look closer to home—to be precise, at the first Minister of Wales and his links with donations to his leadership campaign and the Development Bank of Wales. Can the Minister tell us when the Welsh Labour party will apply to itself the standards that Labour has called for in the Chamber this morning—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. If you all shout, I cannot hear what the hon. Lady is saying, but I think there is some doubt: the hon. Lady cannot ask the Minister a question about what the Labour party will do. Would she like to rephrase what she is saying?

**Sarah Atherton:** With reference to the links between the First Minister of Wales, the donations to his campaign and the Development Bank of Wales, would the Minister like to describe why this is such an issue for the people of Wales while the Opposition keep shouting that we are doing the wrong thing?

**John Glen:** My hon. Friend makes a very strong point. If a devolved Administration receives a donation as part of a political campaign—if the leader of that Administration receives a £200,000 donation at the same time that the Development Bank of Wales makes a £400,000 loan to a subsidiary of that company—that is surely a matter of public interest. It will be for the First Minister of Wales to determine what is appropriate, but I would have thought some explanation would be the very least that the people of Wales would expect.

T3. [902505] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Last year the Government pledged to introduce a ministerial deed to legally commit Ministers to keeping to the after-Government business appointment rules. If I were cynical, I could think of a reason why the Government have not brought that commitment forward, but might the Minister give an idea of when he intends to do so?

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady is right: in July, in response to those three reports from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Boardman review and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Government did say they would work up strengthening the rules on business appointments and developing that ministerial deed. I cannot give an update at this point, because it is work the Deputy Prime Minister and his team are leading on, but it is important work and we do need to get it right.

T4. [902506] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Paymaster General for all his hard work on the contaminated blood scandal. However, as you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I still urge him to go further and faster to get this situation resolved. If the infected blood compensation authority is to be established upon Royal Assent, can the Minister outline the timescale and process for the appointment of the chair and the other directors, and how those with lived experience will be involved and included among those directors?

**John Glen:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind words and her constructive approach. It is absolutely right that she continues to press me, as she does at every opportunity. Reflecting on our conversations and what she has said to me, the key thing is to ensure that we maintain and reclaim the trust of the infected blood community in all its dimensions. She will know that I am engaging with them in depth over several meetings on 1 and 10 May. Sir Brian Langstaff made clear that the infected blood community and all those accessing the scheme should have a role to play in its delivery, so, consequential to listening to what they say to me, I will be thinking about how we build that in. As she knows, the Government have made provisions for committees and sub-committees to ensure representation of the communities, while also maintaining an independent, arm's length body. I will need to reconcile those. I am sorry that I cannot give her a timetable, but I am working on it in some detail.

T5. [902508] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): If I may press the Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Office officials have refused to say whether Lord Cameron has recused himself from parts of his role as Foreign Secretary, given his previous well-paid work in promoting the

China-backed Port City Colombo. Can the Minister tell the House whether the Foreign Secretary has recused himself from any part of his ministerial duties?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, shortly before taking office the Foreign Secretary not only had all his interests properly reviewed by the propriety and ethics team in my Department, but went through them with the independent adviser on ministers' interests. The independent adviser set out all relevant interests, and those have been published, so the information is transparently out there for people to be able to judge for themselves.

T6. [902511] **George Galloway** (Rochdale) (WPB): Ever since the monster Cyril Smith, formally of this House, but initially mayor of Rochdale, the town has been blighted by scandals of grooming and cover-up. We currently have 64 men on bail on grooming charges in Rochdale. The previous Labour mayor of Rochdale and the next mayor of Rochdale—the King's representatives—were both investigated on charges of sexual malpractice towards young girls in their employ, with all the power imbalances that that implies. Self-regulation, with no investigation by any outside party—how can this be right? What will the Minister do to help me to clean up Rochdale?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, any criminal allegations are properly a matter for the courts, and he would not expect a Minister to comment on them from this Dispatch Box. If he wishes to write to me in respect of the further allegations he makes, I will be happy to take them up myself or with ministerial colleagues.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What consideration has been given to the merits of making it illegal for public sector bodies to pay ransoms if they are the victim of a ransomware attack?

**Oliver Dowden:** That is a good question; it is something the Government continue to keep open and under review. The argument against doing so is that it could discourage companies that are subject to ransomware attacks from reporting them, for example to the National Cyber Security Centre. Those reports help us to gather intelligence on the nature of those threats and to work with victims to resolve them. It is not something I rule out totally, but that is the reason that we have not imposed it so far.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), will know that many councils in Northern Ireland have appointed veterans' champions. Will he join me in acknowledging the work that many veterans' champions do? Will he also call on the wide range of political parties on councils in Northern Ireland to offer their unstinting support to those champions to help to deliver services to veterans?

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** Yes, of course. We have made extraordinary progress on veterans affairs in Northern Ireland. I recognise and have always recognised the unique difficulties of that. Veterans' services, and ensuring that these people are looked after because of their service, should not be at

the whim of different political parties. I am working at pace to establish an outpost of the Office for Veterans' Affairs in Northern Ireland to create an environment where everyone can work together and pull together all the different services to get veterans' care in Northern Ireland up to the same level as in England. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and other elected representatives out there from all parties to make sure that we do the right thing.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): With two former Conservative Prime Ministers having recently contravened the ministerial code—twice, in the case of Boris Johnson—and the Radcliffe rules, in the case of his successor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), is it now Tory party policy to routinely ignore the rules? If not, what sanctions will they face?

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady is correct to say that the book by the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), was reviewed under the Radcliffe rules. The Cabinet Office did not clear it. The overwhelming majority of books that are submitted do comply. We will have to keep these matters under review.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): This is a very simple question to the Deputy Prime Minister: does the Foreign Secretary stand recused in any aspect of his job by virtue of his financial interests, either now or before he was appointed to his post—yes or no?

**Oliver Dowden:** The Labour party keep on pushing on this point, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the latest list of ministerial interests, which was published in December and provides details of Minister's interests, including those of the Foreign Secretary, that are judged by the independent adviser to be relevant, or could be perceived to be relevant, to their ministerial roles. All of it is there in the public domain.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): With reference to the written questions that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office has answered, can he outline what the Government consider to be the difference between a foreign court and an international court?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** We have answered this question on a number of occasions.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Paymaster General told my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) that he could not give a timeline with regard to the infected blood scandal compensation. This subject is raised on an almost daily basis in this House by Members on both sides, because our constituents just cannot understand why it is taking so long. Can he at least give an indication of when he thinks compensation might begin to be paid? It is especially important given that, as I understand it, one victim of the scandal dies every four days.

**John Glen:** The answer to this is to be found when we issue the comprehensive response to the inquiry, as soon as possible after 20 May. Legislation is going through

the other place to make good on the amendment that was passed in this House by virtue of the advocacy and leadership of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). We have announced that we will make some interim payments to the estates of those deceased infected who have not yet received any money, but the substantive response to translate 18 recommendations into meaningful and actionable responses for a wide community over 40 or 50 years obviously demands a lot of work to quantify and get the process right. We will update the House as quickly as possible after 20 May.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Just now, the Deputy Prime Minister raised the issue of the £75 billion public spending announcement. Would he care to tell the House why, after 14 years in power, it takes an upcoming general election for him and his party to make defence spending policies?

**Oliver Dowden:** It may have escaped the hon. Gentleman's attention, but Russia has invaded Ukraine and Iran's proxies are attacking our allies in the middle east. That demands a response from the Government, and it has been provided by the Prime Minister. It is very notable that the Labour party is failing to match that commitment.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Papers at an employment tribunal last week reported that Rowaa Ahmar, a former civil servant, stated that

"the racism within the Cabinet Office appeared to be unrelenting and systemic",

and that, despite having a role as head of policy in the Government's illegal migration taskforce, she was made unwelcome at meetings about the Rwanda plan because of her views on the racist ultra-hostility of the policies. Is Ms Ahmar right that speaking up against racism in the Cabinet Office is a career death sentence?

**John Glen:** I do not accept that at all. Of course, Ms Ahmar withdrew her allegations completely on the eve of having them scrutinised at the higher tribunal, so I do not accept that, and it is absolutely right that senior civil servants take action when there are performance issues with the staff under them, without fear of allegations being made against them.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) about the infected blood scandal, the Cumberlege report highlighted over three years ago the need for redress for victims of the sodium valproate, vaginal mesh and Primodos scandals. What progress has been made on redress for those victims?

**John Glen:** I am sorry; I am not able to give an answer on those other scandals. There was a Backbench Business debate on redress schemes last Thursday, to which the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) replied. I believe that work is ongoing, but I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman to give him a thorough answer on the matter.

**George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that standards may have changed since I was last in this place, but in answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), rose to the Dispatch Box and said, “We have answered this question on a number of occasions.” Can that possibly be a legitimate ministerial answer? After all, that could be the answer to virtually every question that is ever asked in this House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I cannot help agreeing with his final point, having sat in the Chair for

thousands of hours and heard the same question answered again and again. He makes a very good point: Ministers are responsible, and have a duty to answer the question again and again. However, if the Minister thought—today or at any other time—that the appropriate answer in the circumstances was the one that the hon. Gentleman just quoted, that is not something that I can criticise, or a matter on which I can take action. As Mr Speaker has said many times, and as I am very pleased to repeat, what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box is not a matter for the Chair.

The hon. Gentleman’s point of order has brought us perfectly to just after 10.30 am. We can therefore proceed to the business question.



## Business of the House

10.31 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** The business for the week commencing 29 April will include:

**MONDAY 29 APRIL**—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill.

**TUESDAY 30 APRIL**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 1 MAY**—Remaining stages of the Automated Vehicles Bill [*Lords*].

**THURSDAY 2 MAY**—Debate on a motion on security in the western Balkans, followed by a general debate on pension schemes. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House of Commons will rise for the early May bank holiday at the conclusion of business on Thursday 2 May and return on Tuesday 7 May.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 May will include:

**MONDAY 6 MAY**—The House will not be sitting.

**TUESDAY 7 MAY**—General debate on defence.

**WEDNESDAY 8 MAY**—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

**THURSDAY 9 MAY**—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 10 MAY**—The House will not be sitting.

**Lucy Powell:** The awful events in Wales yesterday will have been traumatic for students, staff and parents, and our thoughts are with all those affected. I also pay tribute to Frank Field. The words said about Frank in recent days really reflect who he was: principled, determined, relentless, kind, generous and funny. His tireless campaigning against poverty, and for opportunity and education, changed the life of so many children who will never know it. My thoughts are with his family and friends.

As someone well experienced in divided, weak Governments, does the Leader of the House share my concern that the SNP has broken its power-sharing deal, which its leader said only last night was in the best interests of Scotland, leaving the people of Scotland even worse off? Under the SNP Government, one in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list, and people face higher bills and higher taxes. Does she think that is why the Scottish Greens, the SNP's former partners, accuse the SNP of "selling out future generations"?

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): This has got nothing to do with the business of the House.

**Lucy Powell:** It absolutely does; I am asking the Leader of the House for her opinion on these matters.

Another week, another litany of problems for the Government. Last week, there was more scandal and internal positioning, and this week, there is a catalogue of failings. The Government's flagship childcare plan is

in tatters. They spent months in denial, yet this week the Department for Education finally admitted what many parents have been experiencing: that the roll-out targets are "problematic". Yesterday, the spending watchdog warned that the Government's plan does not "achieve its primary aim or demonstrate value for money".

The report was damning about the DFE's oversight and planning for new places. Can the right hon. Lady guarantee that full delivery of the plan is on track? This is the reverse-Midas-touch Government. Only they could turn what should be a popular policy into such a vote loser.

Another policy that the Government have turned to dust is their pledge on renters' rights. Ahead of Report stage of the Bill on that subject yesterday, the Government tabled hundreds of amendments—a poor reflection of the Leader of the House's oversight of the legislative agenda. The amendments watered down that weak Bill even further, and there is no guarantee that banning section 21 evictions will ever happen. Is it any wonder that the Renters Reform Coalition has pulled its support for the Bill?

Despite the Government finally passing their Rwanda legislation, it has emerged that around 100,000 illegal migrants will languish in hotels at the taxpayers' expense in perpetuity, unable to be removed or even processed because of the Government's last piece of legislation. How is stopping the small boats going?

The Government promised levelling up, yet the chair of Middlesbrough football club, a former Ben Houchen superfan, said that the Tees Valley Mayor is "giving away our children's future"

through his management of the South Tees Development Corporation. He is right, isn't he?

In perhaps what will become the Conservatives' most lasting and damaging legacy, there is more worrying evidence today about generation lockdown, among which there is not only massive school drop-out and absenteeism rates, but more drinking, because this Government failed to put in place the catch-up support needed. It is no wonder that this country is crying out for change. How is the Leader of the House feeling about her party's chances next week? We all want to know. I see that on the day we return after the local elections there is a general debate. Is that in anticipation of something, or to keep Government Members away from Westminster? We are still waiting on a lot of important legislation.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I will do so now before she comes to her peroration. Earlier in her questioning, she referred to matters in the Scottish Parliament, and asked the Leader of the House her opinion on them. She has just asked the Leader of the House her opinion on a general political matter. This is business questions, and it is about the business of the House. I let the hon. Lady's questions go very wide. They do not have to be exactly about the business of the House for next week, but they ought to relate to the business of the House of Commons. If, rather than asking the opinion of the Leader of the House, she asked a question about the business before us, that would be perfectly in order.

**Lucy Powell:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was about to ask why legislation such as the Criminal Justice Bill and the Sentencing Bill is not coming forward

[Lucy Powell]

the week after the local elections, as has been demanded by Members on both sides of the House. Many other things could also come before us for debate, yet the day we come back after the local elections is very light. I wonder why that is. Has the Leader of House cleared her diary for that day, too? Is that why we have such light business that week? No matter how much the Government's Mayors and candidates hide behind their green and purple branding, there is no escaping the fact that they are standing on the woeful record of this Tory Government.

We have a plan—they might not like it, but we do—to bring down waiting lists, to deliver lower energy bills, to build more homes and, as we have set out today, to reform our railways in the interest of the travelling public. It is not more free cash, as some have said. The truth is that a vote for the Conservatives is a vote for this chaotic mess to continue. Is it not the case that if people want change, they have to vote Labour next Thursday?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, may I send my thoughts and sentiments to all those affected by the appalling events in Wales? I hope that the community recovers swiftly. May I also place on record my sadness at the loss of our former colleague Frank Field, who was MP for Birkenhead for more than 40 years? When I was going for candidate selection for the Conservative party, one of the questions I was asked was who in the Labour party I most admired, and my answer was Frank Field. Many knew him for his relentless work combating poverty and its causes, but he had many other interests that he pursued with equal vigour. I was particularly pleased to work with him on trying to secure the building of new ships in the UK, and he was also a fellow Brexit campaigner. The connection he had to the people he served, and the duty that he felt towards them and never wavered from, was profound, and I send my deepest sympathy to all who knew and loved him.

May I also pay tribute to Dame Elizabeth Gardiner DCB KC for her service as first parliamentary counsel? She was the first woman to hold that role in its 150-year history, and she has had a very busy eight years. I place on record my thanks to her for her service and wish her well. I also congratulate Jessica de Mounteney, who succeeds her.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) asks me about the SNP. I am sure that we will come to that shortly, but the Greens leaving the coalition provides the Labour party with an opportunity. I thought a memo had gone out to Labour Front Benchers saying that they should go easy on the SNP, with a view to perhaps forming some sort of coalition or alliance with it north of the border.

The hon. Lady and her party talk a good talk—she just has on childcare, ensuring that people have a warm and secure home, and levelling up the Tees Valley—but it is the Conservatives who are delivering the largest expansion of free childcare. It is the Conservatives who have built 2.5 million new homes and are getting people on the housing ladder, and it is the Conservative Mayor Ben Houchen who has delivered regeneration for the Tees Valley and an employment rate 3% above the national average.

In response to the point about the need for more and better competition, the Conservatives are introducing legislation and schemes to strengthen the arm of the consumer, such as FairFuelUK's PumpWatch. Labour's answer reduces competition further and is a return to the British Rail sandwich. The hon. Lady touts the move that was announced today. The shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), says that the change will be done at zero cost, but we read that it will actually require £10 billion of additional funding and will not deliver any fare decreases or improved services. It is socialist ideology over practicality. Even Lew Adams, ASLEF's former secretary-general, said:

"in the public sector, all we got were cuts, cuts, cuts. And today there are more members in the trade union, more train drivers, and more trains running. The reality is that it worked, we've protected jobs, and we got more jobs."

The hon. Member for Manchester Central raises the issue of Rwanda. In response to the British Government's need to control foreign nationals' access to the UK, the Conservatives have been doing the hard yards of institutional and legal reform. We have introduced legislation establishing the Rwanda scheme, and the Home Secretary is working to modernise the international frameworks that govern it. In contrast, Labour has voted hundreds of times against that legislation, and says that it will scrap the Rwanda scheme even if it is working. Instead, it is pursuing a quota scheme that would see immigration rise. We will never do that.

The hon. Lady talks of change, but the Labour party has not changed at all. While Labour Members have been scoffing prawn cocktail, they have been devising 70 new business burdens that they plan on introducing. While posing next to submarines, Labour Members—several Front-Bench Members—voted to scrap our deterrent and are refusing to match our baseline on defence spending. While Labour Members criticise and sneer at those who celebrate the St George's flag, they are allowing some of them to occupy the Labour Front Bench. Today's Labour party is packed with the same old socialists and a few new plastic patriots, and no amount of window dressing—

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before the Leader of the House finishes, I can take a point of order if it relates directly to the matters that we are discussing.

**Dawn Butler:** Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House is misleading the House. [Interruption.] The Leader of the House just said—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Hold on. The hon. Lady cannot accuse the Leader of the House of misleading the House. That would be quite wrong and, if the Leader of the House had done something along those lines, I would have stopped her immediately. If the hon. Lady means that she disagrees with the Leader of the House, that is a different matter.

**Dawn Butler:** Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a matter of fact that Labour Members celebrated St George's day. We all put it on our social media, and the leader of

our party has made a point of wrapping himself in the flag. The Leader of the House is completely incorrect in what she just said to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I think the hon. Lady means that anything that the Leader of the House might have said would have been inadvertently misleading.

**Dawn Butler:** I hope that the Leader of the House will correct the record right now.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I wanted to take that point of order while the Leader of the House was still on her feet. I am quite sure that the Leader of the House did not intend to make any misdirection. Would she care to take that point?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I had finished my response to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), but I am happy to add: the truth hurts.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Let us be clear: we will be taking questions that relate to the business of the House. I call the vice-chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I bring good news from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), whose daughter-in-law is recovering. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] That is good news, and he hopes to be back next week.

May I add my condolences to those sent to the family of Lord Field? I had the opportunity to meet him when I was a student at Liverpool University. He was a redoubtable campaigner on everything he believed in and one of those people I profoundly respected.

On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, in addition to the business that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has announced, on Thursday 9 May there will be a debate on miners and mining communities and a debate on the BBC mid-term charter review. If we are given the time for Thursday 16 May, we have offered a debate on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s report on women’s state pension age, which is extremely well subscribed; and if we are given 23 May, there will be a debate on UK arms exports to Israel and inequalities in dementia services.

In further good news, we have filled up the business for Westminster Hall on Tuesdays until the Whitsun recess with debates on: costs associated with illegal immigration; the impact of smartphones on social media; and the introduction of UK-made zero-emission buses in the UK. On Thursday, we have debates on global health agencies and on Global Intergenerational Week. The Backbench Business Committee has been aiming to get as many debates on the agenda as possible, but, as always, if Members have requests, they should please submit them by Friday lunchtime and we will deal with them as appropriate.

Over the weekend, I spoke to a number of women who are frightened of walking home after dark. The fact is that the rise in crime in London has been dramatic, the rise in knife crime has been dramatic, and the

Metropolitan police is the only force in the country that has failed to meet its recruitment target. Could we have a statement next week on actions that the Government will take to ensure that we have the police that are needed in London to make women—and men—feel safe when they are travelling home?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for stepping up and making that very helpful announcement on all Backbench Business in the forthcoming weeks. I am sure the whole House will want to send good wishes to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and his family. It is very good news that his daughter is making a recovery; we send all our love to him and his family.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the failings of the London Mayor. London has got less safe and crime is on the rise, particularly violent crime, and it is no surprise to hear that my hon. Friend’s constituents are very concerned about that. Unfortunately, many of the areas he mentions are the responsibility of the Mayor of London, but there is something that not just Government Members but the general London public can do in the coming days, and that is vote in a new Mayor of London. I think people will agree that you are indeed “Safer with Susan”.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call Scottish National party spokesman.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments about the dreadful news from Wales, and of course those about Frank Field.

I make no apology for starting this week where I finished last week. The Leader of the House may recall that I asked for a debate on the new Brexit border controls due to come into effect next week. Answer came there none, but things became clear later on, as the *Financial Times* reported within hours of my question:

“The UK Government has told the country’s port authorities that it will not ‘turn on’ critical health and safety checks for EU imports...because of the risk of ‘significant disruption’... the new border systems will not be fully ready.”

It is being called a phased implementation approach—very “Yes Minister” speak from some hapless civil servant trying to excuse the sixth such delay. More delay, more confusion for business, but no statement from the Minister.

Scotland’s importers, exporters, agricultural and hospitality sectors and businesses large and small are all at their wits’ end because the Tories insist on imposing their Brexit folly on us. Brexit is estimated to be costing salmon producers—the largest food exporters in the UK—up to £100 million a year. Tourism in the highlands and islands has been devastated, with staff shortages affecting 45% of businesses to date. Brexit was named as the main difficulty for 44% of businesses in Scotland trading overseas.

Before the latest delays were announced, the chair of the Chilled Food Association, which represents 30 trade and professional organisations, said that every time there is a proposal from the UK Government, people invest in paperwork and computer systems and then the Government change the rules again. Since 2021, £200 million will have been spent on just one export health certificate. A recent report found that the UK



[Deidre Brock]

economy had shrunk by £140 billion, with the average citizen around £2,000 worse off—thanks to good old Brexit that Scotland did not vote for.

Yet this place shuts its eyes to the devastating impact that Brexit has had on people's lives and businesses. Scots are accustomed to being ignored, overruled and treated with disdain by this Government, but being dragged out of the EU against our will has been an economic and social disaster for us. No party can claim to be the party of business and back Brexit, so I urge the Leader of the House to overcome the vow of silence—an omertà between the Tory and Labour parties—and tell us when we can have an urgent debate on the effect of Brexit, starting with this disastrous delayed Tory trade tax.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Despite what the hon. Lady says, we have now become the fourth largest exporter in the world. I will not annoy the hon. Lady by listing how well the nation is doing on trade, fishing and many of the things that we wanted to see improved to give people new opportunities, because I know it would irritate her. It is no surprise to me that SNP Members do not want to face realities: they do not want to engage with the trader support service that is supporting business very well or with the fact that we are creating an interface directly between the IT systems in businesses and the legacy Government systems such as His Majesty's Revenue and Customs so that we reduce bureaucracy for those traders and support them in meeting their ambitions. It is no surprise that SNP Members do not want to deal with the reality of the situation given the reality of the situation now for the SNP, a minority Administration with their failings and some very serious issues that we all know are now subject to prosecution as well as investigation. Not even the Greens want anything to do with them.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): May I first pay tribute to Lord Field? He was one of my political heroes, and I first met him when I was a 20-year-old student, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). As his constituency Member of Parliament, I am delighted to inform the House that he continued to correspond with me on the issues and campaigns that he cared about until the very end of his life.

As part of our national health strategy, we rightly emphasise the importance of eating healthily and taking physical exercise, but we do not take sleep into account. Today the Sleep Charity published "Dreaming of Change: a Manifesto for Sleep", which highlights the serious mental and physical health problems that a lack of sleep can cause among both children and adults. Would my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time on the vital public health importance of getting more sleep?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that incredibly important issue. We could run a positive public health campaign; rather than just telling people not to drink or smoke, we should also ask them whether they have had enough sleep. We should be proud of the research that has been done in the UK. Professor Russell Foster at Oxford University has done amazing work

which is leading to improvements in the general population, but particularly among veterans who have suffered blast injuries and lost their sight. I would be happy to raise what my hon. Friend has said with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, because I think that that would be a very good initiative.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I first associate myself with the comments about our old friend Frank, whom I knew for many years.

It is widely acknowledged, in this Chamber and elsewhere, that Iran is run and controlled by a bunch of clerical fascists and homicidal maniacs who have now taken to attacking people on British soil, which is a bit of a break with what used to happen. However, there is a difference of opinion over how we should respond, especially with regard to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I know that we have had plenty of statements and urgent questions about Iran, but could we have a statement next week?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The point raised by the hon. Gentleman is a regular theme at business questions, and throughout the week. These are very serious matters, and he is right to point out that this activity is not limited to the strait of Hormuz or other parts of the world but is taking place on British soil. Our citizens are being threatened, and many representatives such as councillors and others who hold public office are having to be protected as a result of the appalling campaigns against them and the death threats. I will ensure that those at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and will encourage them to update the House.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): The United Kingdom has a vibrant classic car sector, but the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency seems to have taken against it somewhat, forcing cars that have been subject to modest repairs or even heinous crimes such as the fitting of seatbelts to have Q-plates. As I know from attending the Heritage Matters Insight Day event held by the Historic & Classic Vehicles Alliance during the Easter recess, and indeed from my own inbox, the problem seems to be getting worse. I have raised it numerous times in the Transport Committee, but it is not going away. May we have a debate in Government time to iron out these issues and ensure that the Department for Transport gets a grip on the DVLA's attitude to the classic car sector?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I would be happy to raise the hon. Gentleman's point with the Transport Secretary, as Transport questions will not take place again until 16 May. This is not just about people's personal vehicles; it concerns an enormous number of UK businesses. We have a huge export market, and Britain is, of course, very well known for its motor sport and motoring in general. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign on this important matter, and will ensure that all relevant Secretaries of State have heard what he has said.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Frank Field was a great mate. We even forgave him, in the end, for his daft views on Brexit. He was a great guy and a great colleague, and we miss him dearly.



I genuinely seek the guidance of the Leader of the House this morning—I am not trying to make a political point. We have worked very hard to ensure that standards in this House are of the highest order, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) has played a big part in that. This Parliament's reputation is based on standards here and in the upper House. Is it possible for her to have a conversation with her senior colleagues in the House of Lords? I do not know whether she saw a recent article in *The Sunday Times* that said the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, a former MI6 chief in Moscow, is a lobbyist for a man in the US who is believed to be involved in Russian gang crime. Everybody knows there is a group in the upper House that is very close to Russia. Could we look into this issue? It will impinge on Parliament if it is not dealt with.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Is the hon. Gentleman relating his question to the business of the House?

**Mr Sheerman:** Oh, and may we have an early debate on it?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that others will follow his learned example.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will answer the hon. Gentleman with the same good faith with which he asked his question. If he has serious concerns about anyone on the parliamentary estate, he needs to raise them formally, and in the appropriate way, with the House authorities. That would be the right course of action if he had genuine concerns about anyone.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I do not quite agree with the last answer given by the Leader of the House. We know who we are talking about, and I agree with those on the Opposition side of the House.

May we have a debate in Government time on the Three Rivers development in Mid Devon—I have mentioned this before—which is now becoming a cover-up and a financial scandal? The chairman of the scrutiny committee has done a runner and slunk off to rented accommodation in Bampton, which is a disgrace. I am afraid this is now becoming a serious issue for local government. Mid Devon Council has no scrutiny, no responsibility, and absolutely no idea what it is doing. In Government time, can we talk about local government that is not taking its financial responsibilities seriously and is covering up major issues?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about what sounds like a very concerning issue that is affecting my hon. Friend's constituents. Given that the next questions to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are not until June, I will ensure that he has heard what my hon. Friend has said today.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): May I add my condolences to the family of Lord Field? He was an exceptional man and an outstanding politician, and I had the privilege of knowing him for two years while he was still a Member of Parliament.

Working or studying in other countries has wide-ranging benefits for young people. Perhaps the saddest outcome of Brexit is that the number of young people from the UK working and studying in EU countries, and the number of young people from the EU working and studying here, has dramatically reduced. In order to reverse this worrying trend, last week the EU proposed youth mobility visas, but the Government rejected them outright, even though they would have brought a wide-ranging and welcome boost to our economy—I mean that in good faith. Can we please have a statement from the Government on why that proposal was rejected outright and how they propose to boost youth mobility between EU countries and the UK?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. She will know that our approach has been to widen opportunities for our citizens and give them more choice about where they might want to study abroad. I think that the Secretary of State did put out a statement explaining why the scheme was not deemed to be in our interests, and it was due to the fact that it was not going to be reciprocal.

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): This is the first time in my 19 years as a Member of Parliament that I have raised this sort of frustration and complaint, so I hope my right hon. Friend realises how serious it is.

Over a month ago, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary about a British citizen whose husband is being held illegally in a foreign country without trial. I have tried repeatedly to ask the Foreign Secretary for a reply and I went to the Deputy Foreign Secretary to chase things up, but still nothing. I find it wholly unacceptable that the Foreign Secretary has not replied to me in over a month of correspondence when I am raising the rights of a British citizen whose husband is being kept in appalling circumstances abroad. It is his duty and responsibility to respond in writing to Members in a timely fashion. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House please take this issue up for me with the Foreign Office?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear that. This is clearly an incredibly pressing matter. If my hon. Friend gives me further details after business questions, I shall raise it immediately with the Foreign Office and ensure that he is able to speak to the people he needs to speak to in order to do his duty by his constituents.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House advise me on how we can bring Ministers to the House to account for their decisions on arms export licences? As she knows, the Select Committee on Business and Trade assumed responsibility for the oversight of arms export licences in January. At the beginning of April, an important legal judgment was issued by the International Court of Justice. We therefore held our first hearing on licensing arms exports to Israel yesterday. We gave Ministers 20 days' notice to attend, together with detailed questions in correspondence. I am grateful to the Deputy Foreign Secretary for his apology to me yesterday for the Foreign Office not fielding a Minister. I have had no such correspondence or contact from the Department for Business and Trade.

[Liam Byrne]

This is not acceptable. Ministers are politically accountable to Parliament. This is a matter of extreme interest to the House, and it is part of Ministers' legal responsibility that they are politically accountable. Will the right hon. Lady advise me on what steps she can take next week to ensure that a Minister answers for the judgments the Government have made?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I know that the right hon. Gentleman takes those new responsibilities very seriously. As he knows, both Departments have made it clear that they are perfectly happy to attend and be scrutinised in respect of those decisions and to answer questions on the Government's position. Twenty days' notice sounds like a long time, but he will understand that the Ministers in question may have travel obligations and might therefore have been unable to make the specific date. I know that he knew last Friday that they would not be able to attend the session that took place yesterday. I also know that the Deputy Foreign Secretary spoke to him and, I hope, reassured the right hon. Gentleman of his intention to field a Minister for his Committee. Even though I am not telling the right hon. Gentleman anything he does not already know, I hope that reassures him that Ministers do intend to attend. I am very sure that no stunts such as those that took place yesterday will be required to get them to do so.

**Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** May we have a statement on Harlow Council and the success of its Conservative administration? My right hon. Friend will be aware that Conservative-led Harlow Council has cut and frozen council tax for three years and protected vital public services, as well as clearing the housing backlog and securing millions of pounds in Government investment to build an even better Harlow. Harlow's Conservative council is currently led by the youngest council leader in political history, Mr Dan Swords, who is a former apprentice in my office. Does my right hon. Friend agree that how Harlow Council leads, other councils should follow, and will she encourage everyone in Harlow and across the country to vote Conservative on 2 May?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for congratulating Dan and the other councillors who have done so much for their community. Dan is proof that age is not relevant, but political hue is. Elsewhere, in the west midlands, Andy Street has been following Harlow's example. He has never raised any taxes, and he does not charge an additional precept, yet he has brought billions of pounds of investment into his region, in stark contrast to Sadiq Khan in London, who has increased the mayoral precept by more than 70%, and Labour-run Birmingham, which is increasing council tax by 21% to pay for its errors. It is very clear: if you want better services at lower cost, vote Conservative.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** Like many across this House, I was utterly floored to hear the sad news of my friend Lord Field's passing. His was a life devoted to helping those in poverty, especially children. We worked together on the all-party parliamentary group on hunger, the School Holidays (Meals and Activities) Bill and the Food Insecurity Bill. We then set up Feeding Britain, a national charity that continues to alleviate

hunger across the UK, but we both knew that our charity should not have to exist in a country as rich as ours. With over 4 million children in poverty, does the Leader of the House agree that it would be a fitting tribute to our dear friend to hold an urgent debate on ending child poverty?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting Frank Field's legacy, as many other Members have done. The work of the organisations that he helped to found, and that he worked with, will continue. The hon. Lady will know that we brought forward a cost of living package that now exceeds £108 billion. She will also know that there are hundreds of thousands fewer children living in absolute poverty, and over a million fewer workless households. We stand on that record, and we want it to continue.

**Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** Wrexham will soon have the largest trading estate in Europe, with more businesses seeking to invest, expand and export. As businesses grow, so do opportunities. I was pleased to visit the newly established centre for international trade support, which helps companies to identify, understand and reach global markets. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Clive Barnard and his team on their new business venture, and consider a debate in Government time on export opportunities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the House's attention to this new venture? I am sure we all want to send our good wishes to Clive and his team on their new business venture. Wrexham's international profile has grown in recent times, which is providing a strong hook for local businesses to take advantage of global markets and our new trade agreements.

I thank my hon. Friend for all her work to ensure that her constituency is on the map. The investment zone will make Wrexham the absolute leader in the field of advanced manufacturing, as well as in the creative and digital sectors. We expect this to encourage further growth, with up to £160 million of support for the zone, which will help to protect tens of thousands of existing skilled jobs and create many thousands more. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her part in it.

**Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab):** The counter-disinformation unit, now known as the national security online information team, has a remit to tackle the greatest national security risks facing the UK, and misinformation and disinformation cause risks to elections. Disturbingly, a racist letter riddled with misinformation and disinformation was posted to all Hindus in Brent and Harrow. It attacked our current Mayor of London and our Assembly member, Krupesh Hirani, incorrectly stating that Sadiq and Krupesh do not care about Hindus, which is a complete and utter lie. With one week to go until the mayoral election, will the Leader of the House condemn the letter and ensure that the NSOIT investigates it? May we have a debate on the Floor of the House on the NSOIT's role?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that. She will know that there are ways in which any concerns about things such as election literature can be addressed. Clearly, if she thinks a criminal offence has been committed, she should raise that with the police. I suggest that that is the best course of action for her.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Our sanctions on the Russian Federation are much needed, but they are being undermined by a weak, politically compromised global anti-money laundering system, which means that Russia is not on any domestic money laundering blacklist. May we have a debate on how we can strengthen our anti-money laundering regulations, particularly to make sure that Putin cannot use UK businesses to finance his illegal war in Ukraine, as he is now?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important matter. She is absolutely right. She will know that in March the Treasury launched a consultation on anti-money laundering regulations to further strengthen the effectiveness of that regime, and to ensure that they responding to emerging changes and that the burdens placed on businesses are appropriate. I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard her interest in this matter and that she is updated.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Unfortunately, this morning many of my constituents find themselves in the same position as the two now former Scottish Green Ministers, in that they have been cut off from government services. In Kirkliston, the post office is going to close, which will deny many of my constituents access to vital government services and to cash, as no banking facility is available within easy reach by public transport. I know that the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), is very busy dealing with the Horizon scandal, but could he come to the House to give us an update on why so many post offices across the country are closing and leaving constituents in the same position as mine?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am sorry to hear that that is happening in the hon. Lady's constituency and I will certainly make sure that the Post Office Minister has heard what she has said today. I will also ask officials at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to get in contact with her office. She will know that where this has happened in communities and people are not able to get access to free cash services, or banks or other bricks-and-mortar premises are closing, there are ways in which to ensure that businesses and individuals have access to those services. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has a good best practice guide on how that can be delivered.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I bring good news from Kettering, where Kettering General Hospital has become the first hospital in the whole of Europe to insert into more than 100 patients the very latest, special, state-of-the-art implantation loop recorders, which diagnose heart rhythm disturbances such as atrial fibrillation; in fact, 178 local patients have now benefited from that innovative diagnostic tool. May we have a statement from the Leader of the House congratulating Kettering General Hospital and its superb cardiac team on that wonderful achievement?

**Penny Mordaunt**: We all look forward in business questions to more good news from Kettering. I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work he has done in supporting the hospital and in securing the £1.2 million-worth of

funding that was given to expand and upgrade its facilities. We can all be proud that the hospital is one of the first in Europe to fit those devices, which will make a huge difference to patients, and I am sure that everyone here would want to congratulate Kettering General Hospital and its cardiac team on that landmark achievement.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): It is standard practice in schools, universities, the NHS, local government and Government Departments that if somebody is arrested for or charged with a sexual or violent crime, a risk assessment will be carried out, followed potentially, if necessary, by an exclusion or suspension from work, pending further investigations and, if necessary, a trial. The Standards Committee and the House of Commons Commission agreed that we should have something similar for this House, which has been sitting on the stops now for several months.

I understand there are perfectly legitimate questions about exactly how that should operate, but I do not understand why the Leader of the House has not tabled the motion that came straight from the House of Commons Commission, which I would think was her duty as Leader of the House. Secondly, why has she pulled the vote on at least one occasion and still not given us a date to have that vote? We need to burnish the reputation of this House, not tarnish it. Will she please give us a date, as soon as possible, so that we can have a debate and come to a legitimate view on how we can progress this?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I hope to be able to do that at the next business statement I give. The hon. Gentleman will understand that we have had a number of pieces of legislation that we have needed to act on, some of which was not expected, so we have had to find space for that. He will know that as a member of the Commission I take this matter seriously and I would be very happy to bring forward that debate, and I hope it will be announced in my next business statement.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): In her opening remarks, my right hon. Friend referred to the rail network and was rightly critical of Labour's latest proposals to make changes to that. My constituents want improved services on the Brigg to Cleethorpes and Barton to Cleethorpes lines, and on through services from Grimsby and Cleethorpes to London. Could we have a debate about the state of the rail industry and the way forward, and how we can improve services for customers, rather than tinker with the structure?

**Penny Mordaunt**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank him for his continuing campaign to ensure that his constituents can get better rail services and we are maintaining good value for money. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State for Transport has heard his request. He will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): For years now, victims of the Philips Trust scandal have been trying to get answers to their questions on how they can recover the money building societies, including the Newcastle Building Society, encouraged them to invest in family trusts with unregulated companies. They have been let down at every level, especially by the Financial



[Mary Glindon]

Conduct Authority. Will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to meet with me and representatives of the Philips Trust Action Group to address this issue quickly?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the situation and I thank the hon. Lady for her ongoing efforts on behalf of her constituents. I will certainly ensure that the Chancellor and relevant Ministers have heard her plea.

**Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con):** To try to make up for its financial mismanagement, Labour-run Kirklees Council is looking to introduce new car parking charges, punishing hard-working families and destroying our high streets in our towns and villages. In a recent damning report, independent auditors said about Kirklees:

“We have been unable to satisfy ourselves that the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.”

Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on the failings of this shambolic Labour-run council?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend’s constituency. When councils use motorists and people going about their daily business as some sort of cash cow to plug gaps in their budget due to their mismanagement, communities end up in a downward spiral. People cannot go to the shops, they do not use those services and it is a disaster. Whether in Kirklees, Sheffield, Nottingham, Birmingham or London, Labour is waging a war against working people, and motorists in particular. That has grave and dire consequences if we want vibrant communities. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue his campaign against the council and that particular initiative, and I urge everyone who has the opportunity to vote in a Conservative council.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** First, may I offer my deepest condolences to Frank Field’s family?

Thames Water has been putting vast amounts of sewage into both the Thames and its tributaries in my area, including the Pang, the Lambourn, the Kennet and Foudry Brook. In addition, we had an incident recently where hundreds of Reading residents had their water cut off for two days and we are still to see any compensation for them. A similar incident happened in Surrey. To make matters worse, the company now has mounting debts and there is a looming financial crisis threatening its very future. Is it possible to have a statement, so that Ministers can explain their actions to tackle these serious problems?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Member will know that the infrastructure programme to upgrade our water and particularly our wastewater systems is the largest of its kind in the world. He can track progress against those infrastructure plans on the dashboard of the Water UK website. Good progress has been made. Just to give one statistic, when we came into office, less than 7% of overflows were monitored; the figure is now 100%. Those overflows will come down very swiftly in the coming years. But there are particular issues with particular companies, and I will make sure that the Secretary

of State has heard his particular concerns about these aspects of Thames Water, as the next questions is not until 9 May.

**Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con):** Residents in Lancashire have had an excellent police and crime commissioner since 2021 in Andrew Snowden. He has prioritised community and neighbourhood policing, recognising that visible policing is a key way to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. But that is now under threat: Labour’s candidate in the upcoming election is the same person who held the role previously and did so much damage to Lancashire policing. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the importance of community policing and stations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I know that my hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate and I would encourage her to do so. I understand that, when the Conservative police and crime commissioner came into office, he found out that his predecessor could balance the books only by shutting police stations, including Accrington, Burnley, Chorley—Mr Speaker would be very disappointed to hear that—Morecambe and many others, and by making redundant a large number of police staff: the precise people we want in touch with their communities daily. In contrast, Andrew Snowden, who has been Lancashire’s PPC, has reopened four police stations and is currently constructing two more. That is the kind of service that people want. They want bobbies on the beat and to be able to call in to local police stations. That is exactly why Andrew Snowden should be re-elected.

**James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op):** In March, I was very glad to get together with the local police and local residents at the Royal British Legion club in Greenford to thank Arthur Gray for 30 years’ service in the Met police. In recent years, Arthur has been a police community support officer for Greenford and Northolt in my constituency. On his retirement, he said that “the biggest joy has been working with residents. It has been a privilege to support the local community and build up long-lasting relationships.”

Will the Leader of the House join me in sending my sincere and heartfelt thanks to Arthur for all his years of service to the local community?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving not just me, but the whole House the opportunity to say a big thank you to Arthur for his many years of service. It is because of him that our communities are not just safer, but stronger and better places in which to live.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** And I expect the hon. Gentleman wanted to ask for a debate on the matter.

**James Murray:** That would be lovely; a debate would be great as well.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, we shall take that as read on this particular occasion.

**Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con):** In stark contrast to London, in Essex, our brilliant police, fire and crime commissioner Roger Hirst has cut knife crime by over



11% in just one year and his hotspot policing model to tackle antisocial behaviour is now being rolled out around the country. But education is also key to tackling knife crime, which is why I am working with Roger Hirst and with our city cabinet member, Councillor James Courtenay, who is also up for election next week, to bring the Knife Angel to Southend. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way to continue cutting crime, particularly knife crime, is to re-elect Roger Hirst next week and all Conservative councillors on 2 May, and can we have a debate on how we should strengthen the successful PCC model?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Well done on being in order. I saw you nod approvingly, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yes—vote for Roger and James for that positive trend to continue. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work to get the Knife Angel project to come to her constituency. We should put on record our thanks to that fantastic organisation, which has done so much to strip out knives from communities and educate young people.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of all the opaque and arcane procedures in this place, the Reasons Committee procedure is perhaps one of the most opaque and arcane, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on seeking to amend and oppose the Government's reasons for objecting to the Lords amendments to the Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill in the Committees this week. I note that the minutes show that the Labour Members sat on their hands throughout those meetings. I wonder whether we could make the procedure more transparent simply by the Government publishing their reasons alongside the motion to disagree, so that we can debate the context of the Government's reasons for rejecting the Lords amendments, and perhaps speed things up without additional votes.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Well, there is an offer from the hon. Gentleman. I am always interested in any innovation that hon. Members propose. The House collectively will make the rules of this place, but the reasons the Government have been pursuing the legislation and want it to achieve Royal Assent in a particular form have been well set out on many occasions from this Dispatch Box.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that we have had many debates in this place relating to the Nolan principles and MPs, but in just days residents across Bedfordshire will vote in the police and crime commissioner elections. It has been reported that, back in March, the police and crime sub-panel found that the Conservative candidate and current PCC Festus Akinbusoye has had serious complaints against him upheld. The panel determined that Akinbusoye has used "unreliable statistics", made "false and malicious accusations" and was "disrespectful to members of the public", including calling one of them the "enemy". Surely residents in Bedfordshire deserve better, and deserve to know the panel's full findings, so will parliamentary time be allocated to the importance of the Nolan principles for those in all elected positions, and the processes that hold them to account?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The Nolan principles, which run across every aspect of public life, are very important. They play a very important role in all our standards and

proceedings, both in the House and in Government. I have to say that what the hon. Lady says is in stark contrast to my experience of the gentleman she refers to. He has an amazing track record of serving his community. I have been out on patrol with him in the area that he serves. He is very highly regarded by the people I spoke to on the doorstep.

**Sarah Owen:** So you back those statements. That is very dangerous.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. Do not shout from the Back Benches. I have already said that this is not a time for asking the opinion of the Leader of the House. This is business questions. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady asked her question perfectly well; it is her comments from a sedentary position on which I am commenting. This is not about opinions. She asked a perfectly reasonable question, and it has been answered.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I add my voice to the tributes paid to Frank Field, whose assistance and wisdom was of great help to me as a newly elected constituency MP for a nearby seat. He is held in very high regard by my constituents, and his legacy will live on in Ellesmere Port through Ellesmere Port College and the Frank Field Education Trust.

Can we please have a debate on private parking companies? I have had a number of instances recently where these companies seem to be operating by their own rules. Constituents have put appeals in against fines. There seems to be absolutely no consideration given to technical issues, or wider questions about why tickets have been issued. Frankly, it seems to me to be nowhere close to approaching justice in the sense that Members of this House would understand.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman's constituents have been suffering due to poor practice by those firms. He will know that under the coalition Government, new measures were introduced to crack down on things such as clamping on private land and other practices that came from such firms, and this Government take those issues very seriously. If the situations are not resolved, I think that the hon. Gentleman, when he gets the next opportunity on 16 May at Transport questions, or at other opportunities or other business questions, should name the companies. He can do that, which I find gets people in such companies to focus on resolving these issues more sensibly.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): In last week's Backbench Business debate on the covid-19 pandemic response and trends in excess deaths, I asked whether it is now accepted that it was a mistake to give the respiratory suppressant drug midazolam, as part of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline NG163, as treatment for those suspected of having covid-19. I also asked, should there be legal cases proving unlawful killing linked to overdoses and toxicity from midazolam, who would be held criminally responsible. Would it be the then Secretary of State for Health, NICE, NHS England or the individual doctors and nurses who administered the drug? Those questions were not answered. Can we have a statement from a Health Minister? The evasion and gaslighting on this issue has got to end.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. The hon. Gentleman will know that he can either write to the Department or put in a written question, and that there are timeframes under which those questions have to be answered. He has had many debates on these issues and he has ample opportunity to raise these questions and get answers from Ministers.

I would also caution the hon. Gentleman on some of the things he is saying and, again, some of the things he is putting on social media. I do not think that any healthcare professional or nurse administering a vaccine is doing those things for any other reason than the care of the patient in front of them. If there is an insinuation that they are doing them for other reasons and that they should face consequences for doing their duty in the NHS or other services, people might get the wrong idea, so I urge him, because I know that is not his intention, to be clear in his communications on these matters.

**Keir Mather** (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): In recent weeks, I have been running a Selby Shoutouts competition, where local people can nominate for recognition small and medium-sized enterprises that make an outstanding difference to our local community. I have been blown away by the responses, with 90 different firms nominated by some 150 local residents. Local people clearly know how crucial SMEs are to our local area, so please can we secure time for a debate on support for SMEs across the wonderful county of North Yorkshire?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a brilliant initiative, which is not only helping to raise the profile of those fantastic local businesses in his constituency, but demonstrating that business is a force for good in the world and in his local community. He will know how to apply for a debate, but I wish the initiative very well.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Although the House will be debating the Buckland review of autism employment later today, the Government have just axed a £100 million scheme to support people with disabilities into work. Does the Leader of the House agree, therefore, that the Government are merely paying lip service to supporting those in need? Can we have a debate or statement from the Government to outline and explain their confused position?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) and all Members who have assisted him, on the work they have done to produce this new focus on an important area. I do not think there is any inconsistency with his work or the Government's work in this area. A million more people with a disability now have the dignity of a pay packet than in 2010, not just because of our welfare reforms, but because of the health and work support. Such disabilities are now viewed with much greater focus than a few years ago. Progress is being made, but as my right hon. and learned Friend has pointed out, more work is needed. I encourage everyone to take part in the debate later today.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to add to the tributes to the late Frank Field. He was a graduate of Hull University, of which

we are very proud in Hull. I worked with him on ensuring that this House delivered the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and he was one of the first campaigners around the contaminated blood scandal back in the 1980s.

On the forthcoming business of the House, Ministers have told us how important the Criminal Justice Bill is; yesterday, the safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), told the Home Affairs Committee that it would be back before the House imminently. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether the potential Conservative rebellion over the criminalisation of the homeless is one reason that the Bill is not mentioned in the forthcoming business, and whether the Bill will ever come back before the House?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The right hon. Lady has made her points well, and I shall ensure that the Home Office has heard them. As she will know I am going to say, further business will be announced in the usual way, but I will take it that she is keen to see the Bill come back.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I echo the sentiments about Frank Field. Although his seat was elsewhere, he told me on day one that he was a proud Chiswickian.

Week after week, MPs have pushed Ministers to restore UK funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and all the while we have seen lives lost in Gaza. The stock response has been that we await the Colonna report—well, that report was published on Monday, and yet there has not been a peep from the Government. Can we have an urgent statement on this? Now that Canada, Australia, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany, France, Japan and, in fact, the EU have all unfrozen funding, when will we?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will certainly ensure that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has heard what the hon. Lady has said. These matters are taken extremely seriously. She will know that the Deputy Foreign Secretary has been very concerned about ensuring that there is aid and support going in to support people who have been displaced and those who need food, medical attention and many other things in Gaza and elsewhere. There may be other issues beyond the security issues the hon. Lady referred to—UNRWA has for a long time been a very financially fragile organisation. We want to ensure that the people in need, whom we wish to support, are getting aid, and that it is done in a way that does not compromise security.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Can we have a debate on the kindness of charity fundraisers? Next month, the team at Pollokshields early years centre are running the Cancer Research UK Race for Life as “Jamal’s Warriors” in memory of 10-year-old Jamal Aslam, who tragically passed away last year from a soft tissue cancer. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should thank all the researchers who work so hard to ensure that no families have to go through losing a cheeky, funny and incredibly sweet boy like Jamal to cancer?

**Penny Mordaunt:** On behalf of the whole House, I thank the hon. Lady for giving us the opportunity to send our thanks and good wishes to the early years centre, and again to place on record our admiration and thanks to all those working in these important fields of

research. We have made dramatic progress in the past few years on many therapy areas—cancer in particular—and we know that survival rates are improving dramatically.

**Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): British farmers are operating on ever narrowing margins in a volatile market. It is hugely concerning to farmers in my constituency that red diesel suppliers are encouraging farmers to stock up in case of price rises. Brent crude oil has soared by 16% over the past three months. There are conflicts that may escalate in the middle east, Europe and South America that could make prices rocket even further. I ask the Leader of the House if we can have a debate on the impact of red diesel prices on British farming.

**Penny Mordaunt**: That is an important matter, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. She can raise it herself at the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on 9 May, and she will know how to apply for a debate, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what she has said.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Tonight is the annual awards of the Music Producers Guild. The awards would have been largely a male preserve for a lot of the 23 years that I have been in the House, but tonight, for the first time, over half the nominees are women, thanks to pioneering work by women producers and engineers such as Olga Fitzroy, Catherine Anne Davies and Hannah Peel, which is why we should have a debate on the Government's decision to reject the recommendations in the Women and Equalities Committee's "Misogyny in music" report. Naomi Pohl, the general secretary of the Musicians' Union, has described being shocked at the fact that the Government have rejected the recommendations, and the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), said:

"We have had platitudes and reassurance, but still no action".

Is the Leader of the House comfortable with what the Government have done? If she is not, will she facilitate a debate to explore it further?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I think the improvements in the statistics that the hon. Gentleman gave at the start of his question are something to be proud of and show

that improvements are being made. I will certainly ensure that the relevant Department has heard what he has said. Given that I am a member of the Government, I stand on the Government's position.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Christian Wakeford.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Monday, the Official for National Statistics released its reports on alcohol-specific deaths registered in 2022. There were 10,048 deaths related to alcohol, which is a 32.8% increase on pre-pandemic levels and the highest number on record. It has been over a decade since the Government last set out an alcohol strategy. Can we have a statement from the Government on what they are doing to tackle the issue and the stigma of addiction?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. I will ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care has heard what he has said. He will know that, in addition to that strategy, a huge amount of work has been going on in all parts of our healthcare system to ensure that the right interventions are getting to the right people, including, notably, alcohol screening services at hospitals, which for many are now part of the standard processes to go through when people are taken into accident and emergency, helping to identify those who need support, particular interventions, and, of course, an expansion of those services.

## ROYAL ASSENT

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: Before we proceed to the next item of business, I must notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Pedicabs (London) Act 2024

Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024.

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024

## Points of Order

11.48 am

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Now that you have indicated Royal Assent to the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, have you been given any indication by the Government as to whether they will make a statement to the House on when they intend to send people to Rwanda, which people they intend to send to Rwanda, and what will happen to the tens of thousands of people whom they will be unable to send to Rwanda?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for her point of order—*[Interruption.]* Did I just call her a gentleman?

**Alison Thewliss**: That isn't how I identify!

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Quite. Take two: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I understand why she makes it, but it is not one for the Chair. She knows that she and many others have debated these matters for many, many hours in recent weeks, and I have personally heard her speak for hours, cumulatively, on the subject. The Government have replied to her questions and those of other hon. Members in so far as they are able to do so to. I am sure that the Leader of the House will have heard the hon. Lady's request for even more time for this business on the Floor of the House, but I should point out for the sake of clarity that many, many hours have been spent on that business in recent weeks.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the course of business questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) raised a point of order, understandably concerned about something the Leader of the House had said implying a lack of patriotism on the part of some Members of Parliament. As I said earlier, I have been a Member for 23 years, and as a regular attender of business questions, I do not remember

it previously being possible to raise a point of order during the course of business questions. Can you clarify from the Chair for all of our benefits whether that is now something that is going to be permitted, in case we want to do the same thing in future?

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which is actually not a point of order, but a direct challenge to me on a decision that I took about an hour ago here in the Chamber. That was a matter of my judgment: the hon. Lady indicated to me that she wished to raise a point of order about a matter that had immediately occurred in the Chamber, and I took the decision that it was reasonable for her to raise a point of order on that precise subject at that precise moment.

**Kevin Brennan** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: No, the hon. Gentleman cannot come back. I am not having a debate with him about procedure. The rule is that a point of order can be taken at any time if it is pertinent precisely to the matter that is currently before the House.

**Kevin Brennan**: May I make a further point of order?

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I will allow the hon. Gentleman to make a further point, but I am not having a debate with him in the Chamber, either about my judgment or about procedure.

**Kevin Brennan**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not attempting to call your judgment into question, and I apologise if that was the impression I gave. I was simply trying to clarify what the position is for hon. Members who might wish to raise points of order. You have made that very clear, and I thank you for that clarification.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the question, and I am glad the matter is now closed.



## Ofsted's Work with Schools

### EDUCATION COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We now proceed to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Education Committee. I will shortly call Mr Robin Walker, the Chairman of the Committee, who will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, which should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed, not to the relevant Minister, but to the Select Committee Chair. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

11.53 am

**Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con):** I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement on the Education Committee's report on Ofsted's work with schools, to which the Government's response has been published today. The response from Ofsted was published on 11 March.

I put on record my thanks to the Clerks of our Committee for their brilliant work, to our expert advisers, and to all the teachers, leaders, inspectors, former inspectors and education experts who contributed evidence. Members of the Committee, as well as our witnesses, brought with them experience of the inspection process, both from the receiving end as teachers and governors and, in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), as a former inspector. The pressures of local elections mean that many Members who contributed to the report cannot be in the Chamber today, but I am glad that we were able to make all of our recommendations unanimously, and I am grateful for the contributions of Members on all sides of the House.

Our inquiry was called in the midst of heightened concern about school inspection following the tragic events at Caversham Primary School. While the inquiry was not focused on that specific case and had to be careful to not trespass on the work of the coroner, which was ongoing for much of its duration, I pay tribute to the family of Ruth Perry for the dignified and thoughtful way in which they have sought to raise concerns and ensure that lessons are learned and reforms made. The coroner reported just before the end of the inquiry, and we included in our report a commitment to follow up on all of their recommendations, something that I know every Member of my Committee is looking forward to being able to do. We will be taking evidence from the new chief inspector before the summer.

The inquiry heard widespread agreement on the importance of an accountability system and the roll of an independent inspectorate, but also concerns about stress and anxiety experienced by school staff due to high stakes nature of Ofsted's inspections. The report highlighted criticisms of how inspections are carried out and reported, the workload they generate and the complaints system. We heard concerns from current and former inspectors about the length and depth of inspection, and we took evidence on the impact of

successive frameworks over time. The Committee heard that relations between Ofsted and the schools sector have become extremely strained, and that trust in the inspectorate was worryingly low.

We said in our report that the appointment of a new chief inspector provided a crucial opportunity to restore trust and, in that regard, our first recommendation was that in his Big Listen with the sector, His Majesty's chief inspector must ensure that he listens to wide range of views, including those of teachers, school and trust leaders, governors, parents and pupils. In doing that, he must ensure that Ofsted is genuinely open to engage and willing to reflect on where it needs to improve.

We are glad that the process is treated seriously in both Ofsted and the Department's responses. Ofsted said:

"We have done much since January 2024, but more—much more—is to come. We launched the Big Listen on Friday 8 March 2024. We want to hear from those we work with and those we work for. We know that we need to do more. Ensuring inspections are carried out with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect and conducting a listening exercise are not enough. Action must, and will, follow. We fundamentally believe that those actions should not be based on the views of...HMCI alone. That is why we are conducting a serious exercise to gather the views of as many people as possible, where nothing is off the table."

The Department places welcome emphasis on that Big Listen in its response today. It mentions the process no fewer than 20 times in the space of 15 pages of response.

The inquiry heard serious concerns about the single-word judgment. The Committee has made recommendations to both Ofsted and the Department for Education to rethink the process, to consider serious alternatives and to look at what other jurisdictions do inside and outside the United Kingdom in that respect. As part of that, we encouraged them to use this process to engage in serious discussion about genuine alternatives. We also encouraged them both not just to focus on the overall judgment but to encourage schools and the Department to look at all the sub-judgments reached within Ofsted reports, and publicise those just as much as they do the headline judgment.

In its response, Ofsted was clear that that is within the scope of the Big Listen. The Department stressed what it sees as the significant benefits of the current system, but was clear that it is continuing to listen to the sector's views and to look at alternatives to four single-word judgments, including looking at "various approaches taken internationally". That in itself would represent a welcome shift from some of the language used during our inquiry, and a welcome acknowledgment of the need to look at alternatives.

I am disappointed, however, that this morning the Department appears to have gone further and ruled out changes to single-word judgments, prejudging the outcome of the consultation process and making any consideration of alternative systems academic. Ministers would be better advised not to rule out any changes. Both they and Ofsted would be right to ensure that feedback from the Big Listen and a wide range of comparisons can be taken into account before final decisions are made.

We are glad that both Ofsted and the Department have emphasised the importance of all judgments, and set out steps to improve the visibility of sub-judgments, as per our recommendation. In conjunction with that, the Committee said that DFE should reassess its policy of maintained schools that receive two "requires

[Mr Robin Walker]

improvement” judgments being required to become academies. We also called on the Department to ensure that regional directors who decide academisation orders genuinely take into account the views of local stakeholders before making a decision, and called for an increase in its accountability to this House. DFE response said it keeps this policy

“under review and will have regard to stakeholders’ views.”

It also argued that presumptions in favour of academy orders are rebuttable, and that

“in each case the particular circumstances of the school, and the needs of its pupils, will be assessed in the round, in order to establish the best course of action.”

The Department confirmed:

“In line with civil service convention across government, Regional Directors continue to be available to give evidence if called before Parliament.”

However, it went on to say:

“Approval for their attendance before the Committee rests with the Secretary of State”.

I hope that my Committee or its successors will be able to hear evidence directly from them. Given the wide scope of their powers and their importance within the system, that is an important element of accountability.

The Committee also found broad agreement that inspections are not long enough to cover the full framework and give an accurate picture of a school’s performance. Given that there is finite funding, we accept that any increase to the length of inspections would require a decrease in their frequency, and we are clear that we do not wish to return to the previous exemption for outstanding schools, which stayed in place for too long. On balance, we recognise that there is a case to be made for a small reduction in the frequency of inspections to increase their value, length and depth.

In the short term, the Department should work with Ofsted to enable the inspectorate to reduce the frequency of inspections to approximately five to six years for good and outstanding schools, and three to four years for schools judged “requires improvement” or inadequate. That should be supported by better use of risk assessment to identify the schools most in need of inspection. Ofsted should use the additional resource released by that change to enable inspections to be carried out in more depth. In the longer term, the Department should support Ofsted in making a strong case to the Treasury for additional funding to carry out in-depth inspections. Funding for Ofsted should not be seen as being in competition with school funding, and any additional funding for the inspectorate must not result in less funding being made available to schools.

Ofsted has been clear that it wants to consult on the regularity and depth of inspections in the Big Listen, but it pointed out reasonably that changing the five-year timeframe is not in its gift, as it is set in legislation. The Department has rejected our recommendation that it should consider a reduction in the regularity of inspections to increase their depth, but it has acknowledged that it will work in partnership with Ofsted to ensure that it has appropriate resources to carry out its programme effectively. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ofsted stated:

“We very much welcome the Committee’s commitment to supporting us in asking for additional funding for more in-depth inspections”.

As an example, we could inspect schools in greater depth by ensuring that every inspection is led by one of His Majesty’s inspectors, and that each inspection team has an additional inspector. That could provide a number of additional benefits; it would allow the team more time to look at a school’s unique approach, and allow for a dedicated focus on a national priority area in each inspection. Ofsted has costed that at £8.5 million a year, and we hope that Ministers will consider that proposal in future spending review discussions with the Treasury.

Another area of key interest for the Committee is multi-academy trust accountability. My predecessor as Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), called on Ofsted to have a role in that. That was also called for in the “Beyond Ofsted” report by Lord Knight, and the idea has enjoyed strong cross-party support in this Chamber. The Committee argued that the Department for Education should urgently authorise Ofsted to develop a framework for the inspection of MATs, and set out plans for building expertise and capacity in this area. In its response, Ofsted stated:

“We welcome Recommendation 28, and the Committee agreeing with our evidence that inspection of MATs is appropriate and inevitable.”

The DFE’s response said that it

“continues to actively consider how we might strengthen” scrutiny of MATs. It added:

“This might include the role of Ofsted. We look forward to hearing views on this issue through Ofsted’s Big Listen”.

We welcome the change in tone in this response. When the former Schools Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), gave evidence to the Committee during our inquiry, he appeared strongly opposed to MAT inspection. We have pressed the urgency of action in this space, and it feels like it is a step closer. Given the large and growing role that MATs play in the school system, we continue to believe that mechanisms for their accountability need to be stronger.

I welcome the acceptance of our recommendations 1, 2, 9, 15, 17 and 27 by Ofsted, and its commitment to exploring recommendations 1, 3, 5, 10, 13, 20 to 22 and 24 and 25 through the Big Listen. The one recommendation that Ofsted rejected was for an independent review of the challenges for inspector retention, but it did so on the basis that it feels that it already knows the answers to those challenges, and that a review would not be good use of taxpayers’ money, which we can understand.

We welcome the respect that the Government have shown to the Big Listen through their response, but recognise that many will not be satisfied by conversations and will continue to call for more urgent reform. The Government’s response highlights important changes, including for those schools rated inadequate purely on the basis of safeguarding. Those can be rapidly re-inspected, which is certainly a welcome change. There are hopeful signs about the new chief inspector’s intent, but the Committee will continue to hold him and the inspectorate to account for how they deliver.

I want to give Members the opportunity to respond, so I will conclude by saying that what our Committee heard overall is that Ofsted is needed and plays an important role in the system, but it needs to change. We will continue to hold the Department and the inspectorate to account for the change that we need to see.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Education Committee for bringing forward this statement, following the Committee's much-needed inquiry and report on this issue. In the report, he rightly extends his condolences and gratitude to the family, friends and colleagues of Ruth Perry, all of whom have contributed to this report at an incredibly difficult time. Labour welcomes the findings on Ofsted single-word judgments, but the Government seem to have defended the indefensible in their response. The current system is high-stakes for teachers and low-information for parents. Like his cross-party Committee, we believe that it must be reformed.

Further to the Chair's comments, does he agree that the Government should look again at the response that the Committee received from those across the sector, who overwhelmingly want to reform the system, just as Labour considered the sector when setting out our plan for report cards, which has been welcomed by the former chief inspector? Similarly, on inspection of multi-academy trusts, the Government seem simply to have ignored a recommendation that Ofsted's chief inspector has called "inevitable". Will the Chair therefore outline what conversations he has had with Ministers on the issue, and any further work that his Committee might do in this area?

Finally, the Committee's inquiry did not appear to extend to inclusion being part of Ofsted inspection frameworks. Labour proposes to ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities have access to clear information, and that their parents understand their child's school in that regard. Will the Chair and his Committee look at that? I thank him again for the thorough and timely work that he and the Committee have undertaken, and for the light that it has shed on this important and pressing issue.

**Mr Walker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her response. She raised some important points. I expressed my disappointment that the Government seem to have ruled out our recommendation that we move away from single-word judgments and explore alternatives. It is important that the Big Listen is a proper process of listening and engagement, and that it can reach its own conclusions. I am more inclined to agree with what was said in Ofsted's response about nothing being off the table.

There is an extremely strong case for MAT inspection. That case has been heard by those in all parts of the House; it is a reflection of the maturity of MATs and their huge contribution to the school system, which the Government's response acknowledged, that we are having this debate. There was a significant move forward in the tone of the Government's response on that. I welcome the fact that they are actively exploring the options. Of course, that needs to be done proportionately, and we need to ensure that it does not increase the burdens on any school. I am sure that can be worked through by the Department.

I have some sympathy for the idea that inclusion needs to be considered. In previous Committee sessions—I know this happened under the previous Chair—we tested that idea in many respects, and some previous recommendations of the Committee have been fed into the framework, such as the recommendation that no school should be rated good or outstanding for performance unless its performance for special educational needs

pupils was good or outstanding. It is important to acknowledge that some progress has been made on that front, but I believe that balancing attainment and inclusion is always important, throughout education, so that was an interesting contribution. Of course, because that is not part of Government policy or the current framework, it was not within the terms of reference for our inquiry.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the report, and I welcome the recommendation on Ofsted supervision of MATs, but may I turn to careers advice in schools? My first ever speech in the House of Commons—my maiden speech—was about trying to encourage more schools to encourage students to do apprenticeships, as well as to go to university. While much progress has been made on this issue—we are in a very different world in 2024 from that of 2010—there is still much more work to be done, including on informing students in all schools that there are great T-level offerings, and great apprenticeship offerings as well. Does he agree that Ofsted needs much tougher measures on ensuring that schools encourage students to take up all the apprenticeship and other skills offerings, so that students have choices other than going to university?

**Mr Walker:** My right hon. Friend knows more about this issue than almost anyone else in the House, and has made a huge contribution to the debate on skills. He is, of course, absolutely right about the importance of careers advice, and of signposting people towards vocational opportunities in schools. This was the subject of an inquiry and a report that he as Chair bequeathed to me when he moved on. It was about careers education, information, advice and guidance. In that report, we made recommendations that Ofsted should align its work on personal development and its work in this space with the Gatsby benchmarks. The work he did on putting those benchmarks more prominently in our education system, both as Chair of the Select Committee and subsequently as a Minister, was vital to the success of that process, so I congratulate him on that. We absolutely think that needs to be part of this role.

