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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 7 May 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBER

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

Chris Paul Webb, for Blackpool South.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Cost of Living

1. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increases in the cost of living on households in 2024.

[902662]

19. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increases in the cost of living on households in 2024.

[902683]

21. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increases in the cost of living on households in 2024.

[902686]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): The Office for Budget Responsibility expects UK living standards to grow in all years of the forecast period.

Allan Dorans: The Building Societies Association described the housing market as “broken”, with first-time homebuyers facing the toughest housing market conditions in 70 years. With the International Monetary Fund projecting interest rates to be around 5% for the remainder of the year and the Government rejecting the Scottish National party’s calls to reinstate mortgage interest relief, does the Chancellor anticipate any relief for first-time buyers in the near future?

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Bank of England is independent. The good news is that the OBR expects inflation rates to fall to near target in the very near future.

Marion Fellows: The Warm this Winter campaign has found that households will have to pay an additional £1.3 billion to help energy companies to cover bad energy debt. What assurance can the Minister give that the extra charge will be passed on to indebted customers to alleviate their debt burden, rather than it being allowed to just alleviate debt for energy companies?

Laura Trott: It is good news that energy prices are set to fall. The hon. Lady will know that the Chancellor abolished the surcharge in one of his first Budgets.

Patricia Gibson: The UK is set to have the highest level of inflation in the G7 and the lowest rate of growth in the entire OECD in 2025. Bizarrely, the Chancellor claimed ludicrously that the Tories are winning the war on inflation. With GDP per capita continuing to fall as part of the longest unbroken decline since records began, who does the Minister think in the real world really believes that this plan is working, and that the cost of living crisis is easing?

Laura Trott: It is important to note that inflation has more than halved since the Prime Minister took office, and is now at 3.2%. That will have a material impact on the cost of living pressures on households. In addition, support this year includes cutting national insurance rates across the UK and raising the local housing allowance. Benefits are up by 6.7%, the national living wage is up by 9.8%, and pensions are up by 8.5%. We are on the side of the British people.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, it is not solely households who face increased cost pressures: businesses across our communities do as well, particularly small music venues, which are shutting at the rate of two a week. Ahead of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s inquiry into that issue, what thought has the Minister given to a VAT cut for grassroots music venues across our constituencies?

Laura Trott: I know my hon. Friend cares deeply about this matter. I know she has a report coming out in a few weeks, and I look forward to reading it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is crucial to bring down inflation and ensure that we create the right climate for reductions in interest rates and further tax cuts. Does the Minister agree that is the best way to tackle the cost of living pressures?

Laura Trott: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): In the past financial year, Buckinghamshire Council supported 4,186 people struggling with the cost of living through the £4.8 million of funding from the household support fund. The council’s Helping Hand scheme continues, with £2.4 million of funding through to this September. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Buckinghamshire households who are struggling with the cost of living should get in touch with Buckinghamshire Council to get the help and support that they need from the Helping Hand scheme, which is funded by this Government?

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend is completely correct. The household support fund has done so much to help people struggling with the cost of living. I commend the way that Buckinghamshire Council has handed out the money, and, indeed, will continue to do so throughout the year.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Westminster's cost of living crisis disproportionately affects those on low incomes, young people, and people living in rural areas with limited travel options. One example is the soaring cost of car insurance, which is inexplicably higher in Scotland than in most other parts of the UK. A 22-year-old with five years' driving experience might expect their premiums to go down, yet they pay on average £667 more than they did when they passed their test at the age of 17. Why are the UK Government doing absolutely nothing to hold insurance companies to account?

Laura Trott: I cannot comment on the specifics of car insurance companies, but what I can say is that for people struggling with the cost of living, whatever form that struggle takes, working-age benefits are going up by 6.7% this year.

Drew Hendry: Clearly, the Minister has paid no attention to this matter at all. This issue is exceptional to the UK. While prices for car insurance have more than doubled in the UK, they have gone up by only 18% across the EU over the same period, and car insurance has gone down by 20% in an independent Ireland. What are the reasons? Is it Brexit, or shameless profiteering? Or, as we suspect, has Westminster just given up on people in the cost of living crisis?

Laura Trott: I think that we have heard enough from the Brexit zombies on the other side of the Chamber.

Drew Hendry: Answer the question.

Laura Trott: I am, if the hon. Gentleman would just like to listen. The national living wage is up by 9.8% this year, which helps with exactly the type of costs that he is talking about.

Co-operative Sector

2. **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the co-operative sector to the economy. [902663]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The Government acknowledge the vital contribution that co-operatives make to the economy. The "Co-operative and Mutual Economy 2023" report found that co-operatives generated a combined annual turnover of £41 billion, a 3.7% increase from 2022 levels.

Jim McMahon: As the Minister outlines, co-operatives are worth £41 billion to the UK economy; moreover, they are, on average, 10% more productive than other businesses, twice as likely to survive the first five years of trading, and have higher rates of investment than other private businesses. What more can the Government do to encourage more co-operatives to thrive? Does he believe, as I do, that the creation of co-operative development agencies in every region has to be part of that?

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I note his long-held interest in the co-operative sector, and the work that he does on it. So, what are the Government doing? They are doing two things specifically. First, they recently took the further step of backing the Co-operatives, Mutuals and Friendly Societies Act 2023; they also commissioned the Law Commission to review

the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 to make sure that co-operatives can do as much as possible to benefit the wider economy.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Over the past two years, Rotherham Council has spent £240,000 promoting co-operatives and employee ownership. Does the Minister agree that this huge amount of money would be better spent on fixing potholes and opening youth clubs, rather than on an ideological viewpoint, with no measurable outcome for the people of Rotherham?

Bim Afolami: I do not wish to comment specifically on Rotherham, but the best way of promoting co-operatives in general is to allow them to thrive as best they can, and to support their members in doing what they do best, which is to help their local economies—not necessarily through huge amounts of public subsidy, but through doing what the co-operative movement was founded to do, which is, as I have said, to support local economies and local people.

Taxation: Living Standards

4. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of his tax policies on living standards. [902666]

17. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of his tax policies on living standards. [902681]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Thanks to a combination of national insurance cuts and above-inflation increases to thresholds since 2010, the average worker on £35,400 will pay more than £1,500 less in personal taxes this year. In addition, maintaining fuel duty rates at their current levels represents a further £13 billion benefit to households over the three years since the introduction of the freeze.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister will know that people are still really struggling with the cost of living crisis. One way that the Government could help is by seeking a bespoke veterinary agreement with the EU. That would not only cut costs for businesses but stop food prices rising even more. A future Labour Government would do that, so why will the Government not commit to it?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady's first comment was correct: everyone in this House recognises the extreme cost of living challenges over the past few years, and that is precisely why the Government have adopted the strategy of a laser focus on inflation, combined with tax cuts and, recently, national insurance cuts. We have a very constructive and positive relationship with the EU, and are always engaging with it on a variety of matters.

Paul Blomfield: In the run-up to last week's elections, the Prime Minister never stopped talking about national insurance cuts, and the Minister talked about them again today, but the Government have been giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Does the Minister recognise that according to the Resolution Foundation, the combined impact of all the Government's tax changes leaves workers who earn less than £26,000 a year worse off? Will he apologise to workers in South Yorkshire, whose average earnings are close to that level, for misrepresenting the position?

Nigel Huddleston: Of course we recognise the challenges for those on the lowest incomes, which is precisely why we have adopted a whole bunch of other measures, including on housing allowance. If the hon. Gentleman is so opposed to the national insurance cuts that we introduced, why did the Leader of the Opposition support them?

Mr Speaker: Congratulations, Mr Chishti, on your engagement at the weekend. You are not crossing the Floor, I understand.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Most definitely not!

It has just been said that there is a real cost of living challenge, and that is absolutely correct. A key part of that relates to the war in Ukraine, which poses real challenges for energy supplies to the United Kingdom. As a former Minister who applied sanctions to Russia and looked at the oil price cap, I know that we need to ensure that what happens in Ukraine is offset by actions that hold Russia to account and address the cost of living. The US has seized Russian assets to pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine; the UK should do the same. That would help ease the burden on the UK economy and the taxpayer.

Nigel Huddleston: It is always a pleasure to see my hon. Friend in his place. He raises a variety of really important issues that show precisely why we work across Government—there are multiple Departments involved—on matters relating to sanctions. The invasion of Ukraine has had an incredible impact around the world, not just in the UK. Everybody in this House should welcome the fact that, because of action taken by this Government and the Bank of England, and other measures, inflation is now falling and will soon hit target.

Mr Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesman.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservatives' decisions in this Parliament mean that the average family will face a tax bill that is £870 a year higher, and pensioner taxpayers will pay £960 a year more. The director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"This remains a Parliament of record tax rises."

Higher taxes, squeezed living standards and weaker public services—that is the Conservatives' legacy. Does the Minister understand why the country has lost confidence in them?

Nigel Huddleston: Many people in this country remember the abysmal economic performance of the last Labour Government. The tax-free allowance was £6,475; it is now £12,570. More than 1.5 million people have been taken out of paying income tax altogether. The Government have a focus: now that the economy is turning, we want to put more money into people's pockets. That is exactly what we are doing with the national insurance cuts and other measures, and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not welcome that.

Public Sector Productivity Programme

5. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If he will use outcome evaluations to assess the effectiveness of the Public Sector Productivity Programme. [902667]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Improving public sector productivity is a major focus for this Government, which is why I announced £4.2 billion of funding to make our public services more efficient in the Budget.

John Penrose: As a former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend will know that evidence-based medicine transformed health productivity, systematically cutting out ineffectual treatments and replacing them with ones that worked better. Using the evaluation task force and the What Works centres to do the same for other public services, including back to work programmes, prisoner rehabilitation and early interventions for supported families, could be the productivity-improving silver bullet that he needs, so can I urge him to beat a path to their door?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the What Works programme, which has delivered more than 500 trials and is recognised internationally. There are some very good example in the NHS of what is working, including the NHS app. That is now used by 75% of NHS patients—including 17,000 over-90s, so let no one assume that older people are not internet savvy.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Some £8.7 billion was wasted on defective personal protective equipment during the covid crisis, much of it paid to people associated with the Conservative party. People did not have to be Conservative party members to benefit from the fast track, but it did not half help. What is the Chancellor doing to get public money back from those people who sold that defective equipment to the NHS, and does it not just show that we cannot trust the Tories with public money?

Jeremy Hunt: What it shows is that we took very difficult decisions in the pandemic to speed up access to PPE for frontline workers, who were literally dying at the time—but there should be no hiding place whatsoever for anyone who commits fraud on taxpayers, which is why there have been over 100 arrests.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The only productivity improvement we have seen from this Government is the awarding of wasteful contracts. On top of all the PPE waste that my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) referred to, there are still £1 billion-worth of unresolved PPE contracts that this Government awarded, but that have not been delivered on. Only one company, PPE Medpro, is facing legal action. Why are the Government not taking legal action against the other companies that have not delivered on their contract with members of the public?

Jeremy Hunt: Let me be clear: there is absolutely no hiding place for anyone, whether they are connected to the Conservative party, the Labour Party or any other party. If they have defrauded the taxpayer, we will go after them.

Darren Jones: The Chancellor says that he is making progress, and that there is no hiding place, but that money belongs to our public services. The Government know that the contracts have not been delivered on, but

they will not reveal the names of the companies and the contracts that have not been delivered on. If there is no hiding place, why would the Chancellor not name them today?

Jeremy Hunt: Because we are taking legal action, and as the hon. Gentleman knows full well, when we take legal action, that information belongs to the police.

Tax Reduction

6. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce taxes. [902668]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The spring Budget delivered personal tax cuts, including cuts to national insurance, for 29 million workers. That means that someone on the average salary has the lowest effective personal tax rate since 1975, and that is the lowest effective tax rate of any G7 country.

Maggie Throup: While responsible tax cuts, such as the £900 cut to national insurance contributions, are welcome, can my right hon. Friend update the House on when we can expect VAT to be abolished on high-factor sunscreen? That would not only help to protect more people from one of the leading causes of preventable cancer, but could save the NHS approximately £55 billion.

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend and I have talked about this issue on many occasions. She will know that high-factor sunscreen is on NHS prescription for certain conditions and is VAT-free when dispensed by a chemist. With my Chancellor hat on, I should say that we have had £50 billion of requests for VAT relief since Brexit. It is great to have the freedom to make those changes, but we have to be honest about the trade-offs. In particular, we must ensure that if we do apply reliefs, the benefits are fed through to consumers.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This weekend, I spoke to a constituent who has invested heavily in a restaurant in my constituency over the last 15 years. He was in desperation because his business, like two other businesses that have already closed in the town, is being crushed by VAT, business rates and increases in corporate taxes. He finds that he can no longer sustain a business that has become the love of his life. Does the Chancellor realise that the tax burden he is imposing on small and medium-sized businesses is crushing this economy?

Jeremy Hunt: We are doing everything we can to support small businesses. Businesses like the one that the right hon. Gentleman mentions have received, for two years in a row, a 75% discount on their business rates. That is a massive leg up for businesses recovering from the pandemic. We have also made sure that any increases in corporation tax apply only to larger businesses. There is only one major party in British politics that wants to bring down the tax burden for businesses, and it is the Conservative party.

Green Book

7. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): Whether his Department has made a recent assessment of the adequacy of its guidance entitled “The Green Book.” [902669]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): In 2020, the Treasury undertook a comprehensive review of the Green Book and how it is used in practice, and we have made several changes as a result. We regularly update the Green Book to ensure that it remains fit for purpose, and we published a further technical update in 2022.

Chris Loder: I represent a rural constituency in Dorset in the south-west of England. My right hon. Friend will know that it is important to me and my colleagues in the region that the Government give due consideration to the south-west when it comes to allocating funds and investment opportunities to it. Typically, the Green Book has not adequately allocated funds in favour of Dorset and neighbouring counties. What steps will she take to correct that?

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend is, as ever, a brilliant advocate for his local area. I note that West Dorset is getting £4.4 million from the UK shared prosperity fund, and the wider Dorset area is benefiting from a range of other significant investments, including £9.7 million from the future high streets fund, but I am happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Like the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), I represent a rural constituency. Strangford is the reason I am here, and I want to represent it well. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that all updates to and volumes of the Green Book apply to Northern Ireland as well as to other areas across this great nation?

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman raises an excellent point—one that I will be discussing with the Northern Ireland Finance Minister in a couple of weeks.

Small Businesses: Fiscal Support

8. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [902670]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): Small businesses drive our economy, and we support them to thrive using levers across Government, whether through our small business rates relief, by increasing the VAT registration threshold, or providing reliefs such as the annual investment allowance.

Stephen Crabb: In England, many small businesses receive a 75% reduction in business rates thanks to action by this Conservative Government. In Wales, the Labour Administration have cut that level of support to 40%, meaning that excellent hospitality businesses such as Martha’s Vineyard in my constituency must find thousands of pounds more in tax. Does the Minister agree that that is not the way to support the tourism and hospitality sector at a challenging time, and that it is an example of the Labour party saying one thing here at Westminster and doing another where they are in government?

Gareth Davies: My right hon. Friend is right that in the autumn statement the Government extended retail, hospitality and leisure relief in England, essentially to cut tax for 230,000 businesses—a tax cut worth £2.5 billion.

The Barnett formula allows the Welsh Labour Government to offer similar relief to Welsh businesses, and it is disappointing, if not surprising, that they have chosen not to.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): On Friday, I visited the K C Jones Motor Repairs garage, a medium-sized business of very long standing in Oswestry in North Shropshire. One of the many challenges that it faces, alongside astronomical energy bills and a shortage of skilled labour, is the business rates that it needs to pay because it must have a high street presence in order for people to take their cars there. Will the Minister consider fundamental reform of business rates so that businesses that need a high street presence can continue to exist? At the moment, they are under huge pressure.

Gareth Davies: As I was saying, we have a 75% relief for most high street businesses. I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the package as a whole. We have increased the VAT threshold, bringing 28,000 businesses like the one she describes out of paying any VAT at all, on top of a range of other measures.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): The cherished independent shops and restaurants that line the streets of Morley serve the lifeblood of our community. In order to safeguard the very heart of our local economy, what bold measures is the Department taking to counter the oppressive weight of skyrocketing business rates imposed by the financially reckless Labour-led Leeds City Council?

Gareth Davies: I know that my hon. Friend is a great champion of all businesses in Morley and across Leeds because I have seen it at first hand. I point out to her as well that the Government have reduced taxation on small businesses, we have increased the VAT threshold, and we have a 75% rate relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, which she alluded to. It is this Conservative Government who are on the side of hard-working people and businesses across Morley and around the country.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In the last decade, more than one music venue closed every week, including Moles in Bath. That has resulted in the loss of 4,000 jobs, 14,250 events, over 190,000 performance opportunities, £9 million of income for musicians and £59 million in lost direct economic activity. What are the Government doing to support small music venues?

Gareth Davies: We are doing a lot. We are increasing the VAT threshold, and we have a rates relief package. The recent spring Budget was one of the biggest packages supporting our cultural industries that this country has ever seen, and I encourage the hon. Lady to look at it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Since 2022, almost 400 communities have lost their local bank branch, which has had a devastating impact on local and small businesses. Despite witnessing the decline of the British high street, the Government have been dragging their feet on rolling out banking hubs, which would help local and small businesses. Will the Minister finally back the Labour party's plans to provide a banking hub in every community that needs one?

Gareth Davies: Banking hubs are driven by commercial organisations. Any area that loses bank branches is entitled to get a banking hub. Of course, we want to see more across the country, but we also have to recognise that banking has changed and the ways in which people bank have moved more towards digital, so it is right that commercial organisations take commercial decisions.

Regional Economic Inequality

10. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent fiscal steps he has taken to help reduce regional economic inequalities. [902672]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): At the spring Budget, we built on the £15 billion of levelling-up commitments made since 2019. We announced a trailblazer devolution deal for the north-east mayoral combined authority and a £400 million extension to the long-term plan for towns.

Liz Twist: The cross-party Public Accounts Committee has revealed that the Government's levelling-up funds were subject to a "worrying lack of transparency", with rules for accessing funding changing while bids were still being assessed. Will the Minister therefore apologise to the 55 local authorities rejected for funding that were not told in advance that their applications had no chance of success?

Gareth Davies: This is the Government who implemented £15 billion of support for communities outside of London and the south-east, which is one of the reasons why median pay growth is higher in every region outside of London and the south-east. Of course, there is a robust methodology and criteria for selecting places for funding, and I encourage the hon. Lady to look at those criteria.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): With the Darlington economic campus now having passed 750 employees and being well on its way to providing over 1,500 roles in my constituency, what assessment has my hon. Friend made of its contribution to the local economy, to reducing inequalities and to our levelling-up agenda?

Gareth Davies: The Darlington economic campus is an important part of this Government's operations and of our Government estate, but it is also important to the people of Darlington, and not just in terms of the jobs it has created. Of course, it builds on the back of significant funding on my hon. Friend's watch: the £22 million town deal and the £6 million as part of the shared prosperity fund. That is one of the reasons why the people voted to elect Ben Houchen just the other day.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Regional inequality may be made worse by my constituents facing having to pay again for funeral plans after they were sold fake funeral plans by Legacy funeral directors. Many simply cannot afford to pay for those plans again and, instead of having the funeral that their families wanted for them, they will only be able to have the free service offered by the council. Does the Minister agree that banks should offer more discretion when looking at victims of fraud, and will he meet with me to discuss this specific case further?

Gareth Davies: I am very sorry to hear of the circumstances that the hon. Lady has described. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary, in whose portfolio this issue sits, will meet with her.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): For many years, coastal communities have suffered economic inequalities, and we all know that the best way of changing that is to create the conditions for investment and the jobs that go with them. Despite the good work that the Government have done, we still need more funding in areas such as Cleethorpes. Could the Minister outline what plans the Government may have for bringing forward further schemes in the near future?

Gareth Davies: It is right to acknowledge that funding has gone in. I completely appreciate the specific challenges that coastal communities face, but it is important to look at the package of measures to level up—not just funding such as the shared prosperity fund, levelling-up fund and towns fund, but the 13 devolution deals, 13 investment zones and 12 freeports. These are all packages and measures that will help areas such as my hon. Friend's, but I will always keep his area in mind.

Cost of Living

11. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support households with the cost of living. [902673]

18. **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support households with increases in the cost of living. [902682]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Over the last two years, cost of living support has totalled £96 billion, or an average of £3,400 per household. As a result, living standards, which were predicted to fall 2% last year, rose by nearly 1%, and we are on track to reach pre-pandemic living standards two years early.

Mrs Drummond: I welcome the support that the Government have provided throughout covid and the recent energy crisis for my constituents in Meon Valley—I thank the Government. It has made a huge difference to people's domestic budgets, but now inflation is falling and the economy is improving, can we look forward to the Government's continued support with a range of fiscal steps, including cutting taxes?

Jeremy Hunt: We can absolutely do that. I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out that the biggest single thing we can do to help people with cost of living pressures is to bring down inflation. That seems to be something that escaped the shadow Chancellor this morning, when she said it was not a big deal to get inflation down to its target. It is a very big deal for families facing a cost of living crisis, and she needs to know that inflation falls by design, not by accident.

Nadia Whittome: The Chancellor can talk all he wants about inflation falling, but this is little comfort to my constituents who are still struggling to make ends meet. Even with the national insurance cut, annual post-tax earnings for the average family remain on course to be £380 lower at the start of 2025 than they

were in 2021—a gap not predicted to close until 2029. This means yet more years of lost wage growth, so when will the Government get serious about tackling the low-wage, insecure work that they have allowed to become the norm in this country?

Jeremy Hunt: Could I suggest, if the hon. Member really thinks that inflation falling from 11% to 3.2% is little comfort to her constituents, that she might want to talk to a few more of them, because actually it is the biggest single thing that we can do to deal with cost of living pressures. If she says, "What are we doing to tackle the scourge of low pay?" we have abolished it by raising the national living wage to £11.44 this year alone. For someone working full-time, that will mean an increase in their pay of £1,800.

Child Trust Fund: Recipients with Disabilities

13. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Whether he has taken recent steps with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that people with disabilities can access their child trust fund when they turn 18. [902675]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): On 9 June 2023, the Ministry of Justice launched a programme to raise awareness of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 in relation to how and when to access child trust funds. The first part of this programme is a new toolkit. The Ministry of Justice will continue that programme of work to raise awareness of how to obtain legal authority to access a child trust fund, for which a court fee waiver is available.

Vicky Foxcroft: The only way for parents of young people without capacity to access their child trust fund is through a deputyship order. After consulting on the introduction of a mental capacity small payment scheme, which would allow a suitable person temporary access to release the funds, Ministers opted not to legislate, and instead introduced a toolkit, as has been said. Over 80,000 young people in England and Wales remain locked out of their child trust fund, so would the Minister agree to look at this again?

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I know how avidly she campaigns in this area. The House should know—and you should know, Mr Speaker—that I recently met my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin) and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to discuss this very issue. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady as well to discuss it and to see if we can get a solution, because we do want to get this problem fixed.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for the meeting to which he referred. Will he compliment financial institutions that are doing their utmost to make it easier for their disabled customers to access their child trust funds and, if his ministerial colleagues can find a way of making that easier across the board, would that have his support and that of his colleagues in the Treasury?

Bim Afolami: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Indeed, working with not just the Ministry of Justice, but the Department for Work and Pensions is key to deliver this, as is working with the Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that any financial institution

that does the right thing does not lose out or face any regulatory issues. That is indeed something that has my support and that of the Treasury, and we will work across Government to get this right.

VAT Exemption for International Visitors

14. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): Whether he plans to reintroduce VAT-free shopping for international visitors. [902676]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): As stated in the spring Budget, the Government are considering the findings of the review by the Office for Budget Responsibility of VAT-free shopping, alongside industry representations and broader data. We continue to welcome further submissions and representations in response to those findings.

Andrew Rosindell: Data from Heathrow, the United Kingdom's largest and busiest airport, shows that despite a near-full recovery in passenger volumes post lockdown, retail spend on affected goods is 32% below pre-pandemic levels. That figure is shocking. Heathrow airport joins hundreds of businesses in calling on the Government to reintroduce VAT-free shopping for tourists, or similar incentives. Will the Minister acknowledge the figures, listen to the industry and reinstate that popular policy, as British businesses are demanding?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I will not only listen to the industry, but I met Heathrow just last week to hear its representations. The challenge is the way that modelling, and forecast and behavioural changes can be confidently assessed. Government estimates suggest that a worldwide scheme could cost as much as £2.5 billion. The challenge is the so-called deadweight cost that could happen by subsidising spending that otherwise would exist anyway, versus the incremental benefit that we could get from new visitors coming to the UK. Of course that is a behavioural change based on a tax change. It is based on a variety of assumptions, and therefore the modelling and assumptions underlying it vary, but I am listening to all representations.

High income Child Benefit Charge

16. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of raising the high income child benefit charge threshold on household incomes. [902678]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): The high income child benefit charge threshold was raised to £60,000 on 6 April 2024. The point at which child benefit is fully withdrawn was also increased to £80,000, and the Government estimate that that will take 170,000 families out of paying the charge in 2024-25. The Government also plan to administer HICBC on a household rather than an individual basis by April 2026.

Mrs Wheeler: I have been contacted by many South Derbyshire parents who are caught in this unfair situation. Can the Minister be even more precise about the savings that this will now mean for my affected constituents?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments and continual interest in this area. The changes to the high income child benefit charge mean that almost half a million hard-working families will gain an average of £1,260 towards the cost of raising their children in 2024-25. She will recognise that that is a meaningful difference for her constituents, and for those across the country.

Topical Questions

T1. [902687] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The shadow Chancellor often likes to ask what has improved over the past 14 years, so I thought I would update the House on some of the latest statistics about the British economy. According to UN conference data, we have now overtaken France, the Netherlands and Japan to become the world's fourth largest exporter. The International Monetary Fund says that we will grow faster over the next six years than France, Italy, Germany or Japan, and there are 200,000 more people in work compared with a year ago, which means that, for every single day Conservative Governments have been in office since 2010, there are 800 more people in work, many of whom will be very pleased that we are sticking to our plan.

Debbie Abrahams: We should add to the Chancellor's statistics that we have the widest economic inequalities in Europe. Last week, Professor Sir Michael Marmot published new analysis showing significant increases in health inequalities—how long we live, and how long we live in good health—and that is particularly the case between the north and south-east England. That is of course driven by the economic inequalities that I have just referred to. What assessment has the Chancellor undertaken on the loss in productivity directly as a result of that increase in health inequalities?

Jeremy Hunt: If the hon. Lady is concerned about economic inequalities, she will be horrified to know that they were even worse under the last Labour Government. They have been reduced under this Government. When it comes to health inequalities, it is this Government who are phasing out smoking for everyone under the age of 14—one of the biggest single things in a generation that will reduce health inequalities and mean that poorer people live longer.

T6. [902692] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The Government's plans for a carbon border adjustment mechanism will create a level playing field for British manufacturers facing un-green, high-carbon competition from abroad, but to comply with free trade rules, the CBAM must be an environmental measure, rather than revenue-raising trade protectionism. Will Ministers confirm that it will be fiscally neutral and that any net receipts will be returned to taxpayers, perhaps even by cutting fuel duty or green levies on energy bills?

Jeremy Hunt: I can confirm that we are very alive to cost of living pressures caused by fuel duty. In fact, we spent £6.4 billion freezing the duties on fuel, which will save the average motorist £50 over the coming year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): At the Budget, the Chancellor set out his intention to abolish national insurance—a £46 billion annual commitment with no clear plan as to how it would be paid for. One way to do it would be to merge income tax and national insurance. Does the Chancellor agree with analysis from the House of Commons Library that shows that merging those two would increase income tax by 8p in the pound?

Jeremy Hunt: Which is why it is not our policy.

Rachel Reeves: That is strange, because the day after the Budget, the Chancellor told Sky News that

“you can end that unfairness of taxing work: you can merge income tax and national insurance.”

The late Chancellor, Nigel Lawson—the Prime Minister’s hero—warned that merging them would

“destroy the contributory principle and create many losers, especially among the elderly.”

In fact, a retired pensioner with an average occupational pension income of £198 a week would pay an additional £738 a year in tax. Is the reason that the Conservatives will not come clean not that they are planning to pick pensioners’ pockets to fund the abolition of national insurance?

Jeremy Hunt: If the right hon. Lady listened to my comments carefully, and I do not always give her credit for that, she would know that our policy is to abolish employees’ national insurance, and that means we want to bring it down to zero. If Labour’s strategy is to win the election by frightening pensioners with fake news stories, I would just say that Britain deserves better.

T8. [902694] **Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): The taskforce on nature-related financial disclosures came out with its framework last year. I would like an update on where we are with the International Sustainability Standards Board approach, because just as it has been a huge success for companies and for UK plc to switch to the recommendations of the taskforce on climate-related financial disclosure, it is vital for our planet that we also start to have the TNFD framework as standard right across the board.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): My right hon. Friend is right that this issue is critical. I am pleased that the ISSB recently announced its intention to commence a research project on a nature thematic standard, carefully considering the TNFD’s recommendations. His Majesty’s Government have established a formal mechanism to assess the ISSB standards for suitability for the UK to ensure that with a general sustainability standard, and more specifically with a climate sustainability standard, we are doing the right thing for the UK. The Government will publish an implementation update on sustainability disclosure requirements shortly to provide further information for industry—watch this space.

T2. [902688] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): We have all seen it: the richest Prime Minister in history has spent the weekend telling the public that his plan is working. Well, it is not working for people in Leeds East, whose taxes are going through the roof while our public services are on their knees. Would a better plan

not be to go after the tax dodgers, rather than making ordinary people pay the price for this Government’s abject failures?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): I have to say that I find this hypocrisy astounding. First, if the Opposition objected to the national insurance cuts, why did the Leader of the Opposition say that he supported them? If the Opposition are so keen on abolishing tax dodging, why did they not support our Finance Bill, which had measures in place to do just that? They did not support it; they abstained on it.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The Bank of England has said that quantitative tightening is not an official part of its monetary policy targeting, yet it is at risk of costing, fiscally, £179 billion in losses underwritten by the Treasury. That is having a major effect on the fiscal situation of the country. Will His Majesty’s Government encourage the Bank of England to hold these bonds to maturity, taking the carry cost rather than taking the hit from selling them in the market and crystallising an enormous loss?

Bim Afolami: In relation to the asset purchase facility and how that has worked over recent years, it is not His Majesty’s Government’s—or indeed the Treasury’s—intention to change the way in which that works with the Bank of England, but as with all measures, the Chancellor keeps everything under close review.

T3. [902689] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): According to the Bank of England, a typical family remortgaging this year will pay £240 a year more in mortgage payments. Does the Chancellor accept that even if the Bank cuts rates, those homeowners will still be paying a penalty because the Government crashed the economy?

Jeremy Hunt: What I would say to those families is that the most damaging thing of all is to have inflation at 11%. Now we have reduced it to 3.2%, and indeed we expect it to go lower. Interest rates are also starting to fall. If the hon. Member is worried about families in her constituency, she might be extremely worried by the shadow Chancellor saying that if interest rates fall, it is somehow not a big deal. It really is.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I encourage my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to revisit his decision to change the tax arrangements of furnished holiday lets in rural constituencies such as my own? Those businesses make an important contribution to the local economy, provide jobs and enhance the tourism offering. Indeed, they stop depopulation rather than adding to it. His decision is creating much concern among those who operate such businesses.

Nigel Huddleston: We recognise the important role that FHLs play in the tourism ecosystem right across the country. The problem was that there was not a level playing field with long-term lets. We are making sure that there will continue to be tax incentives and benefits from such letting, but they need to be on par with short-term and long-term lets.

T5. [902691] **Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): The consistently high price of fuel is making drivers dig deep just to go about their daily business. With a rise of 10p reported since the start of the year and the average cost of filling a family car now £82.50, what efforts will the Government make to help those people in my rural constituency and across the United Kingdom who have little or no access to public transport and are dependent on their vehicles for work and family life?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The hon. Member is entirely right. That is why we froze fuel duty at the last fiscal event: a measure that costs £6.5 billion and will save the average driver £50.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I place on record my thanks to the Chancellor, who in his Budget devoted funds to Bournemouth for a police violence reduction unit? Does he agree that these units have a track record up and down the country of tackling knife crime by not just seeing extra police on the frontline, but engaging with schools to ensure that youths and students understand the folly of carrying a knife in the first place?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: violence reduction units reduce crime and save lives. I want to thank him, because he was one of the first colleagues who, ahead of the Budget, brought to my attention how impressive the results are. As a result, I was able to make it a national policy in the Budget.

T7. [902693] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Many of those campaigning for justice in the contaminated blood scandal will have been encouraged by the reporting in *The Sunday Times* over the weekend. Given that time is of the essence, will the Chancellor please indicate by which date the promises will be fulfilled?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the Government are taking this issue very seriously, and we completely understand that speed is of the essence. It is now only a matter of days before the report will be published; we have always said that we want to publish our response very quickly after that and I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will not hang around.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): The best way for a business to thrive and for customers to receive a great service is for companies to employ individuals on merit. Does the Chancellor agree that the recent overreach by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority regarding their equality, diversity and inclusion policies is a step too far, and that it is inevitable that those policies will have a negative effect on us all?

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is important that the FCA bears in mind that it should not be distracted from its core focus on conduct and regulation by things that are more marginal for the people and businesses it oversees. I urge the FCA to take into account the representations made by my hon. Friend and by industry in that regard and many others.

T10. [902696] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Chancellor recently claimed that £100,000 a year is not a huge salary. Does he realise how out of touch that sounds to families in my constituency who are working hard, earning much less than that and really struggling because they are paying 25% more for their weekly shop than they were two years ago, and whose mortgages soared after the Tories crashed the economy?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that he has taken my comments out of context. I will tell him what is really out of touch: the shadow Chancellor saying it is not a big deal if inflation falls.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): Cramlington has a world-leading pharmaceutical company, Organon, which employs 700 people and produces medicine for the UK market as well as abroad, with a particular focus on women's health. Will my right hon. Friend the Chancellor please meet me to discuss the impact on pharmaceutical investment?

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The pharmaceutical industry is worth some £14 billion to our economy. I am pleased to tell him that the industry has seen a twelvefold increase in equity financing in just the past decade, and I would be pleased to meet him to discuss that further.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Soaring rent costs are the biggest reason why my constituents in Bath are struggling. The average monthly rent in Bath and north-east Somerset has risen by more than £200 in the past three years. What support will the Government give to people who rent in the private sector?

Jeremy Hunt: That is why we need to build more houses. The hon. Lady will be reassured to know that we are building record numbers of houses—in fact, more in the last year than in any single year under the previous Labour Government.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I would like the Chancellor of the Exchequer to know that high business rates are having a devastating effect on small and medium-sized businesses in historic market towns, such as Romford, that are large retail centres. As the Government are business friendly, will he please look at ways to reduce the burden of business rates on local businesses in constituencies like mine?

Jeremy Hunt: May I say what a pleasure it is to be asked a question by my hon. Friend? I think this is the first time it has happened since he has been back. There is no more formidable a champion for Romford. He speaks about business rates, and we have indeed been doing what we can to bring them down at every fiscal event.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps have been taken to support pensioners to know what benefits they are possibly entitled to? I understand that 1.4 million people access pension credit, but a great many more are entitled to it.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott):

The hon. Gentleman will know that this is an issue that is close to my heart, as a former Pensions Minister. We did a huge amount of work to increase the uptake of pension credit. I know that this matters a lot to Members, and work is being done in everyone's constituency, including the hon. Gentleman's.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The lifetime ISA is a positive instrument, but I understand that under its terms there are circumstances under which savers lose not only the benefits of the ISA but also part of their capital investment. That does not seem right; will the Minister please meet me to discuss it?

Bim Afolami: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the lifetime ISA, which is a fantastic product brought in by this Government to help young people to get on the housing ladder. I am happy to meet him to discuss ways in which we can make it more accessible for more people in more circumstances.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it related to Treasury questions?

Tulip Siddiq: Yes. In his response to me, the Exchequer Secretary said, "Any area that loses bank branches is entitled to get a banking hub", but I have numerous

examples of towns that lost bank branches, applied for a banking hub and then had their application rejected. Please could you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how I can get some clarity on this matter and what the Minister said about "any area that loses bank branches"?

Mr Speaker: Obviously, we cannot continue the debate. The hon. Lady has certainly put her point on the record. I do not think this will be the end of it; she knows how to carry it on through the usual channels, which I expect she will use, no doubt starting with the Table Office.

Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Chancellor, in answer to my question, said that economic inequalities actually increased under the previous Labour Administration. A House of Commons Library publication released last month shows that that is categorically not the case. Would he like to take this opportunity to correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I believe the Chancellor would.

Jeremy Hunt: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady may have misunderstood me. What I said was that economic inequality had fallen since the last Labour Government.

War in Gaza

3.30 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Deputy Foreign Secretary to make a statement on the war in Gaza.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his urgent question.

We want to see an end to the fighting as soon as possible. Well over six months since Hamas's terror attack against Israel, it is appalling that the hostages are still being held. Very many civilians are also dying in Gaza, and this weekend Hamas rockets killed four Israeli Defence Forces soldiers and injured others. As we have said, the fastest way to end the conflict is to secure a deal that gets the hostages out and allows for a pause in the fighting in Gaza. We must then turn that pause into a sustainable, permanent ceasefire.

Regarding the situation in Rafah, our position has been consistent. We are deeply concerned about the prospect of a military incursion, given the number of civilians who are sheltering there and the importance of that entry point for aid. Entry points for humanitarian aid, including Kerem Shalom, must be reopened quickly to allow aid in. Israel must facilitate immediate, uninterrupted humanitarian access in the south, especially the entry of fuel, and ensure the protection of civilians and safe passage for those who wish to leave Rafah. As yet, we have not seen a credible plan to protect civilians.

We are, of course, following closely the latest developments on the hostage talks. At this stage, while events are still shifting, I cannot—as the House will understand—provide a detailed running commentary. As the British Government have said, we want to see a deal agreed that would ensure the release of hostages and a pause in the fighting. A generous offer was on the table last week, proposed by Egypt and accepted by Israel. We need to see Hamas accept a viable deal and we can start building the momentum towards a permanent sustained ceasefire.

In parallel, we continue to push as hard as we can to get much-needed aid into Gaza via vital land routes, alongside sea and air, to alleviate the suffering. Israel has now committed to significant steps to increase the amount of aid getting into Gaza. We now need to see that turned into action to ensure that aid actually gets over the border, and that it is safely and properly distributed. We look to Israel to meet its commitments to flood Gaza with aid.

Ultimately, we need a long-term solution to this crisis. This means the release of all hostages; Hamas's rule dismantled; their ability to attack Israel removed; a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza; and a political horizon to a two-state solution. Israelis and Palestinians should be able to live together side by side, in peace and security. This is our goal. We will continue working tirelessly to achieve it.

Mr Lammy: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, but I have to say that it is extraordinary that the Government did not come forward with a statement today. This is a profoundly concerning moment

in this awful war. Ceasefire negotiations appear to be going backwards. Today the war is not just continuing, but escalating.

Labour has been clear for months that we oppose an offensive in Rafah, which risks catastrophic consequences. The United States has said that it would be a disaster, the European Union has said that the world must prevent it, and the United Nations Security Council has called for an immediate ceasefire. Benjamin Netanyahu is ignoring the warnings of Israel's allies and partners, the United Kingdom included.

So can the Minister tell me what the consequences will be? We are already seeing the consequences for civilians: airstrikes in densely packed areas; the Rafah crossing—as well as Kerem Shalom, shamelessly attacked by Hamas—now closed; aid reportedly being blocked; and northern Gaza in full-blown famine. Some 1.4 million people are sheltering in Rafah, many of them ordered to go there by the IDF in the first place. Half the children in Gaza are in Rafah. Where can they go to be safe? The French Government said yesterday that the forced displacement of any civilian population is a war crime. Does the Minister agree?

Hamas are a terrorist organisation and their cowardly tactics are reprehensible, but that does not change Israel's obligation to follow the rules of war, or the Government's obligations on arms exports, so can the Minister say why he thinks that an attack on Rafah does not present a clear risk of a serious breach of international humanitarian law? Can he also confirm whether he has received any assessment—not legal advice, but any assessment or policy advice—from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials that the threshold has already been met? Now more than ever, we need an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and unimpeded aid to Gaza.

Mr Mitchell: The shadow Foreign Secretary has set out in eloquent terms what is effectively the policy of the Government and the entire House. He chided the Government for not offering a statement today, but I suggest that the Government have not been slow in coming to the House with frequent statements and responses to urgent questions, and we will of course continue to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Government's discussions with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the entire Government have been very clear about our advice to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and I have set it out repeatedly in the House. When I last answered questions from the right hon. Gentleman here, I made very clear our position on Rafah as well. He asked about the consequences and how we deal with those. Britain and our allies, through the United Nations—and I remind him that Britain was pivotal in securing Security Council resolutions 2720 and 2728—are working together to try to improve what is a terrible situation, and we will continue to do just that with, I hope, the support of the whole House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the efforts made by the Foreign Secretary, the Deputy Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East,

[Alicia Kearns]

who have been in and out of the middle east many times over the past two weeks in order to hear from our allies. However, as we see the launch of the Rafah offensive, what reassurances have been received that aid access and, above all, aid workers will be protected? We cannot see the entire aid industry flee from Rafah junction, as is currently being predicted. There is speculation about Al-Mawasi as a safe zone for civilians, but there is no infrastructure in what is essentially a desert, and it was not safe on the last occasion when, as we saw, the British charity Medical Aid for Palestinians was bombed—on which we have still had no answer. Finally, have we had any proof of life for those Israeli citizens who have now been held for seven months? For many, there has been no proof of life since at least Day 20. What are we doing to push for that proof of life, which families so desperately need?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right to make that last point. We do seek proof of life. The families to whom she refers are desperate for information, but that information has not been forthcoming. We are deeply concerned about the humanitarian position in Rafah. Any plan would have to respect international humanitarian law, and we have yet to see such a plan. The immediate priority, as I set out in my opening remarks, must be a humanitarian pause in the fighting. As the House well knows, such a pause would allow us, potentially, to get the hostages out, but also to get aid into Gaza.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A week ago from that Dispatch Box, the Minister said:

"Given the number of civilians sheltering in Rafah, it is not easy to see how such an offensive could be compliant with international humanitarian law".—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2024; Vol. 749, c. 141.]

Despite repeated appeals for Israel not to attack Rafah, just hours after the dashed hopes of a ceasefire, that offensive is happening. Is this the breach of international humanitarian law you referred to last week, and will that breach immediately end UK sales of arms to Israel? Or is this yet another example of the UK declaring a red line only for Israel to completely ignore it without condemnation or consequence? We know how this plays out, Minister. You plead with them, they ignore you, they do what they want and you find excuses for them. A blind eye will be turned to the slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, and while the UK Government call for more aid to the survivors, they will continue to issue arms export licences. That has been the pattern of behaviour for seven months. Can we expect anything different now?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, he will know that we are working flat out in these very difficult circumstances to achieve something different, and we will continue to do so. He quoted what I said the last time I was at the Dispatch Box, and I would point out that the words I have used today, in answering the same question, are virtually exactly the same. I have made it clear that there would have to be a plan that

respected international humanitarian law, and we have not yet seen such a plan. That is entirely consistent with what I said before.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the sale of arms. The Foreign Secretary announced on 9 April that the British position with regard to export licences is unchanged. We do not publish the Government's legal advice, but we always act in accordance with it. I would point out that we publish data on export licensing decisions transparently and on a quarterly basis.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): Yesterday I met survivors of the Nova festival massacre—people who had fought singlehandedly for hours in Israel on 7 October against brutal Hamas terrorists. We all want peace, and we all want to see the end of civilian fatalities, but sometimes countries must fight for peace. Israel has a right to defend herself and a duty to protect her people from the brutal terrorist cult of Hamas. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will maintain steadfast and resolute support for Israel as she finishes the job of eliminating Hamas from Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: I am very pleased to hear that my right hon. Friend had the chance to meet those survivors yesterday, so that she can share with the House the hideous circumstances that they suffered. She makes it clear that Israel has the right of self-defence, and she set out eloquently why that is the case. But Israel must also abide by international humanitarian law.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I say to the Minister, if I may, "You're better than this." We all condemn Hamas's attack and we all want to see the hostages released, but we are on the edge of witnessing a massacre, a mass murder of innocent men, women and children at the behest of fanatical zealots in the Israeli Cabinet. We need this Government to lead an international exercise to prevent this attack now. One way to prevent it is to make it clear to Netanyahu that if it goes ahead, this Government will pursue him as a war criminal at the international courts.