Our one wariness was that we did not want to recommend a huge slew of things that Ofsted should be adding to the inspection process or framework, because we did not want to increase the workload or pressure on teachers and leaders. All these things need to be looked at in proportion, but there is absolutely a place for ensuring that schools provide the right careers advice and range of opportunities to students.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I thank the Chair and the Committee for their excellent work on this very important matter. I also pay tribute to my constituent Ruth Perry, who was an outstanding headteacher. The events at Caversham Primary must never be allowed to happen again. I also commend the work by Julia Waters, Ruth's sister, and local campaigners and heads in the Reading area, as well as others across the country, who have listened and called for Ofsted reform. I offer my wholehearted support for an end to the single-word judgment, and for wider Ofsted reform, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on our Front Bench. What steps does the Committee Chair believe the Government should take now, given their unfortunate announcement this morning? Does he believe that the



[*Matt Rodda*]

response from the Department for Education and Ofsted so far has been remotely adequate, particularly the suggestion about using a former chief inspector to mark Ofsted's homework, and continuing to ignore concerns raised by him and the coroner about this serious matter?

**Mr Walker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has engaged on this issue, and for rightly championing the interests of his late constituent and her sister, who has engaged with this process in good faith throughout. She has had meetings with the Secretary of State and the new chief inspector of Ofsted, and I know that she is not satisfied that the Government have gone far enough. I urge the Government and Ofsted to ensure that the Big Listen is a genuine process that takes nothing off the table, and to respond in depth to the feedback on that.

It is absolutely legitimate for the hon. Gentleman's constituents to raise concerns about the independence of the person appointed to look into this matter, but I point out that other organisations, including the National Education Union, not notably a friend of Ofsted, have praised the appointee for their independence. This matter will have to be considered carefully. It is vital that the process is seen to be conducted independently of both the current and former management of Ofsted, and that it offers genuine insights into what went wrong at Caversham and how that can be put right. It is important to acknowledge the changes in both the Ofsted and Government responses today—the steps already taken to provide better support to headteachers, and the change in the approach to schools that are rated inadequate on one factor, which will get the opportunity to be reinspected. It is also worth putting on the record that subsequent to inspection, Caversham Primary was rated good, which shows that that approach can and should work.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): As a member of the Select Committee on Education, I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent statement, and for the fantastic report on which it is based. I also thank my hon. Friend for being a brilliant Chair of the Committee. It was an almost impossible job to take on, given the big boots he had to fill. I see the former Select Committee Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), in his place; he literally put the words “degree apprenticeship” into the “Oxford English Dictionary”.

I want to talk about the report's recommendation 28. The Committee strongly recommended that the process for multi-academy trust inspections be delivered urgently. That recommendation was also made by predecessors and others, and was indeed accepted by Ofsted. I am pleased about the change in tone from the Government and that they are “actively” considering this, but does my hon. Friend agree we need to go further? Does he agree that, given that MATs are now the biggest part of the education system, we need to go beyond “actively” considering? We must accept these recommendations, and the MAT inspection regime should be delivered urgently.

**Mr Walker:** In a word, yes.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): A long time ago when I was a teacher at Radyr Comprehensive School and the hon. Member for Cities of London and

Westminster (Nickie Aiken) was a pupil there, we were inspected. It is a necessary part of the system but can be very challenging for all concerned. I very much welcome the—if I may use a single word—outstanding report from the Select Committee today and I am very disappointed that the Government have not accepted its recommendations. One is about extending the length of time before schools that are given an outstanding rating are re-inspected. Some years ago the Government had to row back from allowing schools rated as outstanding to go uninspected for as long as 15 years, with the result that on re-inspection more than 80% were downgraded. As we have heard over and over again in the Chamber, that was a statistical fix to make it look as if there were more outstanding schools in the country. Is the hon. Gentleman confident that if the period were extended we could avoid leaving schools with a previous outstanding finding to languish uninspected when there are in fact problems in those schools?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, as he often does. When I became a Minister in the Department, one of the first questions I asked officials was whether that exception was still in place and whether if it was we could end it, and I was relieved to discover that my predecessor my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb) had already removed that “outstanding” exception. If he had not done that, I would have done so, because I share many of the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the length such findings were in place. That was clearly a mistake and it built up pressure in the system, which was deeply unfortunate in some circumstances. We have now gone back to a five-yearly cycle.

What we were querying was whether we could be more risk-based in our approach. All schools should be inspected on a regular basis, but we made the argument for good and outstanding schools to be inspected slightly less regularly, and for those which require improvement or are judged inadequate to be inspected more regularly, so that they have the opportunity to turn themselves around quickly.

I understand and respect the reasons why the Government might not think that that is appropriate and feel the need for a level playing field. They rejected that [part of the recommendation, but we anticipated that they might do so and therefore also recommended that they needed to help Ofsted make the case to the Treasury for the funding necessary to do all the inspections properly, particularly for schools in need of a turnaround—schools which know they need to improve and which need the resource and support of an in-depth inspection that engages with teachers across the board. That is the case we were making and I read the Government's response as a partial acceptance of that case, albeit not one that puts us at any risk of returning to a situation where schools languish uninspected for long periods of time.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This House is both the best and worst workplace in the world for those with a disability or disadvantage. The reason I raise this is that constantly lifts do not work, buttons do not work in lifts, doors do not work properly and toilets are always out of order and take months to fix. Just below the Chamber on the lower ground floor there are toilets



that have been out for almost six months on end and no one ever seems to be there doing anything to fix them. This is not acceptable any longer.

I have been here for 14 years and, while every single member of staff is incredibly kind, especially the Doorkeepers, I find it incredible that things have got worse over the past 14 years in terms of doors being shut, lifts not working, buttons not working, lift doors not working, toilets being out of order, and people who should not be using disabled toilets using them. We do nothing about it, yet we publish press statements saying we are inclusive and diverse employers but that means nothing to anyone. So may I urge you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers to look at this issue with the Serjeant at Arms and get these facilities fixed once and for all so that people with disadvantages can go about their business without having to worry about doors being shut and toilets being broken and the other things I have mentioned?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** As the right hon. Gentleman may know, it might be appropriate to raise those matters with the Administration Committee as well, but I will certainly ensure that his comments are fed back. The Deputy Serjeant at Arms is present, and I am sure that he will be one of those feeding it back. I am very sorry to hear of the experiences that the right hon. Gentleman has described. Of course it is right that those facilities should be in good working order, and that there should be proper provision for people with disabilities.

**Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** We really should not be having too many points of order at this stage, but I will take the hon. Lady's point of order if it relates to something that has just been said.

**Margaret Greenwood:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following what was said by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), I wanted to add that I have recently noticed that additional security doors have been introduced around the estate, and they require a pass to be swiped. There is nothing to enable blind or partially sighted people to understand that, and in an emergency it could cost them their lives. Could this be added to the list of things that you will feed back, Madam Deputy Speaker?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I will certainly add that to the feedback that we will give.

## Backbench Business

### Lesbian Visibility Week

12.21 pm

**Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the importance of Lesbian Visibility Week; and believes LGBTQIA women and non-binary people should be recognised for the work they do and the joy they bring.

Lesbian Visibility Week was founded in 2019 by the publisher of DIVA Magazine, my good friend Linda Riley—and I am delighted to welcome Linda to the House today. For the past five years we have set aside this week in April to celebrate and uplift lesbians everywhere, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, and we are a community that grows stronger each and every year for it.

Forty years ago this year, I took my mum to see the “Rocky Horror Show”, and at dinner I told her that I was a lesbian. I distinctly remember her response: “Yeah—and?” Of course she already knew; as a colleague pointed out yesterday, if I was ever in the closet, the closet must have been made of glass. I was incredibly lucky to have friends and family to lean on when I faced and overcame the many barriers that most lesbians have to deal with because, sadly, it is still the case that for so many such support is just not there. However, that does not mean that my journey and dealing with coming out was easy. There was stigma, and there were people our community was losing and not talking about. The feeling of loneliness and isolation led me to move to Newcastle in 1989, and until I was elected to represent my wonderful Jarrow constituency in 2019, I barely came back to London.

Seeing so many people celebrating and recognising Lesbian Visibility Week gives me hope that this and future generations of lesbians will be accepted—and that is thanks to those who came before us, paving the way. When I hosted a reception in Parliament on Monday night in partnership with DIVA magazine and the LGBT Foundation, there was an incredible turnout from activists, campaigning organisations, and Members of both Houses. I am so grateful for the fact that so many friends and colleagues joined us at our first ever parliamentary reception: I think that was the largest number of lesbians that we have ever had in Parliament at any one time. At the event we heard about the media narrative that lesbians are disappearing, but we are not. We are in our ascendancy: there are more lesbians than ever. The number of women who identify as lesbian has increased by 64% since 2014. Instead of being erased, we are multiplying.

As many Members will know, I have dedicated most of my political career to campaigning for LGBTQIA+ equality. My first political activism was campaigning against section 28, and highlighting the damage that it did and continues to do to our community. To go from campaigning against section 28, to stop LGBTQIA+ people being forced to hide, to holding a debate on lesbian visibility in the gayest Parliament in the world is some feat, and something that an 18-year-old me could never have imagined. However, I also could not have imagined that 40 years later I would still be challenging the same homophobic language, including comments about LGBTQIA+ people being a danger to children.

[Kate Osborne]

It has to be said that the slurs currently being thrown at the trans community, and at me for being supportive of that community, are a carbon copy of the hate we faced in the 1980s.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredible speech. Does she agree that hate is hate? Some of the hate we hear reminds me of the hate that my parents heard when they were being subjected to vile racist abuse.

**Kate Osborne:** Yes, hate is hate, and it is unacceptable in any form. We defeated it then, in the '80s, and we will defeat this hate and discrimination now.

Let me return to my coming out. Although I had a supportive family, when I came out “lesbian” was still a dirty word, a word thrown at me at school in a derogatory way. If you were a lesbian you were seen as unnatural. You were chased out of girls’ bathrooms—that has, in fact, happened to me in recent years—and you were sexualised by men far older than you, which is something that lesbians still face today.

It was 10 years after I came out that I bought my first copy of a magazine called *DIVA*. There was nothing else like it at the time; there was nothing else for my generation that helped lesbians to feel included, and that magazine helped me to feel less alone. That was 30 years ago—so happy birthday, *DIVA*, and thank you.

In the last 30 years *DIVA* has been a lifeline for many women, and it was *DIVA* and Linda Riley who launched Lesbian Visibility Week. *DIVA* is much more than a magazine: as it tells us, it is a movement. It has an annual Power List, and for the first time, in 2024, I have made it. To travel from being that young, lonely lesbian 30 years ago buying my first copy to being included in this list has made me feel honoured and deeply grateful. It is a privilege to be named alongside colleagues and other brilliant activists, including the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). Today, I feel proud to see so many LGBTQIA+ women basking in the freedom to explore their sexuality in ways that many women could not, only a few years ago.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady has reminded me of a thought that I once had: something that I felt very strongly when the Bill that became the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was passed. I had a young daughter, and I felt that if I had two daughters and one was straight and the other was a lesbian, I would want them to have the same quality of life, the same protection under the law, and the same right to love whoever they wanted to love. Does the hon. Lady feel that we have made progress towards a situation in which that will be the case?

**Kate Osborne:** Unfortunately, I have to say that we have gone backwards in recent times. I thought we would be further forward than we are, but when I look back to some years ago, I see that that is not the case.

Weeks like this really matter. They show solidarity, and they enable us to support each other and help us to celebrate our differences, embracing the whole LGBTQIA+

community. Too often people seek to divide us, but as the theme of this Lesbian Visibility Week shows, we are unified, not uniform. We are here to be fabulous in our differences and to be seen, to let others know that they can be their true selves. We have to use our own experiences to help people, and to use our platforms to give LGBTQIA+ people spaces. That is what Lesbian Visibility Week is about. That is why I am holding this debate.

An often-used expression is that we stand on the shoulders of giants, which we do, and I want to honour just a few of the wonderful women who have given so much to our community and been inspirational to me and to so many others. In the 1970s, Maureen Colquhoun made history by becoming the first openly out lesbian in Parliament. Her courageous act in the face of media hostility has meant that so many of us can stand in this Chamber today and follow in her footsteps.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) is an iconic lesbian in Parliament. The first to come out in office, and now a dame, she is a role model to many, breaking down barriers as the first lesbian Minister and always fighting for equality by using her platform to stand up for our community.

Of course, there are brilliant women who are the driving force behind so many political and campaigning movements. Lisa Power was one of the founding members of Stonewall in 1989. Like me, she was a volunteer at the Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. Lisa has led a decade-long fight on behalf of people living with HIV.

There are women such as the brilliant Sue Sanders, the founder of LGBT+ History Month, and Baroness Barker, who led the first ever debate in the other place on lesbian, bisexual and transgender women’s health. There are historic queer trailblazers such as Anne Lister, who was fabulously represented by Suranne Jones in “Gentleman Jack”. I was distraught when I found out that “Gentleman Jack” would not be returning for a third season. For the first time, I saw someone on TV who represented me, so much so that I was even told that we look alike, to which I responded, “I wish!”—but I do love wearing a waistcoat.

The wonderful Sophie Ward is a trailblazer for LGBTQIA+ rights. As an actress and model, she was one of the first high-profile women to come out as a lesbian in 1997. The brilliant Phyll Opoku-Gyimah is a wonderful campaigner and the founder of UK Black Pride. Dame Kelly Holmes is a sports hero to us all. She is an icon who was instrumental in the fight to address the vile mistreatment of LGBTQIA+ veterans and those who are still in the Army, and she is now empowering women through her Athena Effect events.

Of course, there is also Linda Riley, one of my best friends, who is the founder of Lesbian Visibility Week and publisher of *DIVA* magazine. She is a titan who has done so much for lesbians, and who I know will do so much more in her lifetime.

Let us not forget another good friend of mine, Nancy Kelley, who is in the Gallery today. Nancy has recently been appointed as the director of Lesbian Visibility Week. She has already been a trailblazer as chief executive of Stonewall and an award-winning human rights and social justice campaigner. She is a champion of LGBTQIA+ rights who always stands up for our community, so I am excited to see what bigger and brighter things are next for Lesbian Visibility Week in the years to come.

Although there is a lot to celebrate, it is important that we do not forget the challenges that lesbians still face. In fact, in celebrating Lesbian Visibility Week, I have faced some awful homophobic remarks on social media, simply for being open about my sexuality. I have been called a “nonce” and had threats on Twitter—or X. I receive a constant barrage of homophobic abuse, but such abuse will not stop me standing here or speaking up on behalf of my community. The toxic culture on social media, and the toxic narrative from the Government, at times, in pushing their war on woke makes LGBTQIA+ people less safe. We have seen a rise in hate crime, and we must make active efforts to support our non-binary and trans community, who still face unique day-to-day challenges simply for being themselves and loving who they love.

Last October I led a debate calling on the Government to remove the additional financial burdens for same-sex couples who need to access in vitro fertilisation. The Minister committed then to a timetable to remove the barriers and bring forward a statutory instrument to end the postcode lottery for same-sex couples seeking IVF, so where is it? The legislation has still not materialised. Before qualifying for IVF on the NHS, same-sex female couples must fund six cycles of artificial insemination, so it comes as no surprise that too often people are being priced out of starting a family. My constituents Holly and Leanne have had to choose between buying a house or having a baby—a decision that couples should never be forced to make. They have been unable to afford IVF and are now, like so many, looking at alternative routes. We need to see action, because many cannot wait any longer.

Today we are told that young people are too woke and that it is fine for young LGBTQIA+ people when they come out, yet the reality is often very different. LGBTQIA+ children are twice as likely as others to be bullied. Some young LGBTQIA+ people are still kicked out and made homeless when they come out, and many do not feel safe where they live. The Albert Kennedy Trust reported that 77% of young LGBTQ+ people gave family rejection, abuse or being asked to leave home as a cause for their homelessness.

A *DIVA* survey in 2024 showed that less than a third of LBQ+ women and trans people in the UK feel safe where they live. To have this continue today is dystopian. Just yesterday, I asked the Deputy Prime Minister about IVF provision and pointed out that the LGBTQIA+ community are being let down. His response was that the Government have been “excellent”, but I can tell the House that none of the lesbians I have spoken to this week thinks the Government are excellent at anything.

We must use our platforms and our ability to speak up, to highlight our diversity and to look at the impact of intersectionality. We must consider how the world is for lesbians of colour and lesbians with disabilities, and how the gender health gap and gender pay gap negatively impact on us all but in different ways.

I am privileged to be able to stand up in Parliament and say all this, because in a third of countries across the world, including 64 UN member states, it is illegal to be LGBTQIA+. Until we have won equality for all people globally, the fight goes on. I wish everyone a happy and safe Lesbian Visibility Week.

12.38 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech. At first I thought, “What am I going to say in this debate?”, because I am not a lesbian, but I have stood in this Chamber and spoken on many issues. The thing is, you do not have to be a lesbian to speak in this debate; what you have to be is a good person. You have to be a person who believes in equality and fairness—that is what is important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow said, Lesbian Visibility Week was created by a bestie of ours, Linda Riley, who is in the Gallery today. She has fought all her life to be heard and to be her authentic self, and what she wants more than anything is for everybody else to have that same privilege. Yesterday we watched a documentary, “The Life of Riley”. As an activist and a butch lesbian, Linda has supported everybody in the LBGTQI+ community. She can do that and support trans people because the two things are not mutually exclusive. I believe it is more important to know what is in people’s hearts than what is in their pants, and that we should spend more time talking about what is in people’s hearts. Nobody wants to erase lesbians—honestly, I would feel sorry for anyone who tried—and this debate highlights that.

I remember my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith)—I am sorry if I mispronounced her constituency—talking about her experience when she was a teacher. Her girlfriend was sick, and my hon. Friend was unable to talk about it in her workplace because she was not out. We should all think very carefully about that in relation to allowing people to be their authentic self. Another lesbian, Sally, came out at work during Lesbian Visibility Week. It stopped a lot of men coming on to her, which she was grateful for, but some other men thought, “Oh, I’ll give it a try.” Get over it. Some women are lesbians—get over it.

Linda welcomes lesbians and makes them feel safe in her environment. I have watched how she looks after the people my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow mentioned—people like Kelly Holmes, who kept her sexuality secret because of her time in the Army, but who is now an activist and advocate, and engaged to a wonderful, beautiful woman called Louise. That is the power of allowing people to be their authentic self and just allowing them to live, giving them space to grow and be happy.

I do not care who people love. As long as it is legal, love who you like. The world would be a better place if there was more love. There is too much hate right now, and I think we need more love in the world. As my hon. Friend said, in some countries, two consenting same-sex people are not allowed to love each other. That is wrong.

Linda talks about LGB with the T. The trans debate has been extremely toxic. The debate in this House last week made trans kids and trans adults feel like they do not exist, like we want to erase them. This is the mother of all Parliaments; we should not have debates in this place that make people feel that they do not exist or that we want them to be erased.

I spent a lot of time over the weekend speaking to Dr Cass, and I am grateful to her for her time. She was advised not to travel on public transport because of her



[Dawn Butler]

report—before it was even published. Some people, including some MPs, implied that I had contributed to that, but Dr Cass said I could quote her saying that that is “absolutely ridiculous”. I felt really hurt and offended because they encouraged a pile-on on me over the weekend. I say to those who think they can silence me and stop me sticking up for marginalised or minoritised groups, think again. That is literally what I have been elected to do in this place—to speak up for people who may not be able to speak up for themselves—and I am not going to stop.

People are making things up about me. They should read my book, which I am happy to plug. “A Purposeful Life”—out in all good bookshops now—is clear about why I am an activist and why I campaign the way I do. As I discuss in my book, the Equality Act 2010 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004 have no bearing on each other. Therefore, you can be a feminist and stick up for the rights of women, and also be a trans ally. That, I think, shows the very best of humanity, and we all need a little bit more of that.

12.44 pm

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a real privilege to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing it and on her excellent opening speech. I also thank our fantastic ally, our hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for all that she does—for the pertinent points she makes about supporting the whole LGBT community and for all the work she has done in standing up for trans people. I must not forget our hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), an outstanding champion who, long before many of us were in Parliament, was flying the flag in what was a very lonely place at the time.

It was also a real privilege to attend the event on Monday that my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow organised and to meet Linda Riley, the publisher of *Diva*, and Professor Sue Sanders, the co-founder of LGBT History Month. Just to be among such people is such an honour for someone like me. Thinking back to 30 years ago, *Diva* was quite a lifeline for people as isolated as we were in south-west Wales, perhaps not knowing anyone quite like us and certainly not wanting to be open about ourselves because we were worried about society’s reaction.

At the time of section 28, I was in a relationship with another woman, both of us were teachers and this was very inhibiting. As I have previously said in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall, it was a very difficult time—a time when it was not easy to challenge the homophobic bullying that was going on then and which still goes on now. I thank all those who were braver than I was and came out sooner than I did.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise to the House for intervening, but I have to go with my wife to celebrate her 17 years as chancellor of the University of Hull.

The hon. Lady is rightly talking about the bullying and the fear she experienced. There has been some of that more recently. I started to become conscious of some of the issues when Kathleen Stock was being

bullied mercilessly in Sussex. We ought to be careful. If I were to make a speech in this debate, I would say that two of the greatest events I have been to were the LGB Alliance conference meetings, which were picketed by people who seemed to hate the people inside. They would not come inside to listen; they were shouting outside. That kind of attitude has echoes of what speakers today have talked about.

**Dame Nia Griffith:** As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central has said, there is real need to approach these things in a calm and appropriate way, and to respect everybody’s different ways of manifesting their humanity.

What for me is very telling is the fact that I came out when my relationship broke up. It is almost impossible to hide grief. It is ironic that, having spent a considerable period not being open and trying not to make it obvious that we were in a relationship, it was when we did not “need” that hidden approach any more that I came out. It is incredibly difficult to explain to people why you are in such a state of grief if you do not explain the relationship. What was interesting about that was not only the reaction of very supportive friends, which was great, but finding that some people had never guessed; I was quite shocked and surprised by that. It was strange to realise that we were more hidden than we understood, because people did not see lesbians. That shows the importance of Lesbian Visibility Week.

Perhaps because society is so male-dominated and women are marginalised in many respects, or perhaps because women are more likely to be seen doing things together, holding hands or going on holiday with other women, we were not even noticed. One of the important aspects of raising lesbian visibility is enabling people to be their natural selves and enabling other people to recognise that. Of course that has meant over the years that women were perhaps not the subject of homophobic legislation. In many ways, it reflected the role of women as society was then and that women were very marginalised and not seen. That is perhaps part of the wider picture of where women were.

There have been workplace stereotypes: women have to dress in a certain way and behave in a certain way towards heterosexual men, or they are expected to do so. When they do not, be that as lesbians or as heterosexual women, it can be interpreted negatively, which has often held lesbian women back over the years. It is a form of discrimination and stereotyping that has had pernicious results.

It is not enough for us to hope that attitudes can change. Hope is not enough. We all have a responsibility to challenge, and to use our legislative powers to strengthen our challenging through legislation. We were proud, as a Labour Government from 1997 to 2010, to do a number of important things that helped LGBT rights, including ending the ban on LGBT people serving in our armed forces, ending discrimination against lesbian and gay partners for immigration purposes, and giving LGBT individuals and couples the right to adopt children. Of course, we scrapped section 28, which was very important for people like me, but we also banned discrimination in the workplace and in vocational training with the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003.

We also included homophobia in the definition of hate crimes. Sadly, we have seen a rise in hate crimes in recent years, to which I draw the Government's attention. In particular, I ask that more should be done to tackle homophobic, including transphobic, hate crime.

Of course, we created civil partnerships and awarded statutory rights to fertility treatment for lesbians on the NHS but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow said, there is a long way to go on equal and fair access. I hope the Minister has listened to what she said today, and to what she said to the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday, and I hope progress can be made on this sooner rather than later.

Although we have made progress, we know that, in many respects, there is a lot to do to stop attitudes regressing in this country but also internationally. Women are hardly noticed or recognised in many countries and, if they are, they are certainly not allowed to be in same-sex relationships.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. With others in this House, I hope I can play my part in securing greater lesbian visibility.

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

12.52 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Lesbian Visibility Week should be about lesbians, but the website put up this week says it is about

“celebrating the power of sisterhood by uplifting incredible LGBTQIA women and non-binary people”.

I think it is a real shame that, in the week about our visibility, the lesbian identity is being subsumed into a number of other identities that have nothing to do with being a same-sex-attracted woman.

Many lesbians fundamentally disagree with this, and I want to speak up for them today. They need someone to speak up for them. It is a mark of how marginalised lesbians have become in our society that so few hon. Members have turned up today. It is the reason I am speaking from the SNP Front Bench, despite having been removed from it several years ago, partly for being the wrong sort of lesbian and one who does not believe that the rights of men who say they are women should trump those of lesbians.

Before I go any further, I declare an interest as a supporter of LGB Alliance and a member of the advisory boards of both the Lesbian Project and Sex Matters. But my main interest in this issue is that I am a lesbian. I came out in the 1980s, when homophobia and lesbophobia were still rife across the UK, and my first activism was against clause 28. In those times, like many other lesbians, I was physically assaulted in the street and mocked for being a lesbian. Lesbians of my generation also faced losing our jobs and our children.

For a long time, we thought that lesbophobia had gone, but lesbophobia is back, and it has been created by those who think that the rights of lesbians are conditional on them accepting gender identity ideology. They are not. Lesbians are same-sex-attracted women, and we are protected on that basis from discrimination, bullying and harassment under the Equality Act, under which our protected characteristic is sexual orientation. Our protection is on the basis of our sex, not our gender.

And as J. K. Rowling has said, without sex there can be no same-sex attraction. That is why lesbians like me fight the replacement of the biological reality of sex with the nebulous concept of gender.

I said a moment ago that the rights of lesbians are “not conditional” on accepting gender identity theory. That is a direct quote from my friend Allison Bailey. As some Members will know, Allison Bailey is a black lesbian barrister who nearly lost her job for standing up for the rights of lesbians. Other lesbians have faced similar persecution.

My friends Kate Harris, Bev Jackson and Eileen Gallagher had to fight a lengthy court battle to protect their charity, LGB Alliance, from being removed from the charity register as a result of malicious legal action. Justice prevailed and they won the case but, shamefully, those who sought to destroy a charity run by lesbians for lesbians included Members of this House, and it was not the first time that Members of this House have displayed hostility towards lesbians.

As the Father of the House said a moment ago, when I was invited to speak on a cross-party panel at the first LGB Alliance conference back in October 2021, I faced the challenge of crossing a picket line that included a heterosexual female MP who, together with self-styled trans rights activists, was protesting against the rights of lesbians to organise a conference to talk about lesbian and gay rights. Just let that sink in. That is where we have got to—heterosexuals telling lesbians that we cannot hold a conference.

Many lesbians have been persecuted for refusing to bend their knee to gender identity ideology. Some have faced losing their job and their livelihood, and some have also faced violence or the threat of violence. I will name a few of them this afternoon. All are or have become my friends as a result of our struggle: Lucy Masoud, Professor Kathleen Stock, Julie Bindel, Professor Jo Phoenix and my dear friend Dr Shereen Benjamin, a Labour activist who has been treated appallingly by the University of Edinburgh.

There are many other lesbians whose lives have been severely restricted by gender identity zealots. We are not allowed to have lesbian-only social events. The only venues left for lesbians say that they are inclusive, which means that men are included. Women's sports are also now inclusive, which means that they include men while excluding lesbians who want to play on women-only teams.

Recently, a lesbian coming to view democracy in action at the Scottish Parliament was told by security that she could not enter the building wearing a small pin badge reading “Scottish Lesbians.” I am wearing that same badge today in solidarity with Scottish Lesbians, which is an excellent grassroots lesbian collective.

Across the United Kingdom, lesbians have been intimidated at Pride marches, spat on and assaulted for simply asserting their right to say that lesbians are same-sex attracted. At a recent event for women in Edinburgh, men counter-protesters held up vile, abusive lesbophobic signs. The police did nothing because, for all the furore in Scotland about hate crime, it seems that hate directed at lesbians does not count.

I do not believe that the interests of lesbians are being properly represented by organisations such as Stonewall and the organisers of Lesbian Visibility Week because,

[Joanna Cherry]

in their determination to promote gender identity ideology and to keep themselves in a job by doing so, not only do they fail to represent lesbians but they actually promote lesbian invisibility and lesbian erasure.

Most people think it is absurd to say that a man can be a lesbian, or to say that lesbians can have penises, and they are right. It is absurd. I am proud to be able to stand up in Lesbian Visibility Week in the House of Commons and say so. I am proud that I can stand up to speak for the lesbians who reject the forced teaming of lesbians with other groups that have completely different issues from us. I say: stop lumping us together with those other groups, as it has the effect that our interests are obscured or overlooked altogether, and it renders us invisible.

Interestingly, back in 2021 the “Inclusive Britain” report found that aggregate terms such as BAME were “no longer helpful”, took no account of the differing needs and outcomes of those included under that umbrella, and should be dropped. The report’s findings were adopted and the acronym BAME is no longer used in government. I, like many other lesbians, think that the same principles should be applied to acronyms such as LGBTQIA+, so that lesbians are not force-teamed with other identities.

**Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): I am reflecting on the speech we heard from the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), and what we could all benefit from in this debate is a bit more love and compassion. Anybody who is setting out to do anything other than demonstrate love to people who do or think differently perhaps needs to think again.

**Joanna Cherry:** Yes, but there also has to be room for difference and for someone such as me to speak up on behalf of some lesbians who feel the way that I do—we are quite large in number. I do not pretend to speak for all lesbians, but none of the other lesbians in this House speak for all lesbians either. I am putting forward what I consider to be a valid viewpoint. Most importantly, it is one backed by the law of this land.

I am constrained by not having as much time as I would have liked. I would have liked to have talked about the Cass report and how it has identified that a large percentage of girls presenting with gender dysphoria are same-sex attracted young women. I would like to have had time to talk about how important it is that we do not shut down holistic talking therapy for such young women. However, I am going to bring my comments to a close by saying this: in my belief, in the view of many lesbians and in the eyes of the law, a lesbian is a woman whose sexual orientation is towards other women. Those who think lesbians include men are deluded. You cannot be a responsible lawmaker if you believe that any man can be a woman just by saying so. That is an old joke worthy of the worst nights in student union bars back in my youth, with drunk testosterone-fuelled men telling me and other lesbians that all we needed was the right man. In future, let us try to retain our grasp on what a lesbian is. Many lesbians are sick of being bossed about by all those who promote their cult beliefs that gender trumps sex—it does not; it never has and it never will.

1.2 pm

**Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this debate, the first on Lesbian Visibility Week in parliamentary time. I congratulate her on her inclusion in the *DIVA* 2024 power list. Her sharing of her coming out story today was generous and powerful. She also reminded us of all the trailblazers and giants upon whose shoulders we stand. She also talked about the homophobic abuse she faces on a daily basis, and I applaud her for her courage and insistence that she will not be silenced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) talked about the importance of everyone being able to be their authentic selves. I was also struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) said about how, as lesbians, we have often been more hidden than she thought, because for so long lesbians were not noticed, not considered and marginalised; we were not seen even when we were not hiding.

As has been said, Lesbian Visibility Week was founded in 2020 by Linda Riley, the publisher of *DIVA* magazine. It is a global event that aims to celebrate LGBT+ women and non-binary people everywhere, and to increase lesbian visibility. Today is an opportunity for us to reflect upon the history of lesbian Members of this place, to celebrate the progress that has been made to make Britain a better place in which to live as a lesbian, and to recognise the issues that our community still faces and the progress that is still to be made.

When I was young, lesbian role models were few and far between; being openly gay was just not something that was present in the public psyche, and I could not then imagine a lesbian being able to exist, never mind be happy. Lesbian Visibility Week is an opportunity for us to celebrate not only that we exist, but that we are a diverse community. We do not all look like each other, behave like each other and agree with each other, but more often than not we can be united, although we are not uniform; fundamentally, you cannot tell by looking.

Today’s debate is a chance to usualise us, and to show that lesbians are everywhere and not in niche, discrete communities. We are in workplaces, communities, schools, churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and families, and, yes, we are in Parliament too. How many times are lesbians expected to “blend in”, keep our heads down and not make a point of our sexuality and whom we love? Without being visible, our identity is hidden, and when we are so hidden, it confirms assumptions that we are somehow shameful. That is why Lesbian Visibility Week is so important. We must be included for who we are, not for fitting in. Once no one looks twice at two women holding hands in public, once no one raises an eyebrow when your wife picks you up from work, when a child’s teachers are not surprised when two mothers arrive for parents’ evening and when people are not looking at the clothes we wear or the length of our hair to decide whether or not we are lesbians, that is when lesbians are becoming equitable. It is not so much about being accepted as being expected. I want my being a lesbian to be un-noteworthy, not because no one has noticed, but because it is usual.

Since today’s debate is the first in this place to celebrate Lesbian Visibility Week, it seems only right to recognise the first out lesbian Member of this place; Maureen Colquhoun, who died in 2021, was one of merely 23 women



elected in the February 1974 election. Not only was she the first woman to come out as a lesbian while an MP, but she was the first MP to come out at all. I never met Maureen, but she was a trailblazer and she never hid who she was, even in the face of some of the worst discrimination, including from within my party. A feminist and a fierce campaigner for women's rights, Maureen openly stated that her sexuality ruined her political career. Deselected by her local Labour Party in Northampton North, Maureen was reinstated by the national executive of the Labour party just before the 1979 election, but ultimately she lost her seat as the country went to the polls. Maureen rightly takes her place in Labour party history and parliamentary history, and I am proud that we are able to celebrate her as part of this debate today.

However, after Maureen's election in 1974, Parliament would have to wait a staggering 23 years until my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), whom I am delighted to see has just entered the Chamber, became the second out lesbian on the green Benches, coming out in 1997. Thanks to those women trailblazers and those who have come since, it has been possible for me to believe I could be here too.

Living as a lesbian in 2024 is vastly different from living as a lesbian in 1974, and I am pleased to say that since then my party and this place have made significant progress on lesbian and LGBT+ rights. I am glad that progress has been made in recent years. I welcome the Government's expansion of the scope of the Turing law to include lesbians who were wrongly convicted of homosexuality while serving in the military. As a Christian, I am delighted that same-sex couples are finally able to receive blessings from the Church of England.

Looking around the world, we see progress in other countries too. 2024 is the year that Greece, Estonia and Latvia are legalising same-sex marriage, and in Dominica homosexual activity has been decriminalised and the age of consent equalised. But there are challenges too. In Russia, displaying the Pride flag has become a criminal offence, and in Uganda, simply identifying as LGBT+ is illegal, showing just how far there is still to go for LGBT+ people, including lesbians, to feel safe to be who they are.

There are still many disparities and discriminations here at home. The Government cannot seem to decide whether or not to bring forward a Bill to ban conversion therapy. Two weeks ago, it was reported that the Prime Minister was killing it off, but a week later it was said that the Minister for Women and Equalities was still working on it. The position changes depending on whoever was last asked. The fact remains that the Government are still kicking a Bill on conversion therapy into the long grass, with no expectation that it will make it on to the statute book during this Parliament, despite its being promised six years and four Tory Prime Ministers ago.

Inequality has soared under the Conservatives. Fourteen years of low growth and their reckless gamble, which cost households thousands, has affected everyone, but women, including lesbians, have been brutally exposed to the cost of living crisis, thanks to a complete failure to close the gender pay gap and a failure to create a working environment that works for women with caring responsibilities. Lesbians and GBT+ people have been let down by a Conservative Government that killed off their own LGBT action plan, disbanded their LGBT advisory panel, cancelled their international LGBT

conference and have still not honoured their promise to ban the insidious practice of conversion therapy. Instead of standing up for LGBT+ rights and bringing people together, the Conservatives have stoked a culture war and pitted different groups against each other.

When Labour left office in 2010, life in Britain for LGBT+ people, including lesbians, had been completely transformed. The last Labour Government repealed the appalling section 28, introduced civil partnerships, paving the way for equal marriage, and ended the ban on LGBT+ people serving in our armed forces. Labour equalised the age of consent, gave LGBT+ couples the right to adopt, introduced the Equality Act 2010 and made homophobia a hate crime. I am proud to take my place here today as a Labour Member and a lesbian, with the record of the last Labour Government behind me and standing on the shoulders of the brave women and men who made this country a safer and more hospitable place for lesbians and all LGBT+ people to grow up, work, love and thrive in. The next Labour Government will continue to build on that work.

1.12 pm

**The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew):** I am glad that the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) pointed out that she is not a lesbian; obviously, I am not either. I feel somewhat outnumbered but I am proud to respond to this important debate. I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing such an important debate, for highlighting the importance of Lesbian Visibility Week and for paying tribute to Linda Riley, who instigated it in the first place. I too pay tribute to Linda Riley for her work, over many years. Inspirational people like her have made my life, as a gay man, a lot easier, and I pay tribute to them for standing up at times when it was really not easy.

I am extremely proud to be one of over 60 openly LGBT members of Parliament, and I am grateful to serve alongside such a diverse range of colleagues across the House. Although I am obviously not a lesbian, the journey of LGBT rights is mirrored in my lifetime. As I have got older, our rights have improved significantly. Walking that journey means a great deal to me personally. I want that journey to continue for future generations. It is important that we have this debate on Lesbian Visibility Week so that the next generation can see that if they are a lesbian, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that and they should enjoy their life happily and freely.

Lesbian Visibility Week has been widely celebrated since its inception and has provided an essential platform to address both the achievements and issues faced by lesbians. Dedicated colleagues have fought for gender and racial equality within the Houses of Parliament themselves, from Maureen Colquhoun in the 1970s, who was the first lesbian MP and who other hon. Members have mentioned, to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), who has been a steadfast campaigner in this place for LGBT rights for many years—I do not want to sound rude.

**Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** Lots of years.

**Stuart Andrew:** There are also inspirational figures outside Parliament, such as Dame Kelly Holmes, mentioned by the hon. Members for Jarrow and for Brent Central,

[Stuart Andrew]

who is raising the profile of those who find their true selves later in life. I was particularly touched by the contribution made by the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith). I know that at times it can be incredibly emotional for her to tell her story, but I am honoured every time I am in the room to hear someone being so open about their experiences. It is inspirational. The UK is undeniably richer for the contributions of these women, and more LGBT role models continue to appear every day. As others have rightly raised, lesbians have contributed importantly to the way of life in this country: in our armed forces, serving to keep our country safe; in medicine, helping us to make medical advances; in education; and in all walks of life. Their contributions have been extraordinary.

Many Members will have heard me say on numerous occasions that I am committed to improving the outcomes for lesbians, and all LGBT people. We especially recognise that lesbians often face specific challenges. The hon. Member for Jarrow talked about how she often felt lonely. As Minister for Loneliness, I was really keen that we had a specific campaign and focus this year on loneliness experienced by members of the LGBT community, as they often find that journey incredibly challenging, particularly if they are in rural areas.

Other challenges may include difficulty in access to IVF, mental health challenges, domestic abuse or hate crime. I was distressed to hear the experiences of hon. Members who have faced hate crime. Having been queer-bashed myself, I know how terrifying it is and the lasting effect such an incident has, not just when it happens but years later, with flashbacks. I reassure all Members of the House that I and the other equality hub Ministers regularly engage with our counterparts across Government, as well as relevant civil society groups, on a range of matters that relate to this important area of work.

The equality hub is working with a range of businesses and professional membership bodies to identify how employers can best support women's reproductive health in the workplace, for example, as part of the delivery of the workplace elements in the women's health strategy. We are holding roundtables and working with employers from a range of sectors to develop case studies and tips on good practice, to improve the support available for women's reproductive health. This will help inform the development of resources to promote and support employer good practice, highlighting those organisations that are leading the way on these issues.

A number of important points were made about IVF. There were a number of changes and future ambitions within the women's health strategy for England to improve the variation in access to NHS-funded fertility services.

Colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care have begun work to improve information provision on fertility and fertility treatments, including on the NHS website, and have launched a tool that provides greater transparency on local provision of IVF. Our initial priority is to remove the requirement for female same-sex couples to self-fund six rounds of artificial insemination before being able to access NHS-funded treatments. My colleagues in DHSC are working with NHS England to take that forward, along with other commitments that are deliverable through the integrated care boards.

I accept that this work is taking longer than expected, which I realise is disappointing to those affected, but please be assured that it remains a priority for delivery. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently reviewing its fertility guidelines and will consider whether the current recommendations for access to NHS-funded treatments are still appropriate, and we expect that review to be published next year.

With regard to the statutory instrument, I am assured that colleagues in the DHSC are working on it, so that it can be presented to the House, but I will update the hon. Member for Jarrow when I have had further discussions with DHSC Ministers.

Let me come on to some of the other points that were raised by Members today. Mention was made of the equal marriage debates that we had in this Chamber. Ahead of that debate, I remember Members receiving emails and letters from people almost suggesting that if we extended marriage to lesbian and gay couples, the sky would fall in the next day. Well, we did it, and the sky is still up there. What I noticed though was that, very quickly, everybody was waiting for their invitation to an equal marriage reception.

Turning now to the issue of hate crime, we need to ensure that we all call hate crime out, and I am glad that hon. Members have done so. I am in regular discussions with my colleagues in the Home Office and will continue to raise the points that hon. Members have mentioned today.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) talked about the voices of lesbians being silenced. I simply cannot understand why anybody would want to do that. Lesbians have as much right as anyone to stand up for recognition and for their rights. It is important that we all enter this challenging debate in a calm and measured way. A toxic debate serves no one. We can have a grown-up debate in which we disagree and agree, but we should do so with dignity and with respect. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) said, this should all be about the people whom we love, so let love be at the centre of that debate.

I was glad that colleagues raised international issues. Unacceptable things are happening around the world—in places such as Uganda and Ghana. I pay tribute to the work that the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights is doing to focus attention on this area. It is right that we join our LGBT alliance friends around the world to encourage progress in this area so that people do not have to live in fear.

I will address the issue of conversion practices that the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) mentioned. No one in this country should be harmed or harassed for who they are, and attempts at so-called conversion practices are abhorrent. We are clear on our stance that they are harmful and that they simply do not work. That is why we are committed to publishing the draft Bill. I know that it has taken time, but it has been a very challenging issue to get right. I am committed to our doing it.

I gently say that I was slightly disappointed by the shadow Minister's conclusions to her speech, trying to make out that this Government have not worked hard on LGBT issues. I am proud to serve in a Government who introduced equal marriage, proud to serve in a

Government who have brought about an HIV action plan to eradicate new infections by 2030, proud to serve in a Government who allow gay men to donate blood, and proud to serve in a Government who instigated the LGBT veterans independent review, so that there can be more support for those who were treated so disgracefully.

Today, though, I will end on a positive note by again thanking the hon. Member for Jarrow for securing this debate today and bringing awareness to the extremely important topic of our lesbian citizens during this important Lesbian Visibility Week. As outlined, the Government are committed to making sure that the UK is a safe place where lesbians are given the opportunities to thrive and live a safe and happy life.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call Kate Osborne to wind up.

1.24 pm

**Kate Osborne:** I thank all those who have contributed to the debate today. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who is no longer in her place, for all that she did to ensure that same-sex marriage was achieved. My huge thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for her continuous support and allyship, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith)—I hope that I have pronounced her constituency correctly—for her activism and her very moving contribution today.

It was disappointing to hear the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), using problematic language such as “deluded” and “forced teaming” in a debate designed to celebrate all lesbians. To bring so much hate and toxicity as the formal Front-Bench speaker is upsetting and this Parliament deserves better.

**Joanna Cherry:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) must really not use such language. I think she should withdraw that comment.

**Kate Osborne:** I am not sure which bit you would like me to withdraw, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The bit referring to hate language.

**Kate Osborne:** Okay, I withdraw it. But it is astonishing to claim that Lesbian Visibility Week is marginalising lesbians. It is because of Lesbian Visibility Week that we are here in this Chamber, bringing to Parliament the issues that lesbians face. The reality is that trans-inclusive lesbians like me are very much in the majority of cis lesbians, so I take offence at any insinuation that I am marginalising or misrepresenting lesbians. As a cis lesbian, I will not shy away from my trans-inclusive lesbianism and feminism. This year’s theme is “unified, not uniform”. To embrace that, we should all be celebrating the wonderful diversity among the spectrum of LGBTQIA+ women.

I thank the Minister for his constructive contribution and his support for the LGBTQIA community and I look forward to receiving his response regarding IVF. I also thank Labour’s Front-Bench spokesperson for setting out that Labour will treat all LGBTQIA+ people fairly and with dignity and respect.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the importance of Lesbian Visibility Week; and believes LGBTQIA women and non-binary people should be recognised for the work they do and the joy they bring.



## Buckland Review of Autism Employment

1.27 pm

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the recommendations of the Buckland Review into Autism and Employment; and urges the Government, businesses and the wider economy to implement them.

There, in the words of the motion, lies the force of the review that I had the honour of chairing and the report that was published at the end of February. This was never going to be a bout of navel gazing—an inward-looking report that purely viewed the challenge that faces autistic people in getting a full or part-time job as a problem, a risk or a challenge—but instead a massive opportunity not just for all of us who are involved and who have spent years campaigning for or caring about autistic people and the wider neurodiverse family, but the wider economy, businesses small, medium and large, and self-employment. The question of productivity in our economy has been at the heart of the economic debate for more years than I care to remember. There is the issue of economic inactivity. We need to move away from the rather tired and clichéd argument that views this through the prism of benefits, rather than the range of talents that autistic people have, the myriad conditions that are involved, and the potential that autistic people want to realise in a happy and healthy workplace.

I put on record my thanks to Stephen Lismore and the team of civil servants in the Department for Work and Pensions, some of whom are here today, for their tireless work and support in marshalling the wealth of evidence that we received—both written evidence, and evidence from a number of roundtables that we held during our call for evidence, in person and online, which allowed people from right across the four nations of the UK to take part. The list of organisations, businesses and people who helped to make the review such a rich and stimulating process runs to seven pages at the back of the document. That tells the House how deep we wanted to go, and how meaningful we wanted to make the process.

The review was robustly independent, and we pulled no punches on the limitations of Government programmes, but the DWP deserves my thanks for its dedication and support. I am also thankful for the support of the UK's leading research charity on autism, Autistica, and of James Cusack and the team there, remembering that the leadership of that organisation are themselves autistic people. That was important for me on many levels. The review had to be led by autistic people, and about autistic people—in other words, “Nothing about us without us.” I speak not only as a parliamentarian and a former Minister, but as a parent of a young woman who will, in due course, face choices, and hopefully be able to have a job of her own.

Some people will say, “Well, he's only in it because he cares about his daughter.” I am in it because I care about the hundreds of thousands of people like her who deserve their chance. They might not be at the top of the tree in terms of their abilities. They might not be able to get jobs in MI6 and the security services, which by the way are really coming to rely on the gifts that

autistic people have. It is about jobs right across the spectrum, down to part-time jobs that will mean so much to the people who can do them, and will give their life purpose, fulfilment and happiness. We must not lose the concept of happiness in all this. There is a moral case to be made for the recommendations in the review, but there is also—I make no apology for this—a hard-edged economic case. What is good for autistic people will be good for the rest of our society.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his excellent speech and his brilliant report. Does he agree that hospitality is an excellent sector for people with learning difficulties, autism and so on to consider, and will he join me on a visit to the Fair Shot café? I extend the invitation to everyone in the Chamber. It is a social enterprise run by a brilliant young woman, Bianca Tavella, who set up the organisation to train young people with learning difficulties to become baristas and café workers, and has secured jobs for dozens of people. Will he join me one day in Covent Garden to visit the Fair Shot café?

**Sir Robert Buckland:** If there is tea and cake involved, I am there. I will happily do that. The point that my hon. Friend makes deals straight away with the stereotype that autistic people cannot socialise. That is nonsense. There are myriad types of presentation. The condition will sometimes present itself in that way, but not always. Plenty of autistic people can and do work in the hospitality sector, in an outward-facing, communications-based job that works really well for them.

Exploding some of those myths is important not just in this House but from an employer's point of view. That is really at the heart of the report: turning risk into opportunity for employers, to get them to think differently. The terms of reference referred to autism, but I reassure people who initially wanted a wider reference to neurodiversity that that was not forgotten at all. In fact, a lot of the recommendations have direct read-across to a wide range of neurodiverse conditions, from attention deficit disorder to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia and dyspraxia—the whole family of neurodiverse conditions. There is clearly commonality in the challenges that people face with recruitment and retention.

In the time that I have, which I have to use economically, let us start with some of the facts that we uncovered. Only just under three in 10 autistic adults are in full-time or part-time work. It is the lowest rate across all disability classes, at about 30%, as opposed to 50% for those with a disability generally. In late 2012, I led a Backbench Business Committee debate on autism in this Chamber. I think it was the first debate on autism that we had ever had in the main Chamber. Then, fewer than one in seven, maybe about 14% of autistic adults, had full-time employment. There would seem to have been an improvement, but we are not comparing like with like. In the years since, we have seen people in the workforce start to reveal their autism in a way that they would not have before, which is encouraging, but let us not forget that we are still talking about the 700,000 or so who have a diagnosis. A large number of people—probably hundreds of thousands or even more—perhaps do not have a diagnosis, and do not even think of themselves as autistic or neurodiverse in any way. The figures therefore start to get a little unclear.

Progress has been very, very slow. There is no doubt that, as a result of Government action and intervention, there has been improvement, but we are still nowhere near where we need to be. The question is how we start to move the dial. More on that shortly. Autistic people have the largest pay gap of all disability groups. They receive a third less on average than non-disabled people. I am afraid that that is the experience of autistic graduates, too, who experience the worst outcomes of all disability groups. They are the most likely to be overqualified for their job. They are the most likely to be on zero-hours contracts or part time. That leads to under motivation, less pay, unhappiness and a lack of fulfilment. Some 50% of managers expressed discomfort with the idea of having autistic people in their workforce, and only 35% of autistic employees were fully open about being autistic.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is making an excellent case. I recently attended a Worcestershire local enterprise partnership presentation, at which an employer talked about finding that his expectations of employing autistic people were completely wrong. When he discovered that one of his employees was autistic, his whole organisation learned and benefited as a result. It strengthened the organisation and increased its productivity. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that many more employers need to engage on this subject?

**Sir Robert Buckland:** Stories like that can open up a whole new way of thinking to employers. That is really the beginning of the recommendations that we make in the report. The power of narrative, and linking that to creating a wave of change, lies at the heart of the recommendations. Let me make a final point about the current situation: about two thirds—61%—of disabled people said that their Access to Work claim took over three months, and 20% said that it took over six months. While Access to Work is a great principle, that is clearly too slow to help change the life of people who face an immediate job offer, or have an interview within days, rather than weeks or months.

What is to be done? I have talked about turning risk into opportunity, but a “universal by design” approach will make the most difference. We have heard a lot over the years about autism-friendly environments, and going out of our way to reach out, understand, and allow people to explain, but that will have only a limited impact, and only on those people who are comfortable talking, and prepared to talk, about their autism. Surely it would be better to have a universal change to the way in which we recruit and retain employees, so that it embraces not just those with a diagnosis, but those who do not want to disclose their diagnosis or do not have one. Suddenly, the number would then be not 700,000, but probably well over a million—and that might be a conservative estimate.

What about the recommendations? There are several groups within our 19 recommendations, but they can be summarised in the following way. The first group of three recommendations relates to initiatives to raise awareness, reduce stigma and capitalise on productivity. We are already working with people, autism organisations and employer-facing organisations to start that national campaign with good news stories like the one that we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker).

In certain jobs, autistic staff can be way more productive than neurotypical staff; statistics show productivity improvements ranging from 45% to 145%. I am grateful to Autistica for its work promoting its new neurodiversity employers index, which will allow employers to measure themselves against best practice; it has an annual awards programme. That is the sort of approach that we have seen really make a difference in other walks of life. The index, with the support and approval of my hon. Friend the Minister, would give employers a degree of certainty, and a uniform framework within which we could see the dial start to move. By developing such small pilots and good practices, we are again using a “show and tell” method, and larger national and multinational organisations and representative bodies can then start to spread this work out.

The second bucket of recommendations, 4 to 8, relates to the support needed for autistic people to begin or return to a career. That is all about making sure that new programmes, such as the universal support programme, are designed in a way that meets the varying needs of autistic people, so that there are supported employment programmes available, as well as supported internships, which the evidence shows are a wonderful route through which autistic young people can develop the skills that they need. I am glad that the Department for Education is piloting an entry route into supported internships for disabled people without an education, health and care plan; that again embraces the “universal by design” approach.

**Mr Walker:** As Chairman of the Education Committee, I completely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend on the value of supported internships. Does he agree that more broadly we need to look at the issue of people without an EHCP? We know that many autistic people do not require or have not had one. We should be looking to make supported internships, or extra support for apprenticeships, as accessible as possible, so that people can progress into work and training.

**Sir Robert Buckland:** My hon. Friend is right about that. He might have noted the very interesting findings of the Nuffield Trust a few weeks ago, which makes the point that although we have to have a system of diagnosis, the EHCP system, which I was proud to support as a Back Bencher when we brought in the Children and Families Act 2014, is a very narrow funnel. It takes a long time to get children and people in. Instead of concentrating on the funnel, we need a more universal approach that can embrace many people who will not need an EHCP, but who have particular needs. That is why promoting cross-industry autism support groups and opportunities for work shadowing and volunteering has to be part of the solution. As recommendation 7 says, apprenticeships are key.

Finally, recommendation 8 is that the Government work with autism charities and other groups to ensure that more people know about Access to Work and improvements to the speed of that programme. If the adjustment passport and the Access to Work Plus pilots being run by Department for Work and Pensions produce positive results, then I say to the Minister: let us roll them out nationally as soon as possible.

The next group of recommendations, 9 to 13, are all about changing recruitment practices to support autistic applicants appropriately. We need to start with careers

[*Sir Robert Buckland*]

advisers in schools and colleges and the National Careers Service in England and its equivalents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, so that there is a better understanding of autism, autistic customers can be better supported, and more properly tailored advice can be given. We also need to increase the rigour of the Disability Confident work and develop higher levels; we need more assessments under Disability Confident and we need to build in a link to the new neurodiversity employers index, so that Disability Confident organisations themselves will be, in the eyes of autistic jobseekers, much better placed to help them. Online support with the employee health and disability service can also link employees to appropriate advice on best practice when it comes to recruitment.

The representative bodies have a role here. The Recruitment & Employment Confederation has a key role to play, because it can advise not only individual businesses, but recruitment consulting agencies. There are myriad agencies up and down our high streets that do the heavy lifting of recruitment for small and medium-sized enterprises, so we have to get into those agencies. It will be good for them, as it means they will have more success in placing autistic employees, and it will of course be good for wider business. Let us face it, these SMEs do not have big human resources departments and they will not be able to do that themselves. That is why getting into the agencies will be important. We must also not forget the self-employed, and ensure that we identify sources of information and support for people who want to get on with things on their own and set up their own business.

In the few minutes I have left, I will mention two more groups of recommendations—I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I want to finish covering this important report. Supporting autistic people already in the workforce is covered in recommendations 14 to 17; working with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development to make sure that the 2018 “Neurodiversity at Work” guidance is published and accessible is at the heart of that. Finally, on career progression, we need to promote the value of employee resource groups and support networks within larger organisations and work with autism charities and the representative bodies to develop the training packages to allow autistic staff to progress.

A new task group will be set up in the weeks ahead—I say weeks, because I am working with colleagues in the DWP to identify an independent chair and suitably qualified members. We need to monitor progress, hold Government to account and audit the progress we are making. I want to see, certainly by the end of this decade, that number of one in three up to the disability average at least, and—who knows?—beyond that.

Let us be ambitious here. I call upon my hon. Friend the Minister to respond positively to the report and its recommendations with all the power that she can muster on behalf of herself and her Government colleagues. They are not the end; they are not even the beginning of the end; but they are the end of the beginning. Let us make progress.

1.48 pm

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland); I congratulate

him on securing this debate and on the report, which makes a very valuable contribution on this extremely important topic. The report does a good job of laying bare the obstacles facing autistic people in the workplace—obstacles that, as he rightly says, we need to overcome. I applaud the obvious passion that he has shown in presenting the report to us. I did not know about his own family link, and I am grateful to him for explaining that to us.

The Work and Pensions Committee has recently launched our own inquiry into disability employment, to follow up the report that we published in 2021 on the disability employment gap. We have just closed our call for evidence for that inquiry—I am glad that we have received evidence from Autistica, among others—and we will soon start to take oral evidence from disability charities and others. The review will help us to frame particular questions on autism employment in the context of that inquiry. As the review points out, the employment gap is much worse for autistic people than for disabled people more broadly.

A disappointing feature of the report for me, though, is the rather unambitious nature of the recommendations, which are along the lines of, “The Government ought to try a bit harder on this, and do a bit more of that.” There are no targets set out in the report, and nothing to help us to monitor progress. I fear that when, in two or five years’ time, we ask whether the recommendations have been delivered, the answer will be a bit unclear. I do not blame the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon for that—no doubt Ministers would not have gone along with a higher level of ambition—but I fear that the Government will be able to accept all the recommendations without really changing anything. It does seem to be a bit of a missed opportunity.

The report rightly highlights the huge size of the autism employment gap. By how much should we aim to reduce it? In his speech a moment ago, the right hon. and learned Gentleman suggested that the aim should be to increase the rate of employment among people with autism at least up to the overall disability employment rate. That would have been a really substantial target against which to measure progress to include in the report, but it is not in there. My fear is that a lack of ambition has regrettably marked the Government’s efforts on disability employment for some time.

There was a moment not long ago when a higher level of ambition was announced. Government Members may well remember that they campaigned in the 2015 general election on a target announced by David Cameron to halve the wider disability employment gap. That gap fell sharply from 1998 to 2010 through the new deal for disabled people, but it has been stuck at around 30 percentage points ever since; it went down for a bit after 2015, but perhaps unsurprisingly during the pandemic it went back up. Unfortunately, the target of halving the gap was abandoned shortly after the 2015 election was safely won, which strikes me as the kind of move that gives politicians a bad name.

In our 2021 report, the Work and Pensions Committee called unanimously, on a cross-party basis, for that target to be reinstated. The report we are debating this afternoon refers in paragraph 2.7 to making progress on closing the employment gap, and I call on the Government, in responding to that report, to set an ambitious target for increasing the employment rate



among people with autism—perhaps, as the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon has just suggested, up to at least the overall disability employment rate. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman spells out with passion in his foreword, at the moment, we are

“missing out on the skills and energy that autistic people could be contributing, to the detriment of us all.”

He is absolutely right about that. The danger, I fear, is that without targets against which to measure progress, the report may not really change things.

**Sir Robert Buckland:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for engaging so closely. I absolutely agree that without a means of accountability, the work that we have done may well be lost. I think that the task group will play an important role; it will have the freedom to start developing some more hard-and-fast approaches where necessary, and to hold the Government’s feet to the fire—whatever that Government’s complexion. I hope that gives the right hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that intervention. Perhaps he could use his influence with the task group—I do not know whether he is a member of it; I am not sure how that will work out, but I am sure he will have influence with it—to urge it to adopt the target that he set out a few minutes ago, which I think could make a substantial difference.

I welcome the call in the report for

“processes and support mechanisms that enable autistic staff to be recruited and to succeed.”

In that context, I want to draw attention to a concept that is not mentioned in the report—I am a bit disappointed that it was not—but which has been referred to elsewhere, not least in our Select Committee report.

The concept of job carving means assessing a person’s skills and then tailoring an employee role to those skills. Catherine Hale, director of the Chronic Illness Inclusion project, told our 2021 inquiry that job carving was particularly effective in supporting people with learning disabilities; given the big overlap between autism and learning disability, I think that job carving could certainly help. The charity Mind says that job carving roles for people with learning disabilities can benefit employers by removing tasks from other employees and freeing up time. In its “Working Better” report, the Equality and Human Rights Commission described job carving as a

“a flexible way of managing a workforce, which allows employers to utilise their staff skills in the most productive way whilst enabling disabled people to make a valuable contribution to the world of work.”

Our 2021 report called on the Government as part of their then forthcoming national disability strategy to provide detailed guidance to employers and providers of employment support on how they could job carve roles for disabled people, and called on Jobcentre Plus to encourage local employers in their area to job carve. The Government’s response to our report did not pick up the concept of job carving, but Ministers could still pick it up in responding to the report we are debating this afternoon. I wonder whether the Minister, who I know takes a very close interest in this area, recognises that job carving could make a significant difference to the employment prospects of many autistic people.

One thing the Government response to our 2021 inquiry did refer to was the plan at that time to increase the number of places on the intensive personalised employment support scheme. IPES provides voluntary employment support to people with disabilities and complex barriers to employment. As we noted in our report, the guidance to IPES providers explicitly mentions job carving as an intervention that can help disabled people to find and stay in work. IPES is referred to in paragraph 2.11 of the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s report, which rightly points out that referrals to IPES have now ended, as our Select Committee heard in a one-off evidence session last week on the Government’s back to work plan. There will be no more IPES referrals.

We were told by providers at our evidence session last week that the work and health programme, also referred to in paragraph 2.11 of the report, is also coming to an end. Those are two programmes that the report rightly identifies as providing valuable help for people with autism to move into employment which are being shut down. The Minister may want to comment on this in due course, but, as far as I can tell, it does not appear that any of the newer employment support programmes, such as WorkWell and universal support, will provide support comparable to that which is being closed down, and which the report has rightly identified as very helpful. The fear is that, despite the laudable aims set out in the report, which I know the Minister will endorse, we are in reality going backwards. The provision at the moment, which has been there for some time, is being removed. It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us why IPES and the work and health programme are being closed down, and where the new initiatives are to close what looks like an emerging gap in provision for people with autism.

Employers are struggling at the moment to fill vacancies. The right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon is absolutely right that there is a big opportunity here to boost disability employment if we can just find a way to enable employers to tap into it. The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) is absolutely right that employers are willing to do so, if only they knew how—it is a bit of a closed book to them. I do not think there is a lack of willingness on the part of employers, but there is a lack of information.

It was very interesting to read in the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s review about Auticon, which I had not heard of before. It is an IT consultancy in which 80% of the workforce are autistic, highly talented IT consultants. The founders—I think they were in Scandinavia—recognised that many autistic adults have extraordinary abilities, such as pattern recognition, sustained concentration and attention to detail, which are valuable qualities in many employment contexts. However, autistic people need support to secure and maintain those jobs, and Auticon specifically provides that support, understanding the needs of its employees, and has built a successful business on that basis.

**Mr Robin Walker:** I am glad that the report also highlights in that respect the good work of GCHQ, which is a big employer in my neck of the woods. Another example along those lines is an IT security company in Worcester called Titania. Its chief executive is an autistic woman, and it has tailored its recruitment process specifically to address some of the challenges that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South

[Mr Robin Walker]

Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) has identified in his report, so that it can recruit more autistic people, who it finds are such valuable and productive employees.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** That sounds like a wonderful model. The more of that kind of initiative around the country, the better.

The report makes the point that a line manager in a mainstream business may well not know that somebody they are managing is autistic. Whether the employer can agree reasonable adjustments for the employee, as is their right under the Equality Act, will depend on them self-disclosing their diagnosis to their line manager. As the review notes, whatever the level of understanding among company directors or senior staff, if the line manager is unable or unwilling to provide support, the employee will struggle to stay in their job.

The review is right to point out that at the moment there is no easily accessible guidance for employers and line managers on how to support autistic staff. Evidence to our inquiry so far suggests that, as the hon. Member for Worcester rightly said, employers want to do the right thing but often simply do not know how. When they are pointed in the right direction and try it, it turns out to be a positive experience. What can the Government do to give employers confidence in this area?

The review calls on the Department to

“Continue to develop Disability Confident, increasing the rigour of developmental work needed to achieve the higher Disability Confident levels”.

I think that is a very kind way of expressing the point. The noble Lord Shinkwin, who sits on the Government Benches in the other place and chaired the disability commission for the Centre for Social Justice, spoke for many of our witnesses when he said that Disability Confident

“is not making a measurable impact”

at the moment. Employers can, as things stand, achieve the highest level of Disability Confident accreditation without employing a single disabled person.

In response to our predecessor Select Committee six years ago, the Department said that it was developing proposals for an evaluation of Disability Confident. That commitment, first expressed six years ago, was announced again in response to our report almost three years ago in November 2021. However, I have still seen no sign of anything happening. Perhaps the Minister can update us. Is that evaluation of Disability Confident now complete, and when can we expect Disability Confident finally to be reformed?

The review is absolutely right to highlight the importance of Access to Work and to call for improvements there. It makes the point—I think the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon referred to this in his speech—that almost two thirds of disabled people stated that it took over three months for their application to be processed, and 20% said that it took over six months. He is absolutely right that that is far too slow. I agree that, as the review suggests, if the adjustment passport produces positive results, it should be rolled out nationally as soon as possible. However, in response to our Committee’s report three years ago in November 2021, we were promised that the adjustment passport would be piloted from November 2021 and, if successful, would

be expanded to support all Access to Work customers. As far as I can tell, we seem to be no further forward in 2024 than we were in November 2021. When are these long-promised improvements actually going to materialise?

One other policy lever the Government could pull is mandatory disability workforce reporting, which was recommended unanimously, on a cross-party basis, in our 2021 report. There is a voluntary framework through which employers can choose to report, but in late 2021 the Government launched a consultation on whether to require large employers to report the number of disabled people they were employing. That work was then paused, but I understand that it has now been resumed, and that the Government plan to publish their findings and next steps in the course of this year. I wonder whether the Minister can update us on when we can expect to see that work. Does she agree that requiring employers to report on the number of disabled people they employ and, within that, perhaps the number of autistic people, could be effective in encouraging the employment of people with autism and other health impairments?

I very much welcome the report, which has highlighted important issues, and the opportunity to debate it today. I also welcome the positive approach that the right hon. and learned Gentleman took, when introducing the report earlier, in seeing the scale of opportunity if we get this right. However, laudable aspirations in this area are just not enough if delivery is delayed for years. We need an ambitious target to increase the rate of employment among people with autism and other disabled people. We need worked-up plans and timescales to deliver them. I very much hope that—perhaps as a result of the work of the task group that he mentioned—we will finally see some of that when the Government respond formally to this very welcome report.

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

2.7 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Running through my mind are the words, “Follow that!” I thank the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) for producing this outstanding report. His family’s lived experience has absolutely made for a much better report, and I thank him for all the work that he has done on it. To follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) is always a privilege and a pleasure—he has taken away some of my best lines, but I will carry on regardless.

It is a real pleasure to speak in the debate, which I signed up for immediately, having spoken many times in this place on the subject of autism. I think it would be remiss of me not to mention Dame Cheryl Gillan at the start of my remarks. One of the first debates that I spoke in was on the closure of the autism One Stop Shop in Motherwell back in 2015, and Dame Cheryl was so kind and helpful to me when I spoke to that important topic. I should point out that I am very close to someone with three autistic sons. My own youngest son has never been diagnosed, but I do not think there is much doubt that he is somewhere on the spectrum, and I think he would admit that himself. I also thank Ambitious about Autism and the National Autistic Society for their briefings, which are always helpful.

The current situation regarding employment for those with autism is simply not good enough across the UK. The UK Government have consistently banged on about reducing economic inactivity and encouraging people into work, but their rhetoric is still not matched with proper support, especially for the neurodiverse, about whom we are talking today.

As we have heard, issues with access to work and the provision of workplace adjustments mean that many autistic people are slipping through the gaps. This is certainly the case for those with autism: as we have also heard, only three in 10 working-age autistic people in the UK are in employment. That statistic is five in 10 for all disabled people, and eight in 10 for non-disabled people. Ambitious about Autism's employment survey found that 71% of those unemployed would like to be in work, but less than a third were confident that they would find work within the next year. That signifies a huge gap in the support currently provided.

I have seen at first hand the transformative power of employment when autistic and disabled people are properly supported into work. I had the privilege of visiting University Hospital Wishaw to meet some of the participants in the supported internship scheme run by DFN Project SEARCH, and met some of the students on that scheme. Some of them have now found employment. Some of them have now married. The transformation in their lives and those of their families cannot be over-estimated—I literally had to be dragged off the scene, because that was one of the most uplifting visits I have undertaken as an MP.

Employment brings fulfilment, independence and purpose, and as I have said, it can positively transform the life of the employee if they are well supported. However, even when employed, autistic people face challenges and discrimination. The Buckland report finds that autistic workers face the largest pay gap of all disability groups, earning on average a third less than their non-neurodiverse counterparts. Further, the report notes that autistic graduates are twice as likely as non-disabled graduates to be unemployed after 15 months. Only 36% find work in that period, and autistic graduates are more likely to be overqualified for the job they have. They are the most likely people to be on zero-hour contracts and the least likely to be in a permanent role. All of those things require looking at properly, because the statistics are appalling.