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that the Government are working with their allies, with the powers in the region and through the United Nations precisely to ensure that that does not happen. He also knows that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and other Ministers who are in close contact with the Israeli Government have made it absolutely clear what the effects of a military campaign conducted within the small confines of Rafah, where so many people are kettled, would be. I have made very clear from this Dispatch Box the view of the Government in that respect.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): A couple of days ago, on Holocaust Remembrance Day, an Israeli commander reminded his men that on that day 80 years ago, the Nazis led Jews to the ovens for the sole crime of being Jewish. On 7 October, at dawn on a public holiday, Hamas and their supporters invaded Israel and murdered 1,200 more Jewish people, including children, and raped, dismembered and tortured people—and yes, they put one baby, alive, in an oven to murder it. They took dozens of hostages, and still have many in savage confinement of a medieval nature.

Many voices put pressure on Israel to do what they believe Israel should do. Does the Minister agree that more pressure needs to be put on Hamas to do what they should do—what any civilised human being would call for—which is to release the hostages and stop attacking aid points? One such aid point was attacked at the weekend, killing four Israeli soldiers—an aid point that, by the way, British aid comes through. They are silent about that, with every focus on Israel and none on Hamas.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point. I want to emphasise to him, but also to the House, that the hostages are not an afterthought. They are at the very centre of this—there are more than 130, including women and children, and a holocaust survivor. The Government are trying to strike a balance. There is an urgent requirement for a pause in all the fighting to enable aid to get in and to negotiate the hostages out, which might then lead, as a process, to a sustainable ceasefire, which is what we are trying to achieve.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I think we all want an immediate ceasefire, and as we see the start of the destruction of Rafah and the impact that it will have on the civilian population, we are horrified. I want to ask the Minister a practical question that might get us a step further. How optimistic is he that a sufficient number of hostages will be released to ensure that agreement between the two sides can be reached and that Israel will then accept an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Lady, who speaks with authority and understanding on these matters, will know that the question she has asked me is at the heart of the negotiations, which still continue, and which we very much hope will be successful. As I have said before, I cannot give the House a running commentary on those negotiations, but I can assure her that the logic she brings to this debate does inform the Government's support for getting a resolution to those negotiations.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Over the past few months, Members from all parts of the House have questioned the Deputy Foreign Secretary on the notion of consequences, and we have heard that again today. He is an experienced Minister, so he knows that every equivocation, every hesitation and every set of diplomatic niceties has led us to this calamitous moment for the hostages, for the Palestinian people and for the interests of both peoples in the long term. On 7 April, the Foreign Secretary said that support for Israel was not unconditional. I shall ask the question in a different way: is there any red line? Is there anything the Israeli Government could do that would so appal this Government that they would feel the need to act? If so, what is it?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend talks about the calamitous situation that we have reached, and no one in the House will forget that it started on 7 October with the brutal events that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) just described. My right hon. Friend asks me a rhetorical question, but the evidence will show that the Government have done everything we possibly can to try to alleviate

the situation, sometimes unpopularly, and that our logic was accepted at the United Nations in the two Security Council resolutions that I mentioned.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Israeli Opposition leader Yair Lapid said at the weekend:

“A government that wants to return the abductees”

would be

“sending the teams to Cairo, not...crushing the hearts of the families.”

Lapid is right, but it is not only the hearts of the hostages' families that are being crushed; it is those of the Palestinians who want nothing to do with Hamas terrorists. Many of them are being chased around the Gaza strip. The UK rightly defends Israel from the threat of attack by Iran, but will the British Government also suspend arms exports to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, he will have seen that both sides have sent teams to Cairo, and we await developments on that with a degree of hope and optimism. On his second point, I have made it clear to the House where the Government stand on arms exports. We follow the legal advice—we do not publish it, in accordance with precedent—and we will continue to do so.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Members have said that the situation in Rafah needs to come to an end, but what needs to come to an end is the fighting. UNICEF has said today that Rafah is a city of children, and we should not be dancing around the issue or playing with words as though it were a game of Scrabble. We should call this what it is and call for an immediate ceasefire. Families of hostages want the fighting to end now, and my constituents in Bolton demand that it does. The international community is demanding an immediate stop. We are one of the most influential countries on the conflict, so will the United Kingdom call for an immediate end to the fighting?

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for keeping in touch with me on issues that are brought to his attention by his constituents. As he knows, it is exactly the Government's policy to try to achieve that pause, which can then lead to a sustainable ceasefire. We will continue to do everything we can to achieve that.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What is the Government's plan to get aid into Gaza now that both Rafah and Kerem Shalom are inaccessible? Even if they were accessible, with an invasion now started there would be no way to distribute aid. What is the Government's plan to get aid in to alleviate the appalling suffering of the Palestinian people?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to identify that yesterday, Rafah and Kerem Shalom were shut with no aid able to get in. That is a matter of immense concern to the Government. She will know that as well as trying to get aid in ourselves by road transport, we have been a leading nation in assisting with the maritime route and with airdrops. Some 11 airdrops have been made, 10 of them by the Royal Air Force.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Constituents are understandably devastated by what is happening in Gaza right now, which is desperate for those on both sides. I am conscious of what the Minister has just said about aid being distributed, but will he ensure that all the resources possible are there to enable us to carry on with maritime delivery and airdrops? Does he agree that ultimately, it is in Hamas's hands to return the hostages and remove any excuse for further actions in Gaza by Israel?

Mr Mitchell: We will certainly continue to boost the maritime efforts, which, as my right hon. Friend knows, are ongoing using both British military assets and our stores in the region, particularly in Cyprus, as well as technology for clearing the kit that is available there. We will continue to do everything we can in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, as we have been, to achieve greater entry of aid into Gaza.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The real concern now is that Netanyahu has one objective, which is to raze Gaza to the ground. That is what he is intent on doing, and it will include Rafah. This Government, along with all other western Governments, have told the Israelis that they must not go into Rafah. I ask the Minister once again: what are the consequences if they do? Will it be a slap on the wrist and a "Don't do it again", or is serious consideration being given to banning the sale of arms and to sanctioning individuals and the Israeli Government collectively? What are the Government going to do? Are they going to do anything at all?

Mr Mitchell: I have made it very clear what the Government are seeking to do. The hon. Gentleman has outlined what Prime Minister Netanyahu is saying, but there are many different voices in Israel, as we have seen this weekend, including significant demonstrations in support of the policy of getting the hostages back. Britain is doing everything it can to help achieve that.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): For me, the defining feature of this appalling tragedy in Gaza is that the civilian population is trapped between the oppression of an appalling terrorist organisation and an appalling military onslaught. Given the increasing compression of that population within Rafah, in a much smaller geographical area, the need for precision, restraint and proportionality from the Israelis is ever more acute. Will the Minister please assure the House that he is doing everything possible to convince the Israelis of the need to preserve the sanctity of human life?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have repeatedly underlined the importance of Israel abiding by international humanitarian law. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have underlined that point in their frequent contacts.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Despite the blatant disregard that we have seen for international law over the last few weeks, the international community has warned that the Israeli ground offensive in Rafah will be a red line. Even the Deputy Foreign Secretary told this House last week that he could not

"see how such an offensive could be compliant with international humanitarian law".—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2024; Vol. 749, c. 140-41.]

With Israeli troops now ready to move into the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp, where 1.4 million people sit starving and fearful for the lives of their children, I have to ask the Minister just why he did not come to the House today to announce a strong UK response that immediately supports the International Criminal Court's war crimes investigation and immediately ends arms sales to Israel.

Frankly, it is shameful that the Government have again come to the House with nothing. Will the Minister please answer the question that we have all come to hear answered? What are the UK Government doing to stop the bloodshed and the massacre that are about to happen hours from now in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, there is no difference between what I have said today and the response I gave on the last occasion I was at the Dispatch Box, to which he refers. He sets out, in eloquent tones, the nature of the problem we face, but he must recognise that Britain, along with a large number of regional powers, the international community and the UN, is trying to stop the very position he sets out.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Seven months ago today, many of us began receiving the most alarming messages from friends and/or family in Israel. By the end of that day, every red line of international law had been breached by the monstrous Palestinian terrorists who raped countless women, murdered 1,200 people and took hundreds of innocent people hostage.

Within hours, people in this country, and some pro-Palestinian activists, were on the streets cheering what happened that day. Since then, we have seen the dehumanisation of Jews through the dehumanisation of Israel. "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" has been dusted off and every antisemitic trope has been trotted out. Some people in this House, whom we would have expected to be allies when it comes to gender-based violence, have had little or nothing to say about the horrors of that day.

Now, we hear calls for Israel to be denied the right to defend itself, while arms continue to flow to Hamas from Iran and North Korea. There is nothing kind or compassionate about that message. Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary confirm to me that any ceasefire, which we all want because we all want this tragedy to end, will include the complete removal of Hamas from governance in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right in what he says. The rightful aim of defeating Hamas will not be achieved by allowing a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, as I am sure he would agree. He mentions gender-based violence; he will recognise that the Government have supplied funding particularly to try to tackle aspects of that, where we are able to make a contribution and have some impact. On what he says about the nature of some of what has been said in this House and outside, the Government make it very clear that we are absolutely opposed to antisemitism and Islamophobia in all their forms.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Last October, the Israeli Defence Minister disgracefully described the Palestinian people as "animals", and that is exactly how Israel has treated them, forcibly displacing men, women,

and children from the north to the south of Gaza and now forcibly displacing people again, slaughtering tens of thousands of innocent civilians and creating famine conditions. Now there is the risk of a massacre. What we are witnessing this week is a clear escalation of Israel's total disregard for civilian life and international law. We need an immediate ceasefire, but will the Minister finally agree to impose stringent sanctions on Israel, not simply on individual settlers, by ending support for its military capability in Gaza, suspending arms export licences and offering support for ICJ and ICC processes investigating Israel's criminal actions? Where is our humanity?

Mr Speaker: Order. Emotions are running high. I want to get everybody in, but I am concerned that we will not achieve it at this rate. Please can we help each other?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady sets out in lurid terms the issues we face and the problems the entire international community is trying to address—

Beth Winter *indicated dissent.*

Mr Mitchell: She shakes her head, but the fact is that the Government are doing everything they can, as we have set out—the Foreign Secretary has set it out, the Prime Minister has set it out and I have set it out from this Dispatch Box—to try to effect the change that she and I so desperately wish to see.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement with regard to the United Kingdom supporting the people of Gaza with humanitarian aid. The Minister knows that I have written to the Foreign Secretary asking that the United Kingdom hosts an international donors conference for Palestine, as it did with the international Friends of Syria group, which was the largest convening of humanitarian donors at a conference held in the United Kingdom. I understand that the Foreign Secretary thought that it was a good idea, so where is the UK in leading the way in setting up an international donors conference for Palestine?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right to identify a political horizon that is constructive; when this ghastly fighting is over, we hope that people will lift their eyes to a political horizon. Britain is doing a lot of work to try to support that opportunity when it comes, and at that point there may well be a role for Britain in the international community to convene something of that sort.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The invasion of Rafah by the Israeli army comes alongside further discoveries of more than 390 bodies in mass graves at the al-Shifa and Nasser hospitals, with the UN confirming evidence of torture, summary executions and instances of people being buried alive and others buried with intravenous needles still in their arms. At the most recent Foreign Office questions, the Deputy Foreign Secretary said that it would be hard to see how an invasion of Rafah would not be in breach of international humanitarian law. Given what I have just outlined, do the UK Government finally consider the invasion of Rafah to be a breach of international humanitarian law—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: Alas, such questions are not susceptible to yes or no answers. We have made absolutely clear our view about an invasion of Rafah. The full reality of the specific incidents the hon. Gentleman mentions is not clear. We need to recognise, as the British Government have made clear, that full and transparent investigations of those matters is required.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Hamas have apparently said to mediators that they do not have 33 living hostages who fall into the categories of women, children, elderly and sick. That is an appalling body blow for the relatives of those held captive in Gaza for more than 200 days. Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary take the opportunity to acknowledge Israel's right to take military action to get those people home?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the awful plight of the hostages, as she has done repeatedly in this House. She is also right to make it clear that, under international law, Israel has the right to self-defence and to take proportionate action to recover hostages.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Like many others, I pray that pressure from this House and elsewhere can bring this conflict to an end, but we all know that that will require agreement on an Arab-led body to maintain peace, order and security. How close are we to that agreement?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to try to lift people's eyes to the political horizon so that from this intolerable misery can come hope for the future. A great deal of work is going on to pinpoint and augment the sinews of such a political future. The Foreign Secretary has been in the region repeatedly—especially on the west bank and in Ramallah. We will continue to do everything we can to plan for that, alongside trying to resolve the desperate situation in Rafah, on which I have tried to set out to the House what Britain is doing.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The Deputy Foreign Secretary reminds us that we are now in the seventh month. Talks are not making progress, the hostages still have not been released and border crossings are closing; we are entering another dark chapter in this terrible conflict. The UN World Food Programme warns of a full-blown famine unless more aid can be delivered. This House is asking what we can do, so will the Deputy Foreign Secretary update us on the building of that new maritime port off Gaza? That is something that the international community can control, of which we can have full stakeholder ownership. Once it is operational, will British troops be involved in aid delivery?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of my right hon. Friend's final point, we will have to see what is required. Securing the temporary pier off the coast of Gaza is a way of getting additional aid in swiftly. He will know that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Cardigan Bay is in the area, and is effectively the command post for this maritime effort. Britain is also thoroughly involved, just as it is from the air and from land, in detail in the maritime effort.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The UK Government have long warned Israel that an invasion of Rafah must not happen. Civilian lives must be protected and aid must enter Gaza. Prime Minister Netanyahu has shown once again that he is not listening to his allies or the ICJ, and that he is hellbent on turning the whole of Gaza into a graveyard. Will the UK Government urgently impose a full arms embargo on Israel, which is the only thing the UK can do to try to stop the starvation and potential genocide of those left in Rafah?

Mr Mitchell: The early part of the hon. Gentleman's question set out what we are all trying to address. On an arms embargo, he will know that the amount of arms that Britain supplies is negligible. Equally, we operate an arms sales regime that is strictly governed by the rules that I have previously set out to the House. We act in line with the legal advice we receive, and we will continue to do so.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Of course I am greatly concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza right now, but I am also greatly concerned that nothing happens that gives Hamas an increased foothold in Gaza and puts them in a position to inflict more evil and misery, like that we saw on 7 October. I am also concerned that some of the proposed ceasefire agreements seem to involve releasing hundreds of Hamas terrorists and do not involve all of the hostages being released. Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary give me a commitment that we will intensify plans for a Hamas-free Gaza, so that innocent people in Gaza can look forward with hope to a future of peace?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Hamas can have no role in Gaza in the future. Much of the work we are doing in that respect is designed to help to build up the Palestinian Authority, so that it can be involved in governing both the west bank and Gaza, as soon as the time is right.

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): The Deputy Foreign Secretary's answers today are virtually identical to those he gave, including to me, last Tuesday. The situation has escalated, but the Government's response remains the same. There are 600,000 child hostages in Rafah alone. There is no proof of life from them, but millions of our people are watching on their phones today the proof of death and mutilation of many of them. The Government say they are doing everything they can, but they are not. You could now stop sending weapons to the people who are raining down this death and misery, and the Labour party could ask you to do that, but did not.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member says "you", but it is not me who is responsible.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman says that the answers I gave to him and others last Tuesday are the same. Those answers reflect, in so far as the parameters of the situation are the same, the fact that we are pursuing long-term policies designed to tackle the evils that have been set out so clearly this afternoon in the House. He also makes a point about the number of children who are denied food and medicine in Rafah. He will know that through medical aid and the British contribution,

not least through a field hospital, Britain has been careful to ensure that where we can bring medical help, particularly to children, we are doing so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The 130-plus hostages have now been held for 214 days, in barbaric conditions, subject to rape and torture, and denied medical access from the International Red Cross. The sad reality is that Israel put a deal on the table that could have led to there being a ceasefire right now, in return for the release of some—not all—of the hostages and of Palestinian prisoners who have been convicted in courts of law. Secretary Blinken described that as an "extraordinarily generous" offer, yet Hamas refuse to accept it. Does my right hon. Friend take the view that Hamas have it in their power to accept the position of a ceasefire, so that the violence and war can come to an end naturally as a result?

Mr Mitchell: The point that my hon. Friend makes, which has been echoed in different ways across the House, is that we must ensure we do everything we can to make certain that the negotiations that are taking place at the moment in Cairo make progress and are successful. That is what everyone should be hoping can be achieved tonight.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What I think the Deputy Foreign Secretary has been saying to us today is that we have not seen a credible plan for evacuation from Rafah, and that there is currently an incursion into Rafah. If I add those two things up, what he is saying, between the lines, is that Israel has currently breached the rule that the UK has set. I do not think he wants to say it here, but that is what I am hearing. If there is no credible plan to move those people and the attack is ongoing, when can we expect, if not today, an update from the Dispatch Box on the UK's position towards Israel, arms sales and other things that have been mentioned?

Mr Mitchell: I have given the hon. Lady the update from the Dispatch Box, in so far as there is an update to give. She asks me about the words that we are using in respect of Rafah. I have made it clear that we have not seen a credible plan for military action in Rafah so far, so we are not able to judge whether it would be in accordance with international humanitarian law, and that is the point that I have been making to the House.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Israel is our friend and ally, but that does not stop us questioning its actions. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Foreign Secretary says that he wants to see much more aid getting into Gaza. The actions in Gaza over the weekend have only made those miles-long queues of lorries even greater. Air and sea drops are difficult. Will he today, on behalf of the Government, appeal to our allies to allow those in those miles-long queues in Rafah to rapidly go into Gaza and relieve the suffering of the people there?

Mr Mitchell: We continually appeal for more aid getting in by road. We have made arrangements for maritime entry, and entry from the air, but getting aid in through entry points on the road system is, by miles, the best way. I said at the outset of my remarks that we were

very concerned indeed about the fact that no aid got in through Rafah or Kerem Shalom yesterday. We are doing everything we can, as we have been since the start of this crisis, to ensure that more aid is getting in, and we will continue to do so.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The pro-Hamas network of the press, politicians and protesters is becoming increasingly hysterical in its efforts to stop Israel pursuing those who carried out the pogrom of murder, rape, torture and hostage-taking last October. Does the Minister accept that if there is to be long-term peace in the middle east, we must continue to support Israel—in its battle against Hamas, in defending itself, and in pursuing those who cynically hide behind innocent civilians today, and tomorrow use their death as a propaganda weapon?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman makes the point that Israel has the right to self-defence, but I am sure that he would accept that it must be exercised within international humanitarian law.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Minister, what does “finish the job” mean, with 40,000 people dead, many of whom are children? Is it finished when every single man, woman, child and baby is dead in Gaza? Is that what “finish the job” means? The Government said that the invasion of Rafah would not comply with international law. The Minister says that we do not supply that many arms to Israel, but if we were to stop even that supply, would it not send the message that our Government abide by, and believe in the importance of, international law?

Mr Mitchell: I hope that the hon. Lady will accept that although the Government do not publish the legal advice that they receive, they always act in accordance with it.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituent Emily Fares has family in Gaza. Here is her message:

“We heard from our family yesterday, half of them have now fled Rafah after threatening evacuation orders fell from the sky. When we spoke to them they did not know where they were going—they mentioned al-Mawasi, but there is no building for them to stay, it is not safe there. There are no food provisions there. There is nowhere to go to the toilet, nowhere to wash. They are now utterly destitute.”

Forced displacement is a war crime. The Minister's Government have it in their power to set up a scheme for people desperate to join family in the UK. If not now, when?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Lady sets out the heart-rending reports that she has received. That is why the Government, with as much vigour and co-operation with our allies as possible, are trying to do the things that I have set out.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The initial Israeli offence in Rafah began last night, and it has been described as “limited”. An operation is not limited if it results in the evacuation and forced displacement of around 100,000 people. An operation is not limited if it results in all crossings being closed, and humanitarian aid being completely halted. The House cannot downplay

the significance of what is happening. The Minister said that the Government are doing everything they can, but will he make it clear from the Dispatch Box that the Government do not support this offensive, and that there must be consequences under international law if it goes ahead?

Mr Mitchell: The Government have made it absolutely clear that we have yet to see a plan in respect of any military operations in Rafah, but we have always made it clear that any such plans must abide by international humanitarian law.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): For months, the Minister has come to the Dispatch Box and told us that the Government are asking the Israeli Government to do this, or requesting that the Israeli Government do that. The harsh truth is that Israel is ignoring the UK Government, and that our Government now need to act. Words are not enough; we need action to show that there are consequences for breaching international law. The Government must act now by ending arms sales and suspending the trade talks, because if they do not do what is necessary and take action to help prevent the attack on Rafah, will the Israeli Government not see that as our Government giving them the green light to commit yet more war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have seen what the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have said, and how we are working with our allies and countries in the region to try to improve the situation. He will know, as the whole House knows, that there is no magic solution. We have to persist with the arguments and the logic that are so clearly set out in United Nations Security Council resolutions 2720 and 2728, and we will continue to do so.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Over the past seven months, I and many other Members across this House have come to the Chamber to gain an understanding of what the red lines are for the UK Government, but it feels like there are not many. It felt like it was not a red line when babies in Gaza were removed from the wombs of their dead mothers. It felt like it was not a red line when children in Gaza looked up to the sky, not knowing whether aid or bombs were going to drop on them. Now, in Rafah, displaced refugees once again face the threat of forcible transfer, and again it does not feel like this is a red line. Given that there is precedent for halting arms sales to Israel, will the UK Government finally halt those sales? If not, can the Deputy Foreign Secretary please explain to us what cost is associated with a Palestinian life? What are the red lines? What does Benjamin Netanyahu have to do that is too much?

Mr Mitchell: The case that the hon. Lady makes should encourage everyone—the Government, but everyone else as well—to do everything they can to bring an end to this catastrophic conflict, which is causing such pain to so many.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I will start as I always do: I condemn Hamas, and I think all refugees on both sides should be returned, but the attack on Rafah has started. The escalation of humanitarian disaster and catastrophe continues, in contravention of international law. There has been too

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

much hand-wringing and making of excuses. We have to call it what it is: we stand here while people are starving and children are dying of malnutrition, and while there is no support for civilians in the area. The case has been made for hostages to be released; what will happen when Rafah is bombed? What will happen to those Israeli hostages? This policy is doomed from the start. Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary call for a ceasefire now and move forward?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have consistently sought a pause, so that the hostages can get out and aid can get in, and have worked tirelessly, I would argue, to try to ensure that aid does get in, including by inventing new ways of trying to achieve that. He started his question by pointing out that an attack had started in Rafah, but he will also know that negotiations are proceeding in Cairo, and we must hope that those negotiations are successful as quickly as possible.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): With nowhere safe for Palestinians to go, and overcrowding in places such as al-Mawasi, I ask again: where exactly do the UK Government think Palestinians displaced from eastern Rafah should go next? If the Deputy Foreign Secretary has no answer, why does the Government's response remain the same?

Mr Mitchell: As I have repeatedly made clear, we think that there needs to be a pause in the fighting that can, as I have expressed on numerous occasions in the House, lead to a sustainable ceasefire.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Is it not time to recognise that Israel's actions are not a disproportionate response to 7 October, but in fact part of a concerted plan to make Gaza unliveable, and to extirpate the Palestinian population there, while encroaching on Palestinian territories in the occupied west bank? As a result, is it not time that we ceased arms sales, stopped being complicit in Israel's military actions, reinstated United Nations Relief and Works Agency aid, and joined other nations in condemning this dreadful genocide?

Mr Mitchell: As I have said to the House before, I do not think it is helpful to use terms such as "genocide". It is important that the House recognises that the findings of the International Court of Justice have been misrepresented in that respect. Joan Donoghue, a former president of the ICJ who was still serving at the time of the preliminary decision, stated that the ICJ "did not decide that the claim of genocide was plausible".

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Minister talks about a pause; the United Nations voted for a resolution calling for a ceasefire. The Minister is now talking about looking at Israeli military plans for Gaza, when the international community has thus far made it clear that there should not be an invasion of Gaza. It feels as if he is going backwards. His Government have so far failed to restore UNRWA funding, which is making the matter and the misery worse. He has failed to take action to ensure that the Government support the implementation of the ICJ's provisional measures

and the International Criminal Court investigation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He has a good track record, but he is failing us by taking us backwards on this important issue. When will he take action on those specific measures?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we speed up questions? Otherwise, some people will not get in.

Mr Mitchell: I do not recognise the early part of the hon. Lady's question, but let me assure her, as I have assured the House in the past, that we are doing everything we can to address the dreadful situation that she has so eloquently articulated.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Minister's reply on 17 April to my written question referred to wanting

"to see Israel take greater care to limit its operations to military targets".

Can he confirm that he is finally aware that Israel has not limited its onslaught to military targets? Given that the Government's own licensing criteria refer to the

"risk that the items might be used to...facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law...or serious acts of violence against women or children",

how can continuing to arm Israel in its bombardment of Palestinian civilians possibly be justified?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady refers to a number of early incidents, which have been condemned. She will know that, in respect of each of those incidents, the Government have said that we want an independent and credible investigation and transparent conclusions, so that we know why and how those acts took place.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Minister has said that the policy has not changed, but the facts on the ground have. Ordering the evacuation of 100,000 people is not a small operation; it is big one. He knows that the clear test for suspending arms sales is a clear risk of a breach of humanitarian law, but he has told the House this afternoon that he has no assurances that that breach is impossible because he has not seen a plan. Can he tell the House what advice he has given the Department for Business and Trade, and when, about its legal obligation to suspend arms sales now? Will he lay that out for us this afternoon, before he gives evidence to the Select Committee on Business and Trade on 21 May?

Mr Mitchell: The position on arms sales and legal advice is clear, as the right hon. Gentleman will be aware. He knows that we always follow carefully the legal advice, although we do not publish it, and we always act in accordance with it. He will also know that, in the light of that legal advice, as the Foreign Secretary announced on 9 April, the UK position with regard to export licences remains unchanged.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Gaza is bleeding and Gaza is starving. At least 34,700 people are dead, the majority of them women and children, while a man-made famine continues to take hold. How much further do things need to escalate before this Government finally take action, restore UNRWA funding and—finally—call for an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member raises the issue of UNRWA, which was also raised by his hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and I should have responded on that point. Britain is currently in a position of not owing any money to UNRWA, we have said that we are considering the Colonna report and we are waiting for the Office of Internal Oversight Services report. In due course, we will come to the House to tell it the decision we have made, but it is important to recognise that at the current time Britain is fully paid up in respect of UNRWA's money and work.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): More than 14,500 children have been killed in Gaza. Is the Minister proud that the UK continues to sell arms for use in this action?

Mr Mitchell: I am proud that Britain is doing everything it can and that the Government are bending every sinew to try to resolve this desperate situation and to make sure that we get aid into Gaza—"flood" Gaza with aid, as the Israeli Government have promised—but also get out the hostages, whose families have suffered so much since the appalling pogrom on 7 October.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Deputy Foreign Secretary has said that he is still waiting to see the military plans from Israel in relation to Rafah, but we are all watching the consequences of the execution of those plans, which is already under way. Part of what we have seen overnight has been the very deliberate destruction of any signage that describes the territory as Gaza, and the taking down of Palestinian flags and replacing them with Israeli flags. That is not necessary in any way to neutralise any security threat. Has he asked Israel what it is doing and why it has done that, and can he give me one example of a consequence now that this red line has been crossed?

Mr Mitchell: We continue to make it clear to Israel that it should not in these circumstances be conducting military operations in Rafah until there is a proper plan that ensures it stands by its duties and responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Thousands of children killed, hostages not released, Israel accused of war crimes, global outrage at Israel's conduct and Hamas very much in being—this is how not to fight a war. Even war has rules, so given the number of civilians sheltering in Rafah, can the Minister make it clear that the UK Government do not support the Rafah offensive?

Mr Mitchell: I have made it crystal clear where the Government stand on the issue of any Rafah offensive, and we will continue to do everything we can—as I have clearly, I hope, set out to the House—to bring about an urgent resolution of this extraordinarily difficult and catastrophic situation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In recent months, Israeli forces in Gaza have been responsible for the killing of aid workers, medics and journalists, including British citizens among them, and they have been responsible for the targeting of civilian infrastructure. In these circumstances, what possible basis can there be in law for continuing to supply weapons to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: The decisions on weapons licences are not made across the Floor of the House, nor are they made on the basis of emotion. They are made on the basis of the rules clearly set down. They are governed by the advice that we receive from lawyers, and we act in accordance with that advice.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The 1.4 million displaced people kettled in the south of the Gaza strip, precisely where they were told to go, are now facing mass starvation—a humanitarian catastrophe unfolding before our eyes. The Rafah offensive cannot and must not be allowed to happen. The Deputy Foreign Secretary says that he is yet to see a plan, credible or not. But a plan clearly exists if the Israeli authorities are asking 100,000 people to move. Given that he has not been clear to the House on consequences or advice from officials, if there is a breach of international law, at which point are the British Government also complicit?

Mr Mitchell: The Government have made it clear that all countries, and Israel in this conflict, must abide by international humanitarian law. The hon. Member will be well aware that there are consequences for not abiding by international humanitarian law. Britain stands by its own international commitments in that respect, and expects others to do likewise.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister said that we have not seen a credible plan to protect civilians. That has been the case since the shameful atrocities of 7 October. Seven months on and 35,000 deaths on, we get the same lip service and the same drivel about urging Israel to follow international law, all while those on the Labour Front Bench gave them political cover. The UK shamefully continues to send arms to Israel, so if this is found to be a genocide, as I think it will be, and Netanyahu therefore a war criminal, this Government and therefore this country will be complicit, will they not?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member uses lurid language, and he should recognise what the Government are seeking to do, together with our allies in the region and internationally, and support the Government in that endeavour.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I want the Deputy Foreign Secretary to imagine that he was in Rafah. If bombs were being dropped on his family and there was no safe place for them to go, I am sure that he would want Governments such as ours to use every available lever to stop the attacks and that he would rightly expect to receive protection. So why is it different for Palestinians? What will it take for this Government to call for an immediate ceasefire, stop arms sales to Israel and hold Netanyahu to account for his war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member is right to set out the jeopardy of the families that she describes in Rafah. That is why, on so many different fronts, the Government, along with their allies, are trying to bring about a resolution to these matters. The fact that so far we have not been fully successful in that endeavour should not deter us from continuing to try to do the right thing in those respects.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister raises concerns about misrepresentation, so let us be clear: those protesting in Israel in support of the hostages were protesting against Netanyahu and his approach in Rafah. That was not the impression that the Minister gave. Those protesters and hostage families recognise, as does this House, that military action in Rafah, the man-made famine, and the displacement of 100,000 people to a place where they are trying to put tents up in rubble, is not going to lead to the release of hostages or to the two-state solution. It will probably lead to further war crimes. The UK cannot sit this out, so will the Minister at least be honest? He will not tell us why he will not suspend arms sales. Will he tell us whether our intelligence shows that to date British-made weapons and technology have been used in Rafah—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member asks me at the beginning of her question about the extensive demonstrations that have been seen in Israel. She is right about that, which is why I said in an earlier answer that there was a plurality of views in Israel, many of which do not coincide with the views of Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): There is nowhere safe for people in Rafah. There is no relief for people in northern Gaza who are starving as aid is being choked off again. The situation in Gaza is intolerable and there are clear breaches of international law. None of that serves the cause of peace or hastens the release of the hostages. So I ask the Deputy Foreign Secretary, who has been short on detail today: where is the accountability and, specifically, what actions is he taking to ensure the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution requiring a ceasefire and the ICJ interim judgment?

Mr Mitchell: I have clarified one aspect of the ICJ interim judgment, which I hope is helpful to the House. In respect of the details that the hon. Member says are lacking today, I put to her and the House that we have been very open and clear about what we expect to happen. We have argued, and we have used our money and our influence diplomatically to make progress in this matter, and we will continue to do so.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Deputy Foreign Secretary knows that international law applies to all, or it matters to none. He speaks of the right of self-defence, and the House would agree with that, but what we have seen is far beyond self-defence. Outside of all the noise around that day, on 21 February, this House set out its position and said in black and white—no ifs, no buts—that we do not support the offensive into Rafah. That is the position of this House as we stand here today. Given what he has said, it is clear that he does not believe that an offensive into Rafah would be within international law, so is he in that circumstance content with UK-supplied arms being used in that offensive? If not, what will he do about it?

Mr Mitchell: I have made clear where the Government stand in respect of arms sales. There is a strong precedent for how we handle these issues, which certainly was pursued by the Opposition when they were in government. We will continue to operate in precisely the way I have set out to the House in the future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The consequences of Israel's Rafah offensive for the Palestinians are absolutely clear: death, destruction, starvation and disease on a scale even greater than the horrors we have already witnessed. It beggars belief that the Deputy Foreign Secretary comes to this House and cannot set out any consequences for Israel from that offensive. We are here because our constituents hold us to account for what is happening in Gaza. Why does he refuse to hold Israel to account for what is happening there?

Mr Mitchell: I do not recognise the hon. Member's description on the question of accountability. We have been very clear on accountability in this House to all sides in this appalling conflict, and we will continue to be so.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The first thing that aid workers returning from Gaza talk about is the smell, because there are rivers of sewage in Gaza at the moment. The assault on Rafah means displacing people from a place with very poor sanitation to a place with no sanitation and catastrophic health outcomes. Only UNWRA can provide the sanitation needs at scale to solve this. The EU, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Japan and Sweden have all restored funding to UNWRA. The Deputy Foreign Secretary has talked about the zero sum with UNWRA, but funding needs to be fully restored and increased to stop this health and sanitation catastrophe. Why will the Government not increase funding to UNWRA?

Mr Mitchell: I have made clear the process that the Government are going through in respect of our future commitments to UNWRA. I have also made clear that, as far as the current situation is concerned, we have fully funded and met our commitments to UNWRA, and we will make decisions when we have completed our review of the Colonna inquiry and the Office of Internal Oversight Services report from the United Nations.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The earlier comment that Israel should get on and finish the job sent a chill through this Chamber and through the homes of millions of people in our country, because they know what that means: increased numbers of children being massacred in Rafah, and I would like the Deputy Foreign Secretary to distance himself from that comment. Given the evidence in the High Court that says that the UK Government have not received any legal advice on potential violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza since 29 February, can he say what confidence he has that the £13 million-worth of aerial targeting equipment licensed for sale to Israel at the end of 2022, or the £10 million-worth of military support vehicle sales approved in May last year, will not result in the death of civilians in Rafah?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, any Member of the House who asks a question is responsible for what they say and how they say it. From the Dispatch Box, I have given an answer to all the questions that have been asked, whether he approves of them or not. On his second point, where, with great skill, he seeks to flush out a different answer, I have nothing to add to what I have already said on the subject of arms sales.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): At a recent event in Glasgow, I heard the parish priest of Gaza describe the situation as almost like hell on earth. If an individual were to escape that hell in Gaza and make their way to the UK by irregular means, because there is no humanitarian visa and no safe and legal route, is it the Government's position that such a person should be deported to Rwanda?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman asks me a hypothetical question. When he comes up with a specific case where there is a need for a response, I will of course give it to him.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Like most people here, I want to see an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and access to humanitarian aid, but quite frankly I have been absolutely gobsmacked by the Deputy Foreign Secretary's response. I see no levers that the Government are using to influence the Israeli Government's behaviour, and I see the playing with words around what our obligations are under international law in relation to our arms licensing process. As I am reading it here from the UN, if there is a "plausible risk of genocide" we should not be supplying arms to any country. The ICJ has already ruled that there is a plausible risk of genocide, so will the Deputy Foreign Secretary stop dancing on the head of a pin and do something about this?

Mr Mitchell: At the heart of the hon. Lady's question is throwing the word "genocide" across the Chamber, which I do not think is helpful. If she heard what I said earlier, I was, I hope, specifically helpful to the House, in showing why what she said about the ICJ and genocide was totally inaccurate, by quoting the former president of the ICJ.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): We need an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and a massive surge of aid going to all parts of Gaza. As we have warned for months, an Israeli offensive in Rafah would be catastrophic and it must not go ahead. What are the UK Government doing to ensure there is maximum international pressure to stop the offensive from happening and to urgently secure an agreement that includes an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes the point that everyone wants to see a pause in the fighting, a sustainable ceasefire, aid getting in in very significant volumes and the hostages getting out. That is the policy of the British Government. We are doing everything we can, together with our allies, to achieve those aims and we will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Israel has a right to defend its people, a right to have the 135 hostages released, and a right to destroy the four Hamas battalions still operating, whose goal is to murder everyone who is of Israeli or Jewish origin. Following the devastating breakdown of ceasefire talks, will the Minister outline how the Government can continue to work with Israel to see the hostages released and the end to hostilities, bearing in mind that families on both sides of the Gaza conflict are grieving and want an end to bloodshed, and want a future for all their children?

Mr Mitchell: As ever, my hon. Friend accurately, in his first three points, sets out the situation. On his final point, we will continue to work with everyone to try to achieve a resolution to these issues in the way I have set out today.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Having promised that Rafah would provide safe sanctuary, they now demand that the Palestinians must leave. Having frustrated humanitarian aid, they have now seized and closed the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings. Having killed 100 journalists, they have now seized and closed down al-Jazeera in Gaza. On Israel's Government, the former US middle east envoy, Dennis Ross, stated today:

"At a certain point, Netanyahu needs to choose Biden over Ben-Gvir, he needs to choose the hostages over Smotrich."

Do the Government agree with him that we are at that moment?

Mr Mitchell: We listen to everyone who comments on these matters, and we have been at a number of critical points throughout these appalling circumstances, but the hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his question that getting aid through entry points which are currently shut was vital, and we completely agree. We supported the maritime and air initiatives for that reason, but opening up those entry points remains the most important and most effective way of getting aid and humanitarian relief to desperate people.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Everyone in the House knows that the trickling of aid into Gaza has been a stop-start affair, but it is a critical lifeline to support Palestinian civilians none the less. Today that lifeline has been cut off yet again. May I ask whether this represents a failure of the Government's policy, may I ask whether it amounts to a breach of international humanitarian law, and may I also ask, like everyone else, what the consequences will be?

Mr Mitchell: The Government are always in favour of people being held to account for their actions. The hon. Lady will have gathered from what I have said at this Dispatch Box, today and on other occasions, that when there is a need for a transparent inquiry the Government always stand up for it. She said that aid had trickled into Gaza. She will know that as part of the Government's intensive efforts, we have tried to ensure that the volume of aid is increased, and she will have heard what the Israeli Government said about flooding Gaza with aid. We are doing everything we can to increase the flow and hold the Israeli Government to account for what they have committed themselves to doing in respect of aid entering Gaza.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): We all want to see an immediate ceasefire on the part of all parties, and the release of all hostages. The United Nations reports:

"Cases of acute malnourishment among children continue to rise due to the unprecedented food crisis, deteriorating health, water and sanitation services, and widespread fear and stress undermining the ability of mothers to breastfeed their babies."

Aid through Rafah has been very limited, and now that route has been cut off. Does the Minister consider the cutting off of aid routes to the civilian population to be a breach of the ICJ's interim report?

Mr Mitchell: We are trying to ensure that we get aid into Gaza in a number of different ways. The hon. Lady will have heard me set out those ways, and I think we have taken advantage of all the opportunities we can find to increase the amount of aid getting in. We will continue to do everything we can to intensify that approach.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The remit of the International Criminal Court does not extend only to war criminals in the Israeli Government and in Hamas; it extends to any Government who have failed to take reasonable steps to prevent these atrocities. The Minister may be happy to hide behind the defence of “My lawyers said it was OK,” but does he respect the right of UK civil servants to take their own independent legal advice on these matters, and will he give an assurance that no British civil servants will be put under any pressure to do anything if they honestly believe that it would contribute to crimes against humanity or war crimes in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The roles and rights of British civil servants in these matters are very clearly codified, and the Government respect that absolutely.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Deputy Foreign Secretary for coming here today and responding to the urgent question for a few minutes short of an hour and a half.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is on this topic.

On Friday Sir Robert Chote, the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, published a letter pointing out the uncertainties and bias relating to the casualty statistics produced by the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health. Many academic statisticians have also pointed out that the Hamas figures are metronomically linear and obviously fabricated. Members on all sides have used these terrorist figures, some with careless abandon, but Sir Robert said that

“it would be desirable for Ministers, Shadow Ministers and other Parliamentarians to state the source of any estimates they use in the public domain and to recognise”

their limitations. Will you, Mr Deputy Speaker, advise Members to heed the urging of the UK Statistics Authority and to be highly cautious about using Hamas casualty statistics?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. and learned Member for his point of order and for giving notice of it. As he knows, comments made by Members in the Chamber are not the responsibility of the Chair, but he has successfully put his own view on the record.

Defence Personnel Data Breach

4.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I would like to update the House on a data incident involving activity by a malign actor. In recent days, the Ministry of Defence has identified indications that a malign actor gained access to part of the armed forces payment network. That is an external system, completely separate from the Ministry of Defence’s core network, and it is not connected to the main military human resources system. The House will wish to note that it is operated by a contractor, and there is evidence of potential failings by it, which may have made it easier for the malign actor to gain entry. A specialist security review of the contractor and its operations is under way, and appropriate steps will be taken.

The contractor-operated system in question holds personal data of regular and reserve personnel and some recently retired veterans. That includes names and bank details, and—in a smaller number of cases—addresses. In response to the incident, we have undertaken significant and immediate action, enacting a multi-point response plan to support and protect our people. I would like to provide the House with details of this eight-point plan.

First, we immediately took the system offline. That has secured it against similar future threats. Secondly, we have launched a full investigation, drawing on Cabinet Office support and specialist external expertise to examine the potential failings of the contractor and to minimise the risk of similar incidents.

Thirdly, while our initial investigations have found no evidence that any data has been removed, as a precaution we have today alerted those service personnel affected through the chain of command. In addition, we are also sending out letters to a small number of veterans who have retired and who may have been affected as an additional precaution. The House will wish to note that the vast majority of the UK veterans community is, however, unaffected.

Fourthly, specialist advice and guidance on data security has been shared and will be available on gov.uk later today. Fifthly, we have additionally set up a helpline to support individuals. The number for the helpline is 01249 596665, and it will be available from today.

Sixthly, we are providing a commercial personal data protection service for all service personnel. That facility will constantly monitor each individual’s personal data and notify them if there are any irregularities. Even though we do not believe that their information has been stolen, we intend to do that in order to bring further peace of mind.

Seventhly, welfare and financial advice is available where needed through each individual’s chains of command.

Eighthly, on becoming aware of the incident, the MOD stopped the processing of all payments and isolated the system. I want to provide further detail on that step. We are making changes to the system to ensure that it is secure before recommencing payments through it. I confirm, though, that, in the meantime, all April salaries have been paid. Some service personnel will have experienced a slight delay in receiving some expense payments; however, we expect that to be fully resolved today, with the money in their accounts by Friday.

Furthermore, I confirm that we are ensuring that all high-value payments remain unaffected. For example, all outstanding Forces Help to Buy and terminal benefits payments have been facilitated by alternative secure transfer. As mentioned, salary payments and pensions for veterans have not been affected, and we do not expect them to be.

For reasons of national security, we cannot release further details of the suspected cyber-activity behind the incident. However, I can confirm to the House that we do have indications that this was the suspected work of a malign actor, and we cannot rule out state involvement. The incident is further proof that the UK is facing rising and evolving threats. As I set out in my speech at Lancaster House in January, the world is, I am afraid, becoming somewhat more dangerous. Last month, the Government therefore announced an increase in defence spending to meet those new threats, reaching 2.5% of GDP by the end of the decade.

Following this incident, I can announce today that although this incident is entirely unrelated to our own MOD networks, we are also reviewing all personnel data networks to ensure that our people's data is secure. This was the work of a malign actor who compromised a contractor-run network entirely separate from the MOD core system. However, as I have said, we cannot at this stage rule out state involvement from elsewhere. This eight-point plan outlines the immediate and significant action we are taking to protect our most precious resource: our people. Even though this occurred on a contractor's system, with a malign actor involved—and we cannot rule out foreign state involvement—I want to apologise to the men and women affected. It should not have happened, and this eight-point plan seeks to ensure that it is put right and cannot happen again. I commend the statement to the House.

5.1 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): There is deep concern in the House about this grave security breach. The House will accept and note the Defence Secretary's apology to armed forces personnel. We welcome the statement and the multipoint plan, and I thank him for early sight of it.

There will indeed be serious concern in the MOD that news of this big data breach was splashed across the media before the Defence Secretary could set out the facts to Parliament. My overriding concern is for the safety of serving personnel and veterans affected, worried about the risk to themselves and their families and hearing first about the data being hacked from the media and not from the MOD. Our military put their own security at risk when they serve on the frontline, and the very last thing they should have to worry about is their data security back home. Any such hostile action against our forces is utterly unacceptable, and their protection must be the first-order priority for the Defence Secretary, whether on operations abroad or for their data at home.

Despite the Defence Secretary's statement, he still has many serious questions to answer. On the breach itself, who held the data that was hacked? When was it discovered? When were Ministers told? How was it leaked to the press? On the contractor, Defence Business Services says that Shared Services Connected Ltd has the MOD contract for core payroll and other business services.