Morally, we should be ensuring that autistic workers are supported when trying to find employment, but it is also incumbent upon Government, employers and other stakeholders to ensure that those with autism are adequately supported when they are in work. The SNP welcomes the publication of the Buckland review of autism and employment, and urges the Government to implement its recommendations to ensure that autistic people have the opportunities they deserve. I further welcome the report's engagement with autistic organisations, as lived experience is vital when shaping policy. That is something the UK Government do not always have a good track record on.

A lack of access to good-quality careers advice, inflexible hiring practices and non-inclusive workplace cultures are just some of the barriers facing autistic people. Once employment has been achieved, autistic people can struggle when employers do not or cannot put in place proper adjustments to support them. Autistic

people process information differently and experience a built environment in a totally different manner, which can impinge on their ability to carry out their work—too much bright light, noise, or social interaction can be overwhelming. Additionally, as has been said, autistic people might need more time to process interview questions. It is imperative that employers are aware of such differences and take steps to accommodate autistic workers—or any disabled workers, for that matter. A person close to me has an autistic son who wears a badge at work to indicate his mood to his co-workers. It is a simple thing: if he is feeling overwhelmed and does not want people to talk to him or to be interrupted, he turns the badge to indicate that.

From my own experience in further education, I know that my students benefited immensely when we had autistic students in class. At first they thought it was strange—they were a bit wary—but over the year they developed an understanding of autism and a real respect for the autistic students who sat next to them. The same happens in workplaces: if we can get people into the right place and the right job, everyone benefits. Not accommodating autistic workers wastes so much talent and skill. It makes no sense for businesses either—we have already heard about the special skills that autistic people can bring to the workplace. When businesses properly accommodate neurodiverse employees, the results can be amazing. I have visited the Barclays bank campus in Glasgow, designed by a woman architect who has autistic sons. The difference in that building is awesome: it is built with neurodiverse people in mind, with big open-plan offices with chill pods and a real understanding of what needs to happen. As a result, Barclays has great employees, and people are getting good work and proper jobs.

It is imperative that the UK Government act urgently to improve support for all disabled people, including those with autism, and tackle barriers to employment. We are really worried about the Prime Minister's recent announcement on fit note reform: pushing people into work without considering what they are suffering and what they need is appalling. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I get very passionate about this topic, so I will try to rush through.

It is important that Access to Work is reformed, as the Buckland report calls for, and reforms to sick pay also need to be introduced for when people need time off. In Scotland, the SNP Government try our best. We are trying to be a fair work nation and are investing money in autism, as well as in simple things such as working within education to get initial teacher education courses that will teach trainee teachers about autism, because as we know, education is the gateway to employment. I will stop there, Madam Deputy Speaker. Again, I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon, and I want the Minister to take on board all the report's recommendations and make life much easier for those with autism in the workplace.

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

2.17 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** I am the next in line to congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) on securing



[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

and opening this debate, but also—and particularly—on the contents of his report. His persistence in pushing to raise awareness of the barriers autistic people face in employment is greatly to his credit, and benefits this House and our understanding of these issues. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and colleagues for making such valuable and insightful contributions. In passing, I also put on record my admiration for Autism Together, formerly the Wirral Society for Autistic Children—a great local charity that has been around for 50 years and does very good work in this area, which has not always been fashionable for people to concentrate on.

As we have heard this afternoon, the Buckland review has been broadly welcomed by charities and other organisations. It has shone a light on the barriers that neurodivergent people continue to face when trying to get into, stay in, and get on in the workplace. It has also demonstrated that there is an increasing understanding of the benefits of ensuring that people with neurodivergence can get into work: they often have a unique view and unique talents. Not only does GCHQ know about those talents, but many other sectors could benefit if they only realised it.

The review is filled with statistics that make for grim reading, to say the least. Only 30% of autistic adults are currently in work—what a waste! Where they are in work, autistic people face the largest pay gap of all disability groups—that is simply not a fair reflection of the benefit they bring to employment. Autistic graduates are the most likely to be overqualified for their position and least likely to be in a permanent role. Our society and our economy suffer as a result of the waste that the Buckland review has outlined to the House. We ought to be anxious to do something about that.

The review highlights that a startling 50% of managers feel uncomfortable with the idea of hiring disabled people. Let us imagine someone wanting to work but being prevented from doing so because the hiring manager feels uncomfortable around them, does not understand the way in which they relate to the world or has preconceived ideas about their ability. That is pure discrimination. It is not always deliberate, but it must feel like it, whether it is suffered because of benign ignorance or bigotry. We must think about how to get rid of the ignorance that the report talks about, and we must give neurodivergent people the confidence that the law will support them if they are subjected to bigotry.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman's report talked very much about the soft power end of tackling that, but we also have to think as a society about the harder end. We have discrimination law in place for people with disabilities. Perhaps we need to think about how to give that more bite. I admit that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has not done that in his review, and it probably was not in the terms of reference, but it is important to remember that context when considering this issue. We simply cannot let generation after generation of very talented people be wasted in this way.

The review's key recommendations are only a first step on the road to eliminating some of the barriers. The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows that, although he is appropriately passionate about what he discovered in his review. Undoubtedly, many of the

recommendations have the potential to have a positive impact on autistic people's experiences and open up those important vistas of opportunity for them in our society.

The review rightly has a strong focus on collaborating with autistic people, employers, employer organisations and specialist support groups. That is important because there are unique insights to be had. Clearly, the right hon. and learned Gentleman's report has done that very well. For example, shadow Minister for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), went to an event attended by BT a few months ago to highlight how to improve its hiring practices and workplace support for neurodivergent people. She told me that BT spoke highly not only of the positive benefits felt by autistic employees, but of how the company has been able to capitalise on the unique skills that they bring. There are many examples of that, some of which we have heard today.

The review has been largely welcomed, but we must ask how quickly it can be implemented and whether we can give it a bit more bite. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is very gentle in his way, and no doubt he has been sent down particular railroads by the Government in producing his report. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that other neurodivergent and disabled people benefit from measures similar to those outlined in the review? What can she say to back up the remarks made by the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), about increasing the predictability and speed of access to work, making it easier for people to know that they will be supported in a practical way if they make the step into work?

Over the last few years, the Government have brought a hodgepodge patchwork of piecemeal measures claiming to strengthen and improve the rights of disabled and neurodivergent people. There has been lots of activity, but very little effective output in terms of a change in the number of people with disabilities in work. We had the national disability strategy, which was largely viewed as tinkering around the edges. We had the health and disability White Paper, which raised more questions than it answered. We had the disability action plan—again, a smattering of well-received, small policy ideas. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham pointed out, we had the dropping of the target for increasing employment of disabled people more generally.

We have had consultation after consultation, pilots and various hearts and minds initiatives with employers, but little has changed, as we have seen in the Buckland review. We need proper action, not more gentle observations. We need to deal with the societal barriers that make the lives of people with neurodiversity challenging and their employment prospects far too narrow.

On inclusion measures, there was a contradiction that struck me when listening to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, between the bleak picture that the review paints of the continuing barriers that autistic people face while trying to get into work, and some of the other attitudes that can be discerned in the Government about how to deal with that. The Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), is on the record saying that equality, diversity and inclusion measures have already gone too far, dismissing them as “snake oil” and

performative, and deriding disability equality and inclusion measures in the economy as woke and something to be eliminated and driven out. That sends confusing and mixed messages about the Government's approach.

I hope that the Minister's response will include a far more positive approach, telling us that the Government intend to do something about the review. I hope that they will take up some of the issues that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham raised in his contribution about targets rather than nice words and warmth, which we all agree with. We want targets and a commitment to practical action, not just a repeat of the issues about Disability Confident employers. As my right hon. Friend said in his remarks, analysis shows that disabled people do not report better experiences working for Disability Confident employers compared with employers that are not part of the scheme. An employer can say that they are Disability Confident without employing a single disabled person. Is it not time for targets, and transparency about the numbers of people with disabilities who are in work? Is it not time for reporting, more rigour and, if needs be, an application of the law?

2.28 pm

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies):** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) for introducing this important debate on autism employment. It is a pleasure to follow the Lesbian Visibility Week debate. I had the pleasure of hearing Dame Kelly Holmes talk about how it had changed her life at an Inspiring Leadership Awards this week. Let me take the opportunity to put on record our covenant that covers disadvantaged girls and vulnerable young women.

I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for mentioning Dame Cheryl Gillan. I pay tribute to her passion and commitment in championing autism and its opportunities, and understanding of the individual, which is so important. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon also does that so well. I firmly believe that autism should not be a barrier to starting, staying or succeeding in employment. I know that all Members present and those watching share that vision. Although not every autistic person can work, given the right long-term support—not just to get into work, but to progress in work—the vast majority could. One in 70 people is autistic, which is about a million people across the UK. Giving more autistic people the chance to get into work is incredibly good for them, as we heard from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon today.

There is a huge opportunity to tackle economic inactivity. The talent range and myriad potential must be realised, and I will do my utmost today to give an update on many of the questions raised and what comes next. We know it is good for employers, in building that diverse workforce, to work with more diverse customers. In my role, in answer to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), it is about proper inclusion and action, and turning warm words—not just from me, but from employers and sectors—into action. I can promise her that there has been no railroading on what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon should include in his review. I will come on to the next

steps, and there will also be a further update on the disability action plan in July. Hopefully we are starting off well in answering questions.

In 2017 the Government set a goal to see a million more disabled people in employment by 2027. I am proud to say that in the first quarter of 2022 the number of disabled people in employment had increased by 1.3 million, meaning that the goal had been met within five years. In the first quarter of 2023 disability employment had risen by 1.6 million in total since the goal was announced. I am aware that progress has been good but not even. I feel this week I am under scrutiny again from the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). I am focused on this next goal and how we review and shape what is next. Members should watch this space.

It is sad but true, as we have heard today, that currently only three in 10 working-age autistic people are in employment, even though we know that the majority of autistic people would like to be in work. Indeed, their families would love to see them progressing. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon says the dial needs to be moved on autism and neurodiversity more widely, and we do need to move that dial. The design we are working on for universal support and engagement with the Department for Education, whether that is supportive internships or broader apprenticeships, has to work for young people and the people in our communities. Seven in 10 working-age autistic people being unable to access independence and the sense of fulfilment that employment can bring is far too many.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** As the Minister heard, the right hon. and learned Gentleman suggested a few minutes ago that there should be a target for raising the level of employment among autistic people at least up to the wider disability employment rate. Will she consider adopting that target?

**Mims Davies:** I am absolutely looking at the right way forward, because for me, if someone acquires a disability, we need to be looking at how they are retained in work and whether they have a particular impairment or need. I am looking at that in the round. As part of the Disability Confident challenges, the new guidance for leadership, working with the CIPD, is important. We need to be talent confident. Many employers want to employ more inclusively. They just struggle with how to do it and so regress to the same old recruitment.

**Marion Fellows:** There is also an autism friendly employer award, which we should be looking at. I am proud to say that I have that—I am one of the few parliamentarians who do. It is worth raising that too.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point for all of us. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) mentioned the Fair Shot café in Covent Garden. I think we will all be popping down for coffee and banana cake. My predecessor enjoyed his visit there, and I am looking forward to seeing more work like that, because these things are incredibly important.

The Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham, talked about job carving, and I call it job design. It is about working with employers,

[Mims Davies]

looking at the roles they have, interviewing in the way that suits people and giving long-term support. I totally agree with all the charities that talk about jobcentres always having that individualised approach. I promise the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and all those watching that it is about the right role for the right person in front of us at DWP, so that we can actively change people's lives. That is what we are in the business of doing; it is not just warm words.

The point on self-employment that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon mentioned links to the Lilac review and active, positive choices for disabled people. We recognise talent, ability and entrepreneurship. There is a positive choice there, and access to cash is important.

I will turn to my right hon. and learned Friend's point on autistic people and the recruitment process. I thank Helen Tomlinson, the Government's menopause champion, who is also the head of talent at the Adecco Group. Thanks to her support, my officials are working with Adecco and the Recruitment and Employment Confederation to develop new methods for recruitment that work effectively for both autistic and neurotypical applicants, ensuring that employers are more able to secure the talent they need to thrive. The Government are determined to provide the right support. I also note and agree with the point about career progression for autistic people.

Access to Work continues to provide grants for extra costs, and those adjustment passports are key. We are focusing on new employment. I recognise that there have been delays, and that is partly because more people know and understand the value of Access to Work. We are continuing to develop a universal support scheme. I recognise the point that the right hon. Member for East Ham has made, and I hope I have reassured him about the design on that. I cannot cover all the wide-ranging points he made in this debate, but I am happy to write to him on those.

On the challenge of being ambitious and on what comes next, and in terms of what we are looking to achieve, I can announce that my officials will shortly be going out to the autism community to seek expressions of interest in joining the group, starting with the role of chair. It will be a transparent, inclusive process, and the selection panel will be entirely independent of Government. I fully expect that that is where outcomes and what comes next will be realised when it comes to the review's ambitions.

To conclude, this report is a big and extremely welcome step forward. It has not only produced a plan to overcome barriers for autistic people, but shows a path that can be followed for other groups facing barriers to employment and those with other types of neurodiversity and learning. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon once again.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** The review made the point about the reform of Disability Confident. Can the Minister give an update on that? Has the evaluation been completed? When will the changes be brought forward?

**Mims Davies:** There have been some changes, and I have mentioned some of the updates. There is more to come, which I think the right hon. Gentleman will be

interested in and will welcome, if he can just bear with me. If I am not constantly in the Chamber being examined, I can get on with the bits that I want to bring forward to the House, if that makes sense to those watching. We are seeing some great progress and some best practice. Things always work best when there is real change in getting autistic people into employment. I agree with the hon. Member for Wallasey. I agree with the whole reason for the report, and I thank James and the charity and all those who brought the report together. We need to deliver for autistic people. This is just the start, and may we long continue to deliver on that ambition.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call Sir Robert Buckland to wind up.

2.39 pm

**Sir Robert Buckland:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will exercise my prerogative, because there was a proper debate, with some challenge to the report and the approach taken. May I first say that I make no apology for the fact that the report did not, as is so often the case, make yet another call for a change in the law or ask for another slug of Government money? I just do not think that either will really cut it.

I take the point made by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) to talk about the legal framework. We have equalities legislation, and we have a protected characteristic—namely disability—under which autism clearly comes, fairly and squarely. I am absolutely with her in making sure that employers and employees are much better equipped to understand the full ambit of that and what discrimination actually means. She is right that, more often than not, discrimination is not the product of deliberate, malicious or wilful behaviour, but the product of ignorance. I think that word “ignorance” underpins so much of the obstacles that autistic people and neurodiverse people face in the workforce.

Now, I am with the hon. Lady on waging a war on ignorance, but may I say to Opposition Members that they should not confuse perhaps a diplomatic or gentle approach with a lack of inner determination and steel to get change? That has always been how I have operated. I do believe in respect and courtesy, but underpinning that is a determination to hold the Minister to account and to hold Governments of a future complexion to account. That is why the task group has an important role.

I am grateful to the civil servants who work with the Minister for sharing the draft terms of reference with me. The debate can help inform that process further. The terms of reference, which emphasise the independence of the chair and the group, are a good start. We should make it absolutely clear in those terms of reference that the group is free to look at targets, timescales and the sort of approach that I have presaged in my speech and which the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), rightly presses us on. Let us take that away from the debate as something on which we must build.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for mentioning DFN Project SEARCH. DFN stands for David Forbes-Nixon, who is an incredible man whose own son is autistic. With the charity that he set up, he has built this incredible network. She was right to mention that.



I commend my hon. Friend the Minister for her remarks. She knows that I will be holding the Government's feet to the fire on this matter. Let us use the review as the basis of progress. Let us get industry and business behind us, and let us move the dial on autism employment. Let us get on with it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the recommendations of the Buckland Review into Autism and Employment; and urges the Government, businesses and the wider economy to implement them.

## Single-use Plastics

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

2.42 pm

**Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Cheap and disposable single-use plastics have become a symbol of our throwaway culture—they are cheap, convenient and now pervade every part of our lives—but that also means that they have contaminated every part of our environment, where they take centuries to break down. They often break down into tiny microplastics that are having a catastrophic impact on biodiversity and human health.

Plastics can be found in ever-increasing quantities everywhere, from the top of Mount Everest to the deep ocean trench. The UK produces the second highest amount of plastic waste per capita, with supermarkets producing 900,000 tonnes of plastic every year at the last count. With production increasing, that figure is set to rise.

The UK public have long been ahead of politicians on this issue and have proven time and again their deep concern for the plastics crisis and their determination to find solutions. That was highlighted most recently in a massive citizen science project, the Big Plastic Count, run by Greenpeace and Everyday Plastic. More than 220,000 individuals and schoolchildren agreed to count their plastic for a week, to record the scale of the problem and find out where their waste was being disposed of. Fifty MPs also signed up to take part, and I was proud to be one of them.

The project uncovered that the UK throws away 1.7 billion pieces of plastic every year, but only 17% of that is recycled. The vast majority—58% of it—is burned in UK incinerators, which are often located in deprived neighbourhoods, producing toxic air pollution and often more greenhouse gases per tonne burned than coal. That is a shocking statistic, and a large part of why the plastics industry is contributing such a huge amount to climate change. The industry now produces more greenhouse gases than the entire aviation industry.

Time and again, surveys have confirmed the strength of public feeling when it comes to plastics, and in particular their frustration with single-use plastics. A study by the University of Birmingham earlier this year found the UK public to be more concerned about the threat to society posed by plastic pollution than the coronavirus pandemic or future pandemics, terrorism, economic collapse, natural disasters or artificial intelligence. Plastic-related issues top the list of environmental problems that the UK public want to tackle—plastic in the ocean is first, and the amount produced is second.

A different poll found that 74% of UK residents agreed that, to stop plastic pollution, we need to cut plastic production. When we look globally, it is clear that the problem has grown out of control: global plastic production doubled between 2000 and 2019, and it is anticipated nearly to triple by 2050. A study that came out this week projected that the plastics industry will consume 21% to 26% more of the Earth's remaining carbon budget to keep warming below 1.5°C—and that was a conservative estimate.

All that means, of course, is that we must design a solution that is appropriate for the enormity of the problem at hand. That means a solution that is global,

[Sarah Dyke]

which requires international co-operation; one that forces companies and Governments to change their behaviour, and one that addresses plastic pollution across its full life cycle from extraction to disposal.

As we speak, countries around the world are attending the fourth round of the United Nations negotiations to try to agree a plastics treaty, but that process currently hangs in the balance. Oil producing countries and fossil fuel and chemical companies are out in force at the negotiations, using all their power, resources and wealth to try to obstruct the process and prevent any deal that would put a limit on the amount of plastic that gets produced. For those companies, the plastics industry represents a lifeline as the world looks to replace oil and gas as an energy source. The global plastics treaty needs to secure a global, legally binding target to cut plastic production radically.

The Liberal Democrats are serious about tackling the problem. We want to end plastic exports by 2030. In a previous Session, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) introduced a Bill that would have set a 2025 target to end non-essential single-use plastics as well as a statutory long-term target to cut plastic waste and pollution significantly by 2042 by phasing out all but the most essential use of plastic. I am deeply concerned that the Government targets on plastic pollution, as set out in the Environment Act 2021, will not be enforced until 2037, leaving the Government 13 years to delay taking action. We are pushing for punitive measures for the Government if they do not achieve the targets.

While the Government say some of the right things on the plastics treaty, we have yet to see confirmation that they will push for a genuinely ambitious outcome, particularly on plastic production. To be clear, the Government have announced their intention to “restrain and reduce” plastic production, but they must go much further and call for a radical target for reduction. They also must provide explicit confirmation that such a target should be legally binding, rather than leaving each country to decide voluntarily how much it will do and when, and they must confirm that such a target should address every single form of plastic production without loopholes, not just those containing the most harmful and toxic elements. The absolute priority in the negotiations is that we must stop the problem at source. That will make our air cleaner, and our parks, green spaces and beaches free from plastic. It will protect wildlife and biodiversity, and help us stay within 1.5°C of global warming.

Although it is crucial to recognise the importance of tackling the issue on a global scale, I would also like to recognise some of the important actions we can take at home. In my constituency we are incredibly lucky to have the Carymoor Environmental Trust, which works to educate children on the impacts of waste on the environment. It runs a session called “fantastic plastic” which looks at the environmental impacts of plastic and ways to avoid single-use plastics. Since 2018 the project has worked with over 58,000 children in Somerset. Since 1996, Carymoor has regenerated 80 acres of a capped landfill site into a beautiful nature reserve and welcomes around 100 schools a year to its visitor centre, where it gives advice on using reusable containers for drinks instead of single-use plastic alternatives.

That wonderful example of local educational work needs to be supplemented by Government policy, and I have been pleased by some of the Government’s intentions. Their reformed extended producer responsibility system will put the full cost of collecting, sorting, recycling and disposing of household packaging waste on producers rather than local authorities. It is a step in the right direction, despite being hampered by delays meaning it will not begin until at least March 2025. Local authorities will also be required to collect flexible plastics and films from household waste by March 2027.

Somerset has been preparing for the introduction of these new waste regulations and recently Somerset Council has taken part in a flexible plastics trial. As a proud serving Somerset councillor, I was very pleased by its success. Around 3,600 properties around Frome in my constituency took part and each household was provided with blue transparent bags in which to present their flexible plastic waste. The response has been positive, with over 65% of residents regularly participating in the trial. Just under 500 kg of material was captured each week. If we consider the light weight of this type of plastic, we get an idea of the sheer volume of it that is used each week.

The take-up of the trial demonstrates that there is an appetite among residents to increase their recycling output, and polling from ReLoop has found that 83% of the British public express very high levels of support for recycling. However, one issue is the UK’s current lack of suitable recycling infrastructure for flexible plastics. They are expensive to recycle and more work is required on the end-market side to create the infrastructure to make this type of recycling work. Assurances from Government on the cost and support available for local authorities and for industry will help to ensure moves in this direction are a success.

Returning to the recent Big Plastic Count, one participating constituent in Frome told me that they would use 2,000 individual pieces of single-use plastic a year and that it is mostly food packaging. I would like legislation to oblige supermarkets to sell more loose food, which would dramatically reduce unnecessary plastic waste. That would have the twin benefit of cutting down on food waste, as it would encourage consumers to buy what they need, rather than big, pre-packaged bags of fruit and veg. Farmers could also reduce their costly pre-farmgate food waste, which is created when supermarkets mandate certain sizes for fruit and vegetables to fit into their plastic packaging.

The Liberal Democrats have been calling for a ban on non-recyclable single-use plastics. We want to replace them with affordable alternatives, aiming for complete elimination within three years. In my constituency, farmers have started to look at ways in which they can eliminate their usage of single-use plastics. For example, Tytherington Milk Station, near Frome, operates four milk vending machines—one at the farm in Tytherington, one in Frome, one just outside my constituency in Warminster, and another in Bath—supplying their customers directly, and reducing the farm’s carbon footprint by reducing plastic waste through the use of refillable glass bottles. My constituency is also home to Bruton Dairy, which started to use steel milk churns in a bid to cut down the amount of plastic used. That has proved so successful that over a 12-month period, the dairy sent out more than 200,000 litres of milk in its churns. Innovations and initiatives of that kind should be celebrated and supported.

Let me now turn to an announcement that the Government made earlier today. Having waited since 2018, when they first announced their intention to launch a deposit return scheme, we have now heard their plans. Polling for ReLoop found that 69% of the public supported the introduction of a deposit return scheme, and that 89% believed that the Government had at least a fair amount of responsibility for recycling. Despite the lengthy delays, I welcome the fact that the Government have listened to the public, along with Liberal Democrat support for an all-in deposit scheme, and I hope the Minister will say a little about the scheme in his response.

However, yet again the Government are looking to move too slowly: the scheme is not expected to come into operation until 2027, although international best practice has shown that 18 months should be sufficient to establish such a system. It could potentially save about £11 billion, given the social cost of litter and given higher recycling rates, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 0.46 million tonnes a year by 2032. In the light of those benefits, it is vital for the Government to move fast in delivering this long-awaited scheme. I am also disappointed that they have failed to honour their 2019 manifesto commitment to include glass bottles in such a scheme, but I guess that that promise was made five DEFRA Secretaries of State ago.

The scale of the plastic problem that we face is huge, but I believe we have the tools at our disposal to tackle it. The Government have made the right noises, but now is the time to act, both on the international stage and at home. We know of the devastating impact that climate change and plastic pollution have on our environment, so we must address it as a matter of urgency. The Government have been slow to act in the past, and I hope they will now recognise the urgency that is needed. The UK must take its place as one of the leaders in the global movement to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics, and I hope that through the successful implementation of the measures I have discussed today, we will take important steps forward.

2.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore):** I thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) for raising this important issue. The Government are dealing with it, and take it extremely seriously.

We all know of the detrimental impact that single-use plastic can have on society. It makes up much of our plastic waste, and pollutes our landscape and harms our wildlife when it leaks into the environment. This plastic eventually breaks down into microplastics, ending up in our soils, our seas and, unfortunately, our food chain.

Our priority is to achieve zero avoidable plastic waste by 2042 and keep plastic in circulation for longer, moving away from a “take, make and throw away” model and towards a circular economy. Single-use plastics do not fit in with the new model and can be particularly problematic, which is why driving a circular economy is incredibly important. They are typically littered or discarded into general waste, rather than being recycled, due to the difficulty in segregating, cleaning and processing them. We want to move away from a culture of single-use plastics and towards one where, if they cannot be designed out, we reuse and repair products as much as possible, before recycling them at the end of their life.

I am sure that all of us, as constituency MPs, have been to many a primary school and heard the challenges brought forward by students, who want us to deal with single-use plastics. They come up with ingenious ideas. This Government are prepared to embrace those ideas and drive the challenge forward. We must recognise, however, that single-use plastics have an important role to play in certain applications. When used in the right way and disposed of correctly, single-use plastics can help us to deliver the best environmental outcome. For example, there is a direct need for single-use plastics for medical or clinical purposes in certain circumstances. We are bringing out policy to drive the circular economy. It is important to take a systematic, evidence-based approach to policy, as we have done thus far, to drive down the use of single-use plastics.

We have already made significant progress in addressing the use of single-use plastics. The latest step, in October 2023, was the Government’s ban on some of these plastics, including cutlery, balloon sticks, expanded polystyrene cups and takeaway food and drink containers—and restrictions on single-use plastic plates, bowls and trays. That builds on measures that we had already put in place. We have one of the world’s toughest bans on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, which prevents billions of tiny plastic beads from entering the ocean every single year. We also brought in measures to restrict the supply of plastic straws, plastic drink containers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds from October 2020, and these restrictions have already had an impact. Straws, stirrers and cotton buds used to be in the top 10 littered items on beaches, but this is no longer the case. Having been involved in many a beach clean-up in my lifetime, I am pleased to see that the use of plastic drink containers, plastic stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds has significantly reduced. I am sure that all of us who have taken part in beach clean-ups are happy that that is the case.

The use of single-use carrier bags in the main supermarkets reduced by over 98% through the introduction of the 5p charge. That represents a decrease of over 7 billion carrier bags. In May 2021, we increased the charge to 10p and extended it to all retailers, building on the success of the policy and creating a level playing field for all businesses. Retailers have donated over £206 million to good causes from the proceeds of the charge since its introduction, and we will continue to review the latest evidence on problematic products in order to take a systematic approach to reducing the number of unnecessary single-use plastic products in circulation.

We have also funded ground-breaking research to address this issue through the £60 million smart sustainable plastic packaging challenge. Supported by a £150 million investment from industry, it seeks to make plastic packaging that is fit for a sustainable future. Through the challenge, we have funded numerous UK universities to innovate and drive cleaner growth across the UK’s plastics packaging and recycling systems. That has supported research on reuse systems that tackle single-use approaches head-on. The Government also support the UK plastics pact, a collaborative initiative to create a circular system that keeps plastic in the economy and out of the natural environment. Business members of the UK plastics pact are responsible for 80% of plastic packaging sold through UK supermarkets, and approximately 50% of the total plastic packaging placed on the UK market.



[Robbie Moore]

The impact of single-use plastics can of course be felt across the globe, which is why our work on the global stage is incredibly important. We are working with others, such as the global ghost gear initiative, the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance and the tide turners plastic challenge badge scheme, which helps hundreds of thousands of young people to tackle plastic packaging in their communities. Through our £500 million Blue Planet fund, we are investing in initiatives such as the Global Plastic Action Partnership, to support others in making the transition to a more circular economy.

We know we must go further, which is why we are supporting new global agreements to co-ordinate action on plastics. The UK delegation to the UN environment programme is in Ottawa, Canada, at the fourth negotiation round to develop the first binding UN treaty to end plastic pollution. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), in her role as Environment Minister, was there in person on Sunday, championing our plastics work abroad, driving progress in these important negotiations, and sharing this Government's experience of bringing forward legislation quickly, so that others can benefit from a collaborative approach. As a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to end plastic pollution, the UK is continuously pushing for an ambitious outcome and an effective UN treaty to end plastic pollution by 2040. This includes pushing for a full-lifecycle approach to plastic, designing out unnecessary and problematic single-use plastics, and promoting a circular economy in plastic.

We have further measures to tackle single-use plastics under development. Our incoming collection and packaging reforms, which the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) referred to, are central to our mission of promoting resource efficiency, moving toward a more circular economy and away from the single-use model. We are putting in place our extended producer responsibility scheme for packaging, which introduces measures that incentivise producers to make better decisions and be more sustainable in their design and use of plastic packaging. We will ensure that producers pay the cost of managing the plastic that they put on the market, and will incentivise a reduction in single-use plastics by requiring them to pay higher fees for unsustainable packaging.

The hon. Lady spoke about the deposit return scheme. Today, the UK Government have announced an update on the DRS, setting out next steps and reaffirming our commitment to delivering on this important project. Our scheme will drive the transition to a circular economy by investing in recycling, reducing littering, and offering greater opportunities to collect higher-quality materials for recycling. The update confirms interoperability across UK schemes, the delivery timeframe, and the UK Government's position on glass drink containers and the implications of divergence from the UK internal market.

After working closely with industry and the devolved Administrations, we have refreshed our programme, and we are moving ahead to introduce deposit return schemes for single-use drink containers across the UK by October 2027. We are committed to ensuring that the schemes work, successively and collectively, across

the UK. We are reducing complexity for businesses and consumers, and making sure that consumer behaviour is influenced. We have worked closely with devolved Administrations and agreed alignment on various important points, including labelling, reciprocal returns and container sizes.

Although the hon. Lady did not mention banning wet wipes, I will take the opportunity to do so. On Monday this week, we were pleased to announce that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations are to ban the supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic across the UK. This follows the public consultation held in autumn 2023, in which 95% of respondents supported the proposed ban.

Wet wipes pollute our environment. They have been found in large quantities in beach litter surveys conducted by DEFRA and the Marine Conservation Society. In the period from 2015 to 2020, an average of 20.4 wet wipes per 100 metres were found on UK beaches surveyed. That is completely unacceptable. Wet wipes, both those containing plastic and those classified as plastic free, were the fifth most found item in the 2022 Great British beach clean, which is, again, unacceptable. In 2023, the Marine Conservation Society reported that 21,000 wet wipes were found on UK beaches. Plastic-containing wet wipes break down into smaller pieces in the water environment, contributing towards microplastic pollution, which may be harmful to human and animal health. Banning the supply and sale of plastic-containing wet wipes will significantly reduce the amount of single-use plastic getting into our environment from that source. That is why we made that announcement this week, which delivers on the Government's commitments.

As part of the Prime Minister's vision of creating a smoke-free generation, we are tackling the scourge of single-use disposable vapes. That is why, on 10 April, we set draft legislation before the World Trade Organisation for its members to provide us with any comments. We aim to lay our draft legislation before Parliament before the summer recess.

We are well aware of how much of a scourge littering and fly-tipping can be to our communities. As constituency MPs, we are all constantly challenged by fly-tipping. In my Keighley and Ilkley constituency, Bradford Council's decision to close our local household waste and recycling centres in Ilkley and Sugden End will unfortunately have a detrimental impact in the Worth valley and across my constituency through increased fly-tipping.

The Government are also doing more to clean up our communities that bear the brunt of single-use plastic through fly-tipping. For example, we have significantly raised the upper limit on fixed penalty notices by £1,000 for fly-tipping, and by £500 for littering. As of 1 April 2024, councils have to spend the income from these penalties on enforcement and clean up.

DEFRA is also funding a post in the national rural crime unit, exploring how the police's role in tackling fly-tipping can be optimised, with a focus on rural areas. This work is part of the Prime Minister's antisocial behaviour plan, which sets out how we will support councils in taking tougher action against those who pollute our local environment.

We have taken regulatory action, and have supported voluntary action by businesses. We are planning a raft of new regulatory actions to tackle the scourge of single-use plastics. These actions will have positive outcomes,

and will build on the work that we have done to date. We have introduced a carrier bag charge; reduced single-use carrier bag consumption by 98%; banned the sale of wet wipes; banned the sale of single-use straws, plastic containers, stirrers and stem cotton buds; introduced a ban on microbeads in cosmetic products; and rolled out further bans on cutlery, balloon sticks, expanded polystyrene cups and takeaway food and drink containers, and restrictions on single-use plastic plates, bowls and trays.

We are making great strides towards a circular economy through our commitment to collection and packaging reforms. We are collaborating with the devolved Administrations on banning the supply and sale of plastic-containing wet wipes across the UK. We are increasing penalties and cracking down on those who fly-tip and litter, and we are announcing a ban on disposable single-use vapes. We are leading and funding international efforts, as the Under-Secretary of State

for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, has done this week in Canada. Finally, we are a member of the High Ambition Coalition, which is committed to negotiating an ambitious UN treaty on plastics.

I hope that I have been able to reassure the House and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome that this Government are committed to reducing single-use plastics in this country, and are taking action that will have tangible, real-world impacts. I am pleased to be able to highlight from this Dispatch Box all the measures that this Government have taken thus far, and the continued action that we will take to address the scourge of single-use plastics.

*Question put and agreed to.*

3.14 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 April 2024

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

## Liver Disease and Liver Cancer

12.30 pm

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered health inequalities in liver disease and liver cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who is covering Front-Bench duties in this debate, and who was kind enough to co-sponsor the application for it with me to the Backbench Business Committee. She is a long-standing champion of public services and better healthcare provision for all.

I am grateful to several organisations, including charities, that have helped me with my speech: the British Liver Trust—several representatives are in the Public Gallery—Liver Cancer UK and the Roger Williams Institute of Hepatology. Alcohol Change UK has also been good. I have met its representatives in the past, although not recently, and it has been a long-standing campaigner on this issue.