How many contracts does SSCL or its parent company, Sopra Steria, have with the MOD? What action has been taken by other Government Departments with similar SSCL contracts? On forces personnel, how many serving personnel and veterans have been hit by the hack? Has every serving full-timer and reservist been affected? What support is being offered?

On last night's media reports, has a leak inquiry been launched? The MOD's data security record is getting worse while threats against the UK continue to rise. There has been a threefold increase in MOD data breaches in the last five years, with 35 separate MOD breaches reported to the Information Commissioner's Office and a £350,000 fine last December. Sub-contractors are well known to be the soft underbelly of security, and this latest hack raises serious questions about how the MOD manages its outsourced services.

The media have clearly been briefed that China is behind the hack, but the Defence Secretary tells us only about a "malign actor". The Government rightly have a rigorous system before official accusations or attributions are made, but if this data breach is found to have been carried out by a hostile state, it would represent a very serious threat to our national security.

The Government have been warned. The Intelligence and Security Committee confirmed in its China report last year that cyber-attacks by hostile states now happen daily, and now our wider armed forces community are being targeted. However, the Committee also found there was no cross-Government China strategy, "completely inadequate" resourcing, and defence intelligence with no systematic record of resources focused on China.

The Defence Secretary knows that we are united in this House. We will not stand for any such attacks and, with threats increasing, such flaws in our cyber-security must be fixed. Only then will we make Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

Grant Shapps: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words about the united way in which this House tackles such issues, and there is much of what he says that I can agree with. He asked a number of questions and I will try to rattle off some responses to him.

The chosen date to announce this breach was today, to ensure that we would be able to secure the systems, back up and make sure everyone had their payments made, even if it was not through those systems. The media release last night was coincidental and unwelcome, as far as we were concerned, but unfortunately a lot of people are involved in this. He asked how many personnel had been affected, and the number is 272,000. I stress that that means it is up to that number; the number is still being refined and will probably end up lower, but none the less it is a large number of people and they may have noticed that bank payments were not made, so some of the media will have picked up on that.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the welfare of our personnel is our absolute first priority. I hope that he will agree that the eight-point plan focuses heavily on that and consists of ensuring that they are getting every bit of help and support required. Although we do not think the data is necessarily stolen, we are making the assumption that it has been in order to ensure that personnel get the support required, including through their own data monitoring services, which we are providing to each and every one of them, whether or not they are affected in this particular case.

[Grant Shapps]

The right hon. Gentleman has named the contractor involved, and I can confirm that that is the correct name, SSCL. As I mentioned in my statement, we have not only ordered a full review of its work within the MOD, but gone further and requested from the Cabinet Office a full review of its work across Government, and that is under way. I also briefly mentioned specialists being brought in to carry out a forensic investigation of the way this breach has operated.

Data breaches and this level of attack are nothing new, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to point out, and the House will be aware, that these attacks are growing, to the extent that the MOD's networks are under attack millions of times per day, and they successfully repel those attacks millions of times per day. I stress again, particularly for servicemen and women listening, that this breach does not contain data that is on main MOD systems, and which is of even greater concern to us. It is right that we invest in protecting the systems to ensure that these data attacks are repelled and are not successful.

I would gently say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I think he might expect me to, that one of the best ways to do that is to invest in defence. That is why we are committed to a 2.5% increase, with a fixed timeline and a plan to pay for it, because it means we will be able to do more things, including investing further in cyber-security.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): SSCL was a joint venture with the Cabinet Office—I think there was a legacy minority stake held until last year. As is public, it also provides services to, from memory, the Metropolitan police, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. I welcome the Secretary of State's remark that the investigation will be across Government, because absolutely all areas of Government that are exposed need to be doing the necessary. What specialist support is he receiving from elsewhere in Government, and when might the malign actor be named?

Grant Shapps: As my right hon. Friend will know, the process of getting towards naming—if, indeed, a state-sponsored actor is involved—is a specific process set out by the Butler reforms, and it does take some time to reach such conclusions.

My right hon. Friend asked specifically about the ongoing work with the particular contractor. The Cabinet Office is calling in specialist analysts who will carry out that work over the coming weeks. There are two separate tracks in respect of the contractor in the MOD but also, separately, in the different places across Government that my right hon. Friend rightly identified. I stress to the House—because I suspect that this will be brought up a number of times—that we expect very high standards from our contractors that work with the lives and livelihoods of our service personnel, so we will take all appropriate actions.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement. There was not really much to disagree with in the questions from the shadow Defence Secretary, but I will perhaps ask for a little bit extra. On what the Secretary of State said in relation to there being a

malign actor, I am sure that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who has been bobbing, will not miss the wall when he asks the Secretary of State a question.

There is a bit of concern about the contractor, because it has previous when it comes to delivering Government contracts. Notably, there was a scandal over NHS business services and the running of immigration application systems. Given the seriousness of this issue for the Ministry of Defence, will the Secretary of State advise the House on whether he has confidence that the contractor is able to continue to deliver the contract? Will he consider a review of the specific armed forces payment network element and whether the contract should be brought back in-house and delivered by the MoD, rather than by some conglomerate based in Paris?

Grant Shapps: I can confirm that that review is already under way, and I can go further by saying that I am deeply interested in how this contractor, or indeed any other, behaves. I cannot jump straight to the conclusion of that research, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman would expect me to jump straight to the conclusion of a security review. To answer his question in a more straightforward way, if it were found that there is a better way to do this and we could not be satisfied on security, we would of course consider other options, such as those he suggested.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): With one in five residents of Rutland being veterans or serving personnel, this news will be very concerning to our communities. In the last six weeks it has been concluded that the Chinese Communist party has been responsible for hacking our armed forces, for conducting a cyber-attack on the Electoral Commission and for cyber-attacks on French and British MPs; a German aide was arrested on espionage charges; and two British men were charged with obtaining information useful to an enemy. Attacking our institutions and the people who defend or represent our people is not the act of an ally or a friend, and the British police have explicitly deemed it the action of an enemy. So what is my right hon. Friend doing to make sure that we finally get a cross-Government consensus and get the Foreign Office to change our position on this matter? These are not the acts of a friend or ally; these are the actions of a country that considers itself anathema to our values, our activities and those who defend our interests.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend knows that we take the view that it is absolutely wrong for Members of Parliament to be in any way sanctioned by other countries—I know that she has been sanctioned; I have been sanctioned in other areas, although not by that particular country—and she is right to point out those cases that have been proven, including when the Deputy Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box recently and talked about electoral data. However, it is not the case in this circumstance—I do not want to mislead the House—that there is a proven connection. I stress that although we can see that a malign actor is involved, we have yet to make the full connection to a state. Although, as I pointed out in my statement, I cannot rule out that that might be the conclusion, but we have no evidence to conclude that yet.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): When did the MOD last carry out an audit or review of the security precautions put in place to stop a cyber-attack with this contractor, if it did at all?

Grant Shapps: I can tell the House that, specifically for the MOD estate, we do that all the time—every day. With regard to this particular contract, I am aware that we have been in contact with the contractor about its cyber-security arrangements. For the purposes of national security, I cannot go into detail in the House, but I can perhaps provide the hon. Gentleman with a little further context separately, if that is helpful.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome the fact that the helpline has been established so quickly, and I encourage the Government to be proactive in publishing advice on what people can do, for example to secure their bank accounts. What specialist advice does the MOD routinely seek before outsourcing data on service personnel to external contractors, and what standards must be verified before such outsourcing to a civilian organisation is allowed to take place?

Grant Shapps: It is obviously completely unacceptable for a contractor to leave our brave servicemen and women in this position, so we take it incredibly seriously and are very concerned by what has happened. My right hon. Friend asks about the checks that are in place. Of course, this contract long predates current Ministers, but we are checking through the details at considerable speed. As Members can imagine, we think the contractor has many questions to answer, and the ones that he asks will be included in them.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Intelligence and Security Committee reported last year that the Government were not protecting the UK sufficiently against cyber-attacks, including from China and particularly against our armed forces. The Secretary of State says today that he is sorry, but why did he fail to listen?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned a few moments ago, the MOD successfully defends against millions and millions of attacks each day. The threat is very real—we have that in common with all critical national infrastructure, other Departments and many businesses. That is one reason why the Government have committed to increasing defence spending to 2.5% of our GDP, with a timeline attached, so we will have more money to spend on defending against those attacks. It is one thing to wish for that defence but another to act, which is what we have done.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. We know now that the British Government were warned by the American security services nearly two years ago that the Electoral Commission's system had been hacked and that a number of MPs had been hacked. In the two-year period since, the Government have said nothing about China's role—it was China, and they were warned at the time. In fact, we now know that far more MPs than we thought—nearly 40—were hacked, which was never reported at the time. I am concerned that the Government refuse to say who is responsible in this case, and that it may be another two years before we discover it or it is said publicly.

May I ask my right hon. Friend a very simple question? The FBI director has said that China has a cyber-espionage capacity so vast that it dwarfs everybody else's, and we now know the record of all the direct attacks on us in the House, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), said. Given that the Deputy Prime Minister said in 2023 that the Government were considering placing the People's Republic of China into the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme, why in heaven's name do we not now place this malign actor in that tier and deal with it accordingly?

Grant Shapps: I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about attribution. MPs and the electoral register have been hacked, and he therefore encourages me to jump to the conclusion at the Dispatch Box that the malign actor is China in this case as well. I am simply unable to do that at this stage. He would expect me to follow due process, but I rather support his view that if attribution is required, it should happen in a timely and speedy manner. I undertake from the Dispatch Box to ensure that that happens in this case, and that we do not have many months or years pass by without it being mentioned.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The malign actor did not need to access the armed forces payment network to find out the salary of a British private soldier. A quick search of Google—or indeed Baidu—reveals that the salary of a British soldier on completion of initial training is less than £24,000 a year, which is less than the average UK salary of £35,000 a year. Russia is currently paying its soldiers a starting salary of more than 2.5 million roubles for fighting in Ukraine. Will the data breach by the Conservative Government's contractor shame the UK Government into paying some of our lowest-paid servicepeople a decent salary?

Grant Shapps: That was creative, if nothing else. The fact that we paid a nearly 10% pay increase—9.7% last year—to many ranks of our armed forces, and that the Conservative party has committed to spending 2.5% of GDP, which is a pledge I have not heard repeated by the Opposition, rather suggests that we are prepared to do something about pay and retention.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the great seriousness with which the Secretary of State is taking this appalling data breach, because it really has been awful. I too am convinced that the prime contractors have very significant cyber-security requirements, so it is extremely unlikely that a prime contractor would be hacked in this way. My understanding is that subcontractors and sub-subcontractors down the food chain do not have the same level of cyber-control. We have something called the Cyber Essentials accreditation, but even that is not compulsory. Will the Secretary of State look at the way subcontractors and sub-subcontractors are checked for cyber-security and make that accreditation compulsory rather than voluntary?

Grant Shapps: The concerning thing about this particular incident is that SSCL is a primary contractor, rather than a subcontractor, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the wider issue. The answer is yes: our intention—indeed, our instruction—is to go right the

[Grant Shapps]

way through. As I said in my initial comments, we take this incredibly seriously. It is unacceptable that it happened, and we will take every possible measure, once we have got to the forensic truth of what happened, including against the contractor and any subcontractors.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I understand why the Secretary of State is reluctant to name China, but it seems that every Member in this Chamber believes it is probably responsible for the breach; that is certainly what the media are reporting. I hope the Secretary of State is able to commit to a very clear timescale for coming back with some clarity on that.

I want to ask the Secretary of State about a point that has been made by a number of Members. The outsourced contractors are clearly the weak spot in our system. Will he commit to examining and analysing every single subcontractor, with a view to bringing them back in house in the light of the threats we face?

Grant Shapps: The MOD, as is the case with most militaries, uses a lot of contractors and subcontractors. Let me answer the hon. Gentleman's question directly: yes, the review will encompass all that work, and if we believe we can do this better—many Members may conclude that this would not have happened had that data been held in the MOD and on our own systems—we will endeavour to do that.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): First, I thank the Minister for his call this morning. It is a little frustrating to be told that one's bank details and national insurance number are winging their way to Beijing or wherever they have gone. Given that I was also caught up in the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China breach, I wonder whether I am in the running to be the most hacked MP in Britain.

If it was weak security with the contractor, does that mean it was not a state actor? If the contractor had a high level of security, do we assume it is more likely that a state actor was behind the breach? If there was a state actor behind it, do we assume that it is China, because it has form on stealing mass data and has done so from the US federal Government?

Grant Shapps: I thank my hon. Friend for his service, and I am sorry that he had to receive that phone call about what has happened. I stress that we do not believe the data has necessarily been stolen—there is a danger of running a couple of steps ahead. We have responded with the eight-point plan as if it has been stolen, because we think that is the best position to put everybody in, including my hon. Friend, given the seriousness of the potential breach. I will struggle to answer the detail of the rest of his questions for national security reasons that I hope he will understand. Once again, I undertake that the next stage of this, which is a process set out in the Butler reforms, will be carried out quickly and efficiently.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): We know that the Government consider it likely that China is responsible for this hack, coming hot on the heels of the revelation that it was responsible for the hack on the

Electoral Commission, as was confirmed in March. If it transpires that China is again responsible, will the Government finally stop talking tough on China and labelling it an “epoch-defining challenge”, and start acting accordingly by taking serious measures up to and including diplomatic expulsions?

Grant Shapps: I have outlined the Government's position on this a couple of times, but I do want to note that the hon. Gentleman says “consider it likely”; I am saying that I cannot rule it out. Those are two different things. We need to allow for this forensic work to go ahead before we start attributing it. However, if there is attribution, there will clearly also be consequences.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Well, at least it wasn't Capita. This will be very worrying for service personnel and their families and for veterans, who will feel disrespected by the fact that the Government seem to have briefed that it was China overnight and then not had the nerve to confirm that in the House today because someone rang up from the Foreign Office and said, “Don't do that.” When, oh when, will we start standing up to the Chinese in the way that they are clearly not frightened of doing to us?

Grant Shapps: Indeed, it was not my right hon. Friend's favourite contractor on this particular occasion. None the less, we will be carrying out a comprehensive review of the contractor's work. Again, I want to make it clear to the House that we did absolutely everything that we could to avoid this being made public until I had the opportunity to come to the House. We proactively endeavoured to ensure that our own approach towards removing the data that was online—closing that system down, ensuring the personnel were paid, making sure the alternative payments system was in place for expenses and other things—could all happen ideally before we came to the House. We most certainly did not wish to see nor brief out the story. Unfortunately, as a large number of people were impacted or potentially impacted, it was almost impossible to expect them not to go and talk about it, and I believe that that is how it came into the public domain.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. He is a champion for ensuring that these contractors do the jobs they are actually paid to do. We are now trawling through all the detail and, as I have said before, we will not leave this hanging. We will take every appropriate action because, as he might imagine, my entire team and I are very concerned about the welfare of our personnel—brave men and women who do not deserve to have this happen to them. We do not want to see it happen in the name of the MOD, either.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his positive response in trying to assure our personnel. We saw this type of data breach with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, where information on officers and staff leaked, and the stress was palpable. What steps are the Secretary of State and Government taking to ensure that staff feel safe and protected, and that there is funding available for service personnel protection if necessary?

Grant Shapps: One big difference in this case is that it does not involve a member of armed forces personnel who did something wrong—this was done to them. It is

not a case of someone opening an attachment or something of that nature. This is something that has happened through the system that the contractor ran. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to focus, as I hope I have today and as has the whole House, on the personnel and what it means to them, and in particular on reassuring them. I am grateful for the attitude and approach of the House, which I think will have largely done that for service personnel.

I will not reiterate each of the eight points. However, through the chain of command, the phone number that is now available, the information going on gov.uk and the wraparound services, including the fraud-checking service that staff will now individually have access to and many others, I hope personnel are reassured. Remember that we do not think the data has necessarily been stolen, but we are behaving as if it has in order to provide absolute security.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House so speedily with a great deal about the action that is being taken. I am concerned both about the reluctance to name the malign actor and about the tendency for things to get lost in the Cabinet Office, which has become such a morass of activity.

Who in the Cabinet Office is charged with this responsibility? Is it the National Security Adviser? Which Cabinet committee is overseeing this? Is it the National Security Council itself? I hope so. Which Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff is responsible for cyber-security? Who will be responsible for making sure that all these elements are working together to conduct this review very thoroughly? I suggest that the Secretary of State brings forward a White Paper very shortly on the lessons learned from this incident and others, to provide the reassurance that not least our service personnel need.

Grant Shapps: I stress again that it is not that I am reluctant to name the malign actor, but that we need more information before I can do so. We are not trying to avoid giving the House this information; we need to be certain before we are able to do so.

My hon. Friend asks who in the Cabinet Office is charged with this responsibility, and I have spoken directly with the Deputy Prime Minister to make sure it is set from the very highest levels. My hon. Friend also asks who has overall responsibility, and it is the excellent Chief of Defence People, Phil Hally, who is very good. He has now chaired, I think, 11 internal meetings on this issue, in order to get everything ready for this afternoon. As I have said, it is with deep regret that we did not quite make it to today before the news started to break late last night. Phil Hally is responsible and will continue to be responsible for those efforts.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As an affected veteran, I feel a responsibility for representing and championing my former colleagues in this matter. Will the Defence Secretary please assure me on three particular areas? First, will he assure me that an appropriate diplomatic protest has been made, or will be made, to the guilty party? Secondly, will assurance be given to the House in due course that the firewall protocols given to defence contractors will match or exceed those given to the MOD itself? Thirdly, will he assure me that

the information that has been hacked, if indeed it has been hacked, will be sacrosanct so that no malign actor can gain access to bank accounts after this event?

Grant Shapps: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend. He makes three excellent points, and I absolutely assure him that the guilty party will be brought to book. I also assure him that the MOD was not responsible for failing to issue correct instructions, in terms of the contractual requirement to keep this data safe.

Members on both sides of the House have pushed this point hard, and I will make sure that it is not buried or lost in process. I will return to this House. I cannot promise to do that in the next few days, as the Butler process takes a while, but I will not allow it to drop. The House has my undertaking on that issue.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May I delve into how veterans are being reassured that their data is not being used by, for example, financial scammers? As a Royal Air Force veteran, I am the proud president of the RAF Association in Huddersfield, which I know will be very worried about this issue. Will the Secretary of State be using forces charities such as the Royal Air Forces Association, the Royal British Legion, the RAF Benevolent Fund, SSAFA and many more to reassure veterans that their data will not be used by financial scammers?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we have written to each of those organisations today, both to enlist their support and to provide the detail and information to which the House has been privy this afternoon.

In answer to my hon. Friend's specific question, a commercial organisation will now be monitoring the personal data of the individuals affected. That would include, for example, the data being used in a suspicious way, appearing on the dark web, or any other outcome. In a way, an additional layer of security will be attached to these individuals. Again, I can confirm that, as of this moment, we have seen no suspicious activity at all on those accounts.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is there any indication of how the thief wanted to use the data, if they have actually got it? Have all the staff been advised to change accounts, passwords and internet access in every way, so that no further harm can occur?

Grant Shapps: In answer to the first point, no, there is no indication. On the second point, our regular approach—I speak as someone with an MOD account—is that passwords have to be changed regularly in order to continue to use the system, so those security measures are in place. People do not need to change their bank accounts as a result of this incident. Apart from anything else, using someone's bank details to make a payment somewhere else would be technically difficult, as a new account would need two-factor authentication, so it is not necessary for people to change their accounts. The monitoring service will provide an overlay of additional reassurance to them.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement in qualifying the scale of the breach and the operational changes he is going to introduce. More strategically, it illustrates

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

how the changing character of conflict is impacting our world, with the digital terrain being as important as the physical terrain. That said, had this been a physical, kinetic attack on MOD main building, the House would be demanding some form of proportionate response. Indeed, it could be argued that it would be a NATO article 5 situation. Will the Secretary of State consider the bigger picture, because the rules of engagement and the Geneva conventions are out of date? The Secretary of State is right to say that threats are rising and evolving, but we need to address how errant nations are held to account and what constitutes a proportionate response to a cyber-attack.

Grant Shapps: It is certainly true to say that a malign actor is involved—we know that. It is possible, and I cannot rule it out, that it is attached to a country, but as soon as I say that everyone assumes it therefore is attached to a country. I am not in a position to confirm that at this point, simply because incredibly detailed forensic work is required to get to that point. My right hon. Friend is right that people differentiate, in some senses, between physical attacks and cyber-attacks, but both can be incredibly serious and have enormous consequences. Again, because we do not believe that the information has, in fact, been stolen and because we are monitoring it very carefully through the eight different measures, I stress that in this case there is a degree of feeling that we have caught it and we are controlling it. However, my right hon. Friend's wider point is absolutely correct.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State has been clear about the serious nature of the breach; he has said so several times from the Dispatch Box. He has also said that the contractor failed to follow MOD guidelines and therefore is culpable, to some degree, as far as we can see so far. What sanctions are in place to penalise that contractor? What sanctions will the Secretary of State apply at the limit if that contractor is found to be in breach? Finally, he mentioned addresses. Roughly how many addresses have potentially been leaked? I am deeply concerned not just about bank details but about the safety and wellbeing of those soldiers.

Grant Shapps: I share my right hon. Friend's concern about the safety and wellbeing of those soldiers. Thankfully, the answer is that very few addresses have been leaked—a very tiny number. On sanctions and what will happen, we must not jump the order of events. We have to be confident we are able to run through the audit trail of exactly what has happened. However, I again make it clear from the Dispatch Box that if negligence has been involved, then we will take the strongest possible action as a result. He and the whole House understand that that is our concern this afternoon.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I seek my right hon. Friend's reassurance that there is cross-Government working to identify the vulnerabilities in the system? We have heard this afternoon that a subcontractor's involvement was identified as a vulnerable point. Recently, my constituents had their medical records hacked because, as a small, rural authority, it was identified as more vulnerable. Are

we, across Government and across the United Kingdom, seeking out those vulnerabilities to make our data safer from malign actors and indeed from plain criminals?

Grant Shapps: I reassure my right hon. Friend that the reason I immediately asked the Cabinet Office to be involved is that, although I can do checks on that contractor and others across the MOD and MOD-related contracts, I cannot do so across the rest of Government. That is exactly the job that the Cabinet Office will now undertake. When data is stolen—or rather exposed and potentially stolen—it causes a great deal of concern and we want to ensure that that cannot happen. I reiterate that the data was not being held by the MOD systems and did not affect the MOD systems, but as Secretary of State I recognise that our responsibility extends to whoever is holding the data for our personnel, and I apologise to those involved again. This should never have happened and we will make sure it is put right.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Defence Secretary has reassured us that there is no evidence yet of any data having been removed and there is no suggestion that the MOD's core system and HR network have been compromised. Can he confirm whether there is any evidence yet of ransomware being used? What assessment has he made of whether any data has been published? Although he reassured my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) that the number of addresses that have been accessed is small, can he confirm that those veterans whose addresses have been accessed will be advised accordingly so that they can take security precautions, if need be?

Lastly, on the wider points, can the telephone helpline be used by anyone concerned about late payment of miscellaneous expenses? Will the Secretary of State relay to the Deputy Prime Minister my strong view that the time is ripe for a Cyber Re, or reinsurance, in the same way that we created Flood Re a while back, precisely to deal with the likely costs for small authorities, such as those alluded to, of having to repair their cyber-defences against such future attacks?

Grant Shapps: It is characteristic of my hon. Friend to include five questions in his one. The answers are: no evidence of ransomware; no evidence of data published; a very small number of addresses were accessed, and yes, those people will be contacted individually or as a group if need be; and late payments are unlikely to cause much of a difficulty, as I have said, because they will all be resolved by today and the money will be in people's accounts either now or by the end of the week. However, if personnel have experienced any particular issues, they should take that initially through their chain of command. The phone number is also available and individual instances will be looked at on a case-by-case basis, as he would expect. He has probably taken me slightly out of my area on Cyber Re, which I think will be something for the Cabinet Office to consider. It sounds like a smart idea, but I am afraid he has got me outside my tracks.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As the hon. Gentleman waited very patiently to ask those last five questions, I let him get away with it. I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today and for responding to questions for over three quarters of an hour.

Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (New Drivers)

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

5.43 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about licences issued to new drivers for the period of six months after the issuing of the licence, for the purpose of increasing safety for road users; and for connected purposes.

Since I was elected in 2021 as the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen, road safety has been one of my top priorities and an issue frequently raised with me by concerned constituents. Speeding drivers, high-performance rental vehicles, off-road motorbikes and quad bikes, inconsiderate and dangerous parking and reckless driving blight our towns and villages.

Not long after my election, our community was shocked by a tragic road traffic incident on White Lee Road in Heckmondwike, in which a much-loved local woman lost her life. Our thoughts remain with her family and friends. I have therefore worked closely with the excellent Batley and Spen neighbourhood policing team, local councillors and the West Yorkshire deputy mayor for policing and crime, Alison Lowe, to support the Vision Zero strategy to eliminate fatal collisions on our roads.

That is an ambitious target, but one that other regions and countries have shown is possible with the right measures and resourcing. However, it requires a concerted effort to get there because, despite all the positive advances in road safety in recent decades—from the installation of seatbelts and airbags to drink-driving testing, speed limits, speed cameras and MOTs—it is a tragic and horrifying fact that 29,742 individuals were killed or seriously injured on Great Britain's roads in 2022. As I am sure you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that is a startling statistic. We must never forget that, behind it, thousands of families across the country are grieving and going through unimaginable pain. Lives are changed forever and families torn apart by tragic and often avoidable collisions.

Indeed, I was inspired to introduce the Bill following a meeting that I and colleagues had with Dr Ian Greenwood. Fifteen years ago, he tragically lost his 12-year-old daughter, Alice, in a horrific crash involving a young, inexperienced driver. That 18-year-old driver was racing four of his friends at night time on a rural road when they crashed into the car carrying Ian's two children and their mother. Alice, whose sister and mum were seriously injured, was killed. The 18-year-old driver and their 16-year-old passenger were also killed—three young lives lost. In the face of such enormous personal grief, Ian has steadfastly and courageously campaigned for road safety reform, including the introduction of graduated driving licences.

Sadly, Ian is not alone. On “BBC Breakfast” this morning, we heard from Sam Robinson, the mother of Billy, who was in the passenger seat of a packed, overcrowded car with seven of his teenage friends when it crashed on the way to a birthday party. Billy and the driver tragically lost their lives. The consequences of that awful day will last forever. Ian and Sam's stories are heartbreaking. I know how painful their grief is, and I hope that we can remember them and many others today.

The Bill is not about taking away young people's freedom or fun; it is about trying to save their lives. By giving them the opportunity to build their experience and confidence during the first six months of driving after passing their test, we can try to ensure they have a happy lifetime of driving and the future that they deserve. Road fatalities and serious injuries are not inevitable. Our roads can and must be safer. As the Transport Secretary himself said in March:

“Despite Britain having some of the safest roads in the world, the levels of serious injury and road deaths remain too high.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 776.]

Although there are many ways in which we can and should look at improving road safety, the Bill focuses on one important area of significance: new, often young, drivers who have just passed their test. In 2022, around a fifth of all deaths or serious injuries on our roads were a result of collisions involving cars driven by a young driver. Many of us will remember—just about—becoming new drivers. There is the excitement of passing our test, the independence, the freedom, the feeling of growing up, but what about the inexperience, the nervousness, the underlying lack of confidence, or, sometimes, the overconfidence?

We have a few lessons on local roads that we probably already know quite well, read the highway code back to front, learn all the road signs, master the dreaded parallel parking and then complete a 40-minute practical test before being presented, excitingly, with our full licence for life. We want to celebrate with our mates—maybe with a road trip, or perhaps we offer to be the designated driver on a night out—but we are now driving in a variety of conditions, without the support or guidance of an instructor or an experienced driver. I am sure that we can all see the problem. The danger is obvious.

It is hardly surprising then that, according to the Department for Transport, when compared with vehicles driven by drivers of other ages, the most common contributory factors for fatal or serious collisions involving younger drivers was

“driver failed to look properly”,

followed by “loss of control,” “exceeding speed limit” and “learner or inexperienced driver.” The AA has also found that 71% of fatal collisions involving young drivers were on rural roads—roads where the driver is often unfamiliar with single lanes and blind corners, and roads where experience would instil caution—but currently driving lessons and tests may have failed to give the necessary experience. All this is reflected in the research produced by ALA Insurance Brokers in 2017, which found that almost 28% of drivers aged 25 to 34 admitted to being involved in a crash in their first year of driving.

This is where I believe we can take immediate action to increase safety on our roads. The Bill I am presenting today would place restrictions on newly qualified drivers for the first six months immediately after they pass their test, following consultation. Substantial evidence shows that, during that time, drivers are statistically much more likely to be involved in a collision, often with devastating consequences.

Other countries that have successfully introduced graduated driving licences have included zero-alcohol consumption for newly qualified drivers, as well as restrictions on the number of passengers in the car and

[*Kim Leadbeater*]

on night-time driving, with exemptions, obviously, for work, medical and emergency reasons. Additional options to consider are the inclusion of rural roads, motorways or dual carriageways as part of the driving test, a requirement during driving lessons that a driver gains experience on different road conditions, and consideration of the engine sizes new drivers are permitted to drive within the first few months of passing their tests.

We should consult widely in this country, including with young drivers themselves—although I have to say that the ones I have spoken to would actually welcome some of these changes—and we have to look to other countries and their successful implementation of graduated driving licences. For example, in New Zealand, its graduated driving licence scheme has led to a 23% reduction in car collision injuries for 15 to 19-year-olds and a 12% reduction for 20 to 24-year-olds. We should be looking to countries such as New Zealand, as well as Canada, Sweden and Australia, and learning from best practice.

I am pleased that both the AA and the RAC are fully supporting the Bill, and that graduated driving licences more broadly are also supported by the road safety charity Brake, the Association of British Insurers, Project EDWARD—Every Day Without A Road Death—and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety. Indeed, Edmund King, president of the AA, recently said to “BBC Breakfast” that a six-month graduated driving licence

“is a very small price to pay, and in that 6 months the drivers can get much more experience on the road”.

I therefore strongly believe that this proposal will not only have a very direct effect in reducing the contributing factors to road collisions, but, most importantly, act as a reminder to all novice drivers—actually, regardless of

age—that during their first few months driving on the road they should take additional caution, and take steps to gradually build their confidence and experience on different road types, in different conditions and at different times of day.

I hope Members across the House will consider this proposal seriously and work with me, ahead of Second Reading, to ensure the measures in the Bill are proportionate, evidence-led—the evidence is clear—and effective at significantly reducing road traffic collisions. Finally, I would like to place on record my personal thanks to Ian Greenwood, who I mentioned earlier, whose devastating personal experience prompted his extensive research and campaigning on this issue, which has assisted me throughout. I hope Members will agree that this relatively small measure will be highly effective and, in the years to come, only lead us to question—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am terribly sorry, but the hint was that this is a ten-minute rule Bill, and we have hit the 10 minutes.

This would be the opportunity, if anybody wishes to oppose the Bill, to make a speech. I have had no indication of anybody wishing to do so, and I see no one, so I will put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kim Leadbeater, Tim Loughton, Alicia Kearns, Edward Timpson, Holly Lynch, Lilian Greenwood, Mr Barry Sheerman, Naz Shah and Mrs Paulette Hamilton present the Bill.

Kim Leadbeater accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May, and to be printed (Bill 212).

Defence

5.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defence.

In recent weeks, our armed forces have been required to use force to protect international shipping and to protect our allies. Our armed forces are the best of us; we increasingly need them, and we are increasingly asking more of them as well. When the threat picture changes, the first duty of Government is to respond, which is why this Government have committed to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030, the biggest increase in spending for a generation.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will just make a bit of progress first, keen as the right hon. Gentleman is. That will result in a £75 billion cash boost to our nation's defences over six years from a flat cash baseline. Although we have had a long-held commitment to hit 2.5% when financial conditions allow, delivering that commitment now involves choices.

Mr Jones: If the Secretary of State is serious, can I ask him why next year, if we exclude the Ukraine funding from the defence budget, the core defence budget actually goes down?

Grant Shapps: It does not.

Mr Jones: It does.

Grant Shapps: No, it does not. The outcome from the defence budget, which must be the basis upon which the right hon. Gentleman is judging last year's, includes supplementaries. In particular, it now includes the additional half a billion, which I can tell the right hon. Gentleman I chose to send to Ukraine as an active decision, rather than it coming into our main budget; I feel that that would have the support of the House. When we include all that, the budget increases. In any case, it already increased by 1.8%.

Mr Jones: It does not.

Grant Shapps: I know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to continue this debate, but the fact is that it does as soon as we include the supplementaries.

Mr Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will not for the moment, because this point has been discussed *ad infinitum*. In any case, we are offering another £75 billion in cash terms, which I note that the Labour party has yet to do because the funding requires a determination, in our case, to get the civil service back to pre-covid levels and to help pay for the expansion of our defence. It requires sound economic management and, above all, an understanding that an investment in deterrence today is wiser and less painful than paying to fight a war tomorrow.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State not just confirmed that the amount of money in the budget designated for the British armed forces has, in fact, gone down?

Grant Shapps: No, I still have not confirmed that because, before the extra half a billion, if we take the outcome from last year and the amount that was pledged for this year—including supplementaries, to be clear, which is the same basis as last year—it is an increase of 1.8%. However, this is rather beside the point, because since the time we debated this question at the Select Committee on Defence, we have committed to putting in another £75 billion in cash terms from the baseline over the next six years.

Mr Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Grant Shapps: I think the right hon. Gentleman will want me to complete this section. I would be interested to hear him apply that commitment to his own Front Benchers, because this Conservative £75 billion rise in defence spending is highly significant. It is precisely what our armed forces need to respond to axes of authoritarian states that are trying to reshape the world in their image, and it is the right thing to do.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Rather than Labour Members trying to poke holes in this commitment, would it not be better if they committed to doing the same thing?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend has pre-empted a passage a little later in my speech, in which I suggest that those right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches who want to see more money go into defence might first persuade their own Front Benchers to follow our lead and ensure that we get more money into it. I am very concerned about the apparent failure of the Labour party to match our funding commitment. Labour Members are being incredibly evasive about funding. In addition to not confirming whether they will do the 2.5% in the next six years—we look forward to hearing whether they confirm that—they are also promising, or perhaps I should say threatening, a review of defence. Our enemies will waste no time in putting the UK in their sights if they think that the next thing that would happen is a multi-year review—a waste of time and money that should instead be spent on our brave servicemen and women. Labour's apparent refusal to follow our lead and back our fully funded spending plans would decimate our armed forces by cutting up to £75 billion from defence.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Why does the Secretary of State think that Paul Johnson, in an article on Monday 29 April, said:

"What annoyed me was not the commitment..."—to the 2.5%—

"It was all about the misleading and opaque way in which the additional spending was presented. When it wanted to make it look big, the Government claimed it would boost spending by £75 billion; when it wanted to appear fiscally responsible... It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes, or even the head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, to see that there might be something not quite consistent about these claims."

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that the way this is presented is entirely the usual way for the Treasury to present increases in spending. If I take him back to the previous cash boost for defence—I think it was £24 billion and it was described, I think, as being over five years—it was presented on

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exactly the same basis, and I do not remember the hon. Gentleman making the same point then. Regardless of the numbers, surely the point is this: will the Labour party commit to this timeline?

Labour Members said that they wanted to get to 2.5%, and that they would do it when conditions allow. We have now said that we know conditions will allow because of the management of the economy. Will they follow us, or will they send their Back Benchers out to criticise an increase, even though their own Front Benchers will not match it themselves? Perhaps we should not be surprised, given that the Leader of the Opposition, not once but twice backed Jeremy Corbyn—sorry, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—to be Prime Minister. The Leader of the Opposition proclaims his support for our nuclear deterrent, yet he has stacked his Front Bench with anti-nuclear campaigners—I counted 11 who voted against Trident—while he goes up to Barrow and claims he is all in favour.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Secretary of State is doing, like last time he came out on this debate, his used-car salesman act. The fact of the matter is clear: the only way we get to £75 billion is if we freeze the defence budget for the next six years. Is he going to do that? Given what he announced last week, will he explain first where the money is coming from, and secondly what is the proportion of resource departmental expenditure limits and capital departmental expenditure limits? There is no detail at all. It is just an empty promise and a political slogan that he is batting around as his usual avuncular self.

Grant Shapps: The way the right hon. Gentleman tries to represent it is simply not true. If it were meaningless, why has his own party not taken the difficult decisions to get to the £75 billion which, to be clear, is the amount additional to what is currently programmed in? He is right that defence budgets may have increased over time, but £75 billion is still the additional figure. If it is so straightforward, why doesn't he encourage those on the Labour Front Bench to do it? I think I know the answer. He asks how it will be paid for, and it will largely be paid for by cutting the civil service back down to pre-covid levels. Labour Members do not want to cut 72,000 from the workforce of the civil service so that it goes back down to pre-covid levels, and because of that they will not follow us in our commitment. That shows where their choices lie.

Labour Members say they want 2.5% and are keen to see that, but they are not willing to put in place the difficult decisions to reach that. By failing to take those decisions, they will be failing to fund our armed forces if they were to come into office. That would leave our nation more vulnerable, and play directly into the hands of our adversaries, including Putin.

In January, I set out a comprehensive case for increasing defence spending in response to what I described as "a more dangerous world". After all, Putin is on the march, pursuing wars in the east of Europe while backing greater political influence and assassinations in the west. China has certainly become a lot more assertive in recent years. Russian mercenaries, Islamic extremists and military strongmen have overrun democracies and societies in Africa.

As Iran has nourished and manipulated its proxy militia and groups around the middle east, the Islamic republic itself has for the first time carried out an aerial assault on a democratic near-neighbour, Israel. Its Hamas terrorist allies brought mass murder to Israelis on 7 October, and they have brought pain to the Palestinians—both before and since—with the Hamas approach to running that area. Meanwhile, one of Iran's other key allies—the Houthis—continues to hold global trade hostage in the Red sea. So, from Moscow to Tehran and from Beijing to Pyongyang, a network of authoritarian states is pressuring allies and our interests. Working together, they are more connected than they have ever been before.

Bob Seely: The Secretary of State is making a really important point. Without sounding too academic, do we actually know what war is nowadays? Clearly, there is conventional war, which we recognise, but what he is talking about is proxy war. Earlier, we were discussing cyber-attacks, China's and Russia's role in this sort of hybrid war, and the integration of military and non-military means, which is behind military doctrines in an increasing number of countries. Are we joined up enough to be able to fight these modern conflicts, which are part military and part non-military? Do we actually understand what conflict is in this century?

Grant Shapps: It is true—my hon. Friend will know this as well as or better than me—that in each generation the world relearns what it is to have conflict. We have seen that with Russia, we are seeing it at the moment in the middle east, and we have seen it, as discussed, through various cyber-activities, which are in fact entirely continuous; it is just that most of them do not succeed.

The world has changed, the defence reviews and the refresh looked to try to learn those lessons. One of the things, not least because of Britain's forward-leaning approach to the war in Ukraine, has been that we have been at the forefront of learning some of those new lessons with drones and other technologies; indeed, we have been speeding up the introduction of new technologies such as laser weapons. It is important that we think about this as a whole rather than just through the traditional eyes of three armed services. We now have to think about space and the domain in cyber, and that is what our strategic command does.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a good case. Does he agree that, as this extra money is available, we should ensure that more of it is spent on procuring weapons and military requirements here in the United Kingdom, because we cannot be properly defended unless we can make our own military vehicles, our own steel and our own explosives? We are short of capacity.

Grant Shapps: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is incredibly important that we develop—or, rather, further develop—our own domestic defence industrial base. That is one of the reasons why we have spoken about putting that industrial base on a war footing, and it is one of the reasons why—this is not, as has been suggested, some sort of cheap gibe—it is important that the Government, or indeed the Opposition if they want to be the Government, set out the path in order that that investment can take place. That base will not be able to invest unless it knows what is happening on a multi-year basis.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I have been quite generous; I will make a little bit of progress.

That is why this Conservative Government will act now. We are going to deliver the greatest strengthening of our national defence since the cold war. Some will argue that the threats we face are perhaps not imminent or existential. They may claim that increased defence spending is not a good use of money, which perhaps should go on other commitments—there are many to discuss—but I argue that we have seen the consequences up and down the country of the more dangerous world that I described in that Lancaster House speech.

In recent years, we have suffered terror attacks. We have also suffered cyber-attacks on business, on Government, as we were just talking about, and on critical national infrastructure. They were mostly not successful, but the amount that it costs to get around them increases all the time none the less. We have suffered intellectual property theft. We have seen Hong Kong protesters dragged into the Chinese consulate in Manchester and beaten. We have seen Iranian journalists threatened and stabbed in London. We have seen former Russian military officers assassinated in hotels in Mayfair and poisoned in suburban homes in Salisbury and, just last month, British citizens charged with setting fire to Ukrainian-linked business units in east London, apparently on the instructions of Russian intelligence.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has compellingly described the current situation as moving from post-war to pre-war. Does he share my concern that the people of this country, as a whole, are not yet in a place to understand the seriousness of the problem, that there is in some sense, therefore, the beginnings of an issue of consent, and that it is harder than it should be for young people to get excited about joining some of our big contractors and supporting the work we are doing for our armed forces on diverse fronts around the country? If that is true, does he think that there is a specific role for the Ministry of Defence to lead the process of building consent across the UK?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One issue we face is that if you are not Iranian or Russian and living in the UK, you may believe that this does not affect you too much. My entire argument—indeed, the argument I made at Lancaster House—is that this is not just something that impacts on foreign nationals in the distance; we are all, in effect, under attack. For evidence of that, we can see up and down the land the direct impact on every single family as Putin drove into Ukraine. Every single household budget in Britain was under attack. Remember, the winter before last we were paying up to half of the average family's energy bill. This really does matter back home. It is again why I stress that defence is the cheapest version of looking after ourselves, not the most expensive one. That is why it is so important that, with Putin inflicting that inflation on British households and British business, we wake up to that fact and understand it. I actually think the British people do understand. They do want us to do more. It is popular to make sure that we properly defend these isles and defend our interests overseas. That is why this party has been proud to bring forward this big boost to our national defence.

As was mentioned earlier, this year I have—because this battle is so very important for all of us, not least our Ukrainian friends—provided another half a billion pounds of aid to Ukraine. That will take our total 2024 military package to a record £3 billion, which is the most we have provided in any year. Previously, it was £2.3 billion and £2.3 billion. It brings our total support overall to £12.5 billion, in addition to other aid. In addition, to help Ukraine repel Russia's mounting attacks, we gave, a couple of weeks ago, the largest tranche of military gifting assistance to date.

It is worth reiterating the size and scale of that, because I fear that with the announcement of the 2.5% and the trajectory—I think all Members believe that Ukraine's win is absolutely existential and important—the scale of the gifting was perhaps not noticed. It included 4 million rounds of ammunition, 1,600 key munitions, including air defence and precision long-range missiles, all our remaining AS-90 artillery platforms, 60 combat boats, 400 armour-protected and all-terrain vehicles, and hundreds of bombs for Ukraine's new fleet of F-16 combat aircraft. Just as we initially provided our Ukrainian friends with trained troops, anti-tank missiles, main battle tanks, missiles and so many other firsts, we will now ensure that the aircraft we cannot provide for them—we do not fly F-16s—are properly provided with munitions.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State's personal commitment to Ukraine is second to none. Does he agree with me that if Putin is seen to fail in Ukraine, the threat to western Europe, the United Kingdom and NATO countries will recede for a generation? If Putin is seen to gain any sort of victory in Ukraine, the opposite will happen.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. That is precisely the point, and that is exactly why it is right to invest in Ukraine. I do not want to make this a political speech—

Mr Kevan Jones: It's the way you tell them.

Grant Shapps: This is a serious issue, and I am surprised by that sort of attitude. I want to ask, because it is a serious point, whether the Opposition are now ready to commit to that extra £500 billion if they were elected, because I have yet to hear that confirmed, and that is an important issue for our Ukrainian friends. I accept that the Ukrainians have the Opposition's support, but they also need the pledge of money and the certainty that this House will provide it, come what may.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): If I heard the Secretary of State correctly, a few minutes ago he said that we have now gifted all our AS-90 howitzers to Ukraine. We are buying 14 new Archers. We are then buying a completely different system based on Boxer, which will take some years to come into service, and our multiple-launch rocket systems are being refurbished. What is he doing to ensure that the British Army is not left without heavy artillery for the next few years, because what he is talking about is a dangerous risk?

Grant Shapps: As my right hon. Friend will realise, it is not a move I have taken easily. There is a balance to be struck between where the weapons can do the most

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good and the extraordinarily difficult fight that our Ukrainian friends are in right now. I thought, believe and think that that warrants the provision of further AS-90s. The new equipment, as I do not need to tell him, is vastly superior and will be in our hands quickly, not least because of the excellent work of the Minister for Defence Procurement, who has sped up the acquisition of new equipment through his brilliant integrated plan.