Before I start on the main points of my speech, I pay tribute to Bob Blizzard, a former Labour Member of Parliament in Norfolk. He did a lot of work in this House on the Hunting Act 2004 and in the fight for animal rights. His family have been in touch and wanted me to mention him. Sadly, he passed away in 2022, with a rare form of cancer, having been diagnosed with it in December 2020. His family therefore wanted me to mention the work of the Alan Morement Memorial Fund, which helps patients and healthcare workers.

To start on my key points, this is an important debate about health inequalities in liver disease and liver cancer. It is particularly timely, given the shocking new data released this month, which shows that we are facing the worst mortality and hospital admissions rates for liver disease in a generation. Ninety per cent of liver disease is preventable and, if diagnosed early, damage can often be reversed and the liver can recover fully. Tragically, however, premature deaths from liver disease have surged to their highest levels in decades, and hospital admissions due to liver disease have risen by almost 80% over the past decade alone, driven by obesity, alcohol and viral hepatitis.

We have seen more than a decade of cuts under this Government. Successive Conservative Governments have neglected patients and failed to take liver disease seriously. Our most marginalised communities, the most at risk of liver disease, have been silenced, overlooked and left behind. The liver disease crisis is almost entirely preventable and reflects a decade of decline in our nation's health, widening health inequalities and worsening life expectancy.

Geographical inequalities in health outcomes for patients are stark, and the north of England is disproportionately impacted, accounting for more than a third of premature deaths in liver disease in 2022, or 3,728. New data from

the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities highlights that the north-west, my own region, has the highest mortality rate for liver disease in the country, at 35% higher than the national average. The healthy life expectancy in Blackpool is now the same as in Angola, at 54.5 years.

The Government have failed to deliver on their manifesto pledge and levelling-up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy. They scrapped the promised White Paper on health disparities, repeatedly cut the public health grant and in effect decimated the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. They have also overlooked liver disease entirely in their major conditions strategy, and U-turned on their commitment to roll out non-invasive liver scans to 100 community diagnostic centres. Our nation's liver disease effort is faltering, which is costing lives and piling huge, avoidable pressure on to our NHS. Thousands of people die unnecessarily without access to specialist care, because liver services are consistently overlooked and under-resourced.

Risk factors such as obesity, viral hepatitis and alcohol are most prevalent in our most disadvantaged communities, and mortality rates from liver disease in our most deprived communities are now four times higher than in the most affluent.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on successfully securing this debate. Does he agree that, in the 21st century, the wider expectation in society is that we need to see improving mortality rates from serious conditions? The concern here is that mortality rates are worsening, as he has correctly outlined. That is something we all need to address as a matter of urgency.

**Navendu Mishra:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention; he makes an important point. As one of the most advanced economies in the world, we expect our population to have the best healthcare, and we want life expectancy increasing for everyone, not just in certain postcodes, so I agree with his point.

Almost two thirds of adults are overweight or obese, and nearly four in 10 children with obesity—38%—are estimated to have early stage fatty liver disease. Deaths due to alcohol-related liver disease in England have increased by 87% over the last two decades, due a rise in harmful and hazardous drinking.

The cost of living crisis is exacerbating inequalities and the risk factors facing vulnerable families in deprived areas, with cheap junk food and high-strength alcohol being widely available. It is estimated that over 206,000 people in England are living with chronic hepatitis B, the majority of those cases undiagnosed and unlinked to care. Undetected, it can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer and premature death caused by liver failure.

Liver disease is a silent killer that is often asymptomatic in its early stages. Shockingly, three quarters of people with cirrhosis are diagnosed in hospital when the damage is irreversible and it is too late for effective treatment or intervention. The impact of late diagnosis and crisis-point hospital admissions on our already overstretched NHS frontline services is pushing the hepatology workforce to breaking point, yet pressures are projected to increase at pace.

[Navendu Mishra]

My own constituents are at the sharp end of this public health emergency. In Stockport, the premature mortality rate for liver disease in women has surged by 80% since the pandemic. In 2020, it was 12.5 per 100,000, and 2022, it was 22.5 per 100,000. In Stockport, the overall premature mortality rate from liver disease between 2020 and 2022—a three-year range—was 16.5% higher than the national average. I was greatly concerned to learn that the British Liver Trust's "Love Your Liver" roadshow visit to Stockport last year identified that one in four members of the public had elevated fibroscan readings, which are indicative of liver damage.

Ethnic minorities are disproportionately impacted by liver disease. South Asian populations are particularly vulnerable to fatty liver disease, due to genetic and sociocultural factors, while migrants from countries where hepatitis B is endemic are at higher risk of developing liver cancer.

Liver disease patients also face stigma and misconceptions, which is hampering earlier detection and costing lives. Liver disease and liver cancer continue to be falsely labelled as self-inflicted, despite being linked to poverty and social deprivation. Almost half of patients with a liver condition have experienced stigma from healthcare professionals, according to recent surveys by the British Liver Trust.

Everyone at risk of liver disease and cancer should have equal access to faster diagnosis, no matter where they live. Accelerating earlier diagnosis is pivotal to tackling health inequalities and narrowing the gap in healthy life expectancy. Yet new research by the British Liver Trust shows that fewer than one in five integrated care systems in England currently have fully effective pathways in place for the early detection and management of liver disease. Alarming, my local ICS—Greater Manchester ICS—reported the highest premature mortality rate for liver disease in the country, but it is yet to implement an optimal pathway.

The evidence is overwhelming. We can and must do more to support liver disease and liver cancer patients across the UK. The next Labour Government will have a relentless focus on prevention and earlier diagnosis to turn the tide of this epidemic of preventable deaths. When the previous Labour Government first asked Professor Marmot to review health inequalities, then Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that

"the health inequalities we are talking about are not only unjust, condemning millions of men, women and children to avoidable ill-health, they also limit the development and the prosperity of communities, whole nations and even continents."

Since then, we have had over a decade of austerity and deep cuts to public health, which have caused improvements in life expectancy to slow and even reverse. Health inequalities are widening and a growing number of people live a greater proportion of their lives in ill health.

We need to look upstream, which is why the next Labour Government will be committed to taking bold action to halt the promotion of junk food targeted at children that is high in fat, salt and sugar.

We also need to talk about early detection. To build an NHS fit for the future, Labour is committed to hitting all NHS cancer waiting time and early diagnosis targets within five years. Recently, I tabled a number of written parliamentary questions on this matter, and the

answers do not fill me with confidence about the healthcare that my constituents are receiving. We also need to accelerate earlier detection by doubling the number of CT and MRI scanners in hospitals in England.

I urge the Minister to mirror this upstream focus on early detection by committing sustainable funding in the next spending review for new technology, in order to improve the early detection of liver disease in primary and community care. I also call on the Minister to introduce a new nationally endorsed pathology pathway to improve early diagnosis of liver disease and to ensure that every community diagnostic centre has an assessment for fibrosis.

Liver cancer is the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK. As one of the six least-survivable cancers, it has a shockingly poor five-year survival rate of just 13%. Yet public awareness remains very low, and liver cancer patients are overwhelmingly diagnosed at a later stage. Outcomes for many types of cancer have seen huge improvements over recent decades, yet deaths from liver cancer in the UK have increased by 40% in the last decade alone, hampered by the lack of funding, research and innovation.

Before I come to the end of my speech, I want to mention a couple of staggering points provided to me by Alcohol Change UK. Sadly, it is a fact that harm caused by alcohol is on the rise. The pandemic has had a serious impact on alcohol consumption in England. People are drinking at harmful levels and increasing their drinking. One in five people in the UK is drinking above the recommended weekly amount; many want to cut down. Alcohol causes the majority of liver disease, and drinking alcohol increases the risk of liver cancer.

Alcohol has become the leading risk factor for death and ill health among those aged 15 to 49 in England. Alcohol Change UK found, only this week, that alcohol-specific deaths in the UK are the worst on record—32.8% higher than in 2019. In 2022, 76% of alcohol-specific deaths were caused by liver disease.

This is an extremely serious topic. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for the debate and I am grateful to everyone who has turned up in the Public Gallery, as well as to the Back-Bench MPs who have come to support the debate.

12.41 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing this important debate on health inequalities in liver disease and liver cancer. It is a particularly timely debate, given the recent publication of statistics showing that alcohol deaths in the UK surged during the covid-19 pandemic. While alcohol misuse is not the only cause of liver disease, it is, as we have heard, responsible for a large proportion of cases, and that does need to be addressed.

As the hon. Member for Stockport set out, we need to acknowledge that liver disease has an inescapable link to deprivation. The incidence of liver disease and the risk of hospitalisation and death are all significantly higher in regions and nations of the UK that have higher levels of deprivation relative to London and the south-east of England. It is important to discuss this, and it is welcome that we are having a debate on the

topic today. We should do so from the starting point that deprivation leads to poorer health outcomes. In the case of liver disease and liver cancer, that means that someone from the most deprived area is four times more likely to die than someone from a more affluent area. That is not acceptable.

It is now conventional wisdom that preventing a disease is far more desirable than having to treat or cure it. In Scotland, we have rates of liver disease that are far too high. However, I am grateful that the Scottish Government have introduced policies that are making a real difference by reducing deprivation, decreasing the incidence of liver disease and improving early detection.

The Scottish Government, looking at the issue in the broadest sense, have introduced policies such as the Scottish child payment, which anti-poverty charities have described as a “game changer”. Combined with other interventions, it has the potential to lift an estimated 100,000 children out of poverty. That investment is just one example of the Scottish Government intervening at the early stages of life to reduce inequality, and it will undoubtedly help in our fight against conditions such as liver disease, and indeed all other diseases associated with inequality and deprivation.

The introduction of minimum unit pricing in Scotland has also delivered results. In England, where there is no minimum unit pricing, liver disease mortality and morbidity continue to rise, whereas in Scotland, health inequalities are gradually decreasing. This has resulted in chronic liver disease deaths in Scotland decreasing from 17.9 per 100,000 in 2021 to 17.4 per 100,000 in 2022. Let me be clear: those figures are still stark, and more action needed. However, minimum unit pricing has reduced alcohol-related harms and alcohol-specific deaths by 13.4%. That is surely an intervention that we should now see across the whole UK to help to tackle liver disease, among other issues.

Scotland’s innovative life sciences sector has produced groundbreaking tests to help to diagnose liver disease at earlier stages, when damage can be reversed and the progression to cirrhosis or cancer halted. Unfortunately, as we have heard, the reality is that three in four liver disease patients present at crisis point, usually in A&E, with cirrhosis and all the horrible symptoms that come with that condition. Researchers from the University of Dundee have developed the new intelligent liver function test, which uses an algorithm to perform additional investigations on abnormal blood test results. The test can help to refer patients to specialists earlier than would otherwise be the case, minimising the workload of GPs in primary care and increasing the diagnostic rate of liver disease threefold. It has the potential to revolutionise the diagnostic pathway.

Focusing on tackling alcohol misuse, obesity and viral hepatitis are all important in lowering the rate of liver disease and liver cancer, but we cannot escape the fact that the UK Government’s decision to inflict more than a decade of austerity has exacerbated the inequalities and deprivation associated with liver disease. If the UK Government want to get serious about tackling liver disease, they need to get serious about tackling inequality. Threatening to cut the benefits of disabled people who are unable to work does nothing to tackle inequality. Forcing real-terms cuts on departmental budgets that are already strained because of inflation does not deliver the services needed to tackle inequality.

The UK has one of the highest levels of regional inequality in Europe, and until there is a real and concerted effort to change that basic fact, poorer outcomes for liver disease and liver cancer, particularly among the most deprived communities, will remain stubbornly hard to improve. I hope that we will hear today about the action that the UK Government are willing to take to ensure that that statistic quickly becomes a thing of the past.

12.47 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing this important debate, and hon. Members for their excellent opening speeches, setting the scene.

Addressing liver disease and cancer has for far too long been put on the back burner. Despite the vital work of organisations like the British Liver Trust and Liver Cancer UK, liver disease remains a leading cause of premature death, and is now the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK, yet 90% of liver disease is preventable, and it is in many cases reversible. It is a travesty, and an indictment of the state of our healthcare system, that three quarters of people living in the UK are diagnosed when it is too late for effective intervention or treatment.

I am acutely aware of the effect that liver disease has, because Washington and Sunderland West is at the heart of this public health crisis, which disproportionately affects those living in the north-east. In Sunderland, hospital admission rates due to liver disease were, shockingly, 84% higher than the national average in 2022-23, and the region suffers one of the worst hospital admission rates in England for women with liver disease. We see the hand of inequality stretch even further, as over a third of all premature deaths reported in 2022 were in the north of England, despite the Government’s manifesto pledge and levelling-up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy. The Government’s inaction on tackling health inequality is clearly indicated by the simple fact that, since the Marmot review was published in 2010, health inequalities have widened.

If we are to tackle this issue, we must finally start to tackle its root causes. We must reform our approach to liver disease and cancer, no longer allowing the prevailing myth of it being self-inflicted—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport said in his opening speech—to impact policy decisions, when we know the fatal consequences of the status quo. Despite hospital admissions caused by liver disease having risen by almost 80% over the last decade, liver disease was omitted from the major conditions strategy and was overlooked in the core modalities for community diagnostic centres.

We owe it to all those affected by liver disease to set out a proper plan to improve diagnosis and treatment. We must take a holistic approach, focusing on improving every area, from research to prevention to treatment. I believe the creation of the new nationally endorsed diagnostic pathway will be key to ensuring earlier diagnosis, with less regional disparity. In the short term, I urge Ministers to deliver a prompt and comprehensive review of adult liver services by NHS England, and to ensure



[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

that local health commissioners learn from areas where fully effective pathways for the early detection and management of liver disease are already in place.

We must no longer ignore the simple truth that we cannot improve outcomes for liver disease and cancer if the staffing crisis, long waiting times for diagnosis and barriers to accessing specialist care once diagnosed continue. We are seeing it with liver disease, where the cross-over of specialist services means that those affected experience the pressures on the NHS acutely, but the same story is told in every aspect of healthcare. We must deliver more scans and more appointments every year if we are to catch cancer early.

I am pleased that Labour has committed to a £171 million a year investment to provide the NHS with state-of-the-art equipment and new technology to cut waiting times and speed up diagnosis and treatment. I very much hope we can take momentum forward from this debate and push the Government to finally implement measures to increase diagnostic rates, invest in preventative measures and improve treatment for liver disease and cancer, because those seeking treatment cannot afford for us not to.

12.52 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I am very grateful to the British Liver Trust for its comprehensive briefings and support for this debate. The Alan Morement Memorial Fund, the cholangiocarcinoma charity, has also provided a very helpful briefing on liver cancer.

I often do not speak in debates on health matters, because they are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but I have a personal link to this issue. My husband, Joe, was diagnosed with stage 2 non-alcoholic fatty liver disease in 2019. He has taken significant efforts to deal with that condition, because when caught at that stage it is reversible. Like many men, he did not go to the doctor for far too long, and he had that diagnosis when he finally went to get it checked out. He has been clear that tackling it has been challenging—we consciously have to do an awful lot more to keep ourselves healthy; we live in an obesogenic, alcohol-focused environment, so there are always things to tempt us back into bad habits—but he continues to go on with that challenge.

Joe has talked about the stigma around the disease. Almost three quarters of people with a liver condition have experienced stigma, and almost a third feel that it has prevented them from receiving medical care. It often comes from the association of liver disease with alcohol misuse and viral hepatitis. We must do everything we can bust that stigma so that people go and get the treatment they require as soon as possible, rather than putting it off, because the risks of doing so are very serious.

I also want to mention the read-across to the contaminated blood scandal. Some of those infected with hepatitis C did not know they had been infected because of the subsequent cover-up of their medical records, and some did not find out until serious damage had been done to their livers. For some, the news sadly came too late. I have heard stories at the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood about people whose death certificates cite chronic

alcoholism as the cause of the disease, even though they had never touched a drink. There is a real stigma around liver issues, which we must do our best to bust.

We have a public health emergency that the Government ought to take very seriously indeed. Liver disease and liver cancer continue to be significant issues in Scotland. Liver disease is a leading cause of premature deaths in Scotland, above breast cancer and suicide, and deaths due to chronic liver disease in Scotland have increased by 85% in the last three decades. There was an impact during the pandemic, as the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) also mentioned. I think that speaks a little to the alcohol culture that we are all focused on. I mean, how many people have heard the phrase “wine o’clock”? It has been minimised and reduced to not really mattering at all, but that alcohol culture leads people into harmful habits, and society downplays that.

I was glad to see the Scottish Government respond to the alcohol culture with minimum unit pricing, which has reduced the consumption of alcohol in Scotland by 3%, reducing deaths wholly attributable to alcohol by 13.4% and hospital admissions due to chronic conditions such as alcohol-related liver disease by 4.1%. Alcohol-specific deaths have risen more slowly in Scotland than in England, highlighting that the situation could have been much worse had Scotland not taken the bold step of introducing minimum unit pricing. The greatest harm reduction impact has been among the more deprived groups in Scotland, so there is an important protective factor.

Will the Minister consider bringing in minimum unit pricing in England? The small weakness of minimum unit pricing is that it puts the profits back into the hands of those selling the alcohol, because we do not have full control over the taxation system for alcohol in Scotland. It would be incredibly useful if we had all those powers in Scotland, but an intervention in England might provide an opportunity to do that. Removing the duty escalator on alcohol has meant that alcohol has got relatively cheaper.

I also want to mention the work happening in Scotland, which is showing signals of incremental improvements following the Scottish Government’s focus on prevention and earlier diagnosis. The same progress has not been seen in England, where liver disease mortality rates are at their highest level in decades; hospital admissions for liver disease have risen by almost 80% over the last decade alone.

In Scotland, by comparison, liver disease death rates between 2021 and 2022 decreased from 17.9 per 100,000 to 17.4 per 100,000, and hospital admissions caused by liver disease decreased by 1.5% between 2021-22 and 2022-23. My own health board area, Greater Glasgow and Clyde, has seen the largest fall in chronic liver disease death rates, which is really quite impressive given the health challenges that we have faced. That is quite significant.

When the British Liver Trust “Love Your Liver” roadshow was on Argyle Street in my constituency, I was struck by the number of people interested. Glaswegians are a very curious bunch; you cannot do anything without somebody asking a question and stopping to find out what is going on. People were like, “Oh, a liver test. I’ll queue up and wait for my liver test in a van in

the middle of the city centre.” Around 100 people were scanned that afternoon and 15 of my constituents were later given a referral to their GP as a result, so there needs to be more testing and encouragement of people to go forward and check. It really is important.

Such screening in a community setting is a lifesaving intervention—we should make no bones about that. People should be able to access that at a simple community level. I am sure many colleagues in this place will have had their liver scanned in Parliament, which was welcome. Fibroscan readings have been reassuring in a lot of ways although, with health charities’ propensity to come in and do tests on MPs, I am sure they will find something wrong with me at some stage. However, it is welcome and important that people feel they can go for tests and that there is not a stigma in doing so.

So, there has been progress in Scotland. The intelligent liver function testing pathway developed by the University of Dundee uses an automated algorithm-based system to further investigate abnormal liver function test results based on initial blood samples from primary care, so further important development is happening in Dundee. I am sure the Minister would be interested to hear that the technology is also cost-saving to the NHS by over £3,000 a patient, which is significant. The tests are now being rolled out and piloted in parts of England.

I will touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire said about austerity and its impact on public health. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health in my constituency has done a lot of research into the subject over the years. It says that the years of Tory austerity have cost people dearly, through damage not just to public health services but to people’s life outcomes. My hon. Friend was correct to point out further cuts to social security for people from the Westminster Government, because that makes it more difficult for people to make good and healthy choices in the foods they buy and the lifestyles they have. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health said that it will take another decade just to get us back to where we were in 2010. That is 20 lost years of people’s good health, which will have a significant impact for a long time to come.

**Navendu Mishra:** The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. We already know that people who live in lower-income and more deprived areas have a lower life expectancy than people who live in more wealthy areas. The data from Alcohol Change UK tells us that people from more economically deprived groups experience higher rates of liver cancer and are less likely to receive treatment. There are also higher rates of liver cancer among people from Asian and black African backgrounds than among people from white backgrounds. That tells us that people who have a lower income or live in more deprived areas will die sooner. On the hon. Member’s point about austerity, does she agree that the Government have not done enough in the last 14 years to address the issues?

**Alison Thewliss:** I absolutely agree. I see that very much from the varied communities that I represent. It is baffling that the more recent Marmot findings have come as a surprise to some in government. I remember doing modern studies at high school and learning about the Black report and the inverse care law. It feels as though this Government are no further forward. In fact, in some respects they are much further back in tackling long-lasting health inequalities.

I shall now discuss the public health aspects. The Scottish Government are consulting on advertising restrictions on food and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, which again are disproportionately marketed towards children and vulnerable groups. That marketing is also found in poorer areas, where there is often a lack of availability of fresh fruit and vegetables. That is significant because one in four children with obesity are estimated to have fatty liver disease, which has huge implications for their health and wellbeing for the future. It is caused by an accumulation of harmful fat in the liver and is present in around 70% of people who are overweight and obese. Fatty liver disease and excess weight together significantly increase the risk of premature death due to cardiovascular disease and a range of cancers, including liver, colon, breast, prostate, lung and pancreatic cancers.

Although Scotland tries to do its best within the devolved settlement that we have, sadly a number of key commitments from the UK Government to curb childhood obesity are yet to be implemented, including the 9 pm watershed plans to protect children from junk food advertising on TV and the ban on multibuy junk food deals. We have brought in some of those things in Scotland where we can. It does make a small difference but an awful lot more needs to be done, particularly for those in younger age groups. They are being targeted with all kinds of multiple snack-type foods, which are largely unnecessary. Both Labour and the Tories need to stand up to the multinational companies that wish to push those foods on our young people. These things do not come cost-free, certainly not to society.

Will the Government build on the simple, cost-effective diagnostic pathways already in place across the devolved nations? Will they commit to sustainable funding in the next spending review for new technology to improve earlier detection of liver disease? The fact that early intervention—that technology—can permit treatment before things get worse is significant. Will they also introduce a new nationally endorsed pathway to improve early diagnosis, and will they ensure that every community diagnostic centre can provide an assessment for fibrosis? All of those things will help to improve this public health emergency that we have.

It is important that we have discussed the issue today, but I hope that the Minister will listen and make the changes that she can, and that the Labour Front Bench, should they form the next Government, take this seriously. The alcohol-soaked and obesogenic society that we have poses fundamental challenges that Government should intervene on to prevent the next generation of people developing liver disease and liver cancer; we can prevent that progression if the public health imperative is there.

1.5 pm

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this debate. I thank my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central, for sharing her personal experiences. I know that both Members are great champions for improving health outcomes for all, and I am grateful to them for bringing forward this debate to discuss a neglected but major killer. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member

[Preet Kaur Gill]

for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for sharing the shocking figures on liver disease in her constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport highlighted, new data released this month shows that we are facing the worst mortality and hospital admission rates for liver disease in a generation. Over 17,000 people die of liver disease and liver cancer each year, over half of whom are people of working age—15 to 64—at a huge cost to the NHS and the economy. We have heard from Members that 90% of liver disease is preventable, and if diagnosed at an early stage damage can often be reversed and the liver can fully recover. It is an avoidable epidemic, which is being driven by obesity, alcohol and viral hepatitis. All those issues increase in prevalence in the most deprived communities, and drive the health inequalities that we are debating today.

The debate is timely because it comes in the week when we received the sobering news that annual figures for alcohol-specific deaths had passed 10,000 for the first time ever. Seventy-six per cent of those deaths were from liver disease, including liver cancer, and it is the third year in a row that deaths have risen across the United Kingdom, breaking previous records each time. The rise was not inevitable and it cannot be explained away as the product of the pandemic. It is a policy failure, and Ministers today must answer for it.

Outcomes for many types of cancer have seen huge improvements over recent decades, but as we have heard, deaths from liver cancer in the United Kingdom have increased by 40% in the last decade alone. It is the fastest-rising cause of cancer death in the United Kingdom. It has a shockingly poor five-year survival rate of just 13%. Public awareness remains very low, with liver cancer patients overwhelmingly diagnosed at a late stage.

To her credit, the Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), recognised the problem when she committed in a letter to the chief executive of the British Liver Trust that the Government would make fibroscans available for use at 100 community diagnostic centres by March 2025. I have used one of those fibroscans, and they are a fantastic piece of kit that can tell if someone has liver damage or early signs of liver disease.

Why then, in the answer to my parliamentary question, which I received in February, did the Minister say that the Government had plans for fibroscans not in 100, but rather 12 diagnostic centres at the end of March? What about the other 88? It is all very well the NHS announcing funding for a new diagnostic pathway, but without the kit in local communities, how will that actually work? How and where will patients access scans and tests? Will they be available in the most deprived communities, where outcomes are far worse? What about in GP practices and pharmacies?

Perhaps the Minister could take up Labour's fully costed plan for a "fit for the future fund" to double the number of MRI and CT scanners, so that we can catch illness earlier and treat it faster, before it is too late. To tackle health inequalities, we must get serious about public health and a prevention-first approach. Under this Government, for the first time in a century, life expectancy has dropped in England, and a growing number of people live more of their life in ill health.

While the decline affects us all, as we have heard from many Members it is not spread equally across the country. Over a third of all premature deaths were reported in the north of England in 2022, and in my city of Birmingham, life expectancy has dropped by nearly two years in just three years. A person in Blackpool is three times more likely to die from chronic liver disease than people living elsewhere in England. In parts of that town, life expectancy for men is just two years above the retirement age—but what do we expect when the Prime Minister boasted about changing funding formulas to take money away from deprived urban areas?

As I mentioned, alcohol consumption alone caused more than 7,500 untimely deaths from liver disease in 2022, and those mortality figures have risen three years in a row. Yet faced with that, the Government have decided to dismantle the central public health function and, as far as I can tell from the non-answer that I have received to written questions on this, they have abolished the Department of Health and Social Care's alcohol policy team. Can the Minister confirm whether it is the case that there are no dedicated alcohol specialists in the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, and that that team have now been redeployed? Should we take that as an indication of how much Ministers care about this issue, and does that help us to understand why there was no real-terms increase to the public health grant in the spending review in March, even as alcohol treatment services have been hollowed out over the last 14 years?

It does not bode well for the prevention strategy that the Health Secretary has promised before the summer recess. I hope that that does not go the same way as the major conditions strategy and the health disparities White Paper before that. I am encouraged to hear that measures to tackle the obesity epidemic should feature in it, if not alcohol. Fatty liver disease and excess weight significantly increase the risk of premature death due to not just liver cancer but colon, breast, prostate, lung and pancreatic cancers, not to mention heart disease. When one in six children are obese by the time they finish primary school and one in four children with obesity are estimated to have fatty liver disease, this Government have been sitting on a ticking time bomb for the last 14 years, without taking action. Labour is committed to ensuring that all children get a healthy start to life, with free primary school breakfast clubs serving healthy food, an active and balanced curriculum and a pre-watershed ban on advertising junk food. Can the Minister confirm that concrete prevention policies to tackle the obesity epidemic will be included in the prevention strategy, and will she finally publish the consultation on the junk food ban and get on with legislating for it?

Mortality rates from liver disease are now four times higher in our most deprived communities than in our most affluent. That makes a mockery of the Government's rhetoric on tackling health inequalities and levelling up. To build an NHS fit for the future, Labour is committed to hitting all NHS cancer waiting time and early diagnostic targets within five years. We will drive a prevention revolution, with measures to tackle alcohol harms and the obesity epidemic: banning junk food ads to children, boosting capacity in local public health teams and recruiting thousands of mental health staff to give more people access to treatment before they reach a crisis. As part of our 10-year health mission, we will



improve healthy life expectancy for all and halve the gap in healthy life expectancy between different regions of England.

1.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I have to say that I am a bit disappointed, because the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), in particular, knows very well my personal commitment to the best start to life, so to hear her saying that the Government have done nothing and Labour is going to fix it is a bit rich, but there we are.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this important debate; it is an absolutely vital debate. All hon. Members, including the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), have raised the importance of prevention, early intervention and, in particular, early diagnosis. I commend them all for doing that. The Government are taking significant steps. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central talks about what the Scottish Government are doing. I can absolutely assure her that the Government of the United Kingdom are totally committed to improving early diagnosis and treatment, and I will go on to explain exactly what we are doing.

First, it is important to set out that we know that there are 6,000 new cases of liver cancer each year, making it the 18th most common cancer, with 5,000 deaths a year; that is 5,000 deaths too many. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid) said during his tenure as Health Secretary, regional inequalities are “the disease of disparity”. He was absolutely right because—as the hon. Member for Stockport stated in his opening speech—economic and health inequalities go hand in hand.

Blackpool is a perfect example. It is one of the most deprived cities in England and flashes red on every indicator—for life expectancy, alcohol dependence and liver cancer. No fewer than 40% of the people unemployed there are not fit to work due to ill health, and the rate of death from chronic liver disease is almost two and a half times the average for England. That is an area that I have visited a number of times, to visit its family hubs and to look at the excellent work and huge efforts that go on there to level up to improve the disparities. Nevertheless, there is so much more to be done, and our strategy to eliminate disparities in liver disease and liver cancer is based on two key facts.

First, 90% of liver diseases are caused by alcohol dependency, obesity or viral hepatitis. Secondly, the five-year survival rate for liver cancer is only 13% precisely because people do not come forward with their symptoms until it is too late; early detection is vital. We know what causes liver disease, and we know that diagnosing it more quickly will save thousands of lives. That is why prevention and diagnosis are the twin pillars of our strategy to end inequalities in liver disease and liver cancer across our country.

To be clear, this is not about criticising people for drinking alcohol, but stopping the level of drinking that leads to liver disease and liver cancer. We know that rates of alcohol dependency are double in the most

deprived local authorities. That is why, in December 2021, we published our drugs strategy, which does three things. First, it has brought the greatest-ever increase in funding—an extra £780 million—for drug and alcohol treatment, over £500 million of which is going straight to local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation and alcohol dependence. Secondly, the strategy is boosting screening capacity for liver disease, and thirdly, it is beefing up referral pathways to build a seamless system from diagnosis to treatment.

Since we published our strategy, we are treating more people than ever before for alcohol use. In February, almost 135,000 people were receiving treatment, compared with just over 117,000 just under two years ago, which is an increase of more than 15%. NHS England is investing almost £30 million to bring specialist alcohol care teams to hospitals in the most deprived parts of England. Those experts in addiction identify people in hospital with alcohol dependence, start their treatment and refer them to local authority community services where they can complete their treatment, overcome their dependence and move forward with their lives. I pay tribute to all those brilliant clinicians who are helping vulnerable people to turn their lives around.

Obesity is another major risk factor for liver disease and is a real scourge on the poorest parts of our country. During last week’s debate on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, we came under fire from hon. Members on both sides of the House who said, “Well, what about sugar? Are you going to ban that too?” This Government are not in the habit of banning things, but I am proud of our record on sugar reduction, healthy eating and obesity.

We have made strong progress in reducing the average sugar content in soft drinks through the soft drinks industry levy: we almost halved the sugar content in soft drinks between 2015 and 2019. I want to make the point that that is not with people saying, “Oh, this drink I used to like, I don’t like it anymore because it’s not sweet enough,” but was actually the result of reformulation that nobody noticed, which is the great thing about reformulation. If we can reduce the sugar, salt and fat content in foods so that people can carry on as normal without having to undertake some punishment routine, that is a good way to tackle the obesity problem.

**Alison Thewliss:** Having paid close attention to the sugar tax when it was brought in, there was a particular exemption in the products that required reformulation. Milkshakes could contain as much sugar as any of the full-fat fizzy drinks, but were somehow exempted because they had milk in them. Will the Minister perhaps take the opportunity to go away and think about whether they ought to be contained within a future iteration of the scheme?

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will not be surprised, because she knows me well, that I am absolutely determined to tackle childhood obesity in particular, so that we can reverse the problems that we have seen in recent years, especially the spike in unhealthy eating and overeating during the covid pandemic. We know that people—both adults and children—are consuming too many calories. As she would expect, I am all over this and I am happy to debate any point with her. I agree on the sugar content in milkshakes, but there are many other foods that we also need to focus on. I hope I can reassure her on that.

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

For two years, we have been restricting the placement of less healthy products in shops and online to help consumers to make healthier choices. We are building on that progress. By the end of next year, further restrictions on price promotions on television and three-for-the-price-of-two offers in shops will come into force. I have been encouraging the big takeaway companies, the big supermarkets and so on to try to do it anyway—to get ahead of the regulations and to take action now. A number of them, I am pleased to say, are doing just that.

I am also pleased to update the House on the recent success of the NHS digital weight management programme. This week, the *Obesity* journal published a study showing that almost 32,000 people achieved sustained weight loss with the programme over a single year, which is really positive news. The programme is helping people from deprived backgrounds: more than a third of those referred were from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It is obviously early days, but there are positive signs.

The other major contributor to liver disease is hepatitis. Thanks to increased testing and improved access to treatment, we have reduced the number of people living with chronic hepatitis C virus in England by more than half since 2015. Deaths related to hepatitis C have fallen by just over a third since 2015, well above the World Health Organisation's 10% target.

Liver disease is known as the silent killer because many people are unaware of their condition until it is too late. That is why, as part of our ambition to detect 75% of cancers at an early stage by 2028, NHS England has launched the early diagnosis programme for liver cancer, which aims to prevent liver cancer by actively checking for liver disease in our most deprived areas.

An important part of the early diagnosis programme includes 19 community liver health check pilot sites that were launched in 2022. The most recent data shows that the CLHC programme reached more than 7,000 people in our most deprived areas using mobile units between June '22 and January '23. These units are equipped with fibroskans, which is a fantastic new technology, as many hon. Members have mentioned, for detecting liver damage and identifying liver disease before it becomes life threatening. These non-invasive tests have diagnosed more than 830 patients with cirrhosis or advanced fibrosis. I am pleased to update hon. Members that there are now eight community diagnostic centres providing fibroskans and a further 14 planned.

For my entire career, I have fought for the principles of fairness and equal opportunity—from helping children and babies in deprived areas to get the best start in life to levelling the playing field for small businesses when I was Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and encouraging young women in my constituency

to get into politics. I have done that throughout my career and I will not stop now. I am passionate about making our health service faster, simpler and fairer for all who use it, and tackling liver disease and liver cancer is at the heart of that mission. We have already delivered significant progress and, through prioritising prevention and driving early diagnosis, we have a plan to go further and faster in the years ahead.

1.23 pm

**Navendu Mishra:** I will end on a few remarks. I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate from the Front and Back Benches, though I am a bit surprised that we did not have any speakers from the Government Benches other than the Minister. This is an important issue for everyone.

The rate of hospital admissions for liver disease is higher in deprived areas. In 2021-22, there were 211.4 hospital admissions for every 100,000 people living in areas of multiple deprivation, compared with 125.1 in the least marginalised areas. That is quite serious. Additionally, I agree with the Minister about alcohol consumption; indeed, Alcohol Change UK made the point that it is not anti-alcohol, but against alcohol harm.

I will leave the Minister with a few questions. On a personal level, whenever I have gone to her with various issues, she has been extremely helpful and tried to do her best, but I think this is an important issue for the broader Government and the Department of Health and Social Care. I urge the Minister to take urgent action to improve earlier detection of liver cancer and the less survivable cancers. It is critical that the Government deliver on their pledge to diagnose 75% of all cancers at an early stage by 2030, which is the date I have written down—I think the Minister mentioned 2028, which is even better.

To reduce the staggering health inequalities we still face, the Minister must commit to delivering a cross-Government strategy to curb health inequalities and a prompt, comprehensive review of adult liver services by NHS England. We also need a comprehensive cross-Government alcohol strategy that tackles the social and commercial determinants of health. I also ask the Minister what assessments, if any, the Department has made of the inequalities impact of funding cuts to alcohol treatment services. Those are very serious issues.

I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for her contribution. I hope to work with the Government on this issue. Once again, I thank all the charities and campaign groups that do so much on it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered health inequalities in liver disease and liver cancer.

1.26 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Global Ocean Treaty

[VALERIE VAZ in the Chair]

[Relevant documents: Sixth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee of Session 2022-23, Protecting Marine Mammals in the UK and Abroad, HC 697; and the Government response, HC 1942.]

2 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the ratification of the Global Ocean Treaty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this slot to me. In preparing for this debate, I have been grateful for the many supportive emails I have received from constituents who are keen to see the global ocean treaty ratified. I am also grateful for the time that Lord Benyon took to hear me strongly pushing him to go faster with his policy. For clarity, although I have a private Member's Bill that is due to be considered by the House, my remarks will focus not on that but on the process of and work needed to implement this landmark treaty.

This debate is one in which we all agree with the goal: that the UK should ratify the global ocean treaty, also known as the high seas treaty, which was agreed by UN negotiators on 6 March 2023 following nearly a decade of negotiations in which, although I know she would be too modest to mention it herself, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) had a driving role. She has been supporting me with this issue and, I am sure, will make a worthwhile contribution later. The UK played a significant part in the negotiations. Our team of negotiators, who were supported every step of the way by Ministers committed to achieving an agreement—and, to be fair, by the main Opposition parties—should all be thanked today.

It is good to note that the UK Government was one of the first signatories to the treaty; however, it still has not been formally ratified by the UK. The treaty is a welcome update to the main international agreement on the oceans, which was adopted way back in 1982 and came into force in 1994: the UN convention on the law of the sea. That established the high seas as international waters in which all countries can fish, ship and do research, but did not include any specific protections for marine biodiversity. The global ocean treaty will change that by providing a legal framework for establishing marine protected areas, to protect against the loss of marine wildlife and share the genetic resources of the high seas.

With the current legal framework now out of date, every week that goes by without the new treaty in place sees the precious environment of our oceans put at risk. As soon as 60 countries ratify it, the treaty will enter into force and we can ramp up international action to protect our shared ocean, mitigate climate breakdown and safeguard the lives and livelihoods of billions of people worldwide. Hence, the UK should make progress to get the treaty ratified quickly and within the remaining period of this Parliament—[*Interruption*—despite the objections of some people's mobile phones.

One question that some listening will ask is: what is the potential impact once the treaty is enforced—what are we actually seeking to achieve? At its heart is the delivery of the 30 by 30 target. For background, the UN convention on biological diversity aims to promote biodiversity conservation and includes a focus on the identification of ecologically or biologically significant marine areas. In 2022, the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework was adopted at the 15th conference of the parties. It included a target to ensure that

“by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas...are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures”.

That is now commonly referred to by the much snappier title of the “30 by 30” target. The global ocean treaty is crucial to enforcing that pledge, because without the treaty there will be no legal mechanism to set up marine protected areas on the high seas. We could declare them, but it would be open to some to simply ignore them.

The UK has committed to 30 by 30 and, in an election year, it is worth noting that the three main parties of Westminster are broadly committed to the agenda. The UK is also the leader of the 77-country global action alliance that champions ocean action and conservation towards the target. In that area, we can also be proud to be practising what we are preaching to others within our own waters. Some 38% of UK waters are included in a comprehensive network of marine protected areas, and within the overseas territories more than 60% of waters are protected and sustainably managed within the blue belt. We have a good record, so we should want to show it by being one of the first 60 to ratify the treaty.

We must see the global ocean treaty in the context of the wider work being done to protect our oceans. A few years ago, the idea of mining the deep sea would have been confined to a sci-fi film. Now, technology makes it possible, and areas that until the last century man had never seen or touched, which harbour some of the most unique biodiversity, are under threat. I therefore very much welcome the announcement on 30 October 2023 that the UK would support a moratorium on the granting of exploitation licences for deep-sea mining projects by the International Seabed Authority. As a nation, we should be driving the need for the ISA to develop strong, enforceable environmental regulations, standards and guidelines before any mining commences, while adopting a generally precautionary approach to this novel practice.

Deep-sea mining could pose a new threat to the deepest parts of the oceans, but another threat has been building for decades, and has now touched even the deepest parts of our ocean and washed up on the most remote shores: plastic. I welcome the Government's work to reduce the use of single-use plastics, some of which might be used only for a couple of minutes but last centuries in the environment. The fact that a litter pick in Torbay found crisp packets from the 1980s, with some from the 1960s being discovered nationally, speaks volumes about what a moment's idleness can produce. I am pleased that the UK is a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to end plastic pollution, which is committed to achieving an ambitious treaty by the end of 2024. We need a clear and strong set of global



[Kevin Foster]

standards to tackle the problem. Each nation can make its own contribution, but it is inevitable that a global approach is needed.

I note the aim of ending plastic pollution across the globe by 2040, including by restraining and reducing plastic production and consumption to sustainable levels, promoting a circular economy for plastic, and managing plastic waste in an environmentally sound and safe manner. I still recall how difficult it was during my time in local government, back in the 2000s, to get a contract for the processing of plastic collected for recycling that could guarantee that the plastic would actually get recycled, rather than shipped abroad, often to take advantage of labour and environmental practices that were banned in the UK. At that time, it was also well known that many of the items collected could end up as landfill, and not recycled as claimed when they were collected. It was said that they had been recycled simply because they had been exported for that purpose.

I generally welcome the written ministerial statement of 25 March, which provided a welcome update on the current position on ratifying the treaty. As of that day, the agreement had gained 88 signatures and two ratifications out of the 60 needed—although I understand that the number of ratifications is now four, with Belize, Palau, Chile and the Seychelles having formally ratified the agreement. The treaty was laid before Parliament for scrutiny on 16 October last year. According to the statement:

“Before the UK can ratify international agreements, legislation needs to be in place to ensure that new obligations can be complied with... The provisions in the agreement on marine genetic resources... require a clear legislative framework, including substantive provisions in primary legislation.”—[*Official Report*, 25 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 67-68WS.]

Hence my introducing to the House a Bill to provide a legislative vehicle for just that.

The Government’s statement also outlined how the treaty creates new obligations for UK businesses, in particular the pharmaceutical, agricultural technology, cosmetic and chemical sectors, along with science and research. It also outlined that

“thorough engagement with key stakeholders is underway to help to ensure that implementation is effective and avoids any unintended consequences.”—[*Official Report*, 25 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 68WS.]

Few would argue with a statement like that, but we do not want any delay in getting vital protections in place for our oceans—hence our wanting to ratify the treaty as quickly as we can.

My meetings with the Minister in the other place and officials were interesting, and I welcomed the written statement formally confirming the Government’s intention to ratify. However, given the importance of this work and the impending general election, it is no surprise that many stakeholders are keen to see the Government, who were so keen to get the global ocean treaty in place, be the one that ratifies it—thereby ruling out its ratification being subject to any of the vagaries of future politics, which are inevitable in an election year.

I note that the statement last month indicated that the Government are preparing legislation, with their aim being to implement and ratify the treaty in time for the UN ocean conference in June 2025. I understand that that target is shared by some other countries, but as always I am keen that we set the bar. Hitting 60 countries as quickly as possible is important because the first

conference of the parties will meet within the first year of the agreement entering into force. That is when the real work of the treaty can start.

I note that the UK is already part of the preparatory commission to be established by the United Nations to prepare for that conference. It has been indicated that the legislation will come in the first part of the next Parliament, which could be later this year but similarly could be nine months away. Yet would this be a top priority in a new Parliament in the way that it has clearly been for this one and this Government? The sooner we hit 60, the sooner the first conference of the parties will take place.

Given what I have already outlined, there are some specific points to which I would appreciate hearing the Minister’s response. First, what timeline have the Government set themselves for completing the work on drafting the legislation? Why could it not be done by summer for an autumn introduction? Secondly, what prevents a legislative slot being used in the latter part of this year, given the obvious wide support that the legislation could command across the House and in the other place and—although I do not want to speak for them—the likely support we would have from the Opposition for moving it through this place relatively quickly? Thirdly, from her engagement with other countries, when does the Minister expect the 60-nation mark to be hit?

The global ocean treaty is a landmark treaty. It is the basis of delivering the 30 by 30 target, which would protect vast areas of our ocean and the biodiversity within them. Over the past decade, the Government have helped to drive forward the creation and negotiation of the treaty. Individual Ministers have worked with determination to get it agreed and to put the UK’s signature on it. The final stage is ratification. While the pledge by World Oceans Day next year is welcome, surely the Government must want the ratification of this landmark agreement to be a landmark achievement they can cite to voters when the general election comes.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** I expect to go to the Front Benches just before 3 pm, to give Kevin Foster two minutes at the end to wind up.

2.12 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) most warmly on securing time for the debate. I hesitate to predict anything in politics these days, but I have more than a strong suspicion that this may be one of those occasions when we are all in violent agreement with each other. In order that everybody may have the opportunity to say what they have to say, I will try to keep my remarks suitably brief.

I am quite happy to acknowledge the leading role the Government have taken in the past 10 years that has brought us to the agreement of this treaty. The target of a 30% protected area for the high seas is a significant one. It will not be easy to achieve, but it is an important goal that we should aspire to. Of course, what happens on the high seas may be outwith the jurisdiction of our territorial waters and our exclusive economic zone out to 200 miles, but it is still nevertheless important for the inshore waters on which we rely in my constituency in particular, so we see this as an important opportunity

for us. This is also an important opportunity for Britain to continue the leading role we have taken so far. The target of getting 60 countries to ratify the treaty is an important one, and when only four countries have currently ratified it, for Britain to step up to the plate and give early ratification would make a significant difference.

The truth of the matter is that, so often when it comes to what happens at sea, what happens is out of sight and out of mind, and things that happen on the high seas happen in a state of ignorance, because we simply do not know what goes on there. That is not just in environmental areas: if we consider the labour standards and rates of pay on many deep-water fleets, we will see a similar situation.

For me personally, one of the most important aspects of the treaty is the duty that it gives to parties to assess the environmental impacts of things such as plastics. The growth of plastic pollution has been a blight on our shores for decades. The alarming thing I have found in recent years is that when I do a litter-pick on a beach and end up looking at it and thinking, “Well, this is absolutely pristine,” I then spend another 10 or 15 minutes carefully going over it and realise that even in that short time I can fill a carrier-bag with small pieces of plastic. As an islander both by birth and by choice, I see that all the time when walking around our coastlines. The blight of plastic pollution must be tackled. We made so much progress following “Blue Planet II” in 2017, but then along came the pandemic, the closedown and the necessary biosecurity measures. As a consequence, we have lost so much momentum. This treaty might be one opportunity to recoup some of the lost ground.

The hon. Member for Torbay said that our high seas have unique biodiversity, and he is absolutely right. Of course, we used to have lots of unique biodiversity; we did not have to look to the high seas and the oceans for it. On dry land, however, we have already seen the loss of so much of our critical biodiversity and I fear that it has probably gone forever. So this treaty is for all of us a second chance. Our oceans are the lungs of our planet and if we do not take the action necessary for the ratification of this treaty now, we risk treating the biodiversity of our high seas in the same way that we have treated the biodiversity on dry land, and we will all be poorer as a consequence.

2.16 pm

**Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure, Ms Vaz, to serve with you in the Chair for this debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing this debate. I know how passionate he is about this issue and he has already referred to my commitment to making sure that we get the treaty ratified as soon as possible. That is why I was happy to support his private Member’s Bill. Although I appreciate why it might not be possible to use that Bill as a vehicle for other things—I am sure the Minister will explain in more detail later—it is important that we continue to ensure that the Government, including our good friends at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, are as speedy as possible in sorting out the issues, so that we can get the treaty ratified.

I should also pay credit not only to Lord Benyon but to Lord Goldsmith, who has done a lot of work on this issue. Gosh—the first time I was a Minister in the

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I really got the bug for marine. I think that is not only because my constituency is Suffolk Coastal but because I grew up in a village just north of Liverpool. The sea has always mattered to me in many ways. As I say, I now represent Suffolk Coastal, where I look out at the north Sea, which is a lot colder.

The amount of biodiversity in the North sea, and the importance of the oceans, was brought home to me in my time working on coral reefs, which face the threat of ocean acidification. I also learned about the amazing science that we have in this country. The National Oceanography Centre is no longer formally a Government body, but is still very close to the work that the Government are trying to do. Indeed, it is still leading the United Kingdom’s National Decade Committee on the ocean and the chief scientist from DEFRA was at its conference just a couple of weeks ago in Barcelona.

The world and this Parliament are united in wanting to ensure that we take better care of our oceans, recognising how much the oceans have taken care of us and our planet for millennia, although we will never really properly compensate for some of the harm that we have done there.

However, the opportunity is now. That is why we have done the work in creating many marine conservation zones and marine protected areas, while continuing to try to strengthen the protections that exist, despite people like the European Union taking us to court on protecting areas such as the Dogger Bank—the extra controls that we have put in recently, to protect the sand eels that are the food for the puffins and kittiwakes. Those are the sorts of things that might not matter to every person in the street, whose greatest worries will understandably be about the cost of living and similar matters, but they are long-term strategic issues. That is why it is good to have such cross-party support and focus on tackling them.

It is less than a year ago that the final agreement was adopted in New York, back in June. When the treaty was opened up for signatures during the United Nations General Assembly on 20 September, it was my privilege to be alongside Lord Ahmad when he signed it formally on behalf of the UK Government. There was an interesting debate that day on whether the United States would sign it or not, so I was very pleased that President Biden gave the go-ahead because it matters that we have people sign up to these treaties. I will always give huge credit to the United States for a number of its activities, but they have never signed up to the convention on biodiversity. It is not a shame—they have done that for certain reasons—but the most powerful global treaty we have ever had is the Montreal protocol, signed back in 1987. The United States being a part of that really made a massive difference in ensuring that it was a priority for them in their activities around the world.

The threat to the ocean is so widespread, even from things like illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. That sort of harm is very difficult and challenging. In my time at DEFRA, I was proud of working to ensure that oceans became a very prominent part, while recognising the special relationship within Government, where the Foreign Office takes the lead on UN treaties and the like, and the importance of collective working. The creation of the blue planet fund is probably one of the most significant things we will have done on environmental improvement.

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

While we have been celebrating Earth Day this week, the focus was on plastics, because of the plastics treaty. The oceans have become a sink for carbon and all sorts of different things; they have literally become a sink for our rubbish. We need to continue to work on improving the state of our oceans. An amazing thing happened down in the south Atlantic when a marine protected area was established for the South Sandwich Islands. I recently took part in a debate here on penguins, and it might surprise people to know that through our overseas territories, the United Kingdom is responsible for 30% of the world's penguins.

We must think about the impact on the building blocks of life itself and how the United Kingdom can, not with pride—pride comes before a fall, or a sin—but with determination lead by example. That is why so many parliamentarians and activists have been keen to ensure that we are leading the pack in getting the ratification done, given all the consequences that come as a result.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I am hugely enjoying my right hon. Friend's speech. She mentioned the overseas territories, which fall under the remit of the FCDO. Bermuda is one of those, and is a champion for the Sargasso sea, which is a huge carbon store and increasingly a rubbish dump. Through its hydrographic service, the Royal Navy has mapped the world's oceans more than any other country in the world. Surely, this is a golden opportunity for this country to show an international lead.

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When UNESCO was considering doing the decade of ocean science, we were right behind it, supporting it and putting people forward from the plethora of excellence we have in this country. My hon. Friend points out the Royal Navy, but there is also the funding we give. As we move forward with this, we need to ensure that it is led by science and expertise, rather than solely ambition, in order to save the oceans that have done so much to save us. My hon. Friend is right that we need to be able to deliver for it to have credibility.

At COP26, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador and Panama came together to create the first significant cross-boundary marine protected area, the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor. We helped on that journey and are still financially supporting it; there are good ambitions there. They were well placed to trigger the race, and I hope they succeed, but I have a suggestion for the Minister about what we can do to get into the race. Between Ecuador and the Galápagos Islands, which are obviously part of Ecuador, there is a gap, and I think we should use our resources to accelerate its designation as the first ever biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction zone. We could also get a run-on by working with Namibia and creating a BBNJ zone between it and Tristan da Cunha, which might be simpler. The ambition is there, and I encourage the Minister to discuss that with her officials.

On the treaty, the Foreign Office reply contained various articles and stated that we need legislation. I have to say that it was not particularly detailed. I know we are not supposed to use props, but I have the document, which was circulated to a number of MPs, in

my hand; I am happy to share it with anyone who is interested. If the Minister cannot give us a full answer today, it would be helpful if she gave a more substantive answer, perhaps by writing to the Members who attended the debate or by putting a response in the Library.

Will the Minister set out what primary legislation, secondary legislation and other agreements are needed? We want this to happen, and officials said that they should have it ready before the end of this calendar year. I wonder what, with a bit of a heave and a shove, good will and the wash-up, we can do to get it through so that we are not waiting for it. No disrespect to whoever forms the next Government, but quite often priorities change and things take time. We have been leading the pack—we have at least been co-leaders—so let us stay there and ensure this gets delivered properly.

2.26 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing this very important debate and for his speech, and to the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who spoke with such knowledge of these matters.

We are discussing the ratification of the Global Ocean Treaty, but it is important to see it in the right context. It arose out of a problem with the global biodiversity framework. I was delighted to be in Montreal at COP15 when the global biodiversity framework was adopted. It established the 30 by 30 target to ensure that

“by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures”.

But the problem was how to protect areas of our planet whose biodiversity lies beyond national jurisdictions, and how to create an ecologically interconnected system of protection and enforcement when so much of our planet is open ocean, not under the jurisdiction of any Government.

The treaty is the missing piece of the jigsaw. Without it, there would be no legal mechanism even to set up marine protected areas on the high seas, let alone enforce them. The high seas make up 40% of the surface of our planet and comprise 64%—almost two thirds—of the surface of the oceans, but in terms of capacity they represent 95% of the oceans' volume. We used to think of the deep oceans as a barren wasteland, but we now know they are teeming with life: more than 2,000 new species are discovered every year.

I do not know how much time you spend thinking about whale poo, Ms Vaz, but understanding its importance for life on our planet is quite sobering. Whale faeces, very rich in nitrogen and iron, is critical for the growth of phytoplankton. Like plants, phytoplankton capture large amounts of carbon dioxide and convert it to usable cellular energy. That not only removes carbon from the atmosphere but produces the oxygen that we human animals need to survive. When phytoplankton are eaten by zooplankton and krill, the carbon continues to pass through the food web, creating a healthy ocean.

If phytoplankton do not get eaten, they simply die and sink to the ocean floor where they lock away all the carbon that they have stored.



Known as the “biological pump”, billions of metric tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere are transferred to the bottom of the ocean every year, reducing the impact of global warming. Without the high seas shielding us, we would already be in a full-scale climate breakdown. Over 90% of the warming of the earth between 1971 and 2010 was directly absorbed by the oceans. If we increase the phytoplankton in our oceans by just 1%, it would have the same climate benefits as 2 billion mature trees.

Protection of the high seas is desperately needed for both ocean health and human wellbeing. Properly protecting 30% of the high seas would create havens for ocean wildlife that sustain and replenish the waters closer to shore. Importantly, it would enhance fish populations and food security. The high seas should be a global commons benefiting all of humanity. In fact, they are grossly abused. The result is that 80% of fisheries worldwide are fully or over-exploited, depleted or in a state of collapse. Continuing with the status quo and avoiding the necessary steps to curb overfishing and avert climate breakdown will lead to the comprehensive collapse of fisheries, and the lowest-income nations will suffer the most.

Research has shown that protecting more of the oceans will provide more fish to eat because we create the safe havens for fish to grow to maturity. Orange roughy can live for 200 years. They are not sexually mature until about 30. At full maturity, a female can produce almost a quarter of a million eggs. A female in her 30s might produce only 20,000. So it makes sense to create the marine protection zones that the global oceans treaty will facilitate.

The treaty allows for nations to establish marine-protected areas by a majority vote of ratifying members where they cannot reach consensus. That avoids the blocking stalemates and vetoes that would otherwise come into the political counting. It will ensure the sharing of marine genetic resources, providing equitable access to science and the benefits from ocean discoveries, with a benefit-sharing committee to oversee the treaty’s call for a standard batch ID to be added to genetic samples and subsequent patents on sales.

The treaty establishes the need for capacity building for developing nations to ensure that they can gain equitable access to science, technology and marine genetic resources, and it insists on environmental impact assessments for activities on the high seas that are expected to have a substantial impact. The treaty will not require new permits for research projects exploring the high seas, but it will create a science and technical committee to oversee regulations and react to changing conditions in the oceans. In the context of the last point, let me welcome in passing the UK Government’s announcement of a moratorium on deep-sea mining in October last year.

I am delighted that the UK was one of the first signatories to the treaty, but speedy ratification is vital if we are to reach the triggering number of 60 states that would bring the treaty into force. We have only six years before 2030. If we are to achieve 30% of high seas protection, we have to begin planning now, even before ratification.

Before the general election in 2010, I played a small role in lobbying for the UK to create what was then the largest marine-protected area on the planet, in the Indian ocean. Since then, the Conservative Government have developed their flagship blue belt programme for

the establishment of MPAs in the UK overseas territories. I think it is perhaps their single greatest achievement, protecting over 4 million sq km of ocean habitat, accounting for 1% of the ocean’s entire surface.

The MPZ created by the Government of Tristan da Cunha, which was mentioned, is the fourth largest MPA in the world, providing critical habitat for tuna, penguins and the iconic Tristan lobster. In 2024, the waters around South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands were officially protected by the Government, creating an MPA eight times the size of Wales. Those islands lie on important migration paths for birds travelling from the Antarctic to South America. The waters off their coasts are equally important for various marine species in the Southern ocean. The blue belt programme is a success, and I commend the Government for what they have done, but there have been challenges and disappointments on the way, and it is from those that I hope the Minister will seek to learn when coming to consider how best to implement the Global Ocean Treaty.

The very remoteness that fosters the strong biodiversity in the UK’s overseas territories also creates logistical challenges and capacity issues. While the Government have provided some technical and financial support to address those capacity issues, they know that support has not been sufficient, and it has caused problems with the roll-out of the blue belt priorities. It has also imposed considerable burdens on the already strained capacity of the overseas territories’ Governments.

The unique constitutional status of the OTs has also disqualified them from seeking outside financial support from organisations such as the Global Environment Facility and the United Nations Environment Programme. These capacity issues are often most apparent in the fight against IUU—illegal, unsustainable and unregulated—fishing.

Most of the overseas territories do not have access to cost-effective fisheries surveillance and monitoring systems. That makes it difficult to police the MPAs and ensure that they are not being violated. The UK should not restrict the amount of resource that the overseas territories are permitted to allocate to conservation efforts, which it does at the moment. The Government could also allow the territories to access funding pots already put aside for conservation efforts, such as the UK’s contribution to the UN decade on ecosystem restoration.

Territory Government Departments are unable to deliver all the top-down work programmes being recommended by blue belt agencies. More long-term, local staff are required if the programme is to achieve all its ambitions. These problems will be even greater when we think of establishing MPAs beyond the territorial jurisdiction of even our remotest territories.

The Minister will be aware that the Marine Conservation Society has recommended creating a UK Government-led MPA satellite surveillance system, sharing transparent metrics on enforcement in overseas territories’ waters, and also funding observer coverage on local fisheries. Will the Minister set out how the Government will ensure that, under the treaty, we are not simply drawing lines on an ocean map, but are creating robust and enforceable protected areas?

Finally, I support the call from a number of non-governmental organisations and agencies, and from Members today, urging the Government to begin the work of planning the development of these ocean sanctuaries, and not to

[Barry Gardiner]

wait until the treaty is ratified and enforced. Alliances with other coastal states are already there in embryonic form, such as with the Sargasso Sea Commission—of course, the Sargasso sea is also home of one of our overseas territories, Bermuda.

Bermuda's deputy premier recently called for the Sargasso sea to be prioritised for protection under the new treaty. Can the Minister assure us that she is working with Bermuda and other countries in the region to jointly spearhead a proposal for an ocean sanctuary in the Sargasso sea that might be ready to present at the treaty's first conference of the parties?

2.38 pm

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), my South West Bedfordshire constituency is about as far from the sea as you can get. So why does this debate matter to my constituents? Why am I here today? The reason is that the oceans produce half the oxygen that we breathe. It is worth pausing for a moment on that point, given how important oxygen to human life on the planet.

Oceans are the world's largest carbon sink and have already absorbed 30% of all our carbon dioxide and 90% of the excess heat caused by human activities. Three billion people around the planet rely on the oceans for food and livelihoods. That is a huge number. Just think of the global economy and what would happen to those people if the oceans were not able to carry on supplying that food and their livelihoods. Protecting the high seas from industrial overfishing and mining can lock away carbon, while replenishing those all-important fish populations.

We should also remember the potential of the blue economy for the whole pharmaceutical sector. We know that fungi in the twilight zone of the oceans are highly likely to be a new and really important source of penicillin-like drugs for the future, which can help us to deal with some of the terrible health issues that we face. What is the problem that the global ocean treaty is trying to solve? We know that, sadly, two thirds of the high seas are already experiencing pollution, overfishing and the impacts of climate change. A third of global fish stocks are already overfished, and over a third of marine mammals, such as sharks, are under threat of extinction. Sharks are an incredibly important apex predator—many of us think they are to be feared, but we now know from marine biologists that they have a very important role in the whole ecosystem of marine life.

There is also the whole issue of plastic that is integrally bound up in this, which several other hon. Members have already mentioned. The United Nations believes that some 14 million tonnes of plastic end up in the ocean every year. We all do our bit as litter pickers, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, and I am sure we have all tried to do our pathetically small amount on holiday. We all have to do what we can, but that is an absolutely huge amount. We also know that, in the first decade of the 21st century, more plastic was created than in the whole of history up to that point. The production of plastic is on an accelerating curve, and unless we do something about it, we will not get on top of this issue.

A quarter of all fish sold in Californian fish markets have plastic in their gut, according to some recent studies. There are four countries that dump more plastic in the sea than all other countries combined: China—which is by far the worst—Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. The Yangtze river pours more plastic into the ocean than any other river on the planet, and that cannot go on. I say to our friends in those countries—with a degree of humility, because our own record has not been perfect in the past—that that is an issue they need to get on top of.

What needs to be done to address those really serious problems? The UN high seas treaty was finalised in 2023, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal for her role in that. It took 20 years of negotiation, and that is a very long time. I am proud that the UK was a member of the so-called High Ambition Coalition to get it done, and I join what every other Member has said about trying to get it ratified as quickly as possible, to provide a really important lead on this issue. The UK blue belt around UK overseas territories has protected an area of ocean larger than the size of India, which is to be welcomed. Closer to home, around England, we have three highly protected marine areas as well, which are also very much to be welcomed. We need to ratify the treaty as quickly as possible. We also need the closely related UN global plastics treaty to be created and finalised by the end of 2024. I am pleased that the UK is a member of High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, because those two issues are integrally connected.

2.43 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Vaz. The contributions today have been excellent. I was beginning to question my life choices when my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) started talking about whale poo, but he explained in great detail and breadth why this treaty is important and why it is rightly getting attention today. After decades of campaigning and about a decade of negotiation, it was a landmark moment when it was agreed, and there is no doubt that it will have a positive impact when it is finally ratified.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said that we need 60 countries to ratify the agreement, and as we heard, it will provide a legislative framework for the first time. That is a crucial step if we are to achieve our 30 by 30 goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. All hon. Members present are committed to that, which is a rarity; there is great unanimity about the need for us to get on and ratify the treaty.

I have many constituents, as other hon. Members do, who asked me to take part in this debate, because they understand the importance of the ocean for protecting not just the diverse ecosystem in there but the wider planet. We have seen the effects of the failure to protect our environment in this country alone. A report from the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee published last year noted that, in the UK, "41 per cent of species have decreased in abundance since 1970 while 15 per cent of species have been classified as threatened with extinction."

The fact that the Government support the treaty and are undertaking the groundwork is welcome, but there are concerns about some wider aspects of Government

policy, such as the progress of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, which comes into potential conflict with the ambitions behind marine protected areas. New oil and gas beds can inflict serious harm on the marine environment. Exploration can cause oil spills, which harm marine wildlife and ecosystems. Underwater noise pollution from surveys also causes severe harm to marine mammals, commercially important fish, and invertebrates. There is also direct destruction of habitats such as deep-water sponge and cold-water corals, which form an important part of the natural cycle of our oceans.

Exploration can have a wide-ranging impact on marine life and ecosystems. The treaty is meant to limit those kinds of harms, so it is surprising that some policies seem to conflict with MPAs. Will the Minister comment on how that contradiction will be resolved? Questions ought to be raised about the place of MPAs in UK waters and the commitment to restore 70% of designated features to favourable conditions by 2042. It would be useful to know exactly what measures will be brought in to ensure that that is delivered.

We are short on time, so I will end on a positive note. The treaty is a step in the right direction, which has been decades in the making; we do not want to see more decades go by before we see the results. There are many reasons to be optimistic about where we are heading. The consensus that we have heard today is encouraging, but we have to be aware of wider Government policies. There is a lot of evidence that much more needs to be done to protect our seas—let alone the rest of the planet's oceans. With 71% of the Earth covered by oceans, we have to pay as much attention to what is going on there as we do to dry land.

Last year, we saw record temperatures in the oceans. We cannot ignore the influence that has on the climate. The oceans absorb heat and carbon dioxide. Importantly, they drive weather patterns, the impact of which we are seeing regularly. Warming oceans also contribute to the increasing melting of ice, which causes sea levels to rise. Everything is connected. It is clear that with every passing year, the battle against climate change becomes a little harder to defeat. Protecting the oceans is a key part of that. Ultimately, it will determine whether we continue to survive as a species on this planet, which is why we really must get on and ensure that the treaty is delivered and begins to produce results.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** I intend to call the SNP spokesperson at 2.58 pm.

2.48 pm

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind):** I apologise for my phone going off while the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was speaking. I did not wish to interrupt his speech.

I strongly support the ratification of the treaty. I follow the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) in hoping that that can be sped up in Government processes so that we can pass legislation before the general election, perhaps in the wash-up period. It is clearly not controversial between parties and it could be done. I see the Minister nodding sagely; she obviously wants to do the same thing but cannot say so, so I will say it for her: I hope that we can get this legislation done as quickly as possible.

There is widespread support for the treaty among the members of the public who are aware of environmental issues. Indeed, the whole attitude towards the marine environment has changed dramatically, certainly during my time in the House. I remember the massive controversy about an Antarctic mining Bill in the late 1980s. It was eventually defeated and withdrawn by the Government, and replaced by full support for the Antarctic treaty. Later, we got the protection of the Southern ocean as a whaling-free zone, and then as a fishing-free zone, so we got the principle of large-scale protection for the Southern ocean. That has meant that the whale population has begun to recover quite quickly. Our participation in the International Whaling Commission also helped to achieve that.

Marine protection zones, and other zones that protect all species, are very important. Some 10% of all marine species are under threat at the present time. I am pleased that we have the massive marine protection zone around the Falkland Islands and south from there, but also around Diego Garcia and the Chagos Islands, which has now been adopted by Mauritius, as a continuation of the British initiative.

In addition to the 30% target, we should think more about general attitudes towards the ocean. Obviously, water flows from one place to another, so we can protect one area from mining, overfishing and so on, but unless we have a similar attitude towards the rest of the ocean then, clearly, fish stocks and ocean biodiversity will be severely damaged.

The efforts of deep-sea mining companies will come back. There will be enormous pressure from mining companies and others who want to do seabed mining, just as there is pressure from some in the fishing industry who have a voracious appetite for deep-bed trawling, which ruins coral, ruins biodiversity and destroys the ocean almost for all time. It is about regulation in the whole of the oceans, as well as in the areas that we are seeking to protect.

Many hon. Members talked about plastic pollution, which is clearly very serious. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made the important point that plastic production is rising rapidly all around the world. It is probably rising more rapidly in southern countries than in western Europe or the United States, where there is some degree of regulation. I am not sure that it is possible to have a completely plastic-free life, but a lot of the plastics that we use are completely unnecessary and end up being discarded and wasted. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) pointed out, we can look at a beach and think that it is beautiful and pristine, but once we start sifting through the sand—we do not have to sift very far—we find bits of plastic waste. That plastic waste is ingested by fish and then eaten by those who eat fish. Having this level of plastic waste is self-poisoning, so we need very tough regulation.

We also need tough regulation on what ships dump in the ocean. Cruise liners and other sea-going vessels are pretty bad culprits. They think that because they are out of sight of land, they can tip anything they want into the ocean and get away with it. That means that we need a much tougher attitude towards dumping stuff in the ocean.