I want to be entirely clear with the House: there are choices to make when we do this gifting, and we have to make the choices as to where we think the equipment will be most useful and how quickly we can replenish it. One of the very good things about this significant boost in defence spending, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) will appreciate, is that it will enable us to replenish not only equipment but, crucially, munitions, which have been a real concern of his and many others.

Bob Seely: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will make a little progress, if I may.

We have pledged this half a billion pounds extra, so we are at £3 billion a year. The crucial point—it has perhaps been lost, or perhaps I have not said it from this Dispatch Box—is that over the course of the next Parliament, this party in government would provide £15 billion of guaranteed aid to Ukraine. When I speak to President Zelensky or my opposite number, Minister Umerov, they make it clear that the certainty of that funding is the most important thing we can do right now. I implore and invite other parties to suggest that they would follow that pledge, in order to provide that certainty to the Ukrainians right now. It matters now that the Ukrainians have certainty that that aid will be there, come what may and regardless of electoral cycles elsewhere, even though we will still be here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to defence and the extra money for the budget. I know that he is very committed to the defence sector in Northern Ireland, and we want to encourage that. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is doing an inquiry on defence procurement for Northern Ireland and is suggesting that there should be a regional hub, because that will encourage more companies from Northern Ireland to be involved and be part of that spend for defence over the next couple of years. First, is the Minister aware of what the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is doing on procurement? Secondly, other firms such as Nitronica, an electronics manufacturing firm in Ballynahinch, wish to be part of defence procurement but have not had the opportunity. It is important that we all play our part. I think the Secretary of State will agree with me, but I am curious to hear whether there is a plan.

Grant Shapps: I certainly do agree: all parts of the United Kingdom have a very important role to play, especially Northern Ireland, where missile production, ships and electronics are particular skills. It is important for people there to have a level of certainty that we intend to invest and will carry on investing. Today we can outline exactly how much we would spend each year in the future. By doing so, it is worth them investing. It is cheaper for them to invest. The cost of capital to

build and maintain factories falls when we provide that certainty. I therefore hope that the Labour party will match our long-term pledge to Ukraine and to defence spending, because there is no way that warm words about defence spending make a difference to the frontline; the difficult choices have to be made. We have made our choices and we will reduce the size of the civil service back to pre-covid levels. Labour can make its own choices, but I encourage it to join us in the defence boost pledge.

There is no more important element of defence than our nuclear deterrent. Again, it is good to hear that both sides of the House now seem to back the nuclear deterrent, but that cannot be done without backing the money to support it.

Sir Julian Lewis: It is true that both sides of the House strongly back the nuclear deterrent at the moment, if my right hon. Friend is talking about the Labour Opposition. However, with recent talk of the prospect of a hung Parliament, one could find oneself in the same situation as the Cameron Government in 2010, when the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) and I were begging for a vote to be held to renew the nuclear deterrent, but because of the coalition deal with the Liberal Democrats, that vote was postponed, at great expense, for four years until 2016. We would like to hear assurances from both Front Benches that no such situation will ever be allowed to arise again.

Grant Shapps: I am pleased to reassure my right hon. Friend from this Front Bench that no such delay would be countenanced. Just in the last few weeks we have issued the defence nuclear enterprise Command Paper—[*Interruption.*] I thought the Opposition Front Bench knew that there was a coalition Government, but perhaps they missed it. Perhaps they also missed the point that my right hon. Friend was making.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, and I can offer him the assurance that the Liberal Democrats embrace the continuous at-sea deterrent with four submarines. What is more, the strategic environment in which we were operating in 2010 was very different from that which we see today: the Liberal Democrats made the right call then, and we have made the right call now.

Grant Shapps: You heard it here first, Madam Deputy Speaker. I warmly welcome that commitment, which was not available under the then coalition Government. It is an important moment, and I welcome that commitment from the hon. Gentleman, as I welcome it from Labour.

I gently remind the House that 11 Opposition Front Benchers have voted against the deterrent in their time here, including three members of the current shadow Cabinet, including the shadow Foreign Secretary, the shadow Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary, and the shadow Deputy Prime Minister. The House is right to ask, and the country will want to know, whether that commitment is as firm as we now hear it is from the Liberal Democrats. It will also want to know, even if the commitment is said to be firm, whether Labour is prepared to fund it. Again, it comes back to the 2.5%.

John Spellar: Can we be clear that, as was kindly referenced by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), that situation was the result of a failure of political judgment and will by David Cameron? He could have said to the Liberal Democrats, “This is a matter of strategic national interest. If you don’t like it, you can give up your jobs and walk out of the Government.” They would have bottled it. The fact was that we lost six years and a huge amount of money, and we are putting CASD at real risk with enormously elongated tours of duty for our tremendous submariners.

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Gentleman wants to relitigate the past, but I think we all agree that we cannot do anything about it. I want to talk about the future, and the future is that those on his own side have yet to commit to the 2.5% that is required to ensure that our nuclear deterrent can deliver on time. In March the Prime Minister and I published the defence nuclear enterprise Command Paper, setting out our long-held and unshakeable commitment to our own independent nuclear deterrent.

Mr Francois: I appreciate my right hon. Friend’s desire to look forward rather than back but, just for the record, does he remember, as I do, that at one point the Liberal Democrat policy on Trident was to maintain the submarines but to send them to sea without any missiles?

Grant Shapps: I will be as diplomatic as possible: the Liberal Democrats asked us to investigate a range of options, and I am very pleased that the one we ended up with was the four-submarine continuous at-sea deterrent.

We are investing £41 billion in our next generation of the Dreadnought fleet, and investing in our replacement UK sovereign nuclear warhead as well.

Derek Twigg: The Secretary of State mentioned the Command Paper. Page 89, in paragraph 10, refers to “protecting ourselves...against attack from the skies”.

We know from what has happened in Ukraine, and more recently in Israel, how important our air defence missile system is. The Command Paper continues:

“To counter these threats, we will step up our efforts to deliver an Integrated Air and Missile Defence approach.”

Can the Secretary of State tell us where we are with that?

Grant Shapps: I should point out that there are a wide number of differences for us, because within Nato—this relates to article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty—we are in a different region from, for example, Israel, which was recently attacked. We have a number of layered approaches to defending our skies, including the quick reaction alert. However, the hon. Gentleman will be interested to hear that we are working with our European friends and allies on a European sky shield to do something along the lines of what he has described. It should be understood, however, that there are considerations regardless of which direction we take, because, again, the money can only be spent once, and we would have to consider what else we were or were not going to achieve in defence. So we use a layered approach, but we are actively working on exactly what the Command Paper describes.

John Spellar: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I am a little concerned about not giving others an opportunity to contribute, but I will allow the right hon. Gentleman one last intervention.

John Spellar: Was the Secretary of State not a member of the Government, and indeed chairman of the Conservative party, during the period we are discussing when the Government did not renew Trident?

Grant Shapps: I think the right hon. Gentleman will now understand why I was so pleased to trounce the Liberal Democrats when it came to that election—to squeeze them out of government and ensure that we could get on with Trident as we always wanted to. I encourage his party to join us in that commitment, backed up with money—not just photo-opportunities in Barrow, but money to deliver the nuclear deterrent.

I now want to make some progress. I want to talk about Putin’s war, and the way in which it has underlined the vital role of conventional forces. From the Red sea to the skies over Iraq, our armed forces are already doing incredible work globally in protecting and advancing our interests every day. In the ongoing Exercise Steadfast Defender, they are currently making up 20% of this year’s NATO exercise, itself the largest since the cold war. I have been to visit some of them in Poland.

We are investing £8.6 billion in Army equipment during this decade to make our ground forces more integrated, agile and lethal. That includes the new Boxer and the long-awaited Ajax armoured fighting vehicles, as well as the new Challenger 3 tanks, of which I saw the second prototype come off the production line in Telford just last month—the first British-made tank for 22 years.

Our United Kingdom is at its strongest when we stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies, and therefore our commitment to NATO will only ever increase. That is why it is so important that we have been prepared to set out how to get to 2.5%. At the 2014 NATO summit at Newport in Wales, we set a target of 2% to be reached by this year; we are now extending that to 2.5%, and we invite other countries to join us.

NATO has become stronger because of Putin’s actions in Ukraine. It has added members: two new members have joined us, and we therefore outgun Putin on every single metric. We have three times as many submarines and fighter jets, four times as many tanks, helicopters and artillery pieces, four and a half times as many warships, six times as many armed vehicles, eight times as many transport carriers and 16 times as many aircraft carriers. But it is important that NATO works together and sticks together. It is also important that we send a signal to NATO that the second biggest spender in absolute terms intends to increase that expenditure—that has been widely welcomed by other NATO members that I have spoken to in the past couple of weeks.

The importance of that iron-clad alliance is the third lesson of Putin’s war. Since 2022, we have worked hard with our NATO partners to enlarge the alliance and bolster its eastern flank. We have also worked hard with our closest partners on a range of top-end procurement programmes, from sixth-generation combat jets with Italy and Japan to cutting-edge nuclear-powered submarines with Australia and the United States.

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The fourth lesson of Putin's war is that the battle in Ukraine has needed ever more innovation—new tech, new drones. As we ramp up our defence spending to 2.5%, we will put high-tech innovation right at the heart of our plans. I recently visited the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, and we agreed to ringfence 5% of the defence budget for research and development over the next year, and to improve our strategic defence research.

Bob Seely: As I am sure my right hon. Friend knows, the Royal Navy's radars are made in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. Can we please have a radar strategy for a new generation of radar, and not just for the Royal Navy but for the RAF and ballistic missile defence?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before the Secretary of State comes in, I am slightly conscious that 13 Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to make speeches, so there will be an impact on the length of those speeches if we are not careful.

Grant Shapps: I will be less generous with interventions and will rattle through the remaining important content for our military services.

We are building on the recent defence drone strategy and our £4.6 billion investment in uncrewed technologies over the next decade. As we discussed earlier, AI and other tech advances are transforming the way warfare is fought, and our pan-defence procurement reforms have enabled a speeding up of our ability to deliver new technology. I have mentioned DragonFire several times at the Dispatch Box, and it will be delivered five years early.

Fifthly and finally, Putin's war in Ukraine has underlined the need for all NATO allies to rebuild their stockpiles and grow their defence industrial base. To keep our defence production lines running, we have reformed the procurement process to prioritise exportability from day one. That is now an accredited part of UK production when we make procurement decisions. Our £75 billion boost for defence includes an additional £10 billion to produce even larger stockpiles of munitions over the next decade. That gives certainty to industry and boosts our regions.

Defence supports hundreds of thousands of jobs across the UK, and the boost for defence will provide even more opportunities—opportunities for apprentices and for seasoned engineers. Those jobs would be at risk if the path to 2.5% were not followed, so it is very important that we give that commitment to our defence personnel. We undertake to do that, but we will go further: we will also invest £4 billion in military accommodation, because we recognise that retention, as well as recruitment, is so important. That £4 billion would not exist without the increase to 2.5%. We are also ensuring that there are wraparound childcare services for service families and the service pupil premium.

I thank—as I know the whole House will—the committed, professional and courageous members of our armed forces for everything they do for us in more difficult times. They keep us safe. We are backing them with more money and, in a more dangerous world, I think that is the right thing to do. As I go to Washington

with the Prime Minister for the NATO summit in July, we will be saying to other NATO countries, "Follow our example. Follow us because it is the right thing to do and because it is cheaper and more effective than waiting for wars and conflicts to break out." I encourage other Members of this House to follow us.

6.35 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome this defence debate in Government time. The defence and security of Britain is an increasing public concern in this country. You said that 13 Members had put in to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to each and every one of those contributions. We have pulled in some of the very best in this House on defence for this debate.

I start by paying tribute to our UK armed forces, who are in action defending international shipping in the Red sea, reinforcing NATO allies on the Russian border and protecting all of us in Britain 24/7. Our forces are respected for their total professionalism worldwide. They have a right to expect our full support, on both sides of this House, and in this defence debate they will get it.

This is an era of increasing threats to our UK security, our prosperity and our values. To deal with this more dangerous world, we need a new era for UK defence to deter threats, to defend the country and to defeat attacks. Over the next decade, we face an alliance of aggression from autocrats who have contempt for international law and freely squander the lives of their own people. With Putin's war in Europe now into its third brutal year, the Ukrainians, civilians and military alike, are fighting with huge courage. They have regained half the territory taken by Putin and disabled his Black sea fleet, but Russia shows resurgent strength, with its economy now on a wartime footing and its Government spending 30% of their total budget on the military.

I am proud that the UK is united for Ukraine. In response to the Secretary of State's invitation, the Opposition give our full backing to the Government's increased UK military aid for this year and following years, as well as to the long-term UK-Ukraine security co-operation agreement. Let us take the politics out of this country's backing for Ukraine. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said to President Zelensky in Kyiv, while there may be a change of Government at the election, there will be no change in Britain's resolve to support Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes.

That is because the first duty of any Government is to keep the nation safe and protect our citizens. The defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. If Putin wins, he will not stop at Ukraine. I say very clearly that Labour will always do what is needed and spend what is needed on defence. When Labour was last in government in 2010, Britain was indeed spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, the British Army had over 100,000 full-time troops and satisfaction with service life was at 60%.

Bob Seely: The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) has done really good work with me on the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, and I pay him credit for that. Whenever we take folks to Ukraine, we try to take as many from the Opposition side of the House as from the Government side. The right hon.

Gentleman says that he will do whatever needs to be done, but expenditure requires long-term planning, so I just want to confirm for the record that he is saying that he will meet the £15 billion of expenditure that the Secretary of State has outlined and the £75 billion of expenditure the Secretary of State has outlined for the growth of the armed services budget.

John Healey: I will come on to the £75 billion in a bit, but the hon. Gentleman asked about Ukraine. The Government's increase in military aid for this year and following years has Labour's full support. Every commitment of UK military aid since Putin invaded has had Labour's fullest support; that will continue.

We in the Labour party have deep roots in defending this country. Throughout the last century, it has been working men and women who have served on the frontline, fighting and sometimes dying for Britain. It was Labour that established NATO and the British nuclear deterrent—commitments that are unshakeable for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras as Labour leader and for everyone who serves on the Labour Front Bench.

We are a party with deep pride in forging international law and security—the Geneva conventions, the universal declaration of human rights, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty were all signed by Labour Prime Ministers—and we are a party with deep respect for the serving men and women of our armed forces. Theirs is the ultimate public service. They defend the country. They are essential to our national resilience at home.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I endorse what the right hon. Gentleman is saying and echo his support for the Government's backing of Ukraine. Does he agree that perhaps over the last 25 years, across both sides of the House—I will take my own share of responsibility for this—and maybe across the west as a whole, we have been complacent about the post-cold war situation and about the fragility or vitality of our defence of western liberal democracy?

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one way to demonstrate that we have understood that we are now in a different place is to reverse the cuts to our armed forces? Backing our soldiers—our men and women who put themselves in harm's way—involves backing them with the resources to increase their numbers and to get the size of the Army up to, say, 100,000, so that we can demonstrate to the rest of the world that we are serious about standing shoulder to shoulder with our NATO colleagues and defending democracy and freedom around the world.

John Healey: I agree with the hon. Gentleman only to a point. In his speech to the House, the Defence Secretary set out the range of increasing threats that this country and our allies now face. Those threats are very different from those of 14 years ago, so it is not simply a question of reversing the cuts that we have seen in recent years; it is a question of matching the requirements needed for the future with the threats that we face.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that defence has to be a consensual matter. All the work I have done with

the Labour Front-Bench team has been very consensual, because they have talked a great deal of sense. Every single thing that the shadow Secretary of State has said this afternoon could easily have been said by a Conservative Secretary of State—there is nothing wrong with it whatsoever. Will he therefore continue that worthwhile cross-party consensus by agreeing to match our defence spending commitment of 2.5% of GDP?

John Healey: We share the ambition to hit 2.5%. Our commitment to 2.5% is total. We will do it in our own way and we will do it as soon as we can. I will come on to the flaws in the plan set out by those on the Government Front Bench.

James Gray: The right hon. Gentleman is extremely generous to give way again. There is a very important difference here. Ours is an absolute 100% cast-iron guaranteed pledge to spend 2.5%. Will he match that?

John Healey: I am afraid there is nothing cast-iron about the figures, the plan or, indeed, the proposals for paying for it. I will come to that in a moment.

Before I took the first intervention from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), I wanted to pick up a final point that was made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on the question of reviewing what we need to face the threats that we now face. The Defence Secretary is dismissive about the need for a strategic defence review, despite the fact that his own Department is preparing for exactly that, whatever the result of the next election. That was confirmed in the House last month by the Minister for Defence Procurement. He also made the point a month before, when the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) talked about a defence review and the Minister for Defence Procurement said,

"he makes an excellent point."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 27.]

The problem for the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, who was involved in the five years of coalition government after 2010, and the problem for the Conservative Front-Bench team, who have been in government for the past 14 years, is that people judge Governments on what they do, not on what they say.

The Defence Secretary mentioned his January speech at Lancaster House, and he is right when he argues that what we do on defence sends signals to the world. What signal does it send to Britain's adversaries when our armed forces have been hollowed out and underfunded since 2010, as his predecessor admitted in this House last year? What signal does it send to our adversaries when defence spending has been cut from 2.5% under Labour to 2.3% now, when day-to-day defence budgets have been cut by £10 billion since 2010, and when the British Army has now been cut to its smallest size since Napoleon?

Mr Kevan Jones: The present Defence Secretary was chair of the Conservative party until 2016. Is it not also a fact that, when the Conservative party was in coalition government, it cut the defence budget by 18% and not only reduced the size of the Army but made people compulsorily redundant? Had a Labour Government done that, we would have heard howls and cries from Conservative Members.

John Healey: I said a moment ago that Governments and Ministers are judged by what they do, not by what they say. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and independent Library figures confirm that 18% cut in defence spending over the first five-year Government led by the Conservatives after 2010.

What signal does it send to our adversaries that defence procurement has been condemned by the Public Accounts Committee as “broken,” that at least £15 billion of taxpayers’ money has been wasted through MOD mismanagement, and that procurement delays to Ajax and Wedgetail are putting our NATO commitments at risk? What signal does it send to our adversaries when forces’ recruitment targets have been missed each and every year for the past 14 years, when satisfaction with service life and morale have fallen to record lows, and when military families live in damp housing and use food banks to get by?

Even after Putin invaded Ukraine, this Government cut a further 4,000 troops from the British Army, took 287 days to sign a new contract to replace the NLAW anti-tank missiles to restock our armed forces and, according to the National Audit Office, created a £17 billion black hole—the biggest ever—in the defence equipment plan this year. It is no wonder the Secretary of State wants to talk about the future, not the past. This is the Tory record of 14 years of failure on defence. Our armed forces simply cannot afford another five years of the Conservatives.

Let me say again that people judge Governments by what they do, not by what they say. The Defence Secretary now thinks he has the answer to every problem—a magic wand, a get-out-of-jail-free card—but the Prime Minister’s announcement last month that the Conservatives will raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030 is of course the same level that this country spent with Labour in 2010. Boris Johnson made the same promise two years earlier, and the Conservatives have not delivered it in any of the five Budgets or autumn statements since. None hit 2.5%, none reversed the real cuts in resource spending and none matched Labour’s record.

Everyone recognises that defence spending must rise to deal with increasing threats. We share the same ambition as the Government, and we are totally committed to spending 2.5% on defence. We want a plan that is fully costed and fully funded in Government budgets. Our armed forces deserve no less.

Bob Seely *rose—*

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Francois *rose—*

John Healey: I will give way to two of his colleagues who have not yet intervened on me, and then I am sure I will come back to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely).

Mr Francois: Governments should be judged not by what they say, but by what they do. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Wedgetail. If Labour were in government, would it specifically commit to going back to the original five Wedgetail AEW aircraft, rather than the three that are now on order? Is that what Labour would not say, but do?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman knows the difficulty of serving in this House and debating defence issues from the Opposition Benches. He knows we simply will not have access to the classified information on threats, the capabilities we need, the state of the armed forces or even the true state of public finances until we open the books. Those are the sort of decisions that we will make in a strategic defence review within the first year of a new Labour Government. That is the way that we will balance the requirements for national security with the responsibilities for sound public finances.

Bob Seely: Is there not a simple problem here, though? Labour may be committing to a defence review, but that review will take nine or 10 months—maybe a year. That simply means that it avoids spending or matching those increases for a period of at least 18 months. That is a significant problem.

John Healey: I think the hon. Gentleman needs to have a word with those on his own Front Bench, because the Department is at the moment planning a fresh review, whatever the outcome—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it is, whatever the outcome of the election. The problem for the hon. Gentleman is that the 2030 target is not in the Government’s financial plans; it is in a press release. We cannot rebuild the UK’s armed forces, let long-term procurement contracts, deter those who threaten us or defeat Putin with press releases. If this 2030 plan had been in a Budget, it would have been independently checked, openly costed and fully funded, but it is not and it was not. There are more holes in the Defence Secretary’s numbers than there is in Emmental cheese. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has called the £75 billion figure “essentially meaningless”. The Institute for Government has said that the Conservatives’ 2.5% plan does not add up, and that cutting 70,000 civil servant jobs will get nowhere close to delivering the savings needed to fund 2.5%.

To produce his fake figure of £75 billion, the Secretary of State has invented a zero-growth baseline for the next six years, unlike and in contrast with the Treasury’s official 0.5% real annual growth baseline. To get 2.3% as a different baseline for the annual increases in his plan on page 20 in the annex of his report, which he likes to parade, he has added all the one-off spending this year to the defence core budget—that is £3 billion for Ukraine, £1 billion for the nuclear contingency, half a billion pounds for operations and £300 million for ammunition, all in the figures for each of the next six years. Finally, the Secretary of State has used a trick that the Government tried before, in the 2015 defence strategic review, when Ministers pledged to cut 30% of MOD civil servants just to make their spending plans add up. However, after 2015 and that plan, civil service numbers in the MOD of course did not go down to 41,000; they went up to 63,000.

The new promised increase to defence core budgets will not start until April next year. For the next 10 months, day-to-day budgets in real terms are still being cut, the Army is still being cut and recruitment targets are still being missed. Nine out of 10 of the veterans promised a veterans ID card by the end of last year are still missing out, and around 500 veteran households are being made homeless every three months.

Our armed forces cannot afford another five years of the Conservatives. With threats increasing and tensions growing, we must make Britain better defended. Labour's plan for defence will reinforce homeland protections with a new strategic review. *[Interruption.]* It will fulfil NATO obligations in full, with a NATO test on our major programmes.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: I am finishing off now; the hon. Gentleman will have his chance to speak.

Labour's plan will renew the nation's contract with those who have served through an independent forces commissioner. It will make allies our strategic strength, with new French, German and EU defence agreements, and renewed UK leadership within the AUKUS alliance. It will direct British defence investment first to British jobs with deep procurement reform. Labour is the real party of defence. With Labour, Britain will be better defended.

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

6.56 pm

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): As both Front Benchers have made clear, we are all in this place indebted to the hard work of our armed forces personnel. Alas, we live in a dangerous world. The optimism that followed the fall of the Berlin wall and China joining the World Trade Organisation has proved illusory. The Defence Committee is currently investigating the grey zone: the gathering of intelligence, the manoeuvring for advantage, the pressurising of independent states, the disruption of democratic processes and the deployment of proxies. Into that category can be placed the hack of the defence payroll discussed earlier today, which follows the hack of our electoral data.

However, those are simply symptoms of a much wider pattern of step-by-step aggression. If, at a future date, our adversaries were to step over the threshold into kinetic warfare, no one could argue that we had not been warned. For any who believed that the modern world was too sophisticated, nuanced and interdependent ever to consider the brute force of state-on-state aggression, least of all in Europe, their delusions were shattered in February 2022. As we speak, in Ukraine hundreds of thousands of people are engaged in the gallant defence of their homes and families from an autocratic aggressor operating on the simple mantra that "might is right".

In our last defence debate, I called on the Government to recognise the current threat by setting out a clear path to increasing the UK's defence investment to 2.5% of GDP. The announcement of just that trajectory is most welcome. I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence on that achievement and on the vital additional support to Ukraine. It is all the more welcome that that increase was not achieved by some hockey-stick projection of what will happen in five years' time, but is being realised on a linear basis, with a step up each year. That provides credibility and certainty of delivery, and will send a message to our adversaries and a clear message to British industry that we need it to invest in capital equipment, skills and innovation.

The announcement also sends a powerful message to another critical group: our NATO allies. We are celebrating 75 years as the most effective and successful defence alliance the world has known. As the Secretary of State referenced, it remains the case that NATO enjoys, on paper, a substantial overmatch in matériel against Russia. That is well and good, but NATO must constantly up its game. Russia has shown itself oblivious in its tactics to the human cost of its devastating war in Ukraine. Against that backdrop, it is essential that we maintain a substantial conventional overmatch, especially in deep fires and ensuring air superiority, with the stockpiles to maintain it. We need to continue to do so, notwithstanding Russia spending eye-watering amounts to replace their losses in Ukraine with more modern equipment.

NATO also needs to ensure that military capabilities recognise the new geopolitical realities, namely the close relationship between China, Russia and other potential aggressors: North Korea, with its nuclear capability, and Iran, with its regional proxies looking to seize opportunities from the distracted west. A clash, were it to come, could come simultaneously from multiple quarters. Europe must recognise the implications of that and pull its weight.

When I spoke last, I said that I found it hard to believe we would not end up feeling the need to invest up to 3% of GDP, but that any such decision should be based on a bottom-up analysis of necessary capabilities. It will also be influenced by one other critical factor, which is that the increase in our commitment should be noted not just by our adversaries and our industry, but by our allies. NATO must set a new benchmark of 2.5% to reflect the new realities. That additional £140 billion of defence investment across the alliance would go a long way to reassuring us all that defence is receiving across this continent—a continent in which a live war rages—the greater priority it demands.

This debate is a general debate on defence. Members may wish to tackle a whole range of issues, each of which would be worthy of a parliamentary debate in its own right. To name but a few such themes, there is the balance, given the announced new investment, between the current equipment plan and innovative weapon systems emerging from the Ukraine war; the role of the Royal Navy, the balance of its current commitments, the shipbuilding programme and the continuous at-sea deterrence; the modernisation of the Army, particularly its armoured components; the increased prevalence of unmanned aerial systems, the importance to the Royal Air Force and the industrial base of the global combat air programme, and our future role in the space domain; and our home defence, to which the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) alluded earlier. When I asked the Prime Minister whether, post the failed Iranian attack on Israel, we would be reviewing the need for a multilayered UK air defence, that was because I believe we should. Increasingly, citizens will be vulnerable not just to land-based missile or drone attack, but from the same from vessels at sea, with limited warnings.

These are all valid areas of debate, but I want to restrict my remarks not to those internal defence debates, important though each is, but to the wider issue of how, in a much darker world, defence needs to be working with our allies across Government and with broader society as a whole. Arguments are being made that, in the circumstances, our full focus and commitment must

[Sir Jeremy Quin]

be to Europe. Strengthening our ability to play what would be a vital role in that theatre is of course necessary, as the Committee's report "Ready for War?" set out. However, we have strong continental allies with land-based and land-focused forces, and the contest of the future will be determined not by a stand-off in eastern Europe alone; as in earlier eras, the search for resources, for critical minerals and for dominance of sea routes will remain.

We have influence and we are trusted in many parts of the world. We have genuine friends, a concept unknown to our adversaries. Our role in supporting our allies—for example, in competing with an expansionary China—may lie not in the South China sea, but on the coasts of Africa, in the Gulf and in the high north. We should not lightly neglect the assets we have. In particular, our history has provided us with geographical reach and a position that our adversaries would love to usurp. As senior US military and naval officers are not slow to remind us, UK bases overseas remain absolutely vital, not least Diego Garcia. We must be deeply protective of assets with so much strategic value in protecting the free world, including supporting regional allies.

There is also how defence is viewed inside Government. For anyone who has had the privilege of the serving as a Defence Minister, and I am delighted to say that there are many of us on the Defence Committee, the picture is familiar: the darkened room, probably Cobra, with the ominous description of whatever dire visitation is expected, be it fire, flood, plague, strike or even the failure of security baggage checkers, and all faces turn in our direction. There will always be a requirement for MACA—military aid to the civil authorities—requests and the military will always rise to the task, but it should not be called upon as often as it is. Our armed forces must be training and preparing for their tasks, and their rest and recuperation time is critical if we are to retain and recruit. Departments must be more resilient in peacetime, and must have in place plans for worst-case scenarios, including war, as was once the case, and these should be checked and should be exercised.

Lastly, there is defence working alongside society. In the quarter of a century in which our own national defence appeared to be assured, our ability to think holistically about the strategic interplay between all aspects of our society and how that can help keep us safe has atrophied. Defence cannot be put into a discrete box; we need to think clearly about long-term national plans and how they support our resilience.

I will name just a few examples. The skills agenda on nuclear is commendable. With no disrespect to our Liberal Democrat friends, these are very long-term commitments—we cannot play the hokey-cokey with nuclear. It is a long-term endeavour, so that skills agenda is incredibly important, but are we doing enough to set out exactly what cash will be invested in upgrading our scientific capability? Are our plans for small modular reactors being driven at the pace we require, not just to minimise costs but to appreciate swiftly all the implications that that new technology may unleash? Given the undoubted brilliance of UK research, are we doing everything we can to ensure we are spotting the crossover opportunities? We can be certain that our adversaries are using every possible avenue into that UK research.

When ideas move from research to production, are we calling out those who make—often cavalierly and without proper consideration—trite judgments on what may be ethical or unethical investment, and in doing so are undermining our ability to live in a society where such a debate can even take place?

There has been some commentary in the press about peacetime conscription. While I welcome the honesty of sharing worst-case scenarios and the focus on increased investment in defence that that has brought, I personally view the idea as misplaced, but I would make an observation. In the coming decades, we risk skill pinch points in critical areas of defence. They are the very areas that are at the forefront of technology, and therefore at the forefront of demand in the private sector. Are we doing enough to identify brilliant young men and women, and setting out a specific and unique path for them to enter His Majesty's armed forces for a limited period post university? Some may wish to stay longer term; others may join the reserves. That would require a different approach. The Government would have to consider a whole raft of inducements, including financial ones, but we should not overlook the willingness of young people to accept fascinating challenges and to serve if called on to do so. Done well, that cadre would be recognised by industry as having been hand-picked as the leading lights of their generation, and with among the most sought-after of skillsets, they may even provide the impetus to the zig-zag careers proposed by the Haythornthwaite review.

We need to invest: in innovation, in capital equipment, and in the men and women of our armed forces. I am pleased that the Government are doing just that. It is vital, it is timely, and every penny must be well spent.

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

7.7 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am glad to be in the Chamber for this debate. It is an important debate; those of us on the Defence Committee would probably say that we do not have them often enough.

I wanted to pick up on a point made by the right hon. Members—my right hon. Friends, I hope—for Warley (John Spellar) and for North Durham (Mr Jones) about the reduction in defence spend, and the discussion we had at the Select Committee recently. As is our duty as a Committee, we challenged the Secretary of State on expenditure, and I wanted to pinpoint one specific issue, which relates to people—at least for us on the SNP Benches, people are the bedrock of a defence policy and posture—and to concerns about defence infrastructure and security, especially for those of us who live around nuclear defence infrastructure. We might not necessarily agree with it, but it is there, so we would hope it is secure at all times.

Coming back to the point that my right hon. Friends made, I wanted to look at some specific concerns about the Ministry of Defence police budget. In 2010-2011, the defence police budget was £154.8 million, equating to £226.78 million today when adjusted for inflation. Right hon. and hon. Members may correct me if I am wrong, but I think there was a Labour Government at that point. However, the budget in 2022-23 was

£161.3 million. Leading back to the question posed at the Committee, that is a real-terms reduction of about £65.5 million in the defence police infrastructure over the past 12 years. That is something that Ministers might want to come back to later on.

The shadow Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), made some comments about the £75 billion, and I share his concern. Like me, he understands that the assumption from the Government is based on a baseline of spend, as a percentage of GDP, that is frozen in cash terms, so without borrowing or extra debt, it comes nowhere near £75 billion. I wish the Government well on that point.

I would maybe want to have a wee bit more of a conciliatory approach to this. There will be at least some consistency from the SNP Benches, which I am sure the Minister will appreciate. Although he and I have different views on the nuclear deterrent, we are at least consistent. It was quite interesting to see someone else getting taken over the barrel for that—it makes a change. On the commitment to Ukraine, the Minister can take it from the SNP that, whoever the Government happen to be this year or next year, say, we will also be steadfast on the support for Ukraine. The right to defend national territory, and the right to national self-determination, are elements of human dignity for any modern nation state and alliance. As I said, the gist of my remarks is in three things: people, place and our partnerships.

Let us talk about the ordinary ranks. That is a term that I find quite problematic. I come from a services family. My brother was a sergeant, and my nephew is in the forces as well—in the “ordinary ranks”. There is really nothing ordinary in serving.

Richard Foord: I think the term is “other ranks.”

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Let me come to that in a second, but in common parlance, I think they are always called the “ordinary ranks”—[*Interruption.*] The Minister may want to listen for a wee second. Whether it is “other” or “ordinary”, that type of terminology says nothing about the men and women who served in Iraq, such as my brother; in Afghanistan; out in the Red sea, no matter what happens there—and there is concern that there might be mission creep—or in other deployments such as the joint expeditionary force in Estonia, which I know, as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Estonia, that the Estonian Government welcome.

Those ranks deserve more from us—not just from the Government and the official Opposition, but from all of us as parliamentarians. They deserve it that we take them more seriously in the structure of how we support and pay them, and in their entire terms and conditions. I know that there is probably profound disagreement about my approach, which would be an armed services representative body. Although I am saddened that the official Opposition changed their position, if they form the next Government, the SNP would support their new approach, which we think is at least a step in the right direction.

However, I do not think that having a Government appointee represent the armed forces personnel is the right step forward, because the lived experience of members of the armed forces who have been on the frontline needs to form part of an understanding, as with any engagement on terms and conditions with a trade union,

for example—although an armed forces representative body from this party is not a trade union and does not have the right to strike our proposals. We have to say to those ranks that we believe they can come together as a collective and have critical engagement with Government and, more importantly, with Parliament more broadly. We need to have that discussion with them; they need to be part of defence policy and posture. They are people we want to send to the frontline to fire a gun or a missile, but technically we are saying to them that we do not believe they have the capability of coming together to discuss and debate collectively their terms and conditions. I find that slightly bizarre.

If we do not engage with those ranks in a more robust fashion, as equals, we will go around a consistent revolving door of reports, as we have seen for years in Committees, especially the Defence Committee. I am mindful of the report produced by the Women in the Armed Forces Sub-Committee—I intimated that I would mention them—which was chaired by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), who is not here today. That report was profound. Do I think that if we do not have real engagement with the frontline, there will be substantial change? I have grave concerns that there will not be.

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that close engagement with the other ranks. He might well benefit from serving on the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, where he will discover that all of our time is spent with the other ranks.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for that opportunity, but I have previously declined it for various reasons. I will get into that in a wee bit more detail and, although the hon. Member may not agree with me, I may want to reflect on some of the profound experiences that we saw in that report. I am afraid that we would not hear those things talked about on the armed forces parliamentary body. I am talking about ordinary service personnel, in private meetings with parliamentarians as part of a Committee inquiry, talking about the dreadful conditions that they suffer because of their gender, sex, sexuality or ethnicity. Some of it has been like a revolving door.

James Sunderland: I spent 27 years of commissioned service in the British Army. The hon. Member does the British Army a disservice.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I recall the hon. Gentleman chairing the Armed Forces Bill Committee during the pandemic, when we heard some really profound and challenging evidence. I do not think that he and I would disagree that it was challenging. The report from the hon. Member for Wrexham, a former reservist, was challenging. It was the bare reality of what many members of the armed forces had to go through. I am sure that he was in the Chamber when members of Pride were here to hear the Prime Minister’s apology to LGBT members of the services. That happened; it is not a figment of the imagination. It does not say anything about the abilities and capabilities of the vast majority of the armed forces.

To me it is more about the structure. How different it would be if we had a body in which members of the armed forces, elected by their peers, could engage with any Government in the future. We would then be in a

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

far better position to have that debate and to actually target support where it is needed. I have not yet heard a convincing argument against that.

I am glad that the official Opposition have a policy on this matter. It might not be one that I think is appropriate, but it is a reflection that the time has now come to have some type of body to take up that physical challenge. I believe that their example is from Germany, but I am also mindful of the example of the Kingdom of the Netherlands—one of our closest military allies—where a member of the armed forces could also be the general secretary of a trade union. Having a distinct armed forces trade union does not stop them carrying out their duties as members of the armed forces.

One or two of our NATO allies have unions and actually have the right to strike, although that is not somewhere I would be going in terms of policy. I just think that having such a union is critical, given some of the conditions that members of the armed forces and their families have faced over many years. We have heard about them in Select Committee reports, in debates on housing and in statements. My friend the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about Capita and some of the profound problems that members of the armed forces face on a daily basis. I honestly believe that they would be in a far better position to deal with these challenges if they were able to come together and deliberate and engage with whoever the Government are.

It is important to reflect on some of our Scandinavian allies when it comes to a more coherent approach to how we go forward as parliamentarians, because this is not just about members of the armed forces; it is about the role of Parliament as well. I have heard Members talk about having a more collegiate approach. Were we to follow the Danish or Swedish examples—this could be done whether or not the Government have a huge majority—it would mean that for an entire parliamentary term we could have an agreed military defence posture and an agreed budget. We could bring the main parties together and make a collective parliamentary decision.

The Nordic-Scandinavian model means that there is a good foundation to create a robust defence posture, with full parliamentary support. Even we in the SNP would agree to that. We may disagree on the nuclear deterrent, but Parliament has voted for that. But on the vast majority of issues I think the vast majority of parties in this place could agree and support a Government, which is critical given that the times in which we live need a coherent approach and full and robust parliamentary support.

I do hope that both the Government and the official Opposition will consider that if and when the next election is called, and whoever should form the next Government. That brings people together. It is also about us as parliamentarians taking our responsibilities appropriately, and about creating transparency and openness. Even in the United States, there is far more transparent and robust engagement with the Government on Capitol Hill by the Armed Services Committee. Of course, our Defence Select Committee has no such powers, in any shape or form, but if we had more open and transparent engagement at parliamentary level, we could hopefully overcome a lot of that.

The other thing I want to talk about, in bringing my remarks to a conclusion, is partnership. I am really glad that the shadow Defence Secretary mentioned some partnerships in bringing his speech to a close. Since 2016, we on the SNP Benches have been pushing for a more coherent mutual defence agreement with the European Union. He will need to correct me if I am wrong and that was not a part of what he said in his concluding remarks. The reason for that is not to replace NATO, but to understand that some of the complexities that EU members face—for example, when it comes to logistics, road design and bridge weights—could be tackled far more easily through the EU in partnership than, say, through NATO. That is because if we are trying to move a tank from the west to the eastern front, it has to get across France, Germany and so on. [*Interruption.*] I will conclude my remarks in a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I say that as a Euro-Atlanticist. It is really important that we create defence relationships with people who share our common interests here in the Euro-Atlantic area, because, as others have mentioned, we face a crisis of retention, a crisis of recruitment and unfathomable black holes that I would not wish on any Defence Secretary, whether the present one or anybody who wants to be one. The next Government will face unimaginable tasks, but if we put people, place and partnership at the heart of that, we in the SNP—although with our differences on the nuclear deterrent—would certainly be willing to support that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call Mark Francois, I remind colleagues that there is a certain pressure on time, which I am sure will be borne in mind.

7.22 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to participate in this important and timely debate on defence. It comes at an exciting time for defence, following the Prime Minister's welcome announcement that we will now increase the UK's defence spending from a little over 2% of GDP at present—more if we include Ukraine—to 2.5% by the end of the decade. Moreover, that welcome increase is linear in nature, rather than the traditionally back-loaded version, so it provides a solid path against which both our armed forces and our defence industry can appropriately plan.

As ever with these announcements, my colleagues on the House of Commons Defence Committee will want to scrutinise in detail the Secretary of State's claim that that represents an additional £75 billion for defence over the period. A lot seems to depend on where we draw the baseline in making the calculation. Nevertheless, the declared increase to 2.5% indisputably represents billions of pounds of extra investment over the six years in question, which helps to send a powerful signal both to our allies and to any potential aggressors that the United Kingdom is prepared to defend itself, its values and its interests, both across the globe and at home.

Allied to that, we also had the recent announcement by our very proactive Minister for Defence Procurement of a wholesale reform of how the UK plans to procure

its military equipment in future. The new system, known as the integrated procurement model, was announced in February. If I were asked to characterise it in one sentence, I would say that it represents moving from a bureaucratic peacetime model of procuring equipment to a much faster wartime model. Indeed, in Poland the Prime Minister spoke powerfully about putting the UK defence industry on to a war footing. That is very much in keeping with the Secretary of State's speech at Lancaster House in January, in which he said that we are now moving from a post-war to a pre-war world—about which I fear he may yet be proven right.

Taken together, this suggests that after years of concentrating on wars of choice—in Iraq or Afghanistan—we are now again focusing on the possibility of having to fight a war of necessity, and perhaps even, ultimately, a war of national survival against an adversary on the scale of Russia and/or China.

For someone who has always believed that the first duty of Government is the defence of the realm, I warmly welcome what one might call this new type of clear-eyed realism, which now seems to be infusing our defence planning in a way that, at least with regard to wars of necessity, has arguably been absent for many decades. For instance, we are now recreating across Government a national defence plan, akin conceptually to what was considered everyday normal business during the cold war.

I hope that I am not betraying a confidence when I tell the House that the Minister for Defence Procurement and I, and others such as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), who is in his place beside me, have discussed several times the need not just to change policy in terms of procurement, but crucially to change culture if the reforms are to have real meaning.

I note that the dynamic head of Defence Equipment and Support, Andy Start, when speaking at the Royal United Services Institute recently, explained that the reforms began in March and that the operating model will reach what he calls a “minimal viable product” by the autumn, with the whole programme in full flow by next year. As someone who has previously expressed a great deal of frustration about the bureaucracy and tardiness of our procurement system, I can only wish the Minister for Defence Procurement and the head of DE&S Godspeed in implementing these reforms as fast as possible, particularly as the international outlook continues to worsen. We urgently need a sense of urgency, as it were, and it appears that, finally, we are starting to develop one.

All that said, I would like to highlight one area in which I believe we still remain both operationally and strategically vulnerable: the realm of air defence. Given the concentration, over more than 20 years, on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we effectively disinvested in the air defence of the United Kingdom relative to other priorities. I am pleased to note that in the last few years we have reinvested in some of our radar stations in Scotland and along the east coast, which I warmly welcome.

Nevertheless, the experience from Ukraine strongly suggests that if it were ever to come to a shooting war with Russia, which has made great use of mass cruise missile strikes, most of those fixed radar sites would likely be lost to cruise missile attack in the first 24 to 48 hours of

hostilities, in addition to threats from ballistic missiles. Against that eventuality, we retain a small number of mobile radars—the number is classified, but it is small. It is true that we might also be able to rely to some degree on NATO assets or other specialist assets from elsewhere, but certainly in terms of fixed NATO radar stations they might also be subject to the same cruise missile attacks, and the precious NATO airborne early warning and control system—AWACS—aircraft could be tasked elsewhere in war.

In terms of fighter aircraft for the defence of the UK, the Royal Air Force currently possesses 137 Typhoon aircraft in three tranches, the oldest of which—in tranche 1—are, on present policy, due to be retired in the spring of next year and either cannibalised for parts or sold off to foreign buyers, likely for a pittance compared to their initial acquisition cost. Considering that the Russian air force still possesses thousands of combat aircraft, that would be an act of absolute folly, and one that I personally have likened to selling off our Spitfires prior to the battle of Britain. As I was told by BAE Systems executives on a visit to Warton a few years ago, because of the extremely complex supply chain that goes into the manufacture of Typhoons, it would take at least four years to build one from scratch, or three years if, as they put it, we hurried it all up in an emergency. If, therefore, the UK were to fight what some strategists describe as a “come as you are” war, in which people have to fight with equipment that is immediately available or can be reconstituted at short notice, there would be no prospect of building additional Typhoons in time to fight.

Moreover, both Russia and China have had a long-standing policy over many decades of putting older equipment into a war reserve that can be drawn on in times of conflict to replenish stocks. That is exactly what the Russians did in the Ukrainian conflict, when they pulled mothballed tanks out of depots from as far away as Siberia, to make up for the very large number of losses of more modern fighting vehicles at the hands of very spirited Ukrainian defenders who, one might add, were armed in many cases with British manufactured NLAWs.

Conversely, the UK Ministry of Defence has virtually no concept of a war reserve, although events suggest that we should rapidly be developing one. As a comparator, the US keeps thousands of retired combat aircraft, some very recently retired, in a giant desert boneyard, as it is known, in the Mojave desert, in hot and high conditions where aircraft do not rust. The Americans regularly rehearse taking aircraft out of the stockpile and refurbishing them to return them to the frontline. It therefore seems to me that it would be madness to sell off over 20% of our fighter force. Surely it would make much greater sense to put those aircraft into storage, either in the UK or in the Mojave desert, to begin to constitute a warfighting reserve of our own.

Not only would that come at very little expense, but it would constitute a reserve air wing of up to three squadrons in time of war, not least as the Tranche 1 Typhoon, armed with advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles and advanced short-range air-to-air missiles, is still more than a match for Russian long-range bombers, which might attempt to assault the UK via the back door over the north Atlantic, carrying multiple long-range cruise missiles.

John Spellar: Is it also the case that these aircraft have considerable aircraft life left in them? It is not as though they are approaching redundancy.

Mr Francois: The right hon. Gentleman, a former Armed Forces Minister like me, is absolutely right. Many of them still have half their so-called airframe life remaining. As I have said, they are more than capable of intercepting and shooting down the threat aircraft that they would have to match. That is all the more reason to keep them against a rainy day, rather than flogging them off or breaking them up for parts. Crucially, creating such a war reserve would demonstrate a sign of intent to any potential aggressor that after many years of doing the opposite, the UK is now preparing to fight a sustained conflict with a peer enemy, should that become necessary. Hopefully, in so doing, we will make that eventuality far less likely.

Linked to the vulnerability of our radar stations and the shortage of fighter aircraft are the extremely worrisome delays in airborne early warning. The Royal Navy's early warning aircraft, *Crowsnest*, is many years late. It has only recently entered service for the air defence of the fleet. For the Royal Air Force, the Boeing E-3 Sentry AWACS aircraft were withdrawn shortly after the integrated review was published in 2021, leaving us without a mainstream airborne early warning aircraft. The E-3 was meant to be replaced shortly thereafter by the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail, but the programme has been subject to multiple chronic delays and is still not in service.

The RAF is clearly embarrassed by this and is attempting to deploy chaff between in-service dates, when the aircraft could take off the runway, and an initial operating capability, when the aircraft might actually be ready to fight. The latest information I have is that the ISD could now be in autumn 2025, whereas the IOC could be in the first or even the second quarter of 2026, which is still two years away. That leaves a critical gap in our air defence capability for which the MOD, and Boeing in particular, must be held robustly to account. Moreover, the initial buy of five Wedgetail aircraft was inexplicably cut to three several years ago by ministerial fiat, even though we were contractually obliged to buy all five radars, which themselves were very expensive.

In short, the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail is rapidly becoming the RAF's equivalent of the Army's *Ajax* programme—a procurement disaster that has gone on year after year at vast expense to the taxpayer, without actually entering operational service, as *Ajax* still has not. The Defence Committee, alarmed by that, has invited the head of Boeing Defence, Space and Security, Mr Ted Colbert, to appear before the Committee at Westminster to provide an explanation, although we are still attempting to finalise a precise date for his personal appearance.

Boeing is an organisation in crisis after the sad deaths of more than 300 people caused by the two crashes of its 737 MAX aircraft. We have seen further serious safety incidents, most recently in January when a door flew off an Alaska Boeing 737 MAX 9 in mid-flight. That incident was followed by a number of so-called whistleblowers, involved either at Boeing or in its supply chain, coming forward with very serious allegations about failures in the way the company builds its aircraft. No doubt partly as a result, Mr Dave Calhoun announced that he will step down as chief executive at the end of

the year. In the first quarter of this year, Boeing reported a net loss of more than \$350 million, and it is still experiencing serious production problems across a range of aircraft, both civilian and military, of which the UK Wedgetail is but one example. The US Air Force also has numerous issues with Boeing, not least in its much-troubled KC-46 air tanker programme.

For many years, Boeing as a company has done extremely well in winning major multibillion dollar procurement orders from the MOD, in return for which it has placed very limited amounts of work on those programmes with the defence industry in the UK. To give specific examples, according to the MOD's recent figures, on the E-7 Wedgetail, the estimated UK content is around 10%; for the AH-64 Apache, it is only 7%; for the P-8 Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft, it is barely 4%; and for the original CH-47 Chinook helicopters, it was just 2%. According to the answer to a written parliamentary question I tabled, the UK content for the new order of CH-47 extended-range Chinooks for our special forces will generate a UK workshare of about 8%. Taken together with the purchase of the Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joint electronic reconnaissance aircraft, for which no workshare figure is publicly available, that represents some \$10 billion of business for Boeing from the UK MOD for which the UK workshare has been 10% at best and 2% at worst. Boeing has done incredibly well out of the UK MOD, while UK industry has done incredibly badly out of Boeing.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is also bad news for the defence budget? Those contracts are in dollars, and the dollar exchange rate puts huge pressure on the defence budget.

Mr Francois: Another former Armed Forces Minister is right, and he will know that the effect of the dollar exchange rate on buying so many big off-the-shelf items from the US has cropped up time and again at both the Defence Committee and the Public Accounts Committee.

The problem does not apply just to air platforms. Boeing had a major logistics contract with the MOD called the future logistics information system, or FLIS, which was due to run until late 2020. However, as was evidenced by the Public Accounts Committee, in late 2020 the MOD signed a five-year contract extension called "Bridging the gap", worth £515 million to Boeing, which was not even competed. That raises questions about the degree to which the MOD seems to be mesmerised by Boeing as a company, to the detriment of value for money for the UK and for our industrial workshare. Indeed, the PAC subsequently reported:

"We are...concerned to hear that the MoD awarded the contract for this £515 million programme to a large defence prime contractor without a competitive tendering process."

That is all the more surprising given that in the 1990s, the standard policy of the MOD was to ask for a 100% offset in major off-the-shelf procurements of military equipment from abroad, especially from the US. For instance, in the late 1990s, for the purchase of the C-130J Super Hercules, Lockheed Martin was required to place work to the equivalent of 100% of the multibillion-dollar contract value with UK industry. The work could take one of two forms: direct offset, which is work on the aircraft platform itself, such as propellers or undercarriages or logistics support, or indirect offset,

which is other high-quality work to be placed with the UK defence industry over the life of the programme, but not necessarily directly related to the platform itself.

Under the Blair Government, for whatever reason, the policy was quietly dropped. That has allowed a situation to develop whereby the MOD has bought a number of big-ticket items from the US without receiving any legally binding guarantees of compensating workshare for the UK industry. I therefore suggest to the next Government, of whatever political colour, that if they are reviewing defence, they might want to look at reintroducing the concept of 100% offset for any further major offshore procurements.

In some cases, it is operationally the right thing to buy something off the shelf from the US. I would argue that Wedgetail—at least when it was five aircraft, anyway—was the right decision, but I do not think it acceptable that we hand out such handsome contracts to foreign suppliers without UK industry being given its fair share.

In conclusion, a cynic might say that Boeing is a company increasingly in crisis, which is falling apart even more rapidly than the aircraft it purports to build. That is serious for us in the UK, as like it or not, Boeing is one of our major defence suppliers and is responsible for supporting key equipment in service. We do not want that company to fail. Therefore, we can only hope that the incoming management will take a firm grip of the situation and turn it around—the sooner, the better.

Lastly, it is very good news that we are reversing the downward trend in defence spending and are now investing more, rather than less, in the defence of the realm. That is very much to be welcomed, but it is a question not just of how much we spend, but of how well it is spent. I very much hope that with the new integrated procurement model and perhaps a couple of humble suggestions that I have been able to offer this evening, we can put more of that money to good use to ensure that we, our people and our allies remain safe in an increasingly dangerous world. *Si vis pacem, para bellum.*

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. There are 10 Members still seeking to speak. There is considerable expertise in the Chamber tonight—I appreciate that—and I am sure that all Members will want to make a succinct contribution. Frankly, the Chairman of the Defence Committee confined his remarks to 12 minutes, and I hope and expect that other colleagues on both sides of the House will do likewise.

7.42 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am mindful of your dictum, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I start by following up on the comments of the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about Boeing, because it is about not just getting the contract right in the first place, but enforcing it afterwards? Even when Boeing and other companies have given assurances and agreements, they have not been held to account for them. I fear that the MOD will find a similar problem relating to the hack of the accounts of our personnel, in that the Treasury adamantly, stubbornly refuses to take past performance into account when assessing future contracts. That has to change. For heaven's sake, I thought that one of the supposed

advantages of Brexit was that we could take back control. By the way, our European competitors have been able to do that within the confines of the EU, but we have an ideological battle within the civil service, and Ministers have to take it on across Departments.

May I also apologise for—as is quite obvious—having a cold? It was acquired in good service, as the results in the west midlands last week showed, which colleagues will have noticed. I was hoping that the Minister for Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) would respond to the debate and that he would at least acknowledge, if not welcome, that the council for the home of the British Army is now run by the Labour party, with its excellent leader, Keith Dibble. There is a lesson in that for us. Keith Dibble has been on the moderate side of the Labour party—pro-defence, pro-good sense—for many years and has built up a Labour group that can actually relate to the good people of Aldershot and Farnborough. That is also true in the wider sense for the Labour party. At certain stages in our history, Labour in opposition has been less sound on defence. That is not just a correlation, but a causal factor. Indeed, when Labour is sound on defence, as we always have been in government, the British people have confidence.

This year, we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of NATO—an organisation set up by the Attlee-Bevin Government, who also developed Britain's nuclear capability. Throughout the changes of Government over that period, we have had a continuous at-sea deterrent. I have to say that Conservative performance has quite often not matched up to their rhetoric—we heard quite a lot of rhetoric from the Front Bench today.

At the end of the cold war, we had “Options for Change”: taking the peace dividend, cutting recruitment, running down equipment, and withdrawing our forces and armour from Germany. It looks as though we are going to have to remedy that at great cost.

We spoke earlier about the nuclear submarine renewal. In March 2007, under the Labour Government, this Parliament agreed to a motion moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Dame Margaret Beckett) on the principle of the renewal of the nuclear deterrent submarine programme, with the gateway stage to be further decided between 2012 to 2014. At that stage, David Cameron declined to do that, having allowed himself to be blackmailed—I say he allowed himself, because I do not think the Conservatives would have broken up the Government and given up their jobs, as California was not beckoning at that stage. We have therefore suffered considerable extra cost. Workforce teams have been broken up, the rhythm of submarine manufacture up in Barrow has been lost, and there has been an effect on the crews and our equipment. That is a real worry.

I also have a worry about our current submarine programme. I absolutely agree with the principle of the nuclear national endeavour, but I am very concerned about some of the detail. On the nuclear skills taskforce, the Government say:

“we are investing to increase our intake of nuclear sector graduates to around 2,000 in the next four years”.

When I posed a question to the Department for Education, I was told that there are 65 undergraduate enrolments in nuclear and particle physics courses and 190 postgraduate

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enrolments—a total of 255. I do not think they will all go into the defence industry, and I have found it hard to get data about how many of them are actually British citizens. Given the security requirements—if those who issue security clearance can get their act together—the Government are seriously underestimating the need to expand those courses and prioritise British students in our nuclear national endeavour programme.

On expenditure, I know from previous debates and from the Defence Committee that many Government Back Benchers agree with the critique and recognise that the dead hand of the deadbeat Treasury—not just recently but over the past 100 years or so—has seriously undermined Britain's defence capability time and again. In the inter-war period, there was the infamous 10-year rule—defence expenditure was based on the assumption that there would not be a war for 10 years—and in 1915 there was the shell crisis.

It concerns me that, while history may not repeat itself, it certainly rhymes. Back in July 2021, the Defence Committee had General Hodges, the head of the United States Army Europe, giving evidence. He reported on the 3rd Division participating in an American warfighting exercise in Texas. The British Army ran out of every bit of important ammunition in about eight days of exercises. Nothing was done about it.

That was known, yet, when the Ukraine war started in 2022 and it became clear very early on that it was going to be very much an artillery war—there are newer drones and missiles and so on, but artillery plays a crucial role—it took from early 2022 through to July 2023 for the MOD to sign an agreement with BAE to produce the extra shells. There is not that sense of drive and urgency, especially when we are dealing with a country such as Russia that has put its whole economy on a war footing. Even now, we have only two artillery shell plants: Durham and Glascoed. Glascoed recently had demonstrations outside it by people trying to close it; why they are trying to stop them producing shells for Ukraine is another matter, and I certainly hope the union representing those workers will be taking up the case.

The United States has recognised that it cannot have single points of failure. In Glascoed there was recently an explosion; if it had been more serious, what would that have done to our capacity? The United States is building new, Government-owned, company-operated sites. It is not worried by the complaints about nationalisation; indeed, the powers given to the president to command industry are considerable. Yet we are still going through the same old, same old, relying on the companies putting in their cases. We do not have the luxury of that time.

I have been critical of Ministers and senior civil servants, but the senior military must bear responsibility for the situation as well. Year on year, they have focused on platforms rather than munitions or accommodation, and the costs of that are being seen in report after report from our Committee and indeed in the media. We must recognise that we now have a shortage not just of matériel, but of industrial capacity, plant, supply chain, skilled and production personnel, and any capacity to surge. We also have numerous single points of failure. I have mentioned the United States. France is

commissioning a new explosive plant costing half a billion pounds, again recognising the shortfalls and the critical weaknesses in the system.

I am very pleased that although there has been a lot of focus on the nuclear pillar 1 in the discussions about AUKUS, in pillar 2 there is a lot of work on creating industrial capacity. I credit the Government with the work they are doing there on creating industrial capacity, but I stress that that cannot just be focused on the high-tech end. In many cases, our munitions and platforms depend on industrial skills and basic engineering, which are crucial to ensuring that they are maintained and that they work. We must recognise that we need that industrial base.

As the allies showed in world war two, we can shift domestic industry, plant and personnel to war production; Russia is demonstrating that today. Short-term cost-cutting, identified by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, will not do. Companies need workflows to create the workforce and the cash flow and to provide training opportunities for the workforce of the future. The Barrow submarine yard demonstrates the perils of running down the workforce. However, this is also about a pool of labour. For example, in the context of submarines there has been a great deal of talk about ensuring that people are trained in welding, but if other industries in other sectors are not also training welders, then—particularly if there is any drop in the workforce—they will go off and work in the oil and gas industry. Indeed, that is exactly what has happened, and incidentally it has also happened to parts of the United States shipbuilding industry.

We need a much more holistic approach across Government, because if people are being trained in one industry, it is impossible to control the flow out if there are opportunities elsewhere: there must be pressure on other companies to train as well. I have to say to the Minister that that is why the decision to offshore the commissioning of the fleet solid support ships is so incomprehensible. Given the need to maintain a workforce in certain yards and hence to maintain the skill base, shipping that out to Spain is scandalous. Furthermore, no other country, inside or outside the European Union, behaves in this way. The dead hand of the Treasury is dictating a policy that runs down our industry and ends up being much more costly in the long term.

The Ukrainian crisis has also revealed the need for effective collaboration. As the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford pointed out, we used to negotiate proper contracts of shared benefit, but going for “cheapest is best”—allegedly—has driven that into the ground. We need to work with other countries, which will include, as we have seen in the provision of munitions for Ukraine, working with European companies and European Parliaments. There will be no necessity to create new structures, but work will need to be done, and I suspect that there will be some willing partners in a number of the major European industrial countries, and that will mean a need for more real rather than financial engineers.

Finally—for I accept your strictures, Mr Deputy Speaker—I want to touch briefly on the subject of hybrid warfare and the so-called grey zone, on which our Defence Committee is conducting an inquiry. I do not want to pre-empt its findings, but I do want to urge the Ministry of Defence and the wider Government to take a broader, societal approach. The opponents we are

facing, in Russia, China and North Korea, have the Soviet, Leninist methodology and ideology, across government and society. We have shown our ability to counteract that in previous conflicts, both hot and cold, but I think particularly of the Political Warfare Executive and the actions of the United Kingdom and the United States during the cold war. Sometimes the debate becomes a bit too focused on technology and techniques without an understanding of the political and ideological underpinning of conflict.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: One of the points that we have made previously in the Defence Committee concerns support for the Russian military archive, which was eventually moved to Shrivenham. Is it not about time the MOD took that archive far more seriously, given that it provides all the benefit of what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about?

John Spellar: What the hon. Gentleman refers to was just a manifestation of the running down of our Russia-watching capacity, in that context but also much more broadly within the system. I think there has been an attempt to repair it, but this should be a salutary lesson.

The present transformed security landscape requires money, manpower, mindset and matériel. We have to move further, and we have to move faster.

7.58 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome this defence debate in Government time but, as we run out of time, I am reminded that we used to have five debates every year on different defence topics. Trying to cover the whole waterfront of defence in one debate is proving very taxing.

I will concentrate today on defence policy, which determines how we spend defence money, and indeed how much we decide to spend on defence, so that we are best prepared for whatever may occur—both the threats we can foresee and the events we cannot anticipate—including deterring and containing our adversaries, preferably without conflict. Incidentally, it is far cheaper to use defence money to prevent wars than to save money that then has to be spent on fighting a war.

I welcome the Government's commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP, which clearly sets defence as a higher priority. I fail to understand how this can be tempered by "as resources allow" or "as conditions allow." The cyber-attack we discussed earlier underlines that we are already at war, and I welcome the Secretary of State's attempts to put us more on a war footing, which means being able to rebuild munition stocks and create resilient supply chains, but it also means increasing our pace and creating a sense of urgency across Government.

We can no longer look forward to an era of global peace. We must jettison what might be termed the peacetime mentality that led my colleagues in Government to accept the restraint of the Liberal Democrats on renewing our strategic deterrent. I was shadow Defence Secretary opposite Geoff Hoon, and I remember that the sound defence review under George Robertson was never fully funded. The proportion of GDP spent by Government on defence fell and fell, and so did the size of the armed forces, the number of ships, the numbers in the Army and the number of aircraft. There are lots of pots and kettles in this Chamber.

I welcome the new consensus—although the Opposition have not quite put flesh on its bones—that we are going to increase money for defence. I respect the aspirations of the shadow Secretary of State, but I fear he may be restrained by the same kind of Treasury mentality that he says afflicts this Government.

This shift to a wartime mentality demands a shift in culture, not just in the MOD but across Government, led from the centre by No. 10, the Cabinet Office and the National Security Council, to create a national defence plan that must cover, as has been noted by other participants in this debate, a far wider spectrum of policy—not just cyber-security but energy security, food security, border security, technological security, economic security and even climate security.

The Liaison Committee, which I chair, is shortly to report on how Select Committees can better scrutinise and promote national strategic thinking and national strategy across all areas of Government policy. I hope the House will be interested in that report.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has proved beyond doubt that we live in a world of hyper-competition between the democratic world and the autocracies that show no sign of self-restraint. There are no boundaries, which we expect of civilised countries, that they will not cross. The democratic world is only just waking up to the threat that presents.

I will make three further points that are relevant to this debate. First, there are lessons to be learned from delaying the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. Defence is not something that can be switched on and off, depending on how we feel about what is going to happen next year. The defence capability of our Trident submarines, which are a very expensive, long-term platform, reflects a failure of judgment by the coalition Government in not making that maingate decision much earlier, as the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said. This presents a threat to our capability, as we run the life of the submarines longer and longer, and has escalated the cost.

Secondly, I want to underline the importance of UK leadership in NATO and in the support of Ukraine. We really have led from the front on Ukraine. We have had a delicate relationship with the United States, to encourage them along, but in terms of European NATO we are certainly in the lead. That underlines the importance of the role the United Kingdom plays in the world. We are not just a small country—a little north-Atlantic power—but an opinion-forming country of great influence, which is why we must step up to our responsibilities in defence.

The third point I wish to make is about not so much defence policies but the integrated procurement model, which I very much welcome. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, that is putting us on to a war footing in terms of procurement. It mimics what we have learned from the successful urgent operational requirements programme and will, I hope, lead to a cultural shift to which my right hon. Friend also addressed himself—a shift in attitude and behaviour, which is what we mean by a change of culture.

To achieve that shift in attitude, and to get a sense of urgency, we need to identify the attitudes and behaviours in the Ministry of Defence and in the procurement world that militate against the integrated procurement model, we have to root them out, and we have to identify the right attitudes and the right behaviours,

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which means changing hearts and minds in the MOD. How do we do that? Cultural change is very difficult in a large organisation, and previous defence reforms have disappeared into the sand like water in a desert, because there has not been a sufficient emphasis on a cultural shift.

Now, there are three kinds of people in any organisation such as the Ministry of Defence. When confronted with a demand for cultural change, there are the few enthusiasts who say, "At last! The leadership get it and are going to do something and change things"; most will have seen change programmes come and go and will want to comply, but may be rather cynical about it; and there will be a few resistors, who feel that it is an attack on their integrity, their way of doing things or their own personality. I am afraid the resistors have to be rooted out. They have to be taken out of the equation.

It has to be shown that people who resist cultural change will not prosper. That means that everyone at all levels must be taught and trained in the new procurement system, so that there is no misunderstanding about what it means. Previously I have recommended privately to the Secretary of State, and to the Minister for Defence Procurement, that there should be a defence course at Shrivenham called the integrated procurement model course. It should be like the higher command and staff course. Everybody should go on it and anybody involved in defence procurement should sign up to the new philosophy.

Finally, such a change programme requires leadership. It requires the leadership in the Ministry of Defence—the Ministers, the officials and the armed forces leadership—all to be absolutely united behind pursuing the change in attitude and behaviour across the whole MOD, and they must lead by example. The way they prove that is by making sure that nobody gets rewarded or promoted who does not demonstrate that they have adopted the new attitudes and behaviours. Otherwise, the minute the wrong person with the wrong attitudes and the wrong behaviours is promoted, everybody will say, "There you are: it does not matter. You get promoted anyway." This is a very urgent part of the transformation of defence in this troubling period, and I hope very much that the Government will take up my suggestions.

8.8 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): We are obviously living in a much more dangerous world and preparing for a potential war in Europe, which might involve our personnel at some point, not least, of course, in the support of Ukraine in her continual fight against Russia and Putin. All this adds up to a very serious situation.

I want to spend a couple of minutes on the point that we need to argue more forcefully for why the defence of our democratic, liberal way of life is so important, whatever shortcomings there might be in democracies. We need to reinforce the central tenets of free speech, liberty and the rule of law, as opposed to the alternative of dictatorship, gangsterism, brutal violence and the suppression of opposition that we have seen in other parts of the world. That is what we have to defend and fight for. We need to get our whole population prepared to play a part in ensuring our security and defending democracy and the basic principles that our great country stands for. There needs to be a change in mindset.

I think the Government and Parliament need to do a lot more to say why we need to spend more on defence and why we need to be prepared to deal with some very challenging situations, and possibly war. That is where we have failed to some extent, so we need to be much more up front with the British people. We know the threats and potential threats from Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, and the destabilising activities going on in the middle east and parts of Africa at the moment by some of those countries, and they are causing serious concerns. This is why we need to set out to the British public why defence needs to be properly funded and our armed forces supported in a much more systematic way. We did know Russia's intentions, and its intentions in invading Crimea in 2014 clearly told us that times had changed. We thought that had all disappeared with the cold war, but it had not. However, we did not prepare for this, having cut spending, and we must be prepared to provide the resources needed for our armed forces, because if we want to maintain peace, we have to do so from a position of strength.

The first duty of Government is to defend the security of our country, and I want to look at this Government's record. The path pursued over the past 14 years has led to a weakening of the capability of our armed forces to warfight over a sustained period, and of course of their resilience. We have heard from the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), about the "hollowing out" of our armed forces, and we could not even put a warfighting division in the field at present. The Government's failure to properly fund and the decision to cut the size of our armed forces, as well as the failure to stem the outflow from the armed forces and a defence procurement system that is broken, are putting the security of this country at risk and not preparing us for the threats, some of which I have outlined. If peace remains our goal, and it must be, we must be prepared to buy those resources.

Figures have been provided to me by the House of Commons Library. We have heard about cuts in defence expenditure during the coalition Government, but if we look at the whole period from 2010-11 to 2023-24, in both cash and real terms, the House of Commons Library figures show that spending has fallen by 1.2% at 2023-24 prices. So over the period of this Government, the record is that defence funding has actually fallen, no matter what they are doing now. It is just by coincidence that there is a general election coming up, and they have suddenly committed to a 2.5% increase.

Aside from the £3 billion that the Government have committed to military support for Ukraine, it is not clear exactly what the additional £5.4 billion of funding represents, because it has not yet been approved by Parliament or listed in any detail. On defence equipment, the increase in planned spending has been outstripped by a £65.7 billion—27%—rise in forecasted costs, which totalled £305.5 billion as of March 2023. This equates to a £19.6 billion funding shortfall based on central estimates, although the MOD estimates that the true shortfall could range from £7.6 billion to £29.8 billion if all the risks materialise. The National Audit Office scrutinises the equipment plan and publishes its own report alongside the MOD's, and in recent years the NAO has assessed successive plans—I stress, successive plans—to be unaffordable.

I want to go into the size of the armed forces and the cuts that are taking place. Between January 2010 and January 2024, the size of the full-time UK armed forces decreased by around 50,000 personnel. The Army is now at its smallest, as some have said, since the Napoleonic wars. Both the RAF and the Royal Navy/Royal Marines are below target, by around 3,000 personnel and 1,500 personnel respectively.

The House of Commons Library has sent me a note on UK defence personnel, and it sets out that, in 2023, there was a 1% reduction in the number of personnel leaving the UK regular forces compared with the previous year, but there was also an 8% reduction in the number of people joining the armed forces. Overall, there was a negative flow of personnel, with 5,460 more personnel leaving the forces than joining. This compares with a net increase of 4,660 personnel in 2022. Voluntary outflow accounted for 60% of trained outflow from UK regular forces in 2023. The voluntary outflow rate is the number of trained personnel voluntarily leaving as a proportion of the average trained strength in the period. In 2023, the voluntary outflow rate was 6.4%, up from 6% in 2022. In its commentary published alongside the personnel statistics, the MOD says:

“There is no single reason why personnel leave on Voluntary Outflow, but the personnel who completed the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey indicated reasons for leaving the Armed Forces included the impact of Service life on family and personal life and opportunities outside the Armed Forces.”

Again, the Government have no real plan to address this really challenging problem.

I want to refer briefly to the state of the reserve forces, which is a really serious concern at the moment, particularly where we get specialist grades coming into the reserve forces from civilian life. We have a real problem with recruiting and retaining those reserve forces. In January 2024 the total trained and untrained strength of UK reserve forces was 32,650—a decrease of 665 personnel, or minus 4.9%, compared with the year before. Outflow was higher than inflow for Army, maritime and RAF reserve forces in 2023. The number of reserve personnel continued to decline from a peak of around 37,400 in April 2021.

I know that the Minister has previously been questioned about this issue by my right hon. and hon. Friends, but we cannot get the information about pinch point grades that used to be available. Those are the specialist grades that are so important to maintaining the sustainability, competency and fighting power of the armed forces, and we are still trying to get more information about them. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body said in a 2023 report that

“there could be insufficient personnel with the right skills to deliver the outputs envisaged by the Integrated Review. We would welcome more data from MOD relating to these pinch point areas and what interventions MOD is planning to employ to address the issues.”

We in this House would welcome that data as well.

Our armed forces are running hot and being asked to do ever more without the resources they need. Resilience is a growing concern, not just for personnel, but for the ability to maintain and replenish losses in a Navy and Air Force that are much smaller in terms of ships and aircraft. The Defence Committee’s “Ready for War?” report said:

“It is a matter of national pride that whenever the Armed Forces are asked to carry out a task, they will find a way. It is to the credit of the Armed Forces that they have sustained this effort

for so long. But overtasking has both a personal cost for service personnel and an opportunity cost for the UK. The increase in global instability has coincided with a period of decreasing recruitment and reduced industrial capacity, which requires sustained, long-term investment. The Government risks being unable to build true warfighting and strategic readiness because of the sheer pace of operations, which could threaten the security of the UK.”

We cannot continue like this. As I have said, we live in a dangerous and increasingly unstable world, and we need to move quickly to 2.5% of GDP being spent on defence. The Government have still not set out how they intend to get there: they have not given the details, and the figures they have quoted so far have been rubbished by independent analysis, as we have already seen. The fact remains that over the past 15 years this Government have put our security at risk through their underfunding of the armed forces and their cutting of personnel. That is another reason why the current Prime Minister and this Government need to go.

8.18 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Earlier this afternoon I counted over 50 right hon. and hon. Members of the Labour party alone packing the Opposition Benches for the urgent question on the middle east. Sadly, though predictably, by the time we got to this important debate we were down to the usual suspects—the usual stalwarts, about half a dozen to a dozen Members on each side of the House. That difference in the numbers is relevant: the reason for it is that an actual war is going on in the middle east, so people are very focused on it, now that it is too late to prevent it. Our purpose in holding debates such as this one should be not to get to that situation.

I have some reservations about the constant references to us being in a pre-war world. I know what the Secretary of State and others mean when they refer to that, but it can be taken as meaning that we are in a situation where war is inevitable, and it is not. We have to behave as if we were going to have to defend ourselves in a real war, because if we make those preparations adequately, we will, through a policy of deterrence, prevent the war from happening in the first place.

This close to a general election, it is perhaps inevitable that we will hear people on both sides of the House, but on the Front Benches in particular, quibbling over percentage points of GDP being allocated to defence expenditure. But I have to say that 2.5%, 3% or even 4% would not be anything like adequate if a war actually broke out—44% is probably more like what we would have to spend. This is not just about a loss of treasure; even worse, it is about the human suffering and loss of life that would happen if we fail to invest adequately in peacetime to prevent that from ever coming to pass.

The economist Roger Bootle recently explained:

“During the Second World War, we spent roughly 50% of GDP on the military and slightly more than this in 1916 and 1917, during the First World War.”

So for goodness sake, let us be serious about this. No Government can be exonerated for the Kool-Aid that they drank after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

During the 2015-17 Parliament, the Defence Committee spent a bit of time trying to establish what had happened to defence expenditure in the post-war era. What we found was this: in 1963 we spent similar sums—about 6% of GDP—on both welfare and defence; and by 2017, after the study was carried out, we were spending six times

[Sir Julian Lewis]

as much on welfare as we were spending on defence. Similarly, it was found that in the mid-1980s we had been spending similar sums—about 5% of GDP then—on education, health and defence. By 2017 we were spending 2.5 times as much on education and nearly four times as much on health as we were spending on defence.

At the height of the cold war confrontation, and every year from 1981 to 1987, we spent between 4.3% and 5.1% of GDP on defence. From 1988—when the cold war began to evaporate—until 2014, defence spending almost halved as a proportion of GDP. Of course, there was a reason for that: it appeared that the threat from Russia had gone away. Well, now it is back. The question is this: are we prepared to revert to the sort of investment in defence in “peacetime” that we made so successfully during the 50 years of the cold war, which prevented an outbreak—a terrible further global conflict—between the then superpowers, both of which were armed with nuclear weapons?

I revert to what I said in an intervention on the Secretary of State when he was opening the debate: everything depends on what happens in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Let us be honest that when the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine arose in early 2022, not many people—hardly any in this Chamber, I suspect, myself included—predicted that Ukraine would be as successful as it has proved to be in resisting the might of the Russian invasion. I suspect that what had made that possible was that the shock that they had experienced in previous years over the loss of Crimea, which, if I remember correctly, was taken over by the Russians quite easily, focused their minds, their efforts and their investment upon the dire possibility that Russia might come back for more. That is why Ukraine was so much better prepared, with the covert assistance of other countries, not least this one, to resist the second Russian invasion when it happened.

I cannot stress too strongly that Ukraine’s battle is our battle. If Putin is seen to be unsuccessful in Ukraine, then the threat to us and to the rest of NATO will recede for a generation. However, if he is able to claim some sort of success, by ending up with significantly more territory at the end of the process than he had under his control in February 2022, then it will only be a matter of time before he comes back for more.

I want to say a few words about the middle east, but they are not actually my words; they are words from a remarkably perceptive article written by a Member of the upper House, the noble Lord Hague—William Hague, to us. He outlined his reaction to the atrocities of 7 October in an astonishingly perceptive way in *The Times* within 48 hours of that attack. I want to set some of what he said on the record, because he raised the question of why on earth Hamas should have undertaken such an action when they must have known it would provoke a horrifying response. He asked the question:

“Why, as well as murdering hundreds of defenceless young people at a rave, parade dead bodies as evidence of the atrocities? The answer is that their objective is uncontrolled rage. It is to make Israel lash out in a way that starts a conflagration. To start a war so intense that it spreads, igniting an explosion of violence in the West Bank and bringing in Hezbollah from Lebanon in the north, with Israel fighting on multiple fronts. To see so many

Palestinians killed that the Israelis lose the moral high ground of defending themselves against mass murder. To use the fate of hostages, with maximum cruelty, to intensify a frenzy of hatred whenever that seems to be abating.”

That is still going on now. We heard reference to the Israeli soldiers recently killed in a Hamas artillery strike close to the one entrance where aid was coming into Palestine. Guess what happened? The Israelis immediately closed that entrance, thus intensifying the crisis. The Hamas strategists clearly know what they are doing. It is horrible—devilish—but there is a cruel logic to it.

The heading that Lord Hague—or his sub-editor at *The Times*—used for that article was:

“Hamas has set a trap that Israel must avoid: Iranian-backed attacks are desperate attempts to halt growing collaboration with Saudi Arabia and the UAE”.

The only element that was missing in the article was that that strategy, promoted by Iran, was also extremely beneficial to Russia, because now we spend rather more time considering what is happening in Israel and Gaza than we spend considering what is happening between Russia and Ukraine, despite the fact that what is happening between Russia and Ukraine cannot be emphasised too often because it is of crucial significance to the future peace, or lack of peace, of NATO countries vis-à-vis the Russian threat.

I will close with some remarks about the nuclear deterrent, which has been touched on a few times. One of the votes took place under Labour, as we have heard, on 14 March 2007, when there was a substantial majority for the deterrent. Parliament voted by 409 votes to 161 in favour of proceeding with the initial gate for the renewal of the Trident submarine fleet; but even that huge majority of 248 was eclipsed on 18 July 2016, when under the Conservative Government—free from the coalition—the majority rose to 355 when MPs voted for the decisive main gate stage to proceed. That vote was won by 472 votes to 117.

That shows near unanimity in the House for the maintenance of our strategic nuclear deterrent—and all that happened before the various crises that we have been concentrating on today. Let us hope that unity prevails. I, for one, welcome the comments of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who said that his party is now committed to four submarines and to the maintenance of the continuous at-sea deterrent, which presumably means with the use of Trident missiles. I say “use” because they are used every day of the week. Their use is as a deterrent. If ever—heaven forbid—they had to be fired, they would fail in their purpose.

We have come a long way and we have made a lot of progress. It is just as well that we are united, given the way in which the international scene has darkened, but both Front Benches have a long way to go if they are to reach a stage where we are making the sort of investment, the sort of insurance and the sort of effort that has to be made to deter an aggressive Russia and to ensure that Ukraine prevails.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I will have to put a 10-minute time limit on speeches after the next speaker to get everybody in. That is not an invitation, Mr Jones, to speak for more than 12 minutes.

8.32 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I begin by putting on the record the whole House's thanks to the members of our armed forces for the service they give selflessly to protect us all? It is often said that the first responsibility of a Government is to protect the nation, keep it safe and protect its citizens. I think we need to look at what has happened over the past 14 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) said in his contribution that the armed forces are being "hollowed out"—not his words or mine, but those of the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace). Have we got to that situation by accident? No, we have not. That has been a deliberate policy over the last 14 years, including the 18% cut in the defence budget up to 2015-16. Today, the defence budget is 7% lower in real terms than it was in 2010. As my hon. Friend said, we saw our armed forces personnel cut by nearly 50,000—they were not only cut; there were compulsory redundancies. If a Labour Government had done that, every national newspaper would have had a lot to say about it. One in five ships in the Royal Navy has been taken out of service. We have 200 fewer aircraft in the RAF now, and satisfaction ratings for service life are at an all-time low of 50%.

Is it a time for serious policy and serious money on defence? Yes, it is, but we have not got that from the Government or from the Prime Minister's announcement, which is the usual smoke and mirrors. It is about soundbites that can be sold at the next general election. The Defence Secretary could sell snow to the Eskimos in his confident sort of way. I am not sure they would come back and buy more snow from him once they discovered what they had actually been sold.

If we look at what has been announced, an extra £75 billion is the headline. That will be repeated by every Conservative candidate in the general election, but we know they only get that figure if the defence budget would have been frozen for the next six years—something the Defence Secretary fails to admit. Also, where is the money? If my colleagues on the Labour Front Bench had announced this, straightaway people would be saying, "Where's the money coming from? Where's the detail?" There is no detail; it is just an aspiration—that is all it is. There is no separation between how much will be spent on resource and capital departmental expenditure limits. What we have from the salesman that is the Secretary of State is a whole shopping list of everything that will be put right by the supposed huge expenditure he has announced. It is pretty hollow.

Let us deal with facts. The Secretary of State does not like dealing with facts. It is like when he came before the Defence Committee. If we take the money to Ukraine out of the budget, the defence budget for next year—this was confirmed by the strategic finance director of the MOD—falls. The question that people need to ask at the next general election is: where is the money coming from? Why are our armed forces in such a dire state? We know the answer to that. It is because of the past 14 years.

We need to concentrate on three things: the defence of our homeland and the contribution to NATO, which has been mentioned; the capability of our equipment

and how it can be delivered; and putting weight behind British industry and skills. The Secretary of State said earlier that the announcement meant a huge boost to UK defence expenditure, but the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) demonstrated what we have seen over the last 14 years: contract after contract given to the United States, without any commitment to UK skills. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) mentioned the case of the fleet solid support ship given to a Spanish shipyard. That would never happen in any other European nation. We must ensure not just that we have the right equipment and procurement procedures, but that decisions are taken to boost our armed forces and to help UK plc.

Bob Seely: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a balance? Clearly, one would like everything for the military to be produced in this country to support our industrial base, but at the same time we complain about procurement scandals when the kit turns out to be so much more expensive than elsewhere. We need a balance. When we can realistically produce stuff in this country, we should be doing so—obviously, I will make the case for radar on the Isle of Wight—but if we try to do everything in this country, we will need to increase the defence budget just to pay for poorer quality procurement. He does not seem to be addressing that point.

Mr Jones: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman seems to be talking down the UK defence industry. He talks about radars in the Isle of Wight, which are some of the best radars in the world, but what are we doing? We are not giving long-term commitments to those capabilities. We are buying off the shelf from the United States and other nations. We are not just talking about buying British; it is about co-operation with our allies as well. The problem is that if we take a short-termist view, which is what has happened over the past 14 years, we do not get the commitments and the flow through of orders, nor the R&D, investment and certainty, that people on the Isle of Wight need.

The Secretary of State said that the UK is now on a war footing following this announcement. Why, then, did it take the Government nearly two years to procure the order for 155 mm munitions? That is not a war footing; that is a slow snail's pace of procurement. We need to ensure that we get not only the finance and the increase in the defence budget, but that rapid throughput of work. That cannot be done just by placing one order this week and then leaving it for several years, thinking that somehow the defence contractors will still be there with their skills.

We need a thorough defence policy. One thing that has been missing in the last 14 years is a coherent defence industrial strategy. Even when the Government do come up with a strategy, such as the shipbuilding strategy, what do they do? The main argument for that strategy was that we needed to have a throughput of work at UK yards, so what did the Government do? They made an order where most of the work will be done in Spain. No other European nation would do that.

As has been said, this is a very worrying time, and I agree totally with my hon. Friend the Member for Halton that we need to make the case for defence. I have been doing that for 23 years in this House, as have

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others across the House. We need to make that case to show that the democracy that we take for granted is delicate and needs to be protected. We can protect it only if we invest in the capability to do so, because there are those, even beyond the immediate threat we see from Russia, who would happily see the precious democracy that we cherish snubbed out, not through argument and debate, but through violence and war.

8.41 pm

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): When you took the Chair some time ago, Mr Deputy Speaker, you observed that the House was stuffed full of defence expertise, and that has been demonstrated amply in the debate that has followed your taking the Chair. Once or twice, I felt that I had inadvertently stumbled into a private meeting of the Defence Committee, since most Members who have spoken so far—though not all—are either present or previous members of that Committee. I pay tribute to their huge expertise, particularly on defence procurement. They know what they are talking about in immense detail and I fear that I simply do not, so I will not try to compete with them on that.

However, it has been a very important debate for this reason: this is the first occasion, I think, on which the Government have given us a debate in Government time on the subject of defence. I have banged on for many years, trying to persuade the Government to do that, but this is the first such debate, and I hope it is the first of many. We used to have five every year, so I hope very much that we will have a significant number of debates over the years to come.

The important point about these debates is that, as a number of people have commented, we live in exceptionally dangerous times, in an exceptionally dangerous world, and we simply do not know what is going to happen next. There could be all kinds of warfare and trouble to come. It is therefore very important that the House as a whole—not just the Defence Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee, but the House as a whole—should have a serious understanding of defence and foreign affairs. It is terribly important that debates such as this are used towards the better education of all our colleagues across the House.

In that context, I am particularly proud of the work I have done for quite a long time to seek to educate better Members of Parliament across the House. I have used two mechanisms. Many Members here will be familiar with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which this year has seconded 64 MPs and peers in uniform to the three armed services. As of this year, thanks to an initiative by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), we have introduced a fourth course, namely the strategic command course, which has been widely enjoyed. There are 64 people altogether, four of whom go to the Royal College of Defence Studies—the ultimate in thinking in the armed services.

That seems to me an extremely important contribution that we have made over the last few years. I am glad to say that this is the 10th anniversary of the revived version of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which

I have chaired, and I pay tribute to the people who run it for me. Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Longbottom, in particular, has done great work over those years. The scheme has made a huge contribution to the better understanding of defence by people in this place.

Alongside that, I also chair the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces, which holds two or three events a month, very often downstairs. Again, that is widely enjoyed by a large spectrum of people from across the Chamber. It enables the Ministry of Defence to get its messages over to ordinary Members of Parliament in a way it would not otherwise be able to do. We have laid on various welcome home events when people come back from overseas deployments and laid on individual meet-and-greets in Speaker's House and the occasional breakfast.

I remember in particular the Fighting With Pride breakfast, which moved us all a great deal through the things it brought to light. I did not know before that about the appalling things we had done to LGBT soldiers, sailors and airmen until 2001. Certainly for me and a number of other Members, that breakfast gave us a determination to do something about it. I am glad to say that at the end of a year's campaigning, we did achieve something of that kind. The APPG does an extraordinarily useful job, and I am proud that I chair it. I pay tribute to Amy Swash and Sophie Lane in my office who run it for me. It is a great organisation.

The reason I am proud of all that is that sometimes when people talk about defence in this Chamber they talk about the role that Parliament might have in the event of our going to war. They come to an entirely false conclusion that we should therefore have a debate and a vote in this House on the deployment of troops overseas. This important matter has been troubling me for many years now. Of all the 175 wars we have fought since 1700, only two have had a substantive vote in this House before deployment. The first was in 2003, when Tony Blair sought top cover by insisting on votes on the invasion of Iraq. The second was in 2013 when David Cameron again sought top cover in seeking to retaliate against Syria for using chemical weapons. On the first occasion, we voted in favour of it—what a mistake that was, and I am glad to say that I abstained—and on the second occasion we voted against it, and we did not go to war with Syria. Most people would now say that much of what has happened in the middle east since then would have been different had we done so.

On both occasions where the House of Commons has voted on a matter of deployment, we have got it wrong and done the wrong thing. On all the other occasions where we have gone to war, it has been done by the Prime Minister and the Executive under the royal prerogative and we have tended to get it right. Our role then becomes scrutiny of what it is that the Prime Minister and Executive have done. We can stand here, ask questions, call debates and do all sorts of things to scrutinise how the Prime Minister has done what he has done. That is an important role for Parliament to play. If we are being asked to vote for something, as Labour Members were forced to vote on a three-line Whip in 2003 in favour of the Iraq war, we cannot then turn around and criticise it. Our job here in Parliament is to scrutinise and criticise what the Government have done, not to give them top cover for it.

It is therefore important that, whatever may be about to befall us in this world—who knows what that might be—we do not once again fall into the easy truism that on such vital matters we in the House of Commons must be given a vote. No, we must not. That is to emasculate us as Members of Parliament and to prevent us from holding the Government to account. It presumes that we have the secret intelligence, legal advice and all the other things one needs to take that kind of decision. We must not do that. We are ordinary Members of Parliament; we should be better informed about defence, which is why I welcome debates such as this, and we should know what we are talking about, as well as we can in this place, but the notion that that should lead us to conclude that somehow or other we have Executive power over what the armed services do is, I fear, entirely fallacious.

I very much hope that we will use these debates, the armed forces parliamentary scheme—or the new scheme that will be launched shortly—and the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces for the better education not of the specialists who we see around us in this debate this evening to whose great expertise I pay tribute, but of the generality of Members of Parliament and the generality of people who look into these things, feel concerned, but may not have the detailed expertise that we have seen demonstrated in the Chamber this evening. I want to see Parliament a better informed place about defence and foreign affairs, and I hope that those two organisations will play some part in doing that.