We must also look at the pollution that we create in the oceans around our shores. A phenomenal amount of sewage waste flows into our rivers every year because



[Jeremy Corbyn]

of the inadequacy of the sewage treatment system and the lack of investment in it by many water companies. It is not just about the obvious unpleasantness of seeing solid waste in the oceans around our shores. A lot of the chemicals flushed down the toilet or put down drains and so on from industrial processes and elsewhere are not treated. That, too, adds to the pollution and poisoning of our oceans, so we need to be much tougher on water company regulation. For example, Thames Water has made a huge profit from its water distribution, but it has run up massive debts of £14 billion. It is paying shareholders with its debts and polluting our seas and rivers at the same time, so we need to be a bit sharper with all the water companies on the levels of pollution that are caused.

I know that the Front Benchers want to speak, and I do not want to go on too long, so I will just say that it is an attitude of mind about the ocean that is important—that if we throw something in the sea, it does not disappear. In fact, it goes somewhere, it causes pollution and it causes damage which eventually comes back to bite us. I absolutely support the treaty and think it is a huge step forward. I hope that we can get it ratified quickly to help the speed of global ratification. I hope that we will play our part in reducing the pollution to the sea from our own sources, and put pressure on other countries that are producing ludicrous amounts of plastic with no thought given to the damage it does to the ocean and to future fish quality and supplies.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) made the point about the regulation of international waters—by agreement, obviously—because overfishing in one place has an effect on the loss of food supply for migratory birds or larger sea mammals. That causes an upset to the natural balance and we all pay a price. Let us agree today to get this treaty ratified as quickly as possible, so that we are playing our part in delivering sustainability and clean oceans.

2.55 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing the debate. The decision to hold Westminster Hall debates slightly earlier on a Thursday is paying off, because it is giving more of us an opportunity to speak on behalf of our constituents on issues that are important to them.

Like the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), I have had dozens of communications—nearly 200—from constituents expressing their determination to see the global ocean treaty ratified and ensure that this debate is well attended. It is particularly encouraging to see Conservative Members make the positive case for multilateralism and the rule of international law. I want to assure hon. Members that the SNP joins the support for the principles of the treaty and the calls for its immediate ratification by the UK Government. If the hon. Member for Torbay's private Member's Bill helps to speed that up, so much the better.

The treaty goes by many different names: in full, it is known as the legally binding international instrument on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

More simply, it is known as the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction treaty, the high seas treaty or, as most of us have referred to, the global ocean treaty.

How we name things is important, and sometimes the high seas or international waters are described as some sort of frontier, which evokes dated imagery of unexplored territory that is there to be exploited. Previous frontiers, whether the American west or the interior of Africa, were no such things to the people, flora and fauna that had been there for hundreds if not thousands of years before European or other explorers arrived. The approach of the treaty is important in that it is an assumption not in favour of the exploitation of resources, but in favour of the conservation of the marine environment and the sustainable and managed development of any economic potential.

That potential is significant, as we have heard. Around half of the Earth's surface is covered in water, but less than 2% of that area is under any kind of legal protection. At the same time, nearly 10% of global marine species are estimated to be at risk of extinction, so there is a need to rapidly enhance our approach and to ensure that treaty obligations can be undertaken and held to account. That means that there will be another round of COPs, but that is vital if we are to meet the 30 by 30 target that was spoken of by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and others.

The point about plastic pollution has also been well made by a number of hon. Members, starting with the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). Many people in Glasgow North, myself included, recently took part in the Big Plastic Count to better understand our plastic use and how we can reduce our plastic footprint. There is also a campaign for a global plastics treaty that might sit alongside the oceans framework. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what progress has been made on that to ensure a just transition away from the use of single-use plastics in particular.

In Scotland, we stand ready to do our part. Our marine environment is an integral part of life in the country. It is difficult to go anywhere in Scotland and be particularly far from the sea. I am not sure how this compares to South West Bedfordshire, but I think the furthest point in Scotland, Glen Quoich in Braemar, is only about 65 km from the coast. If one goes up to any elevated point, it is not difficult to see either the sea or something that flows into the sea.

The marine environment in Scotland supports about 8,000 species of plants and animals, and new discoveries are always ongoing. Under the SNP Government, some 37% of Scotland's territorial waters are now designated as marine protected areas, including 247 sites for nature conservation. The Scottish Government have a vision of “a clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse marine and coastal environment”

managed in a way

“that meets the long term needs of people and nature.”

They, too, have adopted the idea of a blue economy approach to recognise the mutually beneficial nature of, and connectivity between, sustainable economic growth, inclusiveness and wellbeing, and protection of the environment and biodiversity.

Unfortunately, some of the UK Government's actions to date do not necessarily always meet the same high ambitions. Their decision to grant new oil licences is not

a long-term solution to energy security or the cost of energy crisis and is actively damaging to the progress that needs to be made on tackling climate change. It is estimated that the Rosebank oilfield, which the Government seem determined to press ahead with, would, over its lifespan, equal the annual emissions of about 90 countries and 400 million people. The development company's own environmental statement admits that the construction of new oil wells would have the potential to lead to wider changes in the seabed, the direct loss of species and habitat, and wider indirect disturbances.

The Government have to be very careful about how they use some of the legal mechanisms and instruments contained in this treaty or others or in their own competence. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) spoke—not to my surprise—about the situation in the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos islands. There was concern that when the marine protected area there was introduced, that was less in the interests of the marine environment and more in the interests of preventing resettlement of or the right of return to those islands. Of course, in the end, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the UK should have engaged more fully with Mauritius before making that declaration, and in 2021 the UN's International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ruled that the UK Government do not hold sovereignty over the Chagos islands—but perhaps it turns out that these are just more decisions by “foreign” courts that the UK Government choose to ignore.

That would be my only note of caution. I do not want to break the consensus that we have heard today, but I will just gently suggest to the hon. Member for Torbay that although his initiative today is incredibly commendable and there is clearly consensus in favour of the global ocean treaty and its rapid ratification, the reality is that in recent years the Government have not had the best track record of respecting their international obligations and have been simply dismissing or ignoring decisions or commitments that they find inconvenient.

Likewise, the Government have to consider carefully the message that their attitude sends to other countries around the world. We cannot pick and choose our obligations under international law. If we support the rules-based international order, if we support the treaties and mechanisms that have attempted to secure peace and security, or at least progress towards peace and security, and the protection of the environment since the second world war, we have to support and accept those institutions and agreements in their entirety. By all means make a case for reform, but that has to be done through the order that exists in the first place. That is particularly true if we expect and request other countries to do the same, so it also has to be true of our approach to the global ocean treaty.

The Government have a responsibility to current and future generations to do all they can to protect the marine environment. Water is life, as my friends in Malawi often say, and the waters that make up the seas are home to life in abundance. They are part of a global ecosystem on which we all depend, in a fragile balance that we damage or destroy at great peril to all of us. The ocean treaty has been hard won, and now the challenge is for the UK Government to play their part to ensure that the treaty delivers on its ambitions.

3.3 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I genuinely express thanks to the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for this debate. I recognise that it is not the first time that he has pursued this interest in the ocean treaty. I am really grateful that he has brought about the debate today.

I tip my hat once again to the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who, despite no longer being in the Front-Bench position, has continued to advocate for environmental issues from the Back Benches. I completely respect that. And I love, I have to say, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) being “in violent agreement” in a debate. It is not often that we are in violent agreement, but I quite like that as a phrase—so long live our violent agreement.

I always enjoy the speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). They are always very informed, and I know how passionately he cares about the environment. We share an interest in whale poo, so that is really good. That was going to be in my speech a bit later on; I think it is fascinating.

Why does the treaty matter? The treaty stopping any individual country having a veto is important, because not all countries will agree all the time. One country being able to have a veto would always delay things. That is an important point to highlight.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), an excellent Member of Parliament, has been listening to his constituents who come here to speak about this subject. He has been hearing about it, and he pointed out the rarity of agreement among us. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) highlighted the progress on how we view the oceans and how it has changed for the better over the years. There is still further to go. I liked the phrase he used at the end, about an “attitude of mind” with the ocean. He made the good point that just because it is out of sight, it should not be out of mind. That is worth bearing in mind.

The ocean is beautiful. Perhaps it is the former teacher in me, thinking that every day is a school day—but every day is, when it comes to the ocean. We learn more and more, and we understand more and more. The more we learn about it, the more the mind is blown by how important literally everything is.

In my constituency is a place called the Deep, a big aquarium. It is amazing. When I was younger and my children were little—one was a baby and one a toddler—I got a year's pass, very good value, for us all to go as a family. Every week, my toddler used to say, “Go to the Deep! Go to the Deep!” and I would be like, “Go and push them around the Deep—again?” At lunchtime, if I timed it well, we could go into the dark area—the deep sea area—and the baby would fall asleep, so I could eat with the toddler before the baby woke. I spent many a day in the Deep, learning about and understanding the ocean.

Oceans regulate everything, including our climate. They support biodiversity and provide food and livelihoods, as has been pointed out, but less than 1% of the high seas is currently protected. As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North, without the high seas shielding us, we would already be in a full-scale climate breakdown. We should be preserving critical

[Emma Hardy]

habitats, such as mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs, which act as carbon sinks. Protecting those vast stores of blue carbon is critical to slowing climate change. The plants and animal life of the oceans fix carbon. I loved that about the whale poo. It is amazing. If, however, we were able to increase the plankton population by just 1%, it would have the same climate benefit as about 2 billion mature trees. As I say, every day is a school day—I get very excited about all this.

It is time to stop presenting the protection of the natural world as a trade-off between the needs of people and the needs of nature. There is no trade-off. Protecting our oceans and the life they contain protects us. But do not take just my word for it. The UN global oceans treaty is historic. It is one of the most significant steps forward in international conservation in human history—something we can all be incredibly proud of. Yesterday, the European Union ratified it, and we should be proud that the UK was one of the first countries to sign the treaty when it opened for signatures at the UN last year. Since then, however, progress has stalled, and the legislation has been pushed back—I am hearing until after the general election, apparently.

Please hold in the forefront of your minds, the incredible prize that is in front of us: the opportunity to protect life on our planet. It is not often that we get the chance to look at that. Just imagine how great, how good, for our international reputation it would be if the UK were leading from the front, championing the new high seas ocean sanctuary proposals. Imagine the signal we could send the global community of the UK as a real and genuine world leader, with a commitment to tackling climate change, biodiversity and global ocean protection. Sadly, however, that is just my imagination, and the reality brings us much further down to earth.

The fact is that the Government have simply failed to devote the resources needed to this legislation and to get the job done. In the ministerial letter to the hon. Member for Torbay on 28 March, Lord Benyon claimed that the private Member's Bill would,

“slow down the necessary work towards ratification by diverting resources”.

I find it difficult to believe, or understand, how that could be a serious problem in a well-resourced project.

Will the Minister therefore update us on the progress of the legislation and any future timetable? To meet the goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's oceans by 2030—as has been mentioned—the work to identify and collaborate on proposals for ocean sanctuaries must begin now, so will the Minister confirm that that identification has begun and tell us which countries we are collaborating with?

Another interesting fact: the Sargasso sea—as has also been mentioned a few times—is nicknamed the golden floating rainforest. Wow! The golden floating rainforest is home to more than 145 invertebrate species and more than 127 species of fish. Will that site be identified as a priority by the UK, as it is surrounded by UK overseas territories? Our global British family in the UK overseas territories contains 94% of all the unique species that the UK is responsible for. These huge marine areas throughout the world's oceans are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, yet their contribution to it is negligible. That is understood

by our friends in the overseas territories and recognised by schemes such as the blue belt programme, which have been mentioned. From Helena to Cayman, Bermuda to Anguilla, the Falklands to the British Virgin Islands, these efforts underpin the reasons why this debate is crucial. Does the Minister share my ambition for the UK to be ready to present at the treaty's first conference of the parties, COP1? If so, does she agree that identification of, and collaboration on, marine protected areas is urgent?

The UK has every incentive to lead the way on the ratification of the treaty and show global leadership. Wouldn't it be good for the UK to be leading the world in a positive way, to make the news for positive reasons and to show that it actually follows and agrees with international law? Wouldn't that make a wonderful headline?

**Kevin Foster:** I am very much enjoying the hon. Lady's speech, and there is very little of it that I disagree with. Obviously, I hope that her party will not be the one making this decision. However, can she be clear, given that there is an impending general election, that she would, first and at the very least, meet the target for ratification that the Government set out and, secondly, ensure that the legislation will be in the first King's Speech?

**Emma Hardy:** I am delighted to say that we absolutely would meet that target. We would signal to the international community that we take seriously our responsibility for tackling the interconnected climate and nature emergencies by prioritising the treaty. If we do not prioritise and pass the treaty, we would simply not be doing that. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be in a new Labour Government and ratify this treaty? I almost feel sorry for the people opposite who have put most of the work in beforehand. Instead, we have seen what we always see with this chaotic Government: dither, delay, excuses.

I have a simple message to all those who care about protecting the oceans and to all those who know that protecting the oceans protects us: if the Government will not ratify this treaty, then a future Labour Government will, and we will be the leaders that this treaty needs and deserves.

3.12 pm

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing this important debate and for the contributions from other hon. Members. I have learned much, as I think many of us have, about our oceans, biodiversity and the processing of nutrients.

As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), said, we will all take away useful information; as ever, today is a learning day. The hon. Lady's children sound like future champions of ocean life and biodiversity, thanks to their mother's very cunning ways of spending their afternoons. That gives us all hope that the next generation will also be passionate about this important part of our planetary biodiversity.

It is immensely encouraging to hear so many colleagues so engaged, and I thank them all for their attendance. This is a policy area that we are continuing to lean in on; the Government have led on it throughout our governing time. That includes my right hon. Friend the



Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who provided incredible leadership during her time leading DEFRA, and colleagues in the other place, including Lord Benyon, who holds this portfolio within the FCDO. He has a joint portfolio across DEFRA to ensure that the Government's progress on this can be as effective as possible.

I will address some of the specific points made. As ever, if I miss one, I apologise in advance—we will ensure that we write to Members. I will make and unpack three points during the course of my remarks. First, to be clear, the UK is supportive of the BBNJ agreement. It is really important to set that out in full. Secondly, the BBNJ agreement will help us to protect two thirds of the global ocean that lies beyond any national jurisdictions by establishing marine protected areas in the high seas. That is vital to protecting and restoring the health of our ever warmer and more acidic oceans as they bear the brunt of emissions. It will support the worldwide web of marine life, including those critical commercial stocks that a number of colleagues have mentioned. That is an important and challenging area of policy globally.

As is absolutely right, the UK, led by this Government, has been hard at work behind the scenes over the last 14 years to secure the agreement, with many people putting a huge amount of work in. Our aim is for the UK to be able to implement and ratify the BBNJ agreement in time for the UN ocean conference in June 2025. That is an ambitious target date, which is, importantly, shared by like-minded countries. We are cracking on with the work needed to achieve that, as well as helping others to do similarly. It is important that we get the implementation right.

By 2030, our vision is for the ocean to be governed effectively, clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse—linking resilient and prosperous coastal communities around the world, and supporting sustainable economic growth for the UK, our overseas territories and Crown dependencies. The UK's commitment to upholding the United Nations convention on the law of the sea—UNCLOS, as it is known—in all its dimensions is at the heart of achieving that. For 40 years and more, UNCLOS has effectively been the global ocean treaty, and the BBNJ agreement will sit under it.

As colleagues have highlighted, here in the UK we have cross-party and—it is lovely to hear it raised—constituents' support for powers to establish new high seas marine protected areas. The powers are one facet of an agreement that includes a number of provisions that will be important, especially to developing countries, and that we are working equally hard to negotiate in three particular areas: marine genetic resources—ensuring that the benefits are shared fairly and equitably—environmental impact assessments, and building capacity and transferring technology.

**Barry Gardiner:** I am listening carefully to the Minister. Can she explain exactly how we will support countries to get that access and to have the capacity themselves? What financial and other resources will we make available?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** I am afraid that I do not have that information to hand, but I will ensure that the team gets back to Members to set out the road map that is in place already, on which there is a great deal of work. It covers a very broad range of areas, as I have set out.

Trying to bring all the provisions together has made securing the agreement complicated, to say the least. I pay tribute to our indefatigable UK negotiating team, some of whom are here, as well as the National Oceanography Centre team, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal mentioned, and which was a crucial part of the UK delegation. As we have mentioned, our team played an instrumental role in getting the whole treaty across the line. It is an achievement in which the UK and so many should take real pride. The result is a major victory for ocean protection and multilateral diplomacy that will underpin UNCLOS and help us to make good on shared global commitments to manage the whole ocean sustainably, protect at least 30% of the world's ocean by 2030—the 30 by 30 commitment—and halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity by 2030, which is our global mission.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned, the UK was one of the very first to sign the agreement, on 20 September 2023, the day it opened for signature at the UN—we were at the front of the queue. We want to ensure that it comes into force as quickly as possible. Globally, that will take several steps to achieve: 60 states or regional economic integration organisations must become party to the agreement, and 120 days must pass after deposit of the 60th instrument of ratification before it can enter into force. The first conference of the parties will then be able to meet within a year of that date. The agreement has gained 89 signatures and four ratifications so far. Realistically, we expect that the first conference should be able to meet in late 2026. We intend for the UK to be there as a party to the agreement, and we are making timely progress towards that end, as well as, importantly, helping others to do similarly.

As hon. Members would expect, here at home we have hit the ground running, having been right at the front of the queue in putting our names to the agreement. We are making good progress, in line with the process for the scrutiny of treaties by Parliament, which is 21 sitting days under section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. We began the process of parliamentary scrutiny the first sitting day after signature.

We are working on the clear legislative framework needed to implement the agreement, including substantive provisions in primary legislation, and ensuring that stakeholders can comply with what are complex new obligations. That includes scientists and industry, reaching across the pharmaceutical, nutraceutical, agricultural-technology, cosmetic and chemical sectors—as I say, it is a broad range of interlocutors whom we are working with—and all those required to provide environmental impact assessments both in areas beyond national jurisdiction and, indeed, those within UK waters.

I am pleased to report that work to develop the policy on implementation is almost complete. As I set out, our aim is to implement and ratify the agreement in time for the UN ocean conference in June 2025—that is, next year. It is an ambitious target date, but it is shared by other forward-leading countries, and it will ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of ocean protection. We will provide updates on our progress to both Houses before summer recess and again when Parliament resumes, as well as continuing to work with the devolved Administrations on what they will also need to do. We intend for the UK to play an active part in that first conference of the parties, including in the UN's preparatory commission.

**Kevin Foster:** The Minister says that the work on the legislative framework is almost complete. When does she expect it to be complete, and what timeline has she set for that?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** My hon. Friend asks me questions that I am afraid I do not have the answer to, but to my earlier point, I will ensure that Lord Benyon contacts him to give him the latest update on that as soon as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) highlighted that the UK's blue belt now protects an area of ocean larger than India around the UK's overseas territories, so of course we welcome the extension of the BBNJ agreement to them and to the Crown dependencies, recognising that they have their own domestic considerations and, indeed, procedures to undertake.

We want to see the BBNJ agreement implemented and ratified by as many countries as possible as soon as possible, so we are supporting the efforts of developing countries, including some of the smaller Commonwealth countries, and working through the Commonwealth secretariat for small island developing states. There is particular interest from some Pacific and Caribbean islands and states. We are scoping out new marine protected areas that could be proposed once the agreement is in force. Of course, all that sits alongside our wider work to champion the ocean, both at home and right across the world.

**Emma Hardy:** It is encouraging to know that the Minister is scoping out some areas. Could she give more detail either now or later in writing on where these areas we are looking at are?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** I am happy to ask Lord Benyon to update the hon. Lady on that question. Together we can make good on the promise of this landmark international agreement. Indeed, it matters greatly that we do—not only for the health of our oceans and the good of all those who depend on them, as many colleagues have set out today, but for confidence in the UK's continuing leadership on the world stage in this important area.

I thank all Members for their interventions, passion and commitment to keeping the Government's feet to the fire on getting this legislation in place as soon as possible, as well as raising those important wider issues around ocean pollution and plastics. I noted that the Adjournment debate in the main Chamber was also on that subject. That tells us a great deal about the focus that colleagues and, indeed, their constituents have on this important area.

On the reduction in plastics pollution, the UK have led the world on legislation to change and reduce unnecessary plastic usage. I just got back this morning

from Hong Kong where I was in conversation with an enormous number of people who all raised how the UK had managed to get consumers to be part of this legislative change; they are trying to bring in new legislation themselves on this issue. It was interesting to hear directly that what we have been doing is being watched, admired and learned from. That should give us all confidence that the continuing lead we have on this issue is important, and we must all champion it across the piece.

In conclusion, I confirm that the UK's full commitment to the BBNJ agreement is clear. Its vital role in protecting the areas of the high seas as part of the global effort to help nature to recover, and indeed to help people to prosper across the planet for generations to come, is critical. Our commitment to making progress on the UK legislation so that we can ratify the BBNJ agreement and implement it effectively here at home is in full swing. We will both get that done here and encourage others to do so as quickly as possible.

3.24 pm

**Kevin Foster:** It has been a pleasure to sit through this debate. I repeat the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael): we have all been pretty much in violent agreement about the outcome we all wish to see, namely the prompt ratification of the treaty by the UK. However, I have to say that I did not realise quite how much whale poo would form a part of our discussion.

It is also right that we have referred to the issues around plastic. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in particular for his point on that.

It is welcome to hear some of the comments made by both sides of the House, particularly given the necessity of taking our legislation through either just before a general election, as I had hoped, or just after. That will help to protect us against some of the vagaries of politics that inevitably come in an election year. That said, I hope we can get on with the work of getting the proposed legal framework out there. I would like to hear a timeframe so that we can actually get on. We should not be looking to meet the bar of others; we should be looking to be one of the leading nations in getting the treaty ratified so that we can get on with the vital work of protecting our oceans.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the ratification of the Global Ocean Treaty.

3.26 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Thursday 25 April 2024

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Deposit Return Scheme for Drinks Containers

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore):** Today, I am updating colleagues on our progress to introduce a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. The Government are committed to delivering a world-class scheme and will bring forth legislation to progress this as soon as possible when parliamentary time allows.

DRS is a well-established international model, with nearly 60 schemes due to be in operation by the end of 2024. A redeemable deposit is placed on single-use drinks containers, which is refunded upon return of the empty container. The deposit provides a financial incentive for consumers to return empty drinks containers for recycling. We will continue to prioritise reducing inflation and supporting families with the cost of living as the DRS is taken forward and we will consider the appointed deposit management organisation's approach to setting deposit levels. The DRS will boost recycling levels, reduce the littering of in-scope drinks containers, and turbocharge our transition to a circular economy.

The UK Government have consulted twice—alongside the Northern Ireland Executive and Welsh Government—on the introduction of a DRS: first in 2019 and again in 2021, with the latest Government response published in January 2023. Since then, my officials have been working closely with their devolved Administration counterparts on the steps needed to achieve interoperable schemes that work across the UK.

Extensive engagement has been undertaken to explore various proposals and identify compromises. Together, we have successfully reached alignment on: joint registration and reporting, labelling, reciprocal returns, deposit level, minimum container size, and low volume sales.

There is an outstanding issue regarding the scope of materials in DRS. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in Northern Ireland and the UK Government agree that polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles, steel and aluminium cans will be included in our DRS, and that glass drink containers will be excluded when the scheme launches. The Scottish Government have agreed to commence DRS in Scotland on this same basis to ensure the schemes move forward.

It remains my view that including glass in any UK DRS will create undue complexity for the drinks industry and it increases storage and handling costs for retailers. Glass containers are heavy and fragile, making them more difficult for consumers to return and receive the deposit they have paid, potentially forcing up the cost of their shopping. Moreover, glass is littered less: the Keep Britain Tidy litter composition analysis of 2020 presented that 55% of litter was from PET plastic and metal drinks containers, compared to just 4% from

glass drinks containers. We want to work with industry on an ambitious re-use and refill initiative and will provide further detail shortly.

The Welsh Government are taking a different approach: they intend to include glass when their scheme launches. We will continue our conversations with Welsh Government, but if their position does not change, we will reiterate the duty to protect the UK internal market and facilitate free trade within the UK so that businesses can continue trading unhindered across the UK and ensure better prices and choice for consumers, particularly in the context of the current cost of living pressures. There are no plans to exclude any DRS from the UK Internal Market Act 2020 (UKIM) now that there is maximum possible alignment and interoperability across the UK to protect businesses and consumers. However, any application for an exclusion would be considered on the evidence presented.

As it stands, when our DRS launches, businesses and consumers will be protected by the market access principles of the UKIM Act for the sale of drinks in glass bottles across the UK. In plain terms, this means that drinks in glass containers made or imported into England, Scotland and Northern Ireland will not be subject to a Welsh DRS which includes glass.

As stated in the consultation response published in January 2023, launching a DRS in October 2025 was a stretching target date. Following extensive engagement with industry, who will be responsible for delivering the DRS, and a review of international approaches to DRS implementation, additional time will be needed to efficiently and effectively roll out the schemes across the UK. With the agreement of Ministerial colleagues across the devolved Administrations, the DRS will go live in October 2027. Until then, we are committed to engaging with industry and working with a deposit management organisation candidate(s) to finalise the next steps towards DRS implementation.

We will continue to work with industry, our colleagues in the devolved Administrations, and other relevant stakeholders to deliver a DRS across the UK that works for businesses, communities, and consumers.

[HCWS427]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### UK-Rwanda Partnership

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** The Government today laid a statutory statement, in line with section 20(8) of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, confirming its intention to ratify the UK-Rwanda agreement on an asylum partnership (the treaty). The treaty will be ratified today.

The UK Government and the Government of Rwanda have worked together to ensure that all the necessary measures are in place, such that the parties are able to meet their obligations as and when they arise, to proceed with ratification of the treaty.

This work has included:

The passing by the Government of Rwanda of their own domestic legislation to ratify the treaty and to amend their asylum system to reflect new case-working and appeals processes. These measures will help address the Supreme Court's conclusions on the effectiveness of the Rwandan asylum system and will help build capacity and capability.



Identifying a Rwandan and a Commonwealth co-president to head up the new appeals body, which was introduced under the treaty to address the points raised by the Supreme Court about the independence of the Rwandan judiciary, and to ensure that the final determination of a refugee claim is independent and objective. The co-presidents will work together to ensure the selection of appropriate judges, on the drafting of procedural rules, and on the delivery of effective and appropriate training for new judges.

Progressing the identification of an independent expert to the new appeal body, and of potential experts to support the functioning of casework and to ensure high-quality decision-making.

Creating an independent monitoring committee, which will monitor the operation of the treaty.

Commencing the procurement exercise for the monitoring committee support team, which will be in place prior to a first flight.

Implementing an initial system to monitor the location of relocated individuals, with their consent, to ensure they are safe and that refoulement contrary to the terms of the treaty has not occurred.

Developing and agreeing with the Government of Rwanda a range of standard operating procedures detailing how the provisions under the treaty will be delivered in practice. This includes processes for safeguarding vulnerable individuals and accessing the comprehensive medical support package available to relocated individuals.

I am grateful to the Government of Rwanda for their work in implementing the treaty to ensure those relocated will be offered safety and security.

In line with our obligations under the refugee convention and the European convention on human rights, the treaty, which is binding in international law, addresses the Supreme Court's conclusions by making it clear that refoulement will not occur. The treaty ensures that those relocated: will be safe; will be fully supported for five years; will not be removed to a third country; and will have their asylum claims processed fairly; and that those who are not granted refugee status or humanitarian protection will get equivalent treatment and will be granted permanent residence.

The assurances in the treaty, alongside ongoing work to strengthen Rwanda's asylum system and operational readiness since the evidential position considered by the courts in summer 2022, are sufficient to conclude that Rwanda is safe for relocated individuals. In passing the Safety of Rwanda Act, which received Royal Assent today, 25 April 2024, Parliament has reached the same conclusion.

The Act will come into force upon the ratification of the treaty. Decision makers will be required to treat Rwanda as a generally safe country for the purpose of relocating individuals. The Act does allow decision makers and the courts and tribunals to consider claims that Rwanda is unsafe for an individual person due to their particular circumstances, despite the safeguards in the treaty, if there is compelling evidence to that effect. But an individual claim is not permitted on grounds that Rwanda may remove the person to another state in contravention of any of its international obligations. The treaty has removed this risk.

Parliament is sovereign. Individuals with no legal right to be in the UK should no longer be able to frustrate removal through spurious legal challenges.

Despite the progress we have made in tackling illegal migration, we must go further. To fully solve this problem, we need a strong deterrent. Only by removing the

prospect that illegal migrants can settle in the UK can we control our borders and save lives at sea. That is why it is essential we relocate illegal migrants to Rwanda, rather than letting them stay in the UK.

The sooner we can bring into effect our partnership with Rwanda, the faster we can disrupt the business model of smuggling gangs and demonstrate that making dangerous, illegal, and unnecessary journeys to the UK is not a viable means of entry to the UK asylum system.

When people know that if they come here illegally, they will not get to stay, they will stop coming altogether, and we will stop the boats. Illegal migration destroys lives, costs British taxpayers billions of pounds, and is unfair to those who follow the rules. Passing the Safety of Rwanda Act and ratifying the treaty with Rwanda will help us put a stop to this.

[HCWS430]

## TRANSPORT

### Sustainable Aviation Fuel Mandate

#### **The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper):**

This Government are fiercely proud of the success of Britain's aviation industry, and are committed to ensuring it continues to grow and succeed in future. Decarbonisation is critical to that future, and today we are setting out another key step in delivering that by publishing the full policy detail of a world leading sustainable aviation fuel mandate which will deliver 10% of all jet fuel in flights taking off from the UK from sustainable sources by 2030 and 22% by 2040. It will be one of the first in the world to be put into law and, subject to parliamentary approval, will be implemented from 1 January 2025, once again putting the UK at the forefront of decarbonising air travel. We are also today launching a consultation on an industry-funded revenue certainty mechanism to support investment in the UK's SAF production industry.

Today's announcements are good for aviation, the environment and for the UK overall, with the SAF industry estimated to add over £1.8 billion to the economy and create over 10,000 jobs across the country. The SAF mandate will drive demand for SAF in the UK, secure emission reductions and provide investor confidence. A revenue certainty mechanism will also incentivise investment in UK SAF production, helping to drive growth across the UK, secure the supply of British-made SAF, and maintain the UK's position as a global leader.

This is part of the Government's plan to deliver on our net zero commitments while ensuring we take a pragmatic and proportionate approach which minimises unnecessary burdens on the public.

#### *SAF mandate*

Following extensive consultations with the industry the SAF mandate will deliver emission reductions of 2.7 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2030 and 6.3 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2040 and create high value jobs, particularly in the production of the most advanced fuel types. The Government will lay secondary legislation this summer so that the scheme comes into effect on 1 January 2025.

The Government first consulted on the introduction of a SAF mandate in July 2022 and subsequently confirmed it would be introduced from 2025. This suggested at least 10% of UK aviation fuel should come from sustainable

sources by 2030 and included key elements, such as robust sustainability criteria, to ensure fuels drive genuine benefits and sub-targets to incentivise diverse SAF production pathways. A second consultation, in March 2023, focused on the detail of the scheme, key policy parameters and design of the SAF mandate. Today, the Government are confirming a trajectory for the mandate from 2025 up to 2040 that is ambitious but realistic. The mandate will start in 2025 at 2% of total UK jet fuel demand, increase on a linear basis to 10% in 2030 and then to 22% in 2040. From 2040, the obligation will remain at 22% until there is greater certainty regarding SAF supply.

The mandate will also include a cap on the feedstocks that are used in the hydroprocessed esters and fatty acids process. HEFA is currently the only commercially available SAF; however, it is dependent on limited feedstocks that cannot deliver our long-term SAF goals alone. HEFA SAF has an important part to play in the 2020s alongside the commercial development of advanced fuels that are less dependent on limited feedstocks. Today's publication confirms that HEFA supply will not be limited under the mandate trajectory for the first two years, before falling to 71% of the total in 2030 and 33% in 2040. This will allow SAF demand to be met while incentivising the development of new SAF technologies. The UK is already producing HEFA SAF and we welcome the further development of this UK industry alongside more advanced SAF technologies. We recognise that there is a broader global HEFA market, and therefore there is no limit on the amount of HEFA that can be produced in the UK.

To drive innovation and diversification, a separate obligation on power-to-liquid fuels will be introduced from 2028 and will reach 3.5% of total jet fuel demand in 2040. This will accelerate the development of this high-tech fuel, which is less dependent on feedstocks and can generate greater emission reductions. The mandate includes buy-out mechanisms for both the main and power-to-liquid obligations to incentivise supply while protecting consumers where suppliers are unable to secure a supply of SAF. These will be set at £4.70 and £5.00 per litre of fuel, respectively. These provide a significant incentive for fuel suppliers to supply SAF

into the market rather than pay the buy-out. They also set a maximum price for the scheme, and therefore deliver emission reductions at an acceptable cost.

While we recognise SAF may be more expensive than traditional jet fuel in the immediate term, we are ensuring that decarbonisation does not come at the expense of consumers. This plan is part of our approach to ensure that the rationing of flights through "demand management" is ruled out. The plan includes a review mechanism to help manage prices and minimise the impact on ticket fares for passengers. The Government also have the power to change key limits within the mandate to block higher price rises in the case of SAF shortages—keeping the impact on consumers to a minimum.

Providing sufficient SAF is available, any increases in air fares as a result of SAF will fall well within the range of usual fluctuations in prices we see every year and the Government have plans in place to prevent any major hikes. This is part of the Government's plan to deliver on our ambitious net zero commitments while ensuring we take a pragmatic and proportionate approach which minimises unnecessary burdens on the public.

#### *Revenue certainty mechanism*

The Government committed in September 2023 to introduce an industry-funded revenue certainty mechanism for UK SAF plants and set out how it could be delivered by the end of 2026. Fulfilling our commitment in the Energy Act 2023, the launch of the consultation today demonstrates the Government's ambition to develop a SAF industry in the UK. Such a mechanism will provide confidence in the sector and help to bring forward investment in UK SAF plants.

The consultation sets out four options that have been developed alongside stakeholders, through forums such as the Jet Zero Council. It provides a detailed assessment of these four options, looking at a range of factors from how quickly a mechanism could be delivered, to the scale of investment it is likely to bring forward. Views from stakeholders across the whole supply chain will be critical to the next phase of work and we welcome responses from all interested parties.

[HCWS429]





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