8.48 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), and I pay tribute to him as the chair and lead of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces. He hosts lots of highly experienced, very senior strategic thinkers from the armed forces as part of that APPG.

I welcome this opportunity to debate UK defence policy at greater length. I have been struck that so far many of the speeches have been about defence capability and equipment, but I was particularly impressed by the comments about the strategic environment. The most senior military personnel in our kingdom talk about strategy in terms of ends, ways and means. It would be a mistake to spend all our time talking about means when they expect the Government and Parliament also to think about ways and particularly ends—the end state that the UK is seeking to bring about. I will focus my remarks more on the strategic environment and the wider security context, and towards the end I will talk a bit about cuts to the regular Army. I will also comment on the suggestions that have been knocking around recently about a citizens army.

I was impressed by the remarks of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) about the strategic environment. I am glad that in the west we seek to take the peace dividend when we think it is available to us. One thing that stands out about democracies is that when the security environment allows, we try to invest in health and education. It is absolutely appropriate to champion that, but we should also be realistic enough to recognise when times do not allow for that.

We have talked today about continuous at-sea deterrents and the role of the coalition Government in having a Trident alternatives review, which is not to be regretted.

In the security context of the time, when Obama was talking about a reset button and we signed a strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia—New START—it was appropriate to be thinking along the same lines as in the 1990s, when the west and the Soviet Union were mutually trying to reduce the threats from our nuclear weapons. As it happens, the events from 2014 onwards plainly proved that we absolutely need to be as strong as possible.

The Prime Minister's remarks a fortnight ago were interesting. He talked about a new defence partnership between the UK and Germany. I welcomed the fact that he made the announcement in Berlin and the idea that we should have greater interoperability with our allies, but he then fell into this business of talking about putting the defence industry on to a "war footing". Indeed, that chimed with the Defence Secretary's statement that we are entering a "pre-war era". When we throw such remarks around, we need to qualify what we mean, because we know that our adversaries listen carefully to what we say. We do not need belligerent tones and a mismatch between our rhetoric and our capability; instead, we should speak quietly while making ourselves as strong as possible. That is of course what the armed forces are for. "Bello te praepares" was the motto of the Army training regiment when I was there as a platoon commander. We were very much about preparing for war, but we were doing it quietly. It would be sensible for the Defence Secretary to make those preparations as ardently as possible but not in a showy fashion.

If the Defence Secretary's motivation is genuinely to send a message to Ukraine that we are in this for the long haul and that there is certainty, he will not want to make this a party political issue or suggest that Opposition parties are somehow less supportive of Ukraine. He asked earlier whether we would match the £500 million uplift per year for Ukraine. Yes—we recognise the characterisation of Russia's westward expansion as a threat to all Europe, so Ukraine can be assured that, regardless of a change of Government later this year, it will continue to receive £3 billion in support from the UK.

The Foreign Secretary said last week, when he was in Ukraine, that Ukraine is free to use long-range Storm Shadow missiles over the border into Russia. I am surprised that that has not come up in our discussion today. That may be because such things should not be done on the Floor of the House, and I very much welcomed the approach of the former Defence Secretary, who would share with Opposition parties, well in advance of the debate, the urgent question or the statement, what he intended to say through his special adviser. That was a way to have such conversations not on the Floor of the House or in such a public fashion. As it is, the strategic communications people in NATO will now have to work all the harder to counter the false narratives and lies that Russia pumps out about Ukraine somehow being a threat to the Russian people, or even Russia being threatened by NATO itself.

From an operational standpoint, that use of missiles makes good sense. Clearly, main supply routes, arms dumps and fuel depots will now be brought within range, but we should remember that the centre of gravity here is the Russian people and their willingness to fight. We know that the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan after 15,000 Soviet soldiers were killed. To encourage Russians

[Richard Foord]

not to sign up, we need to persuade them that the state of Russia is not threatened by Ukraine or, indeed, by NATO.

On the cuts to the regular Army, I was interested by the remarks of the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) about recruitment and consent. I would point to the issue of consent when we talk about parliamentary approval of military action. I do not believe that Governments were merely seeking top cover when they had a debate in Parliament on the intervention in Iraq in 2003 or on the intervention in Syria in 2013. Rather, they were genuinely seeking to engage with us as representatives of the people to try to get support.

Finally, I come to a proposal that was leaked to a journalist, David Parsley, at the *i* a couple of weeks ago about a 20,000-strong volunteer force that could potentially train a 200,000-strong volunteer Army. I do not expect the Minister to comment on that or any other leak, but if that is the response from the Government to the pressure they have been under on cuts to the Army, it would not be a sensible approach. The plan talks about an annual spend of some £500 per recruit in training allowances per year for the initial 20,000 ex-forces personnel during peacetime. That amount would not go very far. Service personnel would suppose that the MOD was once again budgeting to withhold blank rounds in favour of commanders asking trainee soldiers to shout “Bang!” We cannot have an Army on paper that does not exist in reality. We need a regular Army of 82,000. We need to reverse the cuts that we have seen in recent years, and we need to build credible armed forces so that we are strong not only in our rhetoric, but in our capability.

8.58 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My constituency lies at the heart of one of the largest clusters of defence and aerospace manufacturing in Europe, namely the south-west region. I am also very proud that Abbey Wood, the home of the MOD’s procurement agency, is based in my constituency. Companies such as Rolls-Royce are playing a key role in developing the Tempest fighter jet as part of the global combat air programme, or GCAP, a next-generation programme that will provide the Royal Air Force and our allies with capability fit for the future. Last month, I was delighted to welcome my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to open the FutureWorks at Rolls-Royce in Patchway. The lift fan for the F-35 is built in the same plant. The engines that power the Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales aircraft carriers have also been built by Rolls-Royce at the same plant in Patchway.

This Friday, I will join Boeing at the opening of their new offices—the third time I have opened an office for Boeing in my constituency.

A few weeks ago I was pleased to join Rheinmetall, who as we all know will be building the new Boxer and the Boxer RCH self-propelled artillery for our military, at the opening of its new offices in my constituency. MBDA in Filton is developing future technologies and expertise, which even today help the Storm Shadow and Brimstone missiles that are making such a difference to Ukrainian efforts to defeat the Russians and kick them out of their country.

Airbus builds the wings for the RAF A400M transport aircraft, and the Wing of Tomorrow facility in Filton represents a significant investment in our future aerospace and defence expertise. Just over the road is the new GKN technology centre. I have recently visited Elbit Systems—a company with a growing footprint in my constituency, which demonstrated some of the capability it is developing to help our armed forces. I regularly meet senior members of civilian and military staff at DE&S Abbey Wood, who have been masterminding the UK’s effort and rallying support for our international partners to support Ukraine, as well as running the MOD’s procurement for our armed forces.

The defence and aviation sector in my constituency employs more than 30,000 people, with a significant supply chain across the south-west. Indeed, a significant number of jobs in the south-west are connected to the defence sector—an additional 17,600 according to latest industry data, although I am minded to think it is probably a lot more. Apprenticeships are key to a wider effort to enable us to train the scientists and engineers of the future, to ensure that we continue to enhance our sovereign defence manufacturing capability, as well as being a vehicle to promote social mobility and opportunity. The MOD is committed to invest at least £6.6 billion in its funding for research and development over the next four years, which will help the apprenticeship programmes.

The most recent statistics relating to the defence sector, published just last week by the United Kingdom Defence Solutions Centre, show that over 406,000 full-time jobs are directly supported by that sector. When I was co-chair of the all-party group on apprenticeships, I produced a report, after chairing an inquiry into MOD apprenticeships, which underlined the fact that the MOD is the largest provider of apprenticeships in the country. Apprenticeships provide fantastic opportunities for our young people, and they keep training and increasing the expertise for our industrial base.

The announcement that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made last month to raise the level of our defence expenditure to 2.5% of GDP is a welcome demonstration from this Government to underpin our commitment to our NATO allies, and our friends and allies around the world. The message is clear: the United Kingdom is leading the way as the largest defence spender in Europe, in addition to demonstrating that we are a reliable partner and ally.

Moreover, the MOD is transforming itself to be ready for whatever lies ahead. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke about this being a “pre-war era” in his Lancaster House speech earlier this year. I was glad that he was able to see some of the work done at Abbey Wood when he visited just a couple of weeks ago. The announcement that at least 5% of spending will be ringfenced for research and development from 2025-26 onwards, with an increased focus on dual-use technologies, received a positive reception in my constituency. There was also the announcement of the overall defence spending increase of £75 billion over the next six years.

I have visited Ukraine six times in the last 12 months, and will soon be going again to attend the International Defence Industries Forum and the Yalta European Strategy Conferences. Moreover, I have promoted the work of many British defence manufacturers, as well as making the case for them to do more in terms of

operations and manufacturing in Ukraine. I have met senior members of the Ukrainian Government, and been told of their frustration at the delays that seem to be occurring in setting up meaningful collaboration between British and Ukrainian defence manufacturers. That is against a backdrop where Russia has increased its military spending by 68% to 7.5% of its GDP. Putin claimed recently that more than 520,000 new jobs have been created in the Russian arms industry, which now employs an estimated 3.5 million people.

On those visits I have met senior Ministers in Ukraine, such as Oleksandr Kamyshin, the Minister of Strategic Industries, as well as the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, the Chairman of the National Security, Defence and Intelligence Committee, and many others. I have been to the front lines in Zaporizhzhia to see British-made artillery in action—the AS-90s, most of which seem to have come from one of my son's Army regiments, 1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery. Michael is currently deployed in Estonia on exercise, deterring the Russian threat.

In addition, I work constantly to bring together defence manufacturers from across the United Kingdom, and I have arranged meetings with the Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge). I have had meetings here in London and elsewhere. The benefits of increased trade in all sectors, but especially in defence matériel, are evident and in the national interests of Ukraine and the United Kingdom, as well as some of the surrounding countries, particularly Poland and Romania. For us in the United Kingdom, we defend our own sovereignty and critical national infrastructure. Russia has already proven that it can conduct cyber-warfare against the west effectively, and has been only emboldened in this by its ever closer relationship with China. For Ukraine, it is armed with the best of British kit and equipment. Coupled with Ukraine's world-leading expertise in drone technology and standards, this could quickly produce high-quality military equipment, for Ukraine has a keen interest in establishing partnerships with defence companies based here in the UK and across Europe, in order to rebuild its own defence industrial base and help to win the war, as well as to invest in deterrence post victory as Ukraine moves towards NATO membership.

Over the course of a recent visit to Ukraine, I produced a report, at the Prime Minister's request, about the challenges in setting up manufacturing bases in Ukraine and how to unblock the bureaucracy that is proving an impediment to doing so. It is reassuring that the Prime Minister has joined me and others throughout the Chamber in calling for the UK's defence industry to be put on a war footing. This will enable our defence manufacturers and the wider supply chains to plan with confidence and to invest in the capabilities that we will need to fight the wars of the future and provide an important deterrent to our enemies.

First, though, we have to unblock the bureaucracy and try to make it as easy as possible for companies to collaborate together, particularly those from the United Kingdom and Ukraine, given our special relationship and the support we have given them, over and above most nations. As our Ukrainian friends say, we must build the arsenal of the free world together.

9.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), and others who have spoken exceptionally well.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) has now left the Chamber, but many of us have had the opportunity to be involved in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which he now chairs. I know the people who previously ran the scheme, which I did for four different terms, and I must say that I learned a lot from it in each and every case.

I put on the record my thanks to all those who serve in the Army, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. In my constituency of Strangford, the tradition of service is one that I am always amazed by—many people have joined up and served, and their families have served, over many a year—so I am really pleased to contribute to the debate.

I want to focus on Northern Ireland in particular, on defence procurement and on how we can do better. In the 2023-24 financial year, the UK spent some £54.2 billion on defence. That is expected to rise to £57.1 billion in 2024-25, which is a 4.5% real terms increase. As a member of NATO, we are committed to meeting our defence expenditure targets, so it is great to discuss the importance of these matters and to underline them.

Our defence industry is so important in the United Kingdom, as has been shown time and again in the assistance offered to support Israel and Ukraine over the past few years. In addition, it is fantastic that Northern Ireland can play its role in the UK's defence industry. There are so many businesses that go above and beyond to provide support. For example, I know that everyone is well aware of Thales and the NLAW shoulder-launched anti-tank devices that have been used with great success against the Russians in Ukraine. Thales is based in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who tells me that the largest number of the workforce comes from my Strangford constituency. Whether in respect of service in uniform or service in the defence sector, I am honoured, pleased and privileged to be the MP for Strangford and to know that my constituents can do such a great job.

Strangford has another section of Thales, the missile section, down in Crossgar. It is producing fantastic military products to combat Russian tanks and aeroplanes both in captured parts of Ukraine and across Russia. With a 30-year heritage of world-class engineering in Strangford, Thales employs some 500 people and contributes £77 million to Northern Ireland's GDP.

There is also an ecosystem of suppliers. Ninety-one per cent of our local procurement in Northern Ireland comes from small and medium-sized enterprises. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is holding an inquiry into procurement in the defence sector, and we hope that Northern Ireland can become a bigger player, but we do not have a regional hub, which should be one of our recommendations. Many companies have come to make representations to the Committee.

The Prime Minister recently announced that defence budgets will increase in 2024-25, and I am incredibly encouraged and pleased that the Secretary of State spoke about ensuring a focus on allocating those funds

[*Jim Shannon*]

towards defence budgets in Northern Ireland. I am sure the Minister for Defence People and Families will repeat that in his summing up, as I know every Minister does, but Northern Ireland does not have the proportion of defence contracts that it should have relative to other parts of the United Kingdom, such as the north-east or south of England.

Companies such as Spirit AeroSystems, Harland & Wolff and Thales need to be offered contracts to help Northern Ireland to contribute towards further supporting the UK. We want to play our part. We have companies with the skilled workforce, the opportunity and the eagerness. Nitronica, an electronic manufacturer in Ballynahinch, is one of the companies that we are very keen to be involved in defence procurement contracts. One way of making that happen would be to have a regional hub, and the quicker we have it, the better.

There is certainly a reason for us to have a conversation about cyber-security and how the defence budget can support online protection. The Secretary of State made a statement earlier on the defence data hack. We have a commitment to cyber-security, and my understanding is that the skills we have in Northern Ireland, whether in Belfast or Londonderry, are equal to those down south or in England.

The defence industry is economically important to many areas of the United Kingdom, and our defence policy must be consistent with an industrial strategy that promotes jobs and skills throughout all the regions and nations of the UK. I am proud to be British, and I am proud to be a member of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we need to see it working physically. In his summing up, will the Minister give us some encouragement by telling us how we can do better? We want to do better, because we believe in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In ensuring that the data breach is not repeated, and with national security being at the forefront of our priorities, it is clear that more steps need to be taken to preclude any future incident. In the years since the Good Friday agreement was signed, Northern Ireland has become a hotspot for cyber-security innovation. The cities of Belfast and Londonderry are to the fore in exhibiting high technology specialists and consistently attracting domestic and overseas investment. We are proud of that hub, and we feel that it should be leading the way. Although it is important that our aerospace, communications and arms sectors are offered further defence contracts, our cyber-security sector is just as important and must also be given recognition.

It is always encouraging to hear about the Secretary of State's intention to boost defence spending. Whenever I ask him questions in the Chamber, he always replies by mentioning Thales, Spirit AeroSystems and Harland & Wolff as examples of where we are doing better, but we need a regional hub—that is my request in this debate—to ensure that we have the means to help ourselves.

We in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a fabulous defence industry, an incredibly skilled workforce, and opportunities to grow and maintain our defence procurement across the whole nation. We must ensure that the boost in spending is offered through contracts to local businesses that go

above and beyond to support us. Our commitment to apprenticeships, through those three big firms, shows how we can do better.

National security has no price, so it is great to hear the Minister's commitments, but perhaps he might clarify how he intends to ensure that the devolved nations can continue to play their role in supporting the wider United Kingdom defence industry, to make this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland even greater. If it is even greater, I would be very proud to be part of it.

9.16 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. I am not a Minister—to echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray)—but I am a former serviceman, and I hope to bring some value, as a practitioner, to what we are discussing.

We know that the first duty of any Government is the defence of their people—that is quite clear—so the need to keep people safe is non-discretionary. Right now we have war raging across Europe, not too far away, and multiple threats are proliferating right across the globe. Given that the international landscape now is probably more dangerous, unstable and incendiary than it has been at any time since world war two, defence spending is absolutely essential. Voters care about their security, and many are nervous about what is happening across the world. Most importantly, it is our duty as politicians to keep them safe.

That is why the Government's commitment to a defence budget equal to 2.5% of GDP by 2030 is so important, both strategically and politically. As a member of the UN Security Council, the UK's continued role as a bastion of global rights and democracy can be underpinned only by hard power. It is a reality of history that we may yet be called upon to protect our own security and that of our allies. We know that the Defence Secretary has recently increased military aid to Ukraine, securing an extra £700 million and thereby taking Britain's total contribution beyond £3 billion—that is a lot of money—so we are doing our bit.

On the 2.5% target, it is extra money, but the issue is what we do with it and how we spend it—that is important—so I advocate for a capability audit right now. The reason I say that is that the extra injection of funds means that we need to work out what we can now do. When I was working at Northwood permanent joint headquarters many years ago, we had this thing called the JOECR—the joint operational estimate of capability and readiness. In my view, with the extra money that we have now, we should be turning all those capabilities that are flashing red to green—in other words, we should plug the capability gaps—and not just on land, at sea and in the air, but in space and cyber. Yes, state-of-the-art platforms are fine, and yes, we must procure weapons that we know can beat our adversaries, but it is also about spending wisely and smartly where necessary.

My second point on the 2.5% is that we need to better operate what we already have so that every part of our lexicon works. We must not rely on the exquisite exclusivity that we have spoken so much about; we must ensure that all our platforms work and can be sustained across the battlespace.

In terms of equipment generally, as one part of capability we need to procure what we need and nothing more. It is about strategic lift as well as exquisite exclusivity. If we do not have the ships—the roll-on roll-off ferries—or the strategic lift, including C-17s and A400Ms, to get equipment and people right across the globe, there is no point having the kit in the first place. It is therefore about enabling expeditionary reach. We cannot put boots on the ground if we cannot get the boots there. Plus, Minister, it is about logistic tail, spares, the supply chain, sustainment, defence contractors, delivery and munitions. We must be careful to ensure that if we buy it, we will be able to use it and then fight it through, and it must be sustainable and enduring.

“Platform” is an interesting word. It means the platform on which a capability sits, but what is put on that platform also matters. I therefore favour a modular approach for future equipment programmes, whereby we can apply different degrees of mobility, firepower and protection, but it is the kit that is bolted on and bolted off that really matters, and that is the battle-winning equipment for me. For me, this is about a commonality of platforms, about spares, about logistics, about interoperability and about cannibalisation. If we run out of something, can we get it? With complex platforms and complex supply chains, we cannot, so let us please go for modular and for commonality.

Richard Foord: Is the hon. Member aware of the Supacat range of vehicles, which operate in much the way that he has described?

James Sunderland: I am very aware of Supacat. I have visited the company, which is in the hon. Member’s neck of the woods. It is a very impressive British company. Yes, we need to do more to ensure that it produces and builds what we need. Let us work with it a bit more on that. As the hon. Member suggests, this is about fewer variants, an easier supply chain, and not having equipment that is too complex to use or to maintain. That is very important: we should keep it cheap, simple and easy.

Let me say a little about NATO. As we know, it is the only show in town. It is the umbrella for European security in the north Atlantic. It now consists of 32 countries, and that is to be welcomed. It has responded magnificently to Putin’s aggression in Ukraine. It has galvanised the alliance since the invasion, in a way that Putin could not possibly have conceived. In many ways, it is much stronger because of what has happened. Article 5 is the prize for NATO membership. It has defined Putin’s actions in Ukraine, in that so far he has not attacked a NATO country. Why? He is worried about article 5, and that strategic uncertainty underpins our security in Europe.

However, there are issues with NATO. First, only 18 of its 32 member countries are currently committed to 2% of GDP, and that is not enough. In addition, the five non-EU members—the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Turkey and Norway—contribute 80% of the operating budget, which is outrageous, with 96% of the EU effectively reliant on NATO for its security. That is a stark contrast. Europe must therefore become much more responsible for its own security, and that is non-discretionary.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman share the concerns that some of us have about Trump’s comments? He has said that if he is the next president of the United

States—he may not be—and if NATO members do not up their commitment to 3%, the United States will withdraw and reduce its own commitment. Is Trump a danger?

James Sunderland: It is not for me to endorse Trump in this Chamber, but what I will say is that to a certain extent he is right. It is absolutely right that Europe must take on more responsibility for its own security, to allow the United States to worry about parts of the world that NATO will not necessarily worry about. It is important to ensure that the United States is not overly committed in Europe for the same reason. We know that NATO in Europe massively overmatches Russia, but we need to reach a point, strategically, at which Europe itself overmatches Russia, leaving the United States to focus on the parts of the world on which it needs to focus.

Another important point that I would like the Minister to note is that the UK has a global footprint that extends beyond NATO. We have discussed NATO a great deal this evening, but it is not just about NATO. East of Suez, where we have not had a presence for quite some time, we now have bases in Bahrain, Diego Garcia—we have always had one there—and of course Oman. If the UK is to be a bastion of global democracy, it is important for us to have that reach across the far side of the globe. We also have operating bases in Cyprus, Gibraltar, the Falklands, Ascension and Diego Garcia. I mention that because it is really important for us to look after those bases. Were we to withdraw from Diego Garcia, for example, that will be a part of the world that we can no longer cover with our strategic reach. We therefore need to be very careful what we wish for politically.

It is imperative that the UK is able to fulfil its global commitments: in the middle east with carrier strike, as well as in the Falklands, west Africa, the Red sea, the Caribbean, the Baltic and the north Atlantic—the list goes on. We are not just focused on NATO, so it is really important that our defence capabilities extend beyond the north Atlantic and fulfil our global responsibilities. We need only look at where UK forces are deployed right now to realise how important that global footprint is. Dean Acheson, the former US Secretary of State, famously said that

“Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.”

Well, we clearly do have that role. We have seen that this evening in this debate, and it is very important that we are resourced and funded to be able to fulfil that role in perpetuity.

Lastly, what numbers should the armed forces consist of? There is a lot of debate about the Army being cut and whether 72,000 is enough, the size of the Navy and the state of the RAF, but the answer is that the forces must be big enough to do the job with which they are tasked. The answer therefore lies in defence tasks. The idea of having an Army or Navy of a certain size is pie in the sky. We know that we have to be able to resource them, but the important thing is that our forces have to be able to meet defence tasks. We know that we do not have enough ships—we need more frigates and more destroyers. Quantity has a quality all of its own. We have state-of-the-art equipment in the RAF, including the C-17, A400M, P-3, F-35B, Typhoon, and Tempest to come, but do we have enough of those platforms?

[James Sunderland]

As for the Army, I keep being told by constituents, “Well, Mr Sunderland, the Army cannot fight Russia.” Of course the British Army is unlikely to be fighting Russia on its own—it is called NATO. We know that NATO has approximately 3 million troops to call upon, and we also know that NATO overmatches Russia in Europe. We need to play our part in NATO, not necessarily being perplexed about what we used to be able to do. The UK needs to be able to retain autonomous and unilateral forces to support NATO and its other tasks, as we have mentioned, so we cannot afford to be harder on numbers.

In conclusion, 2.5% is the right thing to do, but that number must keep rising to meet the threat. Do we need more ships? Yes, we do. A bigger Army? Perhaps. Is NATO fundamental to our future? It absolutely is. Trident? Unequivocally yes—we need to invest in it and reinforce it. It gives us a seat on the UN Security Council, which is really important. Do we need to focus on autonomous and remote platforms? Absolutely, yes. With cyber and space, we now have five domains, not three; we need to invest much more in those, as we saw today. We need to invest in precision capabilities. We need to have better training, better activity, more training, more exciting activity, and opportunities that keep people and attract them to stay. Richard Branson famously said, “We need to train people so well that they can leave, but treat them so well that they do not want to.” With the Minister in his place, I urge him to think about wokery—not too much of it in the armed forces, please; we still have a job to do. Dumbing down of standards? Absolutely not; we have to set the bar and maintain it, because discipline depends upon it. The divisive new accommodation model? No, thank you.

9.28 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). I want to develop some points that he and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) made. I will make a few points about deterrence, and about the type of warfare we are facing. I will say a little about procurement, about Ukraine, and whether we are in a pre-war era and how useful that idea is.

The point that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East made about deterrence was profound: the fundamental problem of the past century is that we failed to deter. We fought two world wars and just about won them both, so to us they are glorious things. Actually, both were catastrophes, in terms of power and in terms of lives lost. Half of my grandparents died: my German grandmother was killed by the Soviets, and my British grandfather, a colonel, was slaughtered while leading his regiment in north Africa. Winning wars is appallingly expensive; losing them is a catastrophe, clearly. But even fighting them when we can deter instead is a huge strategic error. Fighting two world wars effectively destroyed the British empire, which I think was in many ways a force for good—but let us not go there at the moment.

My right hon. Friend made the point that even spending 10% on deterrence is potentially much cheaper than spending 50% of our GDP to fight an existential war for our future, which is what Russians are being dishonestly

told that they face. Around the Solent—of course he knows this—are Palmerston’s follies, the forts to protect the fleet at Portsmouth, on the Isle of Wight and on the south side of Hampshire. They are seen as a colossal waste of money because they were never used, but I think Palmerston’s follies were wonderful because they were never used. It was about deterrence. We do not know whether they deterred anybody, but the fact remains that they were there and that fleet was not attacked, and we lived through decades of peace from the end of the Napoleonic wars through to world war one. I will come on to this in a second, but we are potentially entering a new period of great instability.

The Secretary of State talked about types of warfare, which is critical. If this £75 billion extra is simply going to buy another half dozen frigates that will survive an extra three minutes in the middle east, in the Red sea, before they are destroyed by swarm drones, there is little point having the additional kit. If there is any lesson of not only the Ukrainian war, but the Azerbaijani-Armenian war—the first war where cheap drones destroyed expensive Russian kit from above—it is that cheap mass kit is very good at destroying much more expensive kit.

As a power that seeks to use conventional force and that does not tend to think like revolutionaries, as the Russians or the Iranians do or as terrorist organisations do, I am concerned about the type of war we are planning to fight. If we are just going to buy more expensive kit that does not survive the battle, there is no point having it. We need to invest in the stuff that will not only protect destroyers and aircraft carriers, but enable us to turn the tide—to do as the Ukrainians are doing and to think like a nimble adversary facing a greater power, perhaps using mass drones ourselves to destroy larger forces in future, be they Chinese, Russian or others. It is a question of the type of warfare we are fighting.

To those of us who have read Russian doctrine, the first characteristic of modern conflict is the integration of military and non-military tools—information, spying, cyber or economic. This is the world of the 21st century, and the Secretary of State was right to point out that each century or each generation redefines war. This is a redefinition of conflict for our own era, and we are seeing it from China. The Russians are very conflict-minded, but so far the Chinese place less emphasis on physical, conventional force and more emphasis on the tools of economy, using Huawei, cyber-attacks and so on.

Even with China, however, if we are entering a pre-war phase, we see a build-up towards a potential attack on Taiwan in the next few years. How are we thinking about the type of warfare that the Taiwanese will need to fight to defend themselves? They will need not only cyber, to survive the first minutes of mass cyber-attacks, but mass drones to shoot down and destroy Chinese ships and aircraft if they attack.

That brings me to procurement. I am sure the Secretary of State was going to answer this, but did not because the Deputy Speaker cut him off when I was asking about radar on the Isle of Wight. Our procurement has to be smart. We have an absurd debate in this country: one minute we say, “Why, oh why, isn’t everything made in the UK?”, and the next minute we say, “Why, oh why, does everything cost so much more?” We have to get the balance right. We have to invest and sell stuff into export markets where we have that lead—in submarines, potentially

in radar and in other really good things where we still have the cutting edge—and we have to be much smarter about what we do and how we do it.

Most airmen and most people in the armed forces would tell us that the A400 is a pretty disastrous piece of kit. Maybe they have ironed out those problems in the past few years, but most people in the armed forces would much rather have kept the Hercules and run it with, I think, the C-14 or the Galaxy—*[Interruption.]* The C-17, sorry. It is a beautiful plane—gorgeous. They would rather have the Herc and the C-17. We had a better build deal with the Herc in this country, but for political reasons we bought the A400, which is deeply unpopular and cannot do much of the work, especially in the more rarefied ends of the military, that the Hercules could do. It is about smart procurement—not necessarily committing to buy everything British, but committing to do as much as possible British, as long as it is also delivering value for the taxpayer. That is an important distinction.

Moving on to Ukraine, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell is right that it is shameful that the US is doing so much of the heavy lifting; it is appalling. He is also right about how little Europe is doing. Russia is gaining ground and gaining in confidence, which is a significant problem we face. An old friend, Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, is doing great work highlighting some new tactics on the eastern front, probably the most important of which are the use of glide bombs and CS gas. As a chemical weapon, CS gas is low level, cheap and less offensive to humanity than sarin. By using it on the frontline, the Russians are forcing Ukrainian troops out of their bunkers and their positions, so they become more vulnerable to wave attacks by Russian troops and to mortar and artillery fire.

We know that the artillery ratios at the moment are something like 10:1, so for every shell the Ukrainians fire, the Russians are firing 10 back. That will soon even out to 5:1 or maybe 3:1, but the use of CS gas is still proving to be a highly significant threat. A question I would like to put to the Secretary of State is, although I know we are being generous and doing lots of great things with kit, can we supply gas masks to the Ukrainians? Can we enable British companies that produce gas masks to sell them more quickly to the Ukrainians? They need that kit. From what my friends in the Ukrainian armed forces tell me, the Soviet-era gas masks are not fit for purpose and are costing lives.

On UK supply and support to Ukraine in relation to artillery shells, I do not want to keep banging on about this point, but the more there is transparency of supply, the more the Russians will see that we are in this for the long term. The Gucci kit—the high-end kit—is important, but the stuff that is going to enable Ukraine to hold its positions and not allow a Russian breakthrough of the kind we saw in Kharkiv is going to be the supply of 155 mm artillery shells, preferably with fewer types of western kit. The Ukrainians are running 17 different types of artillery kit that use a variety of shells, which is causing massive logistical issues. It is a remarkable achievement that the Ukrainians are even doing that.

I am delighted the AS-90s have gone. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, that raises the question of where that kit is, but it has been put to good use. However,

those barrels do not last. There are only two or three retooling plants in Europe, so why have we not opened one? The war has been going on for two years. Why do we not have a production line for artillery shells? Why are we not re-barrelling or offering to re-machine kit? If we are, can we say so? That kit is so important; it is the bread and butter of this war.

I was going to make another point, but I will not; I will wind up there because I am running out of time. Finally, on messaging, people think it is a waste of time trying to message the Russians, but I wonder if we should be trying to do that more. If we look at the number of people who are actively supporting this war in Russia, as opposed to people who simply accept Putin's power, there are lots of people in Russia who seem to be sitting on their hands. If we can try to manipulate Russian public opinion, it would be to our benefit.

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

9.38 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): May I begin by welcoming the debate? As the hon. Members for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and for North Wiltshire (James Gray) said, we used to have more of these debates, but it is very good we have had one in Government time. While the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said we are down to the usual suspects, it still has been a high-quality debate. There were excellent speeches from the Labour Benches by my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) and by my right hon. Friends the Members for Warley (John Spellar) and for North Durham (Mr Jones); from the Government Benches by the right hon. Members for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin), for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for New Forest East, and the hon. Members for Harwich and North Essex, for North Wiltshire, for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely); and from other Opposition parties by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). It has been an excellent debate.

The first duty of any Government is to keep the nation safe and protect our citizens. From deployments abroad and the response to the invasion of Ukraine to deployments at home during the covid-19 pandemic, our armed forces are essential to our national defence, our national resilience and meeting our NATO obligations. Labour is deeply proud of our armed forces personnel, veterans and their families, and of the contribution that they make to our country. Theirs is the ultimate public service, and their professionalism and bravery are rightly respected across the world. We thank them.

Labour is committed to strengthening our national defences and supporting our armed forces. Strong national defence is a secure foundation upon which Labour's mission-driven Government will be built if we are fortunate enough to win the general election when it comes.

Labour's commitment to NATO is unshakeable. We are the party of NATO and Labour's values of democracy, freedom and peace are embedded in its founding treaty. Article 5 is the cornerstone of Labour's commitment to Britain's security. Labour's support for nuclear deterrence is total. We will upgrade the UK's deterrent and build

[Maria Eagle]

the new submarines needed at Barrow. We believe that defence procurement can strengthen UK sovereignty, security and economic growth.

There has been much talk about the commitment to 2.5% of GDP, so I wish to make it clear that Labour is totally committed to 2.5%. In fact, the last time defence spending was at 2.5% was under a Labour Government in 2010. The current Conservative Government have cut defence spending. It has never been 2.5% in any of the past 14 years of Tory Government and we have seen the Army cut to its smallest size since Napoleon. My right hon. Friends the Members for Warley and for North Durham and my hon. Friend the Member for Halton made those points very well in their contributions.

Labour will always do what is needed to defend Britain and we will always spend what is necessary to deal with the threats that we face. That is why we are committed to getting back to 2.5% as soon as we can in a responsible way. We will set out a credible plan to do so if we win the general election. It is why we will hold a strategic defence and security review if we do get into government to look properly at the threats that we face and at what we are already spending. It is simply not credible to claim, as the Government do, that it can be done by firing 72,000 civil servants, as the Secretary of State set out. The last time that this Government promised to make their defence plans add up by firing MOD civil servants in 2015, the number of civil servants in the MOD increased, so it is hardly credible now to claim that that will do the job.

In his opening remarks, my right hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary said that people will judge the Government on what they do, not on what they say, and that is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said that the Government's promises were all smoke and mirrors and soundbites for the next general election, and it is hard to see them as anything else when they have been left so late in this Parliament to be announced.

The Institute for Government has said that the Government's plan does not add up and is not credible. It says that cutting 70,000 civil service jobs will get nowhere near close to delivering the savings needed and that, even when using our research and development budgets as well, it will leave questions about how the rest will be paid for. The House welcomed the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford saying that the Defence Committee—the Chair of which is also in his place—will be scrutinising the £75 billion figure. I look forward to hearing what it has to say when it has done so.

The truth is that the Conservatives have failed on defence over the past 14 years. They have cut spending and they are still doing so. They have hollowed out our armed forces. Since 2010, the Conservatives have reduced our armed forces by more than 43,000 personnel, one in five ships has been removed from the Royal Navy, and more than 200 aircraft have been taken out of service in the past five years alone. They have cut the British Army to its smallest size since Napoleon, while the threats are increasing and NATO is boosting its high-readiness forces from 40,000 to 300,000. Ministers now plan to cut the Army further. Those are the facts.

Recruitment targets have been missed every year, so the Government have not even been able to recruit the numbers they want, and retention rates are dropping. My hon. Friend the Member for Halton referred in his remarks to the “outflow” and the state of reserve forces in respect of some research that he has been doing into the numbers. Therefore, the past 14 years have corroded the nation's contract with those who serve, and we must do better. The Government have left personnel living in damp and mouldy housing and, perhaps not surprisingly, morale has fallen, as has retention. Is it any wonder, when we leave people living in the conditions that we have seen in some of our forces accommodation? Nearly half of all serving personnel live in the lowest grade single-living accommodation and more than 4,000 personnel live in accommodation so poor that the MOD is forced to reduce or scrap collecting rent altogether. Contractors hired by Ministers missed 21,000 maintenance appointments between April 2022 and February 2024.

The report of the independent Kerslake commission on armed forces housing entitled “Homes unfit for heroes” has called the state of forces housing

“a tax on the goodwill of service personnel and their families.”

During the cost of living crisis, the numbers of personnel and veterans on universal credit are rising, and some troops are even using food banks to get by.

In government, Labour will renew the country's commitment to those who serve, set new standards for service accommodation and legislate for an armed forces commissioner to act as a strong independent champion for our forces and their families to improve service life. We will fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law, fulfilling the moral contract that our society makes with those who serve. I noticed that the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who speaks for the SNP, said that he wanted a representative body but was willing to support some of Labour's proposed policies.

On procurement, the Conservatives have wasted over £15 billion of taxpayers' money through mismanagement of defence procurement programmes, with over £5 billion wasted since 2019 alone. Forty-six of 52 major projects are not on time or not on budget. Ajax was supposed to be in service in 2017, and £4 billion has been spent so far, but there are no deployed vehicles and it will not be in service until the next decade. It is no wonder the Secretary of State is not listening and is too busy chatting—he does not want to hear about the failures of defence procurement on his watch, or the Government's cost-saving cuts to E-7 Wedgetail, which are cutting the number of planes from five to three, with taxpayers footing 90% of the original cost to get only 60% of the planned capability.

Mr Francois: I am very critical of Wedgetail, but, just as a fact, on Ajax, the initial operating capability for the first vehicles is at the back end of 2025. That is next year, not in the next decade.

Maria Eagle: I accept that fact. If I said the next decade, that was not what I meant to say.

The Public Accounts Committee has described the defence procurement system as

“broken and repeatedly wasting...taxpayers' money.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley was right that we need an industrial base and that short-term cost cutting will not do. He said that we need to speed up procurement, especially of administration, when it comes to making these decisions.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford said that we need a change of culture as well as reform in procurement, as did the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, who set out his ideas about how best to change culture in organisations that can be quite resistant to change. I accept that that will be a difficult job, but I think there is acceptance across the House that it needs to be done.

At the moment, it is fair to say that the Government have been wasting taxpayers' money hand over fist, and that is not just waste in procurement. Parliamentary answers show that the Department has lost £927 million to fraud since 2010, with £619 million of that since 2019—that would be enough to pay for 170 Challenger 3 tanks—yet the average length of time for Fraud Defence to conduct an investigation has increased from 519 days in 2019 to 742 days in 2023. Why? The Government seem to have stopped focusing on good administration.

A Labour Government will do better. Under a future Labour Government, we will drive deep defence procurement reform inside the MOD to reduce waste and ensure that our armed forces have the kit they need to defend Britain.

Labour is committed to strengthening our national defence and supporting our armed forces and their families. We will always do what is necessary to defend the country, and we will always spend what is necessary to deal with the threats that we face. Britain will be better defended under Labour.

9.49 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): First, I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This has been a typically excellent debate. Across the House I think there is an understanding that, after two or three decades of relative tranquillity, we are living with the threat of proximate warfare. The price of freedom is of course eternal vigilance, and that is generally agreed across this House, as evidenced by the contributions made, such as that of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). I think my right hon. Friend was arguing, slightly cheekily, for defence spending of 44% of GDP, although that was probably in the event of total war, which of course we all want to avoid. His proposition was that we should never have taken a peace dividend post the cold war, but I think that is a little harsh on our predecessors. However, plainly the situation has changed, and we must change with it. I hope very much that Europe will follow our 2.5% commitment, meaning £140 billion more for our collective defence against the primary aggressor. I would have been very disappointed had my right hon. Friend not rehearsed the arguments for a continuous at-sea deterrent, which of course is 16,000 tonnes of eternal vigilance.

The right hon. Members for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who speak for the Opposition, I think gave us the commitment we were seeking, which is to match the Government's cash spend. However, the right hon. Gentleman was a bit flaky, if I may say so, on the

2.5%, or at least on when it would be achieved and how they would pay for it. That became clear from the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), for which I am grateful.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne is indeed an honourable man and I like him very much, but I am bound to point out that his assurances that Labour is the party of defence run contrary to its management until very recently by a right hon. Member who had very different ideas indeed. The right hon. Gentleman was very keen to recommend the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to the British public in 2019 as the Prime Minister of this great country and to serve under his leadership for nearly five years, but heaven loves a sinner brought to repentance. I am also bound to point out that defence is not short of reviews, and another review would mean obfuscation. I suggest that is the very last thing our armed forces need right now. At best, it would introduce a huge measure of uncertainty when we simply cannot afford it.

The Chair of the Select Committee on Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin), rightly reflected on what 2.5% across the NATO alliance would mean. Where Britain leads, our European allies must follow: we are not in this on our own. He gave a magisterial romp around the geopolitical, societal and economic contribution of the whole defence enterprise.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) got tied up with nomenclature. There are other ranks in the Army and the RAF and ordinary seamen in the Navy, and I think that was the essence of his confusion. Either way there is nothing ordinary about the men and women of our armed forces, and either way he was rightly concerned about the junior ranks. I recall a previous conversation we had in this place during which he confused a pay award this year for them, which is 9.7%, with the 5.5% for senior officers; I assume he is happy with that. He wanted more Europe in defence, which I think means more European Union. He may have missed, for example, the Lancaster House treaties, the attendant A400M programme and unmanned aerial vehicles, and he may also have missed the joint expeditionary force. We are indeed co-operating wherever we can with our European friends and neighbours.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) gave a very detailed and authoritative account of kit, majoring on air defence. He catalogued some of the procurement issues that have historically bedevilled the defence enterprise, but he resisted reference to his favourite defence contractor, for which we are very grateful. I know that he supports the integrated procurement model announced in February.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), to whom I always listen with a great deal of interest, rightly highlighted industrial skills. I have said it before but I will say it again: the Ministry of Defence is this country's No. 1 employer of apprentices, and we are exceptionally proud of that. He rightly implied that the men and women of our armed forces—both civilians and people in uniform—have a choice. Of course they do, and they very often exercise it; our economy is the better for it. I make no apology for injecting trades and skills into our armed forces and our defence enterprise; it benefits us all. The trick is retaining those people and then perhaps pulling them back in at some future date. He will be familiar with that, because he has read the Haythornthwaite report.

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) rightly highlighted the perils of coalition, but to be fair we have got the Liberal Democrats to commit to CASD, and maybe even CASD with missiles—for that, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) has done us a great service today. The points that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex made about leadership were extremely well made.

The hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) spoke about the recruitment and retention issues that the armed forces certainly have, in common with just about all our allies. Meanwhile, we deal with all our defence commitments. We are rightly proud of the men and women who serve.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was fighting a bit of a rearguard action on defence spending, which the Opposition Front Benchers now say they support. If he wants to disregard the costs for Ukraine, he needs to have a word with his colleagues. Given that I need to face down Putin's naked aggression, he might as well carve out other parts of the defence budget and say that they do not count either. I am sure he would not want to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire spoke about votes in Parliament and about warfighting, and I agree with his analysis. We forget—do we not?—what a grave mistake the Iraq war was. Having been heavily involved with the Etherton process, I entirely agree with his remarks about LGBT people and I salute the role that the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces played early on in that process.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton spoke about a variety of subjects. Interestingly, at the end of his remarks he committed his party to, I think, a regular Army of 82,000. I am not quite sure where that figure came from, but I assume we will hear about the attendant spending pledge in due course—or maybe not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) talked about apprentices, defence-related jobs and R&D. That is not surprising given that Abbey Wood in Filton puts his constituency at the beating heart of the defence enterprise; he is a constant advocate for both.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a strong advocate for the defence enterprise in Northern Ireland, and his part in particular. He rightly highlighted the further opportunities in Northern Ireland, which I know about full well as a former Northern Ireland Office Minister and Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) spoke of enablement and logistics—of interoperability, modularity and plug and play—from a position of real expertise as a former senior logistics officer. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) rightly highlighted the changing nature of warfare. Mass matters, but so does tech, as we can see with potential game changers such as DragonFire. I am not sure I agree with him about A400M, but we can perhaps have a debate later over a cuppa or some such.

In our more dangerous world, the Government believe that spending 2.5% of GDP on defence must become the minimum NATO benchmark as Putin ramps up his

wartime economy as part of a network of authoritarian states that are attacking our allies and interests. NATO must respond, and I am proud that the UK is leading among European allies through our defence reforms and our 2.5% commitment, verifiable against NATO rules, our £75 billion cash boost for defence from a flat cash baseline, and our additional package of support for Ukraine.

As Putin lays waste to his military and recklessly exposes his strengths and weaknesses to general view, we watch, we learn and we act. Our defence reforms are making our industrial base stronger. Our investment in our conventional forces, stockpiles and innovation makes us more capable and more lethal. Our investment in our alliances is making us and our friends more secure. Our investment in our independent nuclear capability will always make adversaries back off.

I finish by paying tribute to the men and women of our armed forces. They are the best of us, and as we enter a new age of high-tech warfare we need to remember that, day in, day out. It is our people and those who support them who put the great in Great Britain. On that at least I hope we can all agree.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered defence.

Business without Debate

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Ordered,

That Dr Dan Poulter be discharged from the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee and Dr Thérèse Coffey be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mrs Flick Drummond be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Richard Fuller be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

10 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Blaydon and all those affected by the contaminated blood scandal. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for her vital work in pursuing justice. My constituent Diane lost her brother Graham Fox aged just 26 as a result of contaminated blood. When I spoke to Diane about presenting this petition, her message was clear: do not forget. I present this petition with those words in mind.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Blaydon,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002950]

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). In doing so, I pay tribute to the Burkert family, who lost their father, who was a single parent of five, in this terrible, avoidable tragedy.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Halifax,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002972]

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I rise to present a petition that calls for the immediate implementation of the final recommendations of Sir Brian Langstaff's report. It is sent by my constituents in Caerphilly, and in particular Lee Stay and Kirk Ellis, two brave victims of contaminated blood.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Caerphilly,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002973]

Tamar Crossings

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Fletcher.)

10.3 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Before I start, I give an apology: so many Members asked to intervene in this debate that I have decided not to take any interventions in the interests of time. I do apologise to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). [*Laughter.*]

I will start by setting out a brief history. In the 1950s, it became clear that a bridge was needed between Plymouth and south-east Cornwall, as the existing ferries could no longer cope. The councils went to the Government, but the Government of the day could not afford the bridge just after world war two. A decision was taken at council level to fund a bridge at Saltash and incorporate what they called the floating bridge at Torpoint. Those integral parts of the Tamar crossings were set out in an Act of Parliament and given the go-ahead. The crossings have become critical pieces of national infrastructure, with around 4,000 vehicle crossings a day in the early 1960s becoming around 4,000 vehicle crossings an hour today on the bridge alone.

Between 2001 and 2005, I was a member of the Tamar crossings joint committee while serving as a Cornwall county councillor. The minutes are no longer easily accessible, but I remember that a sum of money was set aside for replacing the three crossings at Torpoint, as the 50-year-old chain ferries needed replacing. It is important to note that, as far as I can remember, no loans were taken by the joint committee before that time. Around the same time, it was found that the Tamar bridge could not support the European requirement for goods vehicle weights or the quantity of traffic, and money was needed to strengthen and widen it with the installation of two cantilevers.

To carry out those essential works, it was decided to take out a loan to cover the cost of the replacement ferries from the then Cornwall County Council. I do not have the full figure, but I remember that the loan was around £10 million over 25 years. I launched the second chain ferry, Tamar II, at Ferguson boatyard on the Clyde. What could not be foreseen is that this set a trend, which many will say was unavoidable, where borrowing has been seen as the way to cover maintenance costs, and renewing, replacing or even building new infrastructure.

The language since I sat on the joint committee has also changed, with council officers now claiming the crossings are on a "user pays" basis, rather than using what is set out in the Acts of Parliament which clearly state that they should be "self-funding". That would indicate that the only way to fund the maintenance costs and new infrastructure is from toll income, which is clearly not the case. That is backed up by the fact that income is already generated from other means, including advertising boards on the ferries and operating the studs in the Saltash tunnel on behalf of National Highways.

Today, should the Secretary of State agree the latest toll revision order, the tolls will have increased by 100% in four years. For many people who use the crossings to access the district general hospital at Derriford in Plymouth, travel to their place of work or visit our main city, they

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

face what can only be described as an additional tax of £15 per week. I accept that a concession is available through the TamarTag, but it comes with an initial charge and a monthly service charge, which does not make it cost-effective for the non-regular users among my constituents, or those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer).

The financial situation has now become quite serious. The two local authorities responsible for the crossings should, according to the Acts, fund any deficit, but they say they have no budget for that. Decisions have been taken over the years in a piecemeal way to increase borrowing, rising from around £10 million for the initial loan to around £41 million and increasing. If this was a business, it would be bankrupt.

Various decisions have been taken that have not paid attention to good financial practice. During the covid period, Government grants paid to both local authorities amounted to £1.6 million in total, which I believe represented about 85% of the reduction in income, yet despite the joint committee agreeing ways to mitigate the risk for toll collectors, two weeks later the Liberal Democrat portfolio holder and joint chair for Cornwall and the Labour portfolio holder and joint chair for Plymouth took the decision to stop charging tolls altogether. Had they not taken that decision, which was not put to the joint committee, the additional 15% shortfall in income could have been received. My constituents, and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, are clear: this cannot go on. Our constituents are being penalised for living and working on different sides of the Tamar, and it would seem that no one cares.

The Road Haulage Association faces similar excessive charges. Figures it has provided me with, which do not take account of the increase outlined in the latest application, show that an average member based in south-east Cornwall with seven trucks ranging from 18 tonnes to 44 tonnes paid tolls of £4,550 in 2020. That rose to £6,881 in 2022. The 2023 cost, to August 2023, amounted to £5,409. Another haulier with a fleet of 50 trucks in 2020 faced tolls of £32,083, which increased to £58,100 in 2022, and the cost to August 2023 with 75 trucks was £90,730. A final example is that of a national operator with a local distribution centre based in Plymouth, with between 150 and 200 trucks using the crossings, who faced toll costs of £50,000 between December 2020 and July 2021. Those costs rose to £86,000 between August 2022 and July 2023, and that will be reflected in the prices paid for goods by people in Cornwall and Plymouth.

My constituents cannot be expected to continue to fund vanity projects such as multimillion pound offices on top of the council tax that they already pay to the two authorities. I notice that other projects are planned such as the refurbishment of the toll collection booths at the Tamar bridge, which are not yet 20 years old, and when an automatic number plate recognition system is already being explored. There is a proposal to upgrade the offices and workshops at the Torpoint ferry. I do not believe that enough attention has been paid to cost savings or to generating income other than tolls, but we need to change that. Income could come from a shop or restaurant incorporated at the offices—an idea that was

raised by my friend Councillor Lennox-Boyd. There is land held by the bridge that is not fully utilised. There are also further marketing opportunities at the crossings.

The Minister will know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and I met with his predecessor, and I have met him about this situation. The Peninsula Transport Group has also submitted a request for some funding towards the annual maintenance costs of the Tamar bridge, which could be awarded from road investment strategy 3. The bridge is an integral part of the A38 trunk road, which was relocated to run through Saltash when the bridge was constructed. Prior to this, the trunk road ran through Torpoint and was joined by the ferry which was described as a “floating bridge”. I believe that the funding that the Peninsula Transport Group has requested should be conditional on no increase in tolls for the next five-year period and be accompanied by the setting up of the promised working group to look at the future funding of the crossings, outside of but including the two local authorities.

It should be noted that there are other ways to cross the Tamar, but they are not local to Plymouth, the largest city on the peninsula. The other main crossing is via the A30 at the Dunheved bridge which is over 20 miles away by road from Saltash. That bridge was built by the Government in around 1978 as part of the Launceston bypass. It is maintained by the Government—indeed, it had to be rebuilt just under 20 years ago due to concrete cancer—and there is no toll at this crossing.

There are also a number of very old bridges, such as the one in my constituency at Gunnislake New Bridge. That crossing is not fit for large, heavy lorries, and has on many occasions suffered damage and been out of action. Indeed, recently the Labour councillor for Gunnislake has highlighted the air quality of the village and suggested that another bridge be built. One could ask if the shadow Chancellor would agree to that.

I also note that in 2012 the Government deferred the debt on the Humber bridge by £150 million, conditional on the tolls being halved. All I am asking is that the Tamar crossings are treated in the same way. The crossings are vital for both Cornwall and Plymouth and complement each other. They are quite rightly linked by Act of Parliament and must never be separated. If an incident occurs on the bridge, the Torpoint ferry service is necessary, and I would ask that any financial contribution is also conditional on the current timetable for the Torpoint ferry being retained at least on current levels of service. Sadly, some local opposition councillors and MPs have made comments in the press about a reduced service for the ferry if no toll revision order is granted, which is unacceptable. It is time to stop this politically motivated scaremongering—

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The hon. Lady has made it plain that she is not giving way.

Mrs Murray: This important matter for residents of Cornwall and Plymouth should, in my opinion, surmount party politics. I refer the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) to a report on “Spotlight” this evening saying that a Member of Parliament for a constituency a long way from the bridge and the ferry has suggested that the ferry charge more.

I will now turn to the future of the crossings. The Minister should set up a working group, including representatives of all user groups, MPs, local councillors and local authorities, to consider putting the crossing on the same basis as the Dunheved bridge on the A30, which is one of some 10,000 bridges maintained by National Highways. In the meantime, I ask the Department for a contribution from National Highways towards the maintenance costs of the Tamar bridge.

Finally, I will expand on the modernisation of the toll collection system and updating to ANPR. Queues frequently build up because of tag failure and other matters related to the toll collection system, which results in many people from Plymouth and south-east Cornwall missing appointments and simply not getting to work on time. It also has a knock-on effect on the wider area, with road hauliers telling me that research has found that, for every minute a heavy goods vehicle sits in traffic, it accrues a cost of £1.30. On crossings such as the Tamar, each HGV sitting in traffic for 60 minutes at peak times or during heavy congestion will accrue a cost of £78. An ANPR system would help to alleviate this, and I ask the Minister to consider covering the costs of the tollbooth removal in the next five-year major road network programme.

Some 6,300 people signed the petition sponsored by my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View and me. These people object to the toll increase following so closely the increase in January 2023, which would be a doubling in four years. It is now in the Secretary of State's gift to refuse, and we ask him to do so. We know that we need to find alternative funding and, as I have outlined this evening, it could be annual funding from the RIS3 programme.

My final ask is for a public inquiry to be held before any decision is made to increase the toll. This has happened in the past for all but one toll revision order, and our constituents must be able to have their say. We received a copy of the letter that the joint Chairs of the Joint Committee sent to the Secretary of State last Friday, which has been copied to all MPs in Plymouth and Cornwall, stating:

"An intervention by your department supporting the crossings may enable the toll to be frozen."

Our petition was supported by my hon. Friends the Members for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice).

I hope the Minister will look favourably on this request to help freeze the Tamar toll tax for our constituents, and also to immediately pull together a working group, or at least to provide support for us to set one up locally, so that a fairer way of financing these crossings can be found. An intervention by his Department to support the crossings may enable the tolls to be frozen.

Much has been made about levelling up. Doing away with this extra tax on the people of our area would be the single greatest thing that could be done to achieve this. It would create a level playing field for business and stop a regressive tax on residents that is in no way related to how much people can pay. It would also help to allow Plymouth's freeport status to flourish. I ask the

Government to help now, and to look in the longer term at righting what the Government could not afford to do just after world war two.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): It is an honour and a privilege to respond to my esteemed colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). She has once again made the case for her constituents with her usual assiduity, verve and passion, and I salute her for that. This is not the first time she has raised this matter in the House, and nor, I suspect, will it be the last; and it is not the first time I have received correspondence from her. Indeed, I receive it on a virtually bi-monthly basis, but I salute her for that as well. What she is doing is standing up for her constituents, and this is an issue that dates back quite some time.

I shall have to choose my words slightly carefully, for reasons that my hon. Friend will understand. An application for a toll revision, received on 2 May, will be considered by the Secretary of State in accordance with the Transport Charges &c. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1954, and that will constitute a quasi-judicial decision that I do not want to prejudice in any way. However, I want to give my hon. Friend as many answers as I can, in as much detail as I can. I am also aware that a petition dated 23 March has been presented by, among others, my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), my hon. Friend herself, my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). It is to their credit that they have made the case, as indeed have thousands of residents of the local area, and it is to their credit that they have been able to come to the House and be heard in an appropriate way.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am so sorry, but not going to give way at this stage.

I am of course conscious of a detailed file of correspondence dating back some considerable time. As the hon. Lady will know, there are a number of bridges and tunnels on local public roads up and down the country that are operated either by the local highway authority or by private companies. Tolls continue to help repay the costs of the construction and continued maintenance of those crossings. I do not want to go into the nuts and bolts of the Tamar Bridge Act 1957, because I think I would fail to speak with the same eloquence as my hon. Friend, who is clearly acquainted with the Act and the consequential secondary provisions, the schedules and all matters pertaining, and has probably read the Committee notes in great detail as well.

The Tamar bridge and Torpoint ferry are tied together under the 1957 Act, which ensures that proceeds from the crossings are ringfenced and expenditure is limited to the operation, maintenance and improvements of the crossings. Crucially, it also limits any unjustified accumulation of reserves. The bridge and the ferry are jointly owned and operated by Cornwall Council and Plymouth City Council, but, as my hon. Friend said,

[Guy Opperman]

they constitute a vital piece of infrastructure, carrying some 18 million vehicles a year. She rightly made the point on behalf of her constituents, but the freight industry benefits massively—today I met representatives of the RHA, who were passionate about making that point.

The money that is needed to operate, maintain and improve the two crossings currently comes from toll charges, with no specific funding from the Government or the owners of the two crossings. However, some money is contributed indirectly. National Highways makes an operational contribution each year, which enables the Tamar bridge and Torpoint ferry joint committee to monitor the Saltash tunnel tidal flow system. As was announced recently, there is funding for the A38 Manadon interchange transport scheme, promoted by the city council, amounting to about £132 million, with an outline business case stage of £156 million. Communications on that will be issued shortly. Welcome announcements have also been made about the A374, A386 and A3064 Plymouth improvements schemes, amounting to £42 million, with a total estimate of £49 million at the OBC stage.

My hon. Friend will also be aware that the Government have, on the back of the increased settlement at the last Budget in 2023, and by reason of the decisions on the second leg of High Speed 2, provided enhanced funding arising from the £8.3 billion that is shared out around the local authorities, but with a £36 million total for 2024-25 for Cornwall, and an increased total in relation to Plymouth, as I understand it.

In relation to the specifics, on 8 February, in response to my hon. Friend's parliamentary question, and in subsequent correspondence, I have set out the position in relation to river and estuarial crossings. They will usually be funded by tolls, recognising the extra cost of their construction and maintenance, as well as the substantial benefits for users. The Prime Minister then also answered my hon. Friend at Prime Minister's questions on 20 March, when he was pleased to indicate that the Transport Minister would address the matter shortly, and I was of course delighted to receive that instruction. I will not go into *Hansard* in detail, but he explained that any application for a toll revision, whereby the responsible authorities can seek a change, would need to be considered by the Secretary of State for Transport, who is my boss.

I can confirm that, since that exchange, a toll revision application in respect of the Tamar crossings was received on 2 May. The next step in the process is that an application for a toll increase will be advertised in the local press with details of the proposal to users of the crossings. There is then a 42-day objection period. If any objections to the proposed revisions—whether from individuals or collective bodies—are not subsequently

withdrawn, a public inquiry is held. Where such an inquiry is held, the Secretary of State must have regard to its findings when deciding whether to revise the toll. I cannot address the findings of the Secretary of State, but clearly all representations made on these issues are considered, and clearly my hon. Friend will make many representations—I think that is a given.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will not give way; I will echo the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall.

It is the responsibility of the Tamar bridge and Torpoint ferry joint committee to work to find efficiencies in the operating costs so that the crossings are run as cost-effectively as possible. I would also like to raise an important initiative that is being taken forward locally: the Tamar bridge and Torpoint ferry joint committee has agreed its new "Tamar 50" approach. I cast no aspersions on whether it is a good or bad approach—it would not be appropriate for me to do so—but it is important that I put on the record that the Government are aware of the approach.

Clearly, the nine-point plan that the committee has set out provides users of the crossings with a more stable and certain future. Ideally, there is a degree of confidence on the way ahead, and people can see visible improvements to the structure. Critical safety works and the operational necessities that apply need to be seen. As I understand it, the plan includes work to look at the feasibility of free-flow tolling. That could be considered when a suitable funding source becomes available. My hon. Friend has addressed that, and I take her points with due seriousness.

As the Prime Minister outlined on 20 March, this is a real opportunity for key stakeholders to make their views about the crossings heard, and I encourage all colleagues and constituents—not just the thousands with strongly held views who have submitted the petition, and not just my hon. Friend with her many letters—to come forward with their views.

Luke Pollard: Will the Minister allow me to come forward with my view now?

Guy Opperman: I do not think it appropriate in these particular circumstances, bearing in mind the individual restrictions that I have in addressing these points.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall has put her points strongly on the record. We take due notice of that. There is a quasi-judicial process that follows, and we hope that will be expedited and take place very soon.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 May 2024

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Illegal Immigration: Costs

11.30 am

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call Andrea Jenkyns, I have a note on the clocks. Most of them are either telling the wrong time or not working, so there will be no timing of the length of speeches. I do not think that there will be any pressure on time, because we do not have that many speakers. I am using the annunciator clock.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the costs associated with illegal immigration.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I thank Members across the House for their support, including the former Home Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman); the former Immigration Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick); and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who co-sponsored the debate.

For too long, this House has avoided addressing the issue that, according to YouGov's latest polling, ranks among the electorate as the second most important issue facing our country, surpassed only by the economy. We are facing an immigration and asylum crisis in the UK, and we as parliamentarians need to find a solution, get a grip of the problem, and win back public trust in our ability to represent the interests of the British people and to legislate and govern on their behalf. Too many of my colleagues across the House have been reluctant to discuss the real consequences of illegal immigration for our society, culture and security, for fear of being denounced as racist by a loud liberal minority in influential positions in the mainstream media, academia and powerful non-governmental organisations, whose progressive agenda dominates public discourse, or even by fellow Members of Parliament. Only this week, the civil service unions mounted a legal challenge to try to stop the Government's Rwanda policy.

All those people and organisations need to wake up to reality: the British public have had enough, and they demand action from our politicians. Illegal immigration represents an existential threat to our society, culture and security, and cracking down on the issue must be a top priority. This matter should transcend political divides. It is a matter of national importance, and as legislators we have a duty to the British people to address it. It affects every corner of our country. Throughout this debate, I will highlight the astronomical costs of illegal immigration for the economy and wider society, and suggest action that we should take to reduce the total number of illegal immigrants arriving on our shores.

The House of Commons Library report for this debate takes issue with the use of the term "illegal immigrant" to refer to those crossing the channel in small boats. It notes:

"A person might enter the country without permission, but they have the legal right to be here while their claim for asylum or admissibility to the asylum system is being considered."

The report therefore opts to use the phrase "unauthorised migrants" and, when referencing the cost of illegal immigration, includes only those who are subsequently refused asylum and remain in the UK without permission. If we had a fully functioning asylum system and the public had confidence that the decisions being taken were accurate, that distinction would of course be right and proper, but right now this methodology is deeply flawed. Irregular border crossings have skyrocketed in the past decade, with smugglers now preferring to conduct an amphibious assault on our borders rather than shoving people into the backs of lorries to go via the channel tunnel, which was previously the more common route. Those clandestine groups have caught on to the fact that Britain's asylum system is on its knees. They know that anyone who arrives in Britain and claims asylum is afforded protections and benefits at the taxpayer's expense.

There are numerous cases of people with pending asylum applications who have lived in Britain for years, many of whom choose to use loopholes in our human rights laws to bolster their applications. That is something that the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), understands all too well. Let us not forget how, as a human rights barrister, he acted for Islamic cleric Abu Qatada in his bid to avoid deportation. He also helped an Iraqi terrorist suspect sue the Government over breaches of the suspect's human rights.

We have seen people use loopholes such as a sudden desire to convert to Christianity, knowing full well that their applications will be approved, because their conversion shows they would be persecuted back in their claimed countries of origin. Speaking of countries of origin, we simply have no idea where the vast majority of those who arrive without permission and claim asylum are actually from, making it impossible to determine their application.

A Home Office response to a freedom of information request by Migration Watch UK in 2022 revealed that, of the 16,510 small boat migrants to land in Britain from 2018 up to the second quarter of 2021, just 317 arrived with a passport; that is just 1.92%. The total number of arrivals has since risen to nearly 120,000 people since 2018, with no indication that these people have started to make a concerted effort to provide immigration officials with the necessary documentation to confirm their identity. That is the equivalent of a town the size of Watford, comprising a vast majority of adult males, arriving without documentation, who are not forthcoming with their age or country of origin—leaving immigration officials playing a guessing game on who to believe. Home Office figures show that 94% apply for asylum. Yet, according to the Library research briefing on asylum statistics published on 1 March, our annual refusal rate for asylum applications at initial decision has plummeted from 88% down to an astonishing 24% in 2022; three quarters of those refused at initial decision between 2004 and 2021 lodged an appeal, and a third of those appeals were successful.

[Dame Andrea Jenkyns]

Some may qualify such a rapid decrease in asylum refusal rates by claiming that there is more conflict in the world today than there was 20 years ago, but that just does not stand up. There were endless conflicts at the time when we were refusing nearly 90% of all asylum applications, from civil wars in Somalia, Sri Lanka, Chad, Yemen and Niger—to name but a few—to the Iraq war and Russia's invasion of Georgia. The evidence can only lead us to one conclusion: our asylum system is being gamed by people with the help of ever stronger smuggling gangs. They know what to say, and they know what to do to tick the right boxes and be granted permission to stay in Britain. We are faced with a record asylum backlog.

Home Office figures show that 74,172 initial decisions on asylum applications were made last year alone. That is four times the number made in 2022. The Government will argue that this is due to the increase in decision makers; their own figures show an increase in those reviewing applications from 865 in 2022 to 1,281 in March 2023, which is an increase of 48%. But 62,336 of those 74,000 initial decisions were successful—a record annual figure. That raises huge questions over the handling of those applications and how those decisions have been made.

There is absolutely no doubt that some individuals who arrive in Britain through irregular means and claim asylum are genuine people, fleeing war or persecution. We have a moral responsibility to help those individuals and it is right that we support such people—as we did, for example, when the war broke out in Ukraine—but it is also quite evident that our asylum system has broken down to the point where it is unfit for purpose and exploited on an unprecedented scale. It is therefore simply impossible to discount those granted asylum when conducting a review of the true costs of illegal immigration.

To understand the cost of illegal immigration on our society and our finances, we must first understand the scale of the issue in hand—a task that, by its very nature, is problematic. To again cite the House of Commons Library report prepared for this debate,

“The most recent robust estimates of the size of the unauthorised resident population in the UK put it at around 400,000-600,000 in the early 2000s...More recent but less robust estimates have put the population at between 800,000 and 1.2 million in 2017...It is likely none of these estimates accurately captures the situation in 2024.”

I would be pleased to hear from the Minister on that point. That is equivalent to a city with a population 20% larger than Birmingham, or three times the size of Manchester, living in the UK illegally, utilising the many public-funded services that are available to them, regardless of a person's immigration status—and it could be far more.

Public services available to illegal migrants include state education, NHS services, including A&E treatment and primary care such as GPs and dentistry appointments, compulsory psychiatric treatment, legal aid, and various local authority support. I receive hundreds of emails a month from constituents telling me that they cannot get a GP appointment, are struggling to find a dentist, and cannot get their first choice school place or a decent roof over their heads. Is there any wonder?

The Government's impact assessment of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 estimated that the total cost of providing public services to a UK national is around £12,000 per person. Even the most basic calculations put the economic burden on the British taxpayer of an illegal migration population of 1.2 million at £14.4 billion. That is just shy of 10% of NHS England's budget for this year. Imagine that cash injection on frontline services or to help people who are struggling with the cost of living.

There is not just an economic cost; indirect consequences of illegal migration are inevitable, including wage suppression. Those without permission to work legally in Britain must find a way to support themselves and they end up working in the gig economy for unscrupulous business owners, who offer lower wages that are accepted, because illegal workers will take what they can get—for which we cannot blame them.

In addition, the Home Office expects to spend £482 million on immigration enforcements this year alone, and the costs related to the Rwanda scheme continue to pile up to an eye-watering amount. It is important to note that none of the costs mentioned so far takes into account those associated with our broken asylum system, such as the nearly £8 million a day currently used to house asylum applicants. Home Office figures cited by the *Financial Times* in August last year showed that the annual asylum cost reached £3.96 billion in the year up to 2023—double that of the previous year and six times higher than 2018. Yet, despite that astronomical cost, we continue to increase handouts to France to stop the boats. I would like to hear what the Minister thinks of our agreement with France; to those on the outside it looks like it is not working, and taxpayers' money is being wasted.

A House of Commons Library report showed that the UK Government gave a combined £232 million to the French authorities for border control in their own country, between 2014 to the end of the 2022-23 financial year. Under the joint leaders' declaration agreed in March that year, we have committed to give more than double that—£476 million over the next two financial years. I think we should demand a refund from France. The economic costs are endless. It is simply impossible to quantify the true impact of this issue on the public purse. It is clear to me, and a vast majority of the British public, that this is a totally unacceptable state of affairs.

It is not just about the economic cost; there is also a human cost. Seven-year-old Emily Jones from Bolton was stabbed to death by an Albanian national, Eltona Skana, while riding her scooter in March 2020. I am a parent of a seven-year-old—imagine what that family must be going through. Her killer was a paranoid schizophrenic who arrived in Britain in the back of a lorry in 2014, and was granted asylum, despite twice admitting to lying in her application about being a victim of sexual exploitation.

Lorraine Cox, aged 32, was murdered in Exeter in September 2020 by Azam Mangori, an Iraqi Kurd who was denied asylum in December 2018 but remained living in the country undetected. David Wails, Joe Ritchie-Bennett and James Furlong were murdered in Reading town centre in June 2020 by Libyan national, Khairi Saadallah, just two weeks after he had been released from prison; he executed the men in an act of jihad.

He had been granted refugee status, despite participating in the Libyan civil war in 2012. Terence Carney, who was 70, was stabbed to death in the middle of the street by a Moroccan asylum seeker Ahmed Ali Alid in “revenge” for Gaza. I could go on and on. These names should not be forgotten; they must serve as a reminder of the human cost paid for decades of failure by successive Governments and by us as legislators.

I want to talk briefly about the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, which became law just a few weeks ago. I completely understand the motive and need for such legislation. However, I was one of the 11 Conservative MPs to rebel, including the former Home Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham, and the former Immigration Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark, who simply could not support it. Like me, they had great reservations that the Bill would not be legally watertight and would be derailed by political opponents, activist lawyers, trade unionists and civil servants, as we saw last week when they mounted a legal challenge.

In principle, though, I am in favour of an offshore processing scheme such as the Rwanda scheme. We need a genuine, robust deterrent to undermine the organised gangs and the abhorrent people smugglers, who sell the dream to migrants that once they have crossed the channel, they will be in a relative utopia with free welfare, healthcare and housing for the rest of their lives. We need to send a clear message that that is not the case.

Those hoping that the current scheme will act as a deterrent will be disappointed to learn that, just last week, 711 migrants landed in Kent in a single day, which is a record daily number for the year so far. So much for that deterrent.

How do we make a scheme like Rwanda work? I am clear that we must leave the European convention on human rights. I have been spearheading the campaign to do just that via the Conservative Post, and I am pleased to say that nearly 50,000 people have now signed the petition. We need, instead, a British Bill of Rights. We also need to stop those leftie lawyers and unionised civil servants from preventing a democratically elected Government from delivering on their manifesto.

I truly believe that having a viable deterrent is a humane, civilised and responsible thing to do and will actually save lives. We must keep at the forefront of our minds that 72 people are believed to have drowned in the English channel since 2018. Each life lost is a tragedy.

Let us remember that Australia faced exactly the same crisis that we have on our hands, and through an effective deterrent reduced the number of illegal migrants on their shores from tens of thousands to zero. It is time we rolled up our sleeves and did the same.

We must also get tougher on the illegal migrants who have already arrived and live here. As the Home Office’s impact assessment makes clear, of the 5,700 illegal immigrants who have been identified for removal, the Home Office is in contact with just 2,000—just 38%. I would like to know from the Minister why that is the case. It is not just not good enough; it is a dereliction of the Government’s primary duty to keep citizens safe. Such a potential security breach and locating those

individuals must be an absolute priority for the Home Office, as should be implementing measures to ensure that it can never happen again. We need to think radically about how to keep oversight of these people while they wait for a decision.

For too long, the UK has been seen as a free lunch: study, work, marry and smuggle your way in and soon you are guaranteed a lifelong, all-you-can-eat buffet for you and your extended family, with free healthcare, free education, free housing, free social care, legal protections and access to one of the largest charitable sectors in the world. It is unfair to continue to ask the British taxpayer to pick up this bill. We must take a no-nonsense approach to demonstrate that the British state is no longer a soft touch. Other measures could also be adopted, with legislation and procedures similar to those used by European countries, where approval rates are far lower than in Britain. We approve far too many asylum requests when we compare our acceptance rate to the 25% to 30% common across most of Europe. Our legal system and the Home Office guidance on asylum applications make it far too easy for those seeking to try their luck.

The damage that the issue of illegal migration is doing on our country is untold. It is impossible to quantify. The British public know. They see it and they feel it. It is substantial, and they want it resolved. The ordinary Brit, certainly in my part of the world, is decent and fair-minded. They believe in the value of work and the desire to get on in life. On the whole, they are tolerant of others and show respect for different cultures. However, they are also instilled with the great British principle of fair play, and illegal immigration on this scale is simply at conflict with that principle.

In conclusion, I suggest a five-point plan that we must immediately action to start getting this crisis under control. First, we need to profoundly strengthen our border security. We need to invest in technology, personnel and infrastructure to enhance surveillance and patrol efforts along our coastline, and we must have the political will to use this technology to enforce a stricter border policy.

Secondly, we need to get tough on our so-called international partners to address the underlying drivers of illegal migration and deter the crossings in the first place, as it puts people’s lives at risk when they try these dangerous crossings. We should be clear: no more money to France unless they play ball and work more effectively in stopping departures from their own shores.

Thirdly, we need to streamline and improve our immigration processes. We need to process asylum claims far more efficiently and effectively, and ensure that applicants do not go AWOL while waiting for a decision. We can use a tagging system for that. We also need to introduce measures to dissuade people from attempting illegal crossings. That means imposing stricter penalties for smugglers, which I am sure people across the House would agree with, and implementing public awareness campaigns to educate potential migrants about the risks, dangers and consequences of irregular migration. It may also mean thinking creatively about how to charge migrants for the public services that they use while they are here—we have to stop everything being from the taxpayer’s purse. Finally, we must also strengthen the Rwanda deterrent by leaving the European convention on human rights, which is the only way to ensure it will work in the way that the British public expect.

[*Dame Andrea Jenkyns*]

Alternatively, let us as the Conservative party commit to holding a referendum on leaving the ECHR—let the public decide.

The Government need to move quickly. We have just six months to get tough. The Labour party said only last week that if they got into power, they would consider giving automatic asylum to 50,000 of those people waiting for a decision. That is a way to remove them from the books and make the figures look good. They also want to ditch our Rwanda scheme. I would not expect to go to another country illegally, be put up in a hotel and get free healthcare and all the other benefits at no cost to myself. This needs to stop. We also need to stop that pull factor, as that is why people come here. We need to put an end to the soft-touch Britain and toughen up for the future of our great country. I look forward to hearing views from Members of all parties, which no doubt will differ from mine.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members who wish to be called in the debate that they should indicate in the normal way by standing.

11.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As is in order, and rightfully so, I thank the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (*Dame Andrea Jenkyns*) for raising this issue today. I am very happy to be a co-sponsor of this debate, because we cannot ignore the issue of immigration. I will speak, as the hon. Lady has spoken, about the general issues, as well as giving a Northern Ireland perspective.

The issue of immigration is of great concern to many of our constituents, not least to those of us in Northern Ireland who, as we previously highlighted during both protocol and Windsor framework discussions, are at risk of becoming a haven for those who travel to Dublin and then lose themselves in Northern Ireland. If we are to believe the Irish and the Republic of Ireland Government hype, it is the opposite way round, and we are to blame for the immigration rates. No, we are not; Government officials and Ministers have been clear on that. The proclamation, “Come as many as you are and find refuge” rang from the Irish Government up until at least last week. They can make their own decisions on that issue, but they cannot then blame us, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for what goes wrong.

Everyone will know that I am not against immigration, per se. Indeed, I want to see a correct immigration system that invites, helps and encourages those who face persecution and human rights abuses. I believe that we have an obligation to do right by those who need help and assistance, but this cannot be unlimited and done by illegal means. I declare an interest, as chair of both the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief and the all-party parliamentary group for the Pakistani minorities. I speak on behalf of those with Christian faith, those with other faiths, and indeed those with no faith.

With persecution of Christians around the world, they need somewhere to go. In my constituency of Strangford, we have thrown the doors open in the past

through the Syrian refugee scheme, as an example, to invite some of those Christian families who have been persecuted. Those who stayed have contributed greatly to our society, culture and relationships. Persecuted Christians across the world need somewhere to go, and the freedom of religion and expression to worship their God as they so wish, free from human rights abuses. We have a system in place for that, which the Government have made available. We thank them for that.

I am a faithful missions giver, and the projects that I support long term are those who seek to make improvements in the local communities to make a life. I understand that that cannot be done in war-torn nations and therefore there are some endeavours, such as the Ukraine scheme, that need a different approach. The Government were very positive and helpful, and I fully supported that scheme. Indeed, all of us in Westminster Hall today, and those in the main Chamber from all parties, recognised that we needed to take a different approach, and we did that. I thank the Minister and the Government for their help for the Ukrainians and their families.

In my constituency, we have helped numerous Ukrainians to gain job opportunities at Willowbrook Foods and in Mash Direct, where accommodation was available for them as well. The Minister and I discussed that a few weeks ago, and I gave him the contact names and phone numbers of some of the companies that are keen to address the issue. The Minister was keen for an opportunity to promote those two firms—Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct—and I was keen on that as well.

I believe that there should be immigration; I am quite clear on that. However, mass immigration is a completely different issue, and this is where Ireland has found herself in difficulty. I absolutely refute that it is a problem of our making, or that we are facilitating. The civil unrest is not due to an unwelcoming people. There are few people more welcoming than the Irish—north and south. The issue lies in not being able to cope with acceptable levels of immigration. I support the Government in their plans to halt illegal immigration while ensuring that we have a fit-for-purpose asylum system.

Those Ukrainians who came brought a work ethic, skill and an ethos, and they have integrated well into our society. I believe we must always make clear the difference between illegal immigration and the necessary immigration that brings knowledge and expertise to our fishing industry and our hospitals, and brings a warmth and culture that only enhances this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I have pursued the Minister a few times on the issue of fishing visas, and we discussed that at our meeting last week. It affects not just us in Strangford in Northern Ireland but those across the South Down constituency, particularly Ardglass and Kilkeel. We need a visa system. In answer to my question in the Chamber last week, the Minister kindly suggested that there was an onus on the fishing organisations to come up with ideas, so I have suggested that to them. I hope to come back with some ideas very soon and convey them to the Minister, so that we can find a workable system.

It is difficult to find a balance. I am aware that this is not a debate on the Rwanda scheme, although the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood mentioned it in her introduction, and we cannot ignore it because it does give opportunity and take some of the pressure off

Government. However, this is a debate about how we can fulfil our moral obligations while ensuring that we do not sink further and further into debt. The fact is that the Republic of Ireland and the Irish people are a testament to the frustration that is felt when Government is not getting the right message across, and when people feel that the health and education of their children is at stake and that is at odds with Government objectives. That is why we have seen that discontent in the Republic of Ireland, and why there has been such uproar about what has happened. Whether or not the figures that the Republic of Ireland has suggested are correct is a question to be addressed.

I recently attended a family event in Newtownards with the Indian diaspora. They come from Odisha state in India. There were over 100 people there, and the wonderful thing was that every one of them has a visa—they are here to work, and they have brought their families with them—and every one of those people is involved in the health sector, so we need them because they contribute to our society. They work in the Ulster Hospital, Belfast City Hospital and the Royal Victoria, and every one of them—man and woman—is working in the health sector. We welcome what they do.

It was a wonderful night. Whether they were from a Hindu, Muslim or Christian background, the vast majority were integral workers within the NHS care system. I had a great night of fellowship with them. It was wonderful and fun. It was good to meet them, engage with them, welcome them personally and enjoy some of their food. I am a diabetic but I could still eat and enjoy the food that they presented, apart from the fact that my mouth was on fire afterwards, but that is by the way. I had fellowship with those men, women and children, and they are clearly part of the fabric of Newtownards and Strangford.

The messaging must be made clear. We need to get a handle on illegal immigration and welcome those who enhance, protect and build our nation through their jobs and opportunities. I am keen to work with the Minister and the Government and put forward ideas about the fishing sector in particular. I am also keen to see how we can build on the food sector; clearly, there is a need to ensure that Willowbrook Foods, Mash Direct and other firms in my constituency have the opportunity to gain expertise from other places and find people through the legal immigration system.

We must ensure that the young men who are coming illegally in droves across the channel from France are treated differently from young families seeking asylum and refuge. We must ensure that the message sent is clear: we will help where we can, as much as we can and in the best way we can. We have done that already, but we want to see that building.

Whether on our soil or foreign soil, we must strike a balance between compassion and obligation. We have an obligation to help persecuted families and those who have suffered severe human rights abuses. We are a welcoming country: we have been in the past, and we can be so in the future. I am pleased to participate in this debate, and I will also be very pleased to hear the responses of the Minister and of the two Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

12.1 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I apologise for my hoarse voice. I did not want to interrupt my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns) by intervening on her, but I want to make the point that, the way that the laws are currently interpreted, virtually the entire populations of many countries would be given asylum if they could only make it to Britain. That is not lost on those making these daily boat crossings.

I think I am the only Member of Parliament to try to get smuggled into this country from Calais, which I did when I made a TV programme some years ago. I lived in the old Sangatte camp. My observation is very much the same as that of my hon. Friend: these were overwhelmingly fit young men seeking a better life. Some of the asylum seekers are fleeing torture, albeit not claiming asylum in the first countries they come to. Many others are economic migrants doing what many of us might try to do if we were in their shoes. This debate is about costs, but I add a point about the costs facing asylum seekers and their families: it is generally the more wealthy people who can pay smugglers for help to get to the United Kingdom. Others face taking out huge loans and becoming bonded. It is not cheap and illegal economic migrants are rarely the poorest or the most needy of the people coming from a given country.

Many costs have been shared in this debate, but some are hidden and I would like to highlight some that indirectly affect people in Gravesham. I mention these costs not begrudgingly—it goes without saying that anyone who comes here should be treated with compassion and dignity—but the debate has been called in the spirit of openness and transparency, and it is very important. So often the harshest critics of the Government's immigration policy are those who are well insulated from the pressures and costs that immigration places on public services. For example, in Kent, unaccompanied children claiming asylum are looked after by social workers and staff until they can be found homes across the country. Staff are recruited from the same pool of potential recruits.

I understand that children from Albania disappear from local council protection most frequently, and the concern is that this is a result of traffickers and gangs taking them onward to whatever fate awaits them. Obviously, this has reduced, perhaps as a result of the deal the Government struck with the Albanian Government in December 2022—one of the success stories of the Government's immigration policy. That is obviously good news. However, I am reliably informed that Vietnamese children still go missing, requiring additional protection, searching and police intervention whenever they are missing from their home or transition centre. That undoubtedly brings cost to people relying on the police and social care for support.

We also have to think about housing and healthcare. Immigration has obviously increased our local population, and there is a huge hidden cost felt by people in Gravesham who are searching for a home or medical treatment. The purchasing power of the Home Office is keenly felt by local councils and people. We are also facing a great deal of pressure because of people moving out of London because of higher rents; they move to Kent, where it is a bit cheaper, but that effectively inflates rents and makes it harder for local people. We have both

[Adam Holloway]

the direct and indirect financial costs, but there is also the cost of the emotional drain on local people as they try to be welcoming while facing the impact on their own lives.

12.5 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I remember that the last time we had a debate similar to this, it was chaired by the great Sir David Amess, whom we all miss in this House. In that particular debate, I was the voice of reason against many Conservative Back Benchers as they gave a description of the immigration system that, frankly, I do not recognise. While I congratulate the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns) on securing this debate, I am afraid I do not recognise much of what she said at all.

I do not recognise the notion that Immigration Ministers, past and present, are some sort of lily-livered liberals—that has just not been my experience. I certainly did not like the references to Home Office staff being soft touches and the criticisms of them, I am afraid. I am going to defend Home Office staff for the work they do; I have always found them firm and fair. They have a regular weekly telephone call with the constituency office of Glasgow South West, as they do with other Members of Parliament, to discuss cases. Ministers have put in place a system for Members of the House to raise these sorts of cases and to ask which cases should go where, and to raise any concerns we have—I will be mentioning one such case today—directly with Ministers.

I take the view that no human being is illegal, so the discourse of the debate on immigration concerns me on occasion. Last week, I had the great privilege of chairing the annual general meeting of the Showing Racism the Red Card all-party parliamentary group, where a number of children from London, Nottingham and other places described the importance of having antiracism education in our education systems across these islands. I think that Members of this House could learn from some of that education. Perhaps we should have Show Racism the Red Card come into these debates to explain in simple terms the difference between an asylum seeker, a refugee and an economic migrant, because there are occasions in which those who are seeking sanctuary on these islands are referred to as “illegal” or “migrants”, which is a charge that I think is completely and utterly unfair. I do not like the phrase “illegal immigration”. If we close off all the legal and safe routes to arrive in the United Kingdom, we cannot then complain that someone who is genuinely seeking sanctuary has to find another route.

What I find most troubling of all is the fact that the whole discourse of the debate is always focused on the exploited, and not the exploiter. There has to be more of a discussion about how we tackle the gangmasters and the criminal gangs. We spent months discussing the Rwanda policy and the Rwanda Act, but there was nothing in that legislation about tackling gangmasters and criminal gangs. That, I think, is the source of the problem. Indeed, I know that it is the source of the problem, because I have a constituent in Glasgow who was told that he was going to be sent to Canada and thought he was going to arrive there—but he ended up

in Glasgow. There are huge, great links between the two great nations of Scotland and Canada, but that case tells us that there are people—gangmasters and criminal gangs—that are at it here. We need to focus on them a lot more in this debate, not on those who are seeking sanctuary to be with their families. Many of those arriving on our shores already have family across these islands.

As the small boats continue, we must question the entire asylum system on both value for money and effectiveness. I want to raise some issues in the debate, some of which I have raised before with the Minister. He could have predicted some of them. One is asylum accommodation.

I have great difficulty with the nonsensical position in which hotels, barges and military sites are used for asylum accommodation. As the Minister knows, I had a meeting with him a couple of weeks ago, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), in which we said that we need to think about these issues a lot more. We also said that we need to think about what happens when the backlog is cleared and thousands of people are given refugee status at the same time, as well as about what that means for local authorities.

We need to encourage local authorities to take more of the people who seek sanctuary in these islands, but the Home Office needs to do more to negotiate with local authorities. The Home Office cannot just tell a local authority to take more on when that authority will reply, “Well, that’s fine. Tell us what money we are getting, because we will need to think through what that means for our health and social care system, our education system, and all of that”.

I am afraid that there is still a legacy backlog; I know that there is. We were told that every person who had submitted a claim before 28 June 2022 had received a decision. I know for a fact that that is not the case and I will raise that point later.

I have another question for the Minister. I do not expect him to have this figure in front of him right now, but perhaps he could send it to us. We know that on occasion taxi companies are transporting asylum seekers all over these islands. Last week, for example, a family based in a Glasgow airport hotel were transported from Glasgow to Bradford. When they arrived for their interview, they were simply told, “You’re being moved to Bradford.” That leads to a taxi cost; they were put in a Glasgow taxi and taken to Bradford. That has to have an effect on the taxpayer, as the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood said.

I would like to know how much the Home Office is paying taxi companies to transport asylum seekers across these islands—from Glasgow to Bradford, from Glasgow to Manchester, or from wherever to wherever—because it is nonsensical. If asylum seekers based in Glasgow are being transported all over the UK, sometimes at a moment’s notice? I would like an answer to that question and I hope that the Minister will commit to writing to all of us who have contributed to this debate today to tell us what that cost actually is.

I want to raise the issue, raised by the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, of the gimmick that is the Rwanda policy. I have to say that if I were a member of a political party that had contested the local elections

last week, I would have objected to the PR stunt that we saw last week of that Home Office video of people being transported into detention just days before the polls opened in some parts of the UK. I hope that Labour colleagues and others are checking the purdah rules regarding that publicity stunt.

I have asked the Minister's Department why a constituent of mine in Glasgow South West was detained last week, because the Home Office's own guidance says that those who submitted a claim before 28 June 2022 will be dealt with as a legacy claim. That individual should have had a decision on 31 December 2023 under the Government's own policy. He did not; he has not had a decision at all, negative or positive. He arrived for his standard interview last Tuesday to be met by eight police officers, who bundled him into a police van. He was then bundled into an immigration van—a Home Office van—and taken to Colnbrook, and he was told that he is being detained. He has family here.

I would like to know from the Minister why those with a legacy claim who have been waiting years on a decision are now being told they are being transported to Rwanda, because that is not the guidance that MPs are getting from the Home Office. When I raised this with one of the Parliamentary Private Secretaries, they sent me the guidance, which said that that should not be the case. I have serious questions about the application of the policy. People are waiting years on decisions—I at least agree with the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood on that front—and it is taking too long. I would like to see more staff employed at the Home Office, if that is what it takes.

I object to the hon. Lady's description of the civil service, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. The trade unions are absolutely correct and have a duty to their members if they think that a piece of legislation breaks human rights or international law.

Incidentally, I do not share the view that the whole legal profession is somehow left-wing and Marxist; if only that were true, perhaps the legal profession would be in a better place. I completely reject that view on behalf of the legal professional. There are very good lawyers out there and tarring them with the brush that they are somehow Marxist is extraordinary—listening to the debate, anyone would think that when the judge rises, the first two verses of “Bandiera Rossa” are sung in court. I leave that vision with the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is perhaps thinking about it.

In all seriousness, trade unions have the right to take an issue to court on behalf of their members. And when the Home Office tells them that it will send civil servants to Rwanda to work, they also have the right to have discussions about the consequences of that for lives and jobs.

We need a sensible immigration policy built on dignity that allows genuine cases to come here to share with their families and gives them the right to work after six months. The Government are, in fairness to them, going some way on that, with their shortage occupation list, and I would want to see that built on. We need fairness and sensible policies on immigration.

12.17 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for the great Yorkshire seat of Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns) on securing the debate. She mentioned the Leader of the Opposition in her remarks, so I want to gently point out to her that he oversaw the first prosecution of al-Qaeda terrorists as well as the jailing of the airline liquid bomb plotters and of the racist murderers of Stephen Lawrence. Of course, as a lawyer, he has on occasion had to represent people whose views he does not agree with, but I am sure that any fair-minded person would understand that.

I want to briefly acknowledge the contributions made by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), as well as by the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), who soldiered on despite what sounded like quite a sore throat—I would expect nothing else from him. It is good to see the Minister in his place. As he knows, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) would normally speak for the Opposition on these matters, but on this occasion I have been dragged off the subs' bench.

Today's debate comes after the costs of the asylum system have skyrocketed, from £500 million a year under the last Labour Government to an eye-watering £5.4 billion a year under this Conservative Government—an almost tenfold increase over the past 14 years. That is before the £576 million being spent on sending 300 asylum seekers to Rwanda—almost £2 million per deportee—is factored in. What is the taxpayer getting in return for those mind-boggling sums of money? The boats are certainly not being stopped: we are seeing record numbers this year, with 8,100 having crossed since 1 January—up 33% on the same period last year. On 1 May alone, we saw a staggering 711 small boat arrivals, as the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood mentioned. That is the highest single-day number this year to date.

The asylum backlog is certainly not being tackled. When Labour left office in 2010, the backlog stood at just 19,000 cases, but today the number stands at over 100,000. The backlog had already doubled before the small boats started coming, in no small part because back in 2013, Ministers decided to downgrade the pay and seniority of asylum decision makers, supposedly to cut costs. The predictable result? Slow decision-making, poor decisions being overturned on appeal, and a higher rate of staff turnover, all of which led to 56,000 people being stuck in hotels and other forms of contingency accommodation as we entered this year. That cost the taxpayer a mind-boggling £8 million a day.

The dangerous channel crossings run by the criminal smuggler gangs must end; I am sure we all agree on that. To stop that pernicious trade, we need to smash those gangs at source. To do that, we on these Benches have proposed a new cross-border police unit and a new security partnership with Europol based on intelligence sharing. That is part of a practical plan paid for by redirecting funds and focus away from the failing Rwanda scheme.

We also need a detailed plan to clear the backlog by surging caseworker recruitment—a plan that will end asylum hotel use and save the taxpayer up to £4 billion each year. That includes a new 1,000 officer-strong

[Dan Jarvis]

returns and enforcement unit to remove those who have no right to be in the UK. Returns of failed asylum seekers have collapsed by 44% under the Conservatives since 2010, and returns of foreign criminals have collapsed by 27% over the same period. Our plan will make sure that applications are processed quickly so that those with no right to be here are quickly returned.

In contrast, the Government strategy has only exacerbated the chaos and increased the cost. Just recently, the Home Office permanent secretary confirmed at a Public Accounts Committee hearing that the Government have defined 40,000 small boat asylum seekers as “inadmissible” to the asylum system, 99% of whom we know will never be sent to Rwanda. In doing so, the Government have created a perma-backlog of people whom they have prevented from being processed and who are therefore stuck in indefinite limbo. The Government claim that they can send those people to Rwanda, but we know that Rwanda can take only a few hundred asylum seekers—around 1% of that 40,000-person perma-backlog. What happens to everybody else? A 99% chance of staying in Britain is pretty good odds for someone prepared to pay thousands of pounds to a smuggler to risk their life at sea or for a human trafficker determined to bring people into the country for modern-day slavery.

The public have a right to know what underpins the extortionately expensive gimmick that is the Government’s asylum plan. Can the Minister share the annual cost to the taxpayer of keeping 40,000 asylum seekers in indefinite limbo in a permanent backlog? The Home Office Minister in the other place confirmed that the British taxpayer will be paying full board and lodgings for five years for those removed voluntarily to Rwanda. How much is that forecast to cost?

The Prime Minister promised to detain everyone who crossed the channel on a small boat—over 30,000 last year. Given that we have only 2,200 detention spaces, what will happen to the remaining 28,000? Staying on the issue of detention spaces, Home Office sources have told *The Times* that there are only 400 to 700 detention spaces reserved for migrants due for deportation to Rwanda. Can the Minister confirm that that equates to less than 1% of the current asylum backlog in the UK?

If the Minister plans to bail asylum seekers who are to be sent to Rwanda, can he publish his risk assessment on the possibility of asylum seekers absconding en masse to avoid being put on a flight—if one has been commissioned in the first place? That is particularly timely given that a FOI investigation by the *Daily Mail* found that the Home Office has been unable to locate or contact at least 21,107 asylum seekers in the five years running up to September 2023.

The asylum system is in chaos and costing the taxpayer many more times what it did under the Labour Government of 2010. The Prime Minister has failed to deliver on his pledge to stop the boats and the numbers are going up, not down. The public’s patience is wearing thin, and they see right through the Government’s rhetoric. It is time that the Government faced up to their failing policies and started to show some transparency. The Minister can start that transition today by answering the questions I have put to him.

12.25 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns) on securing a debate on this important issue, which matters enormously to her constituents and mine, as well as to people around the country. She is a passionate campaigner on the issue. I would argue that she is strident in her beliefs and in the way she communicates them, always leaving no doubt about where she stands. I am also grateful to colleagues from across the House for their contributions, some elements of which I agree with and many elements of which I do not. I will have an opportunity to respond to those various points during my closing remarks.

There has been much focus on costs, and I will address those specific questions. First, it is important to set the issue in context. A number of factors and forces have coalesced in recent years to create a situation in which vast numbers of people across the globe are displaced and willing—and often able—to migrate in pursuit of improved prospects. I would argue that those challenges are only likely to become more acute in the years ahead. That is why it is right that the Home Secretary is leading the international conversation about what more we can do to tackle migratory flows in a co-ordinated and joined-up way, as he did in his recent speech in New York.

Candidly, the instinct to want to secure a better life is one that we can all understand and appreciate. But while we are a compassionate and sympathetic country, it is incumbent on Governments to be pragmatic about those challenges. Our resources and capacity are not unlimited. Our generosity, as we have seen reflected many times in recent years in response to various international crises, is enormous. The British people have opened their homes. Contrary to the impression that some have given during this debate, we have seen over 500,000 people granted sanctuary in recent years, which is an effort I am enormously proud of. All of us as constituency MPs are enormously proud of the efforts that our respective constituents have played as part of that national effort.

We cannot, however, accommodate everyone who wishes to come here. Saying that is not harsh or inhumane; it is just a matter of objective fact. Illegal immigration is unfair, unsafe and unsustainable. It is not fair to those people who play by the rules and seek to come here through established safe and legal routes—people who, through the various routes that the Government have available, pay the application fee, meet the requirements and come here. It is not right when people try to circumvent those rules to come to the United Kingdom.

Undoubtedly, it is challenging to the bandwidth of Government to deal with all those competing pressures. We want to provide sanctuary through our resettlement schemes, and we are very proud of that work. We want to continue to have a fair and balanced migration system where people who play by the rules and meet the requirements can come to the UK. However, that is made harder by people coming to this country illegally. Often that makes it harder to be able to help some of the most vulnerable people from around the world.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I understand that the Home Office has brought in a lot of new technology to help to identify the illegal migrants who come over. Would the Minister allude to some of that great work? I understand that we are spearheading and quite outward-looking in its use.

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly talk about that.

Several speakers today have set out how expensive this is. Not only is illegal migration unfair, not only is it very dangerous, and not only is it criminal exploitation led by evil criminal gangs, but it is incredibly expensive. It is important to remember that the costs are not purely financial. There is also an intangible, but no less significant, impact on our ability to build a strong and cohesive society. As I have explained, there is also the human cost—lives are tragically lost when people make dangerous and unnecessary journeys. I would argue that the Government have a duty to put the evil criminal gangs responsible for this vile trade in people out of business.

Let us not forget the appalling consequences of the incident in the channel just within the last fortnight, in which a young girl lost her life. That is a tragedy of epic proportions and it is impossible for all of us not to be incredibly troubled by what we saw. The fault for that lies squarely with the evil criminal gangs responsible for putting people in small boats, taking their money, having no regard whatsoever for whether they get to the other side safely, and simply treating human beings as cargo. To take a permissive approach on this issue would be an abdication of our moral obligations; it would also be at odds with the wishes of the constituents whose interests we are sent here to advance. It is upon those constituents that the real-world consequences of illegal migration fall, whether through housing and the associated waiting lists, GP appointments, strained public services, and at times challenges with community cohesion.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being typically generous in giving way. He has spent a bit of time in his contribution rightly criticising the human traffickers and criminal gangs, but when are the Government going to produce some legislation to tackle those evil people responsible for human trafficking?

Tom Pursglove: I have enormous respect and admiration for the hon. Gentleman, and he always makes his case passionately. However, at every juncture when we as a Government have brought forward measures to deal with the criminal gangs responsible—the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and its tougher sentences; the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which made the business model more difficult; and the Rwanda legislation, which again tries to make it more difficult for those criminal gangs to operate, with the ultimate aim of putting them out of business—the hon. Gentleman and his party have opposed our efforts and voted against the legislation. We now have at our disposal tougher sentences for those responsible for those heinous crimes, and I am proud that this Government have legislated to do that. It is incumbent upon the courts to make appropriate decisions in individual cases, but we have put in place a suite of measures through that legislation to better bring those individuals to justice and ensure that they feel the full consequences of the law.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister and the Government have tried to work well with the French authorities to ensure that there is more activity to prevent people from crossing the channel. The Government have made a substantial amount of money available to the French authorities to ensure that they do their bit, but according to the papers and some of the correspondence that I have read, it seems that the French authorities do not have enough personnel on the ground to be effective. Has there been any opportunity to discuss with the French authorities better ways of preventing people from crossing the channel? As the Minister says, what has happened and the lives lost to trafficking are completely outrageous and can never be condoned.

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman often speaks with real authority and takes a close interest in the issues. I will come to the French co-operation, but to answer his question directly, this issue is consistently discussed at official and ministerial level. As he knows, we have consistently deepened our co-operation with the French over time to try to tackle the challenges and make it much more difficult for the evil criminal gangs to operate, with all the catastrophic consequences that flow from that.

As colleagues will be aware, we are taking a multidimensional approach to tackling the issue, and I am pleased to say that we are making strong progress, albeit that there is more still to do. First, we are on track to close 150 hotels, and we aim to go further with that programme. The current situation is unsustainable: we spend £8 million a day accommodating people in the asylum system, and that cannot carry on. To respond to the point that was raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), I would argue that we also need to consider the cost of standing back, doing nothing and saying that the issue is too difficult. That is why I maintain that the cost of the Rwanda policy is the right investment to make, because as the policy is operationalised, it will allow us to dramatically bring down that £8 million a day spend in our asylum system.

Alongside that, we also need to ensure that the domestic accommodation picture is in a more sustainable place. We are bringing on stream cheaper, more affordable, sustainable accommodation through large sites and dispersal accommodation, and we have dramatically reduced the accommodated population. We do need accommodation that is fit for purpose and decent, but it must also be appropriate to the circumstances, and that is precisely what we are delivering through the large sites programme and the dispersal programme. Ultimately, the most important thing is to bring down the flow, which will reduce the requirement for bed spaces in the first place.

Chris Stephens: I am grateful again to the Minister, who is being typically generous. He knows, because we have met to discuss it, that there is also the issue of what happens to those who receive refugee status. What discussions is his Department having with local authorities such as Glasgow, which find that when a backlog is cleared they have thousands of people who have received that status and are looking to be housed in the community?

Tom Pursglove: Again, the point about flow speaks for itself. The current volume of people coming to the United Kingdom, particularly via small boats, is unsustainable. The very best way of tackling the challenge that the hon. Member highlights is to dramatically reduce the numbers of people coming here through those illegal routes. That will help to alleviate the challenges. In the interim, we also need to continue to work constructively with local authorities to try to mitigate the pressures.

One of the things on which I would appreciate some support—the hon. Member and I have had this conversation—is what more other Scottish local authorities can do to play their part to a greater extent in the national effort to provide dispersed accommodation. I pay tribute to Glasgow for the work that it does in this space; it has very much stepped up to the plate and is supportive around the challenges. We also talked about some of the initiatives that we are introducing around, for example, Home Office liaison officer support, which was successful in supporting people with the move-on process in relation to the Afghan response. Having been piloted in other parts of the country, that is now being rolled out in Glasgow as well, and the early indications are encouraging. I want to work with the hon. Gentleman, colleagues across the House and the local authority to understand what works and how they can help as part of the local response when it comes to moving people on from Home Office accommodation, particularly when people are granted asylum, to ensure that they get the proper support and have the best possible chance to have successful lives, with housing, work and school places for any children.

A lot is said about the co-operation with the French, but it is a fact that roughly 50% of embarkations are stopped—prevented—through those partnership efforts. That is not insignificant. If we consider the counterfactual, we would have many more arrivals on UK shores were it not for that co-operation. It clearly plays an important role in helping to tackle this challenge.

More generally, we all recognise that illegal migration is a global challenge demanding global solutions, and the British people expect us to pull every possible lever in dealing with illegal migration. That is why we have taken steps to significantly ramp up our co-operation internationally. In March 2023, the Prime Minister and President Macron announced a three-year funding deal of £475 million to increase the deployment of personnel in northern France, to procure and deploy new technology and to enhance UK-French co-operation through the improved co-ordination and command of a personnel centre in northern France, and improved information sharing between our services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood asked about that point. She will recognise that I am somewhat limited in what I am able to say, for obvious reasons. We do not want to do anything that helps those criminal gangs to circumvent that work. However, the deal is being implemented at pace. More French personnel than ever before are now deployed in northern France, supported by cutting-edge equipment such as new drones that can be flown over an increased range. In addition, a new French zonal co-ordination centre is being established to co-ordinate French deployments, with UK officers permanently embedded in the new centre.

Our close co-operation, including that new deal, has been crucial in preventing dangerous crossings from being attempted. Last year, the number of crossings fell by 36% compared with 2022. We know that we must go further this year to continue that trend, but tackling the global migration crisis and smashing the evil gangs who drive it are challenges that must be met with a shared response further upstream, as well as at our closest borders.

As such, we recently pledged up to £1 million to tackle illegal migration in Libya, amid record arrivals into Europe from north Africa. This money will support survivors of trafficking and migrants in vulnerable situations, while also helping to prevent journeys to Europe by tackling the root causes of irregular migration, facilitating the voluntary return of migrants to their home countries and providing reintegration assistance for migrants who choose to return to their countries of origin. The funding and support we are providing will mean Libya is better equipped to stop people risking their lives to reach Europe. It also demonstrates our commitment to crack down on people smugglers operating not just in the English channel, but across the whole world.

In addition, the UK is participating in the Rome process, working with the Italian Government on upstream projects on the migration route to address the root causes of migration. In support of that process, the UK is co-funding a project to promote and assist the voluntary return of migrants from Tunisia to their countries of origin. It has also been agreed to deepen UK-Italy co-operation on security and economic development across north Africa.

Again, it is right that we keep a close eye on the costs of our international partnerships and agreements, but I would strongly dispute any suggestion that this work is in any way unproductive or superfluous. On the contrary, it is essential that the United Kingdom plays an active role in the global response to this issue. The more effectively we can intervene at our near borders and, as importantly, upstream in countries such as Libya, the better protected the United Kingdom will be against illegal migration and the gangs that fuel it. I hope that gives a bit of flavour on the work that is going on now.

We have also increased dramatically the number of returns of individuals who have no right to be here, to 26,000 in 2023 compared with 14,623 in 2022. We will sustain that progress.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I have no doubt that the Minister is a passionate advocate and we are on the same page on a lot of this. Has he discussed with his Department coming out of the ECHR?

Tom Pursglove: That is not a policy conversation that I have had. What I will say is that when it comes to the Rwanda policy, to which I think the question is relevant and pertinent, the Prime Minister has been consistently clear that we will not allow a foreign court to prevent us from operationalising it. I believe that through the legislation we have put in place and the determination of the Government to see it through, we will fulfil the commitments that we have made under the legislation to operationalise the policy, relocate people to Rwanda and put an end to journeys over the channel and the business model underpinning them.

I also make the point that Albanian arrivals are down by 90% in 2023 compared with 2022. Again, that is evidence proving that deterrents work. That partnership focuses on the point of deterrence, and it is yet more evidence that the general approach we are taking, which is developed further through the Rwanda policy, will deliver, with deterrence at its core to help put these criminal gangs out of business and disrupt their work.

Specifically on asylum grant rates, I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 changes that she and I voted for are making a difference. I anticipate that colleagues will see grant rates coming down. We are also making decisions much more quickly. Asylum caseworking productivity and the learning that has taken place over the course of the last 12 to 18 months are making a real difference in reaching decisions on individual cases much sooner.

I know that my hon. Friend is also a strong supporter of the changes we have introduced around legal migration. I was pleased that we were able to have the first statistical release on that front last week, which demonstrates the changes and the way in which they are beginning to make a difference. We saw numbers down 24% across key visa routes. We obviously saw a considerable fall in student dependant numbers, having stopped individuals being able to bring student dependants on the route, and we will sustain that progress as well. The objective is to bring inflows down by 300,000 relative to the year prior. Again, that is a credible plan that delivers on the commitment we have made to bring those numbers down to more sustainable levels, and I am grateful for the support shown by my hon. Friend in that regard.

In today's debate we have touched a little on the Rwanda policy, which is front and centre in allowing us to kick on and make further progress. The changes we have introduced and the progress we have made are not insignificant, but undoubtedly we need to go further in order to achieve our ultimate aim of putting the criminal gangs out of business. I have said that a few times in the course of this debate, but it is what the British people expect and it is the critical challenge that we face. It is not tenable for any party not to have a credible plan about how it would do that. I will not go into the operational specifics of the policy today.

We have consistently seen efforts to thwart the progress of the Rwanda legislation, and I have no doubt that we will see further efforts from certain quarters to make the delivery of the policy as difficult as possible. We have seen incidents in the last week or so of people trying to disrupt perfectly lawful Home Office business to facilitate relocation in the asylum accommodation estate. We cannot have a mob trying to prevent through criminality that lawful Home Office business from taking place. There is always a right to peaceful protest, but it is not acceptable to behave in such a way that is counter to the law and prevents perfectly lawful business from moving forward and taking place in the way that the British people as a whole would reasonably expect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood raised a point about judicial capacity and being able to get on, process claims and ensure that appeals are dealt with as expeditiously as possible. The Government are working particularly hard to ensure that the justice system can meet increases in demand under the Illegal Migration Act. We have reviewed anticipated workloads

introduced by the Act and will increase court staff and secure hearing rooms and judicial capacity to meet those projections. To make effective use of the Act's provision for first-tier tribunal judges to sit in the upper tribunal of the immigration and asylum chamber when requested to do so by the Senior President of Tribunals, the judiciary has identified and trained about 150 experienced first-tier tribunal judges to sit in the upper tribunal to hear Illegal Migration Act appeals. The additional judges, if deployed, could provide more than 5,000 additional sitting days.

The Lord Chancellor also asked the Judicial Appointments Commission to recruit more judges for the first-tier and upper tribunals of the immigration and asylum chamber. The recruitment is now concluding and new judges will be appointed and trained and will start sitting from this summer. This should increase capacity in both the first-tier and upper tribunals to hear routine cases and, in due course, Illegal Migration Act cases. Again, we are taking a root-and-branch approach, increasing resource and capacity and ensuring that we have the infrastructure to deliver not only on the partnership with Rwanda, but on getting through cases more quickly. That will facilitate greater volumes of removals not just of foreign national offenders, but of individuals who are failed asylum seekers and have no right to be here.

Chris Stephens: In my contribution, I raised the concern of asylum seekers effectively being taxed around the UK. Could the Minister say something on that, or could he commit to writing to me and others about the costs?

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly pick up that specific point. The hon. Gentleman raised an individual case that would not be appropriate for me to comment on, in the sense that I would never think it appropriate to casework individual cases on the Floor of the House. If the hon. Gentleman wants to share details with me, I will ensure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for Countering Illegal Migration is aware of it.

On the point about accommodation moves, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West will appreciate that we are in the process of scaling back hotels. We are closing hotels around the country. We are on track to fulfil the commitments we have made on that 150 figure, and to go further, but we need to do that in a managed way, which sometimes requires people to be relocated to other parts of the country for the purposes of accommodation. Again, we are trying to move towards a place where, if areas played their part through dispersed accommodation, there would not be a need for hotels. I come back to the point about flow. We need to fundamentally and significantly reduce the flow of people coming into this country, which goes to the very heart of the challenge the hon. Gentleman is talking about. If we had a smaller population of individuals who had come here illegally, we would have a reduced need for accommodation, but in the circumstances, it is very helpful where local authorities work with us to identify dispersed accommodation within communities, which dramatically reduces the reliance on hotels.

Let us just contrast all of that to the policy of the Opposition, who have talked again about increased funding for the National Crime Agency. Well, we have

[Tom Pursglove]

already doubled that. They have talked about an additional team of civil servants. Well, we already have around 5,000 civil servants working on this part of the migration and borders system. The Opposition have no credible plan whatsoever on the issue of flow. They have nothing that disrupts meaningfully the criminal gangs. There is a lot of talk about simply getting on and processing claims more quickly. I would love it if the shadow Minister intervened on me to suggest a third country return route, because without that we would simply be accepting unlimited numbers of people of certain nationalities coming across the channel without a route of return to the country of origin. That cannot be right. That is not a sustainable position.

That is why the partnership with Rwanda is so important in addressing this challenge. It allows us to relocate individuals to Rwanda with the aim of breaking the business model that is seeing people being brought across and exploited by criminal gangs in the first place. It is just not good enough for the Opposition to say that they are going to do those two very minor things that the Government are already doing, and that suddenly the picture will be dramatically improved overnight. I do not think anybody fair-minded thinks that is a credible answer to this challenge. It is incumbent on any Government or party that aspires to Government to have a multi-faceted approach to this challenge. We do, and it is working; and we will see it through. That stands in very stark contrast to the Opposition party's approach reflected in the debate today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood set out, the financial stakes are high, but there are also very genuine issues about security and fairness. Most importantly, this is about saving lives. It is about stopping people risking their lives in the channel and all the catastrophic consequences that we have seen play out on far too many occasions, so it is right, not only financially but morally, to get a better grip of illegal migration.

As I said, we have a plan. It is delivering results. We still have some distance to go. I believe that the steps that we propose to take will deliver the results that we intend them to have, and that matters, because people in communities such as Morley and Outwood want to see change. I think they recognise that we have a plan to get there. Their local MP will no doubt hold us to account for delivery against the promises that we have made. There is nothing humane or decent about standing back, doing very little to stop what we are seeing currently or the risk to life that it presents, and just accepting that it is all too difficult and that things cannot change. That is not the position that this

Government have taken. It is not the position that this Government will take, moving forward. We are determined to see this through.

12.56 pm

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I thank you, Mr Stringer, my hon. Friend the Minister, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and the few MPs who took part. It is a shame for this important debate that more did not turn up.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution. He gave an important insight into how illegal immigration is affecting his constituents in Northern Ireland and the impact on the fishing and food sector. He highlighted the unhappiness felt by the Northern Irish people and how we must strike a balance between compassion and obligation. I thank him for that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for participating despite losing his voice—I have been there. He described his own experience for the TV programme that he was in, the dangers of traffickers and gangs, and the plight of the Vietnamese children going missing, which is a very important point. He also described the impact of the current situation on rent inflation, which has a knock-on effect on the British public.

I thank the SNP and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). Despite our having completely different views, I agree with him on a couple of issues, namely, the need to tackle gangmasters and for a better relationship between local government and central Government.

The shadow Minister is well respected across the House, and I thank him for his contribution. However, I did not hear a fully detailed plan on what Labour would do. It has said that it will look at issues. Nor did he touch on my points about Labour giving asylum to 50,000 people. That is really concerning.

I thank the Minister for being here today and contributing to this debate. Knowing him as a friend, I am confident that he is strident in his role and he understands the impact of the current situation on the British people. I again thank you, Mr Stringer, and fellow MPs for their input into today's debate, but I urge the Minister that it is time to get a grip. The British taxpayers have had enough. Let us show them how serious we are in tackling this. Let us come out of the ECHR and finally get control of our borders, because we know that in six months' time, if Labour does get into power, this issue will never be addressed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the costs associated with illegal immigration.

Water Safety Education

1 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I understand that there is agreement by John Cryer and the Minister for another hon. Member to participate in the debate. However, as is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of water safety education in schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank Mr Speaker for choosing this debate, which I am delighted to have secured. It is on a subject that is of great importance to me as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on swimming, and I am sure that it is a matter of interest and concern for Members on both sides of the House. I also want briefly to thank both Philip Brownlie, head of public affairs at Swim England—it used to be the Amateur Swimming Association, in my day—for all his help in securing the debate and with my speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), the chair of the all-party group.

Swimming has been a genuine passion of mine for many years. I started to swim at the age of five or six and I have swum with various swimming clubs, such as Leyton ASC, Hornchurch ASC and East Grinstead Tri Club. I want every child to have the kind of opportunity that I and many others had when we were growing up. If we can develop children's physical literacy through good-quality, positive experiences at school, we can set them up for a lifelong love of being active.

Swimming is obviously a sport, but it is probably the only sport that might save someone's life at some point. Figures shared with me by the Royal Life Saving Society show that the number of child drownings is increasing at an alarming rate. In my view, that is not unconnected to the net loss of swimming pools in this country of about 400 over the past decade. In 2022, there was a 46% increase in the number of child drownings against the five-year average, and although the 2023 data has not been officially published, early indications suggest that child drownings may have increased significantly again last year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate on what, for me, is a critical issue. In my constituency, many young people and children in particular have died while swimming. In the figures that he referred to, 35 accidental child fatalities were reported. That is a classroom full of children. That gives us an idea of the magnitude of the issue. Does he agree that consideration should be given to a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland awareness campaign, alongside the education systems in the devolved nations, to ensure that children have an understanding of basic water safety, and how to be safe and keep safe?

John Cryer: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will not comment on the devolved nations, but he speaks very eloquently.

When the figures are adjusted for socioeconomic status and ethnicity, there are worrying elements in the child mortality data. The National Child Mortality Database reported that the risk of drowning was twice as high among children from poorer backgrounds as among those from better-off backgrounds, and that the risk of drowning was three and a half times higher for children from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. For me, that is a particular worry, because I represent one of the most diverse constituencies in the country.

The debate is very timely, particularly when we consider that we are fast approaching the summer and that 2024 marks the 30th anniversary of swimming's inclusion in the national curriculum. For all these reasons, it is important that we have this debate today and that the importance of swimming and water safety is highlighted in this place.

Figures from the latest Sport England Active Lives survey of children show that 71% of children in year 7 are able to swim 25 metres, which represents a fall of 6.3% compared with five years ago. Worryingly, pupils are also being offered fewer swimming lessons at school. That is raised with me just about every time I visit a school in my constituency. Swim England has also seen concerning examples of parents being asked to pay for their children's school swimming lessons, which risks exacerbating existing inequalities. I represent some of the poorest wards in London, so that is very relevant to my daily work.

I pay tribute to the many hard-working teachers in Leyton and Wanstead and across the country. I recognise that teaching swimming and water safety presents a number of serious challenges, particularly under current circumstances. On top of that, school staff are often underqualified, underprepared and inexperienced when it comes to delivering comprehensive physical education. That is not a criticism of the teachers, but a criticism of the lack of resources. More qualified and prepared school staff would enable smaller ratios and higher-quality teaching to make the most of limited learning time for pupils.

Organisations such as Swim England produce free resources, including the school swimming and water safety charter, to support teachers, as well as running courses such as the national curriculum training programme for primary school teachers, but the Department for Education and Ofsted have been a bit too reluctant to adequately monitor and enforce the curriculum requirements. Although schools are required to publish their swimming and water safety attainment levels in order to receive PE premium funding, evidence suggests that many are not doing so. Could the Minister share the number of schools that the Department has taken action against for not meeting that requirement since its introduction? PE premium funding itself is only guaranteed until the end of the 2024-25 academic year. Could the Minister confirm that the requirement to provide that data directly to the Department will remain, regardless of what might happen to PE premium funding?

PE premium funding has helped schools offer top-up swimming lessons, but I cannot help feeling that providing schools with enough core funding to deliver appropriate school swimming lessons would be a better way to proceed. The Minister may or may not be aware that in Estonia, for example, pupils receive 40 hours of school swimming lessons paid for by the Government.

[John Cryer]

A 2023 Ofsted report on PE described swimming and water safety attainment as “mixed” and stated that “evaluation of the swimming and water safety element of the curriculum is limited”.

It recommended that primary school schools should ensure that

“their curriculum matches the breadth and ambition of the national curriculum for all pupils. It should include carefully sequenced and taught swimming and water safety lessons”.

I would like the Department to be much more active in monitoring and enforcing curriculum requirements, a point that members of the Swim Alliance have raised with me. The alliance, which is chaired by Debbie Kaye of the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association, is a grouping of organisations from across the sector, including pool operators and groups such as the Black Swimming Association, Unity Swimming and Swim England.

Organisations such as the Youth Sport Trust, the Association for Physical Education and Swim England have proposed that PE should be made a core subject. I wonder whether the Minister might consider that in order to help PE obtain the profile and support in schools that it merits.

The growth in the number of pop-up pools is broadly welcome, but their small size and shallow depth means that it is impossible for them to meet curriculum requirements, and local authorities have raised concerns about the impact that increased use of pop-up pools could have on existing community facilities.

I want to allow time for my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green to speak and for the Minister to respond, but we cannot discuss water safety without discussing access to pools for pupils to learn in. Part of my constituency—three wards—is in the London Borough of Redbridge, which, according to Swim England, is the third most deprived local authority in the country with regard to available water space. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that just 20% of children across all ages in Redbridge can swim 25 metres, compared with 75% in Wandsworth. If we are to improve water safety, we must ensure that we have the pools we need for the future.

To summarise my views very briefly, schools need to be adequately resourced and able to provide swimming and water safety opportunities. School leadership groups need to prioritise swimming and water safety in schools. School swimming and water safety need more hands-on monitoring and enforcement from the DFE and Ofsted. As a country, we desperately need to invest in the community pools we need for the future, with both capital funding and revenue funding, so that swimming is an affordable activity. If we do all that, we can start to make the sort of progress that I am sure everyone across the House wants to see.

Finally, I mentioned that my three of my wards are in Redbridge; the other six are in the London Borough of Waltham Forest, where we have seen enormous core funding cuts. As I said at the beginning of my speech, just about every school I visit, in both Waltham Forest and Redbridge, has raised the difficulty of getting access to pool time for swimming. With that, I had better stop speaking and give others a chance to contribute.

1.11 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is, as ever, a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Minister for allowing me a little time to address some of the concerns that we have been raising since 2015, when the all-party group began. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) is a fantastic swimmer—unlike the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green, who pootles up and down the Hampstead Heath ponds on warm days.

The important thing is access and equality of provision for children, because, as the Minister is aware, schools should be the great equaliser. It is important that every child learns to swim, regardless of their parents’ ability to swim. Unfortunately, we are not seeing much consistency. Almost every child goes to school, and it is a national curriculum requirement for them to be able to swim 25 metres, perform a range of strokes and perform safe self-rescue by the end of year 6. Of course, different schools have different priorities, but surely, now that this is an Ofsted priority, there should be much more uniformity. It is particularly worrying, as my hon. Friend said, that we are going backwards. Since the pandemic, a number of swimming pools have closed and the number of children who are confident swimmers has declined.

Why are we seeing such inequality in attainment? Sport England’s Active Lives survey of children and young people shows that while 90% of children from the most affluent families can swim 25 metres by years 7 to 8, that figure falls to just 53% of children with low family affluence, and it is a very similar story when it comes to the ability to self-rescue. Similarly, looking at ethnicity, the figures reveal shocking disparities, with 80% of white children in years 7 to 8 able to swim 25 metres, compared with just 50% of black children and 56% of Asian children.

It should not have to be this way. If we look at the figures for children who want to swim more, or who either like or love swimming, we see that children from poorer backgrounds and those from ethnically diverse communities are just as keen to swim as their friends, so it is not a lack of desire that accounts for the difference. Some good work has been done, including through the Inclusion 2024 programme—my hon. Friend also mentioned the Black Swimming Association—but I am keen to hear from the Minister about the recipe for success, and what assessment his Department has made of the reasons for the stubborn inequalities and what practical steps are planned to address them.

One contributing factor could be access to water facilities, as my hon. Friend said. We have lost hundreds of pools up and down the country since 2010, particularly due to the high cost of running them, given the energy bills. Does the Minister agree that, in such a situation, it is unsurprising that attainment levels across London are below the national average? My constituency is covered by the London Borough of Haringey, which is one of the local authorities with the biggest shortages of publicly available water space; there is quite a lot in the private school sector, but not enough that is publicly available. Just 35% of children of all ages across the borough can swim 25 metres. Even within London, though, the discrepancies are huge. In Hammersmith and Fulham, an area just 10 miles to the west of Haringey with no shortage of water, 88% of children are able to swim 25 metres.

In recent years, there has been some welcome national funding through the national leisure recovery fund and the swimming pool support fund, for which I give the Government credit, but that needs to be seen in the context of falling swimming ability rates. The national leisure recovery fund was much needed, but was only ever a short-term sticking plaster, and the swimming pool support fund was massively oversubscribed, showing the huge level of need in the leisure sector. There is no substitute for long-term, sustainable funding to deliver the network of community pools we need to provide school swimming opportunities for all children.

A recent survey from the Local Government Association shows that sport and leisure services remain under huge pressure, with more than half of local authorities needing to make cost savings in 2024-25. That follows the huge pressure that council budgets have been under over a number of years, as well as the increases in the costs of operating swimming pools as a result of factors such as massively increased energy prices and staffing costs, which have combined to create a real death knell for some of our swimming centres.

With schools already stating that accessing a pool is often one of the challenges in delivering their school swimming programmes, it is absolutely imperative that we make sure that all communities have access to pools. The Government previously committed to publishing a national vision for swimming facilities by the end of 2023. Could the Minister update us on where we are at, given that we are halfway through 2024 and have still not seen that national vision?

My second point—I will make it very briefly; I know Mr Stringer is getting very impatient in the Chair, but as a former council leader, he will be sympathetic on the point about council funding—is that for years it has been felt from the outside a bit like the Department had put school swimming and water safety on the “too hard to tackle” pile. Would the Minister please refresh the vision for swimming for every single child?

I hope the new online reporting tool being introduced by the Department will be a big step forward. Online tools are all very well, but what we need is more children in the pool doing their 25 metres unaided and learning to swim, so that we know that they will be safe in the coming summer, and we do not see any children drowning needlessly.

1.17 pm

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) on securing this important debate. I commend him and the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for their contributions and for their wider work in the all-party parliamentary group. I also welcome, as ever, the contribution from our mutual friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

All children should know how to swim and keep themselves safe in and around water. Schools can play a really important role in ensuring that they are taught vital skills and knowledge, such as the water safety code. Some 91% of primary schools surveyed in 2023 reported that they were providing swimming and/or water safety lessons to their pupils, but we recognise that there is more to do to increase from the current level the number of children who are able to swim.

Data from the last academic year, as has been mentioned, show that 70.5% of year 7 children—the first year of secondary school—reported that they can swim 25 metres unaided. The national curriculum for physical education states that by the time they leave primary school, children should be able to

“perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations”.

That is in addition to swimming a minimum of 25 metres unaided and performing a range of strokes.

Water safety guidance for schools published by Swim England recommends that primary age pupils should be taught about the water safety code, beach flags and cold water shock. It also recommends pupils be taught about survival skills, such as floatation, treading water, energy conservation and how to signal for help.

Secondary schools are free to organise and deliver a diverse and challenging PE curriculum that suits the needs of all their pupils. While there is no statutory requirement on secondary schools to provide swimming and water safety lessons, the secondary PE curriculum provides clear guidance. It sets out that:

“Pupils should build on and embed the physical development and skills learned in key stages 1 and 2, become more competent, confident and expert in their techniques”.

Swimming and water safety lessons are one way of doing that, and resources are available for all key stages. Swim England recommends that children in key stages 3 and 4—secondary school—have the opportunity to extend their knowledge, including through the practical experience of different outdoor water environments, and annual campaign events such as World Drowning Prevention Day can be useful ways to refresh and build pupils’ knowledge across their time at school.

In July 2023, we published an update to the school sport and activity action plan. The plan encourages schools to teach pupils practical swimming and water safety techniques in a pool and to complement that with classroom lessons. In this area, as in others, schools welcome case studies from other schools and guidance on how to bring to life and embed swimming and water safety in their overall offer. In March, we published non-statutory guidance to support schools to enhance their PE provision and improve access to sport and physical activity. The guidance highlights the wide range of support available from Swim England, including, as has been mentioned, the free school swimming and water safety charter, which provides teachers with pupil awards, lesson plans, videos and water safety presentations. Swim England reports that more than 1,700 schools and lesson providers have registered with the charter.

We recognise the importance of getting water safety education right at an early age, so primary schools can use their PE and sport premium funding for teacher training and top-up swimming and water safety lessons. Those are additional lessons for pupils who may not have met the national curriculum expectations after their core PE lessons. As part of the PE and sport premium conditions of grant, schools must publish the percentage of year 6 pupils who meet the national curriculum expectations. The Department announced last year that we will be introducing a new digital PE and sport premium reporting tool, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green just mentioned. It will capture detail on how schools have used their funding. The form will also require schools to input their swimming

[*Damian Hinds*]

and water safety attainment data. We are piloting the digital tool this summer, when schools will have the option of completing it prior to it becoming mandatory for schools to complete in academic year 2024-25.

Swimming and being near water can bring benefits for all children, which is why we are supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities to learn to swim and learn about water safety. The inclusion 2024 programme works with a network of lead inclusion schools across England, and has developed new resources that are available to all schools on the Swim England website's inclusion hub. They include an awards programme, audit tools to facilitate discussions with pool operators, and advice on how to deliver inclusive swimming festivals.

Identifying risk and managing personal safety are central to personal, social, health and economic—PSHE—education, and schools can use PSHE to equip pupils with the knowledge necessary to make safe and informed decisions, which are a vital part of water safety. The PSHE Association is one of many providers to have developed resources in this area that schools can choose from. We will shortly be consulting on revised relationships, sex and health education statutory guidance, and those who are interested will have an opportunity to contribute their thoughts through that process.

A pool can be a valuable asset for a school and help to ensure access for all pupils regardless of background. The Department's opening school facilities programme is spending up to £57 million to help schools to open their sport facilities outside the core school day, including on weekends and holidays. As of April 2024, the programme has supported more than 220 schools to open their pools to more users for longer. The programme is targeted towards the least active children and young people.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister very much for his words so far, but he has not quite addressed the point about inequality and topping up areas that are so far behind, where below 50% of children are able to swim 25 metres unaided.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about equality of access. We are very conscious of that when we talk about safety in particular; this is about not just sporting participation, but children's safety. It is important that we seek to present that opportunity to everybody. It is our ambition to make

swimming up to a certain standard available to everybody in primary school, and that is what we will continue to do.

On a related point, we welcome the efforts to find new ways to overcome barriers to providing high-quality swimming and water safety lessons, particularly for children who may have less access to swimming than others. It is important that pools are safe and appropriate for the activities they provide. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead talked about the trend of pop-up pools. My Department would be interested in hearing more about the work of his all-party parliamentary group and their discussions, and indeed those with Swim England, in that regard.

I welcome the opportunity for the Department to work alongside members of the National Water Safety Forum, in particular the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Royal Life Saving Society UK and Swim England. The Department contributes to the education sub-group by supporting the forum to understand the needs of teachers and improve the dissemination of resources and messages to schools.

The education sub-group recognises the important role of water safety messaging that is age and stage-appropriate for children. The group has recently published a new framework to provide a set of consistent core messages, which will help practitioners and organisations working at local and national levels that wish to develop, deliver and evaluate water safety resources and campaigns. The water safety code is the headline message of the framework and includes key learning outcomes from early years through to key stage 4.

Raising awareness of water safety and key messages is an important part of people understanding the dangers of water. The Department for Education is pleased to have supported the Royal Life Saving Society UK's Drowning Prevention Week in recent years. Last year, over half a million children took part in schools. In June, we will support this year's activity, which will focus on the water safety code.

I know how important swimming and water safety are for all children. Swimming can be one of many activities that foster positive wellbeing and can be a habit children take into adult life. We remain committed to working in partnership with sector organisations to support schools to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn to swim and know how to be safe in and around water.

Question put and agreed to.

1.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Free School Meals

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of free school meals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Betts.

A child pretending to eat out of an empty lunchbox because they do not qualify for free school meals and do not want their friends to know that there is no food at home; a child coming into school having not eaten anything since lunch the day before, so hungry that they are eating rubbers at school; and a child hiding in the playground because they do not think they can get a meal—all stories from schools in England today. This has to stop.

I want every child at school to be happy, healthy and ready to learn, and I doubt that anybody here would disagree on that point. That is why it was the Liberal Democrats in government who introduced free school meals for every infant schoolchild—something of which I am incredibly proud. Since the passage of the Children and Families Act 2014, it has been required by law that free lunches are provided to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2. That universal offering for all infants has paid real dividends. A free school meal can be life changing; its benefits are enormous.

Extending free school meals offers a triple whammy of benefits. Free school meals save parents time and money, as parents save an average of £10 a week on food and 50 minutes a week preparing it. They improve educational outcomes; when free school meals for children aged five to seven were piloted in east London and Durham, pupils made around two months more progress in their SATs results compared with those in the rest of the country. They help children to eat more healthily: packed lunches are much more likely than school meals to provide more calories from fat, sodium and sugar. When free infant school meals were rolled out, two in five headteachers told the Education Policy Institute that healthy eating across the school had improved. Free school meals are incredible, and we should give one to every child living in poverty, whether in primary or secondary school, because hunger and poverty do not stop at the age of 11.

Not only does a free school meal make sense for the reasons I have already outlined; it also makes financial sense. An analysis by PwC found that every £1 spent on free school meals for the poorest children generates £1.38 in core benefits, including a boost to the lifetime earnings of those children by almost £3 billion. Free school meals are a simple, unintrusive way of ensuring that all children from low-income families have at least one well-balanced, healthy, nutritious meal a day. The Government know this, having already extended free school meals to children without recourse to public funds during the pandemic, before making that extension permanent. Even the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), told a Conservative party conference fringe event that he supported extending free school meals to all children in poverty. Doing nothing is economically, morally and politically unsustainable.

There has been some progress. My party and I welcomed the extension of free school meals to every primary school child in London by the Mayor of London in 2023. I am sure that all hon. Members will agree that a proper analysis of that scheme and its outcomes will be critical, and I look forward to seeing the Education Endowment Foundation's report in due course. I hope that that work will inform both this Government's and any future Government's policymaking on free school meals.

The Mayor's commitment to free school meals is admirable, but it would be remiss of me not to point out that earlier in this Parliament the Labour party chose not to support extending free school meals to all children in poverty. When the Liberal Democrats tabled an amendment to the Schools Bill in the other place to that effect, Labour peers sadly chose to abstain. Although there was much in the Bill I disliked, I was disappointed that we were not able to press the same amendment to a vote in the Commons. I hope and expect that many hon. Members here would have felt able to support it had we secured that opportunity.

Regarding the Conservative record, I am sure that many hon. Members will recall that Marcus Rashford had to drag this Government kicking and screaming to provide free school meals in the school holidays during covid. They may also recall some of the comments that were expressed from the Government Benches in debates at the time, such as:

“Where is the slick PR campaign encouraging absent parents to take some responsibility for their children? I do not believe in nationalising children. Instead, we need to get back to the idea of taking responsibility”—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2020; Vol. 682, c. 1155.]

or,

“it's a parent's job to feed their children”. —[*Official Report*, 21 October 2020; Vol. 682, c. 1160.]

Frankly, that is an insult to every parent who cannot afford to feed their child. Of course, we all agree that it is a parent's job to feed their children; that is exactly what almost every parent is desperately trying to do.

Indeed, I met a mother at one of my constituency surgeries who had fled an abusive partner. She was skipping her mental health medication because she needed to use the money that she would have spent on prescriptions to ensure that her daughter could eat lunch at college. That is a mother taking her responsibility to feed her child seriously, and she is paying the price with her health and wellbeing. I am afraid that the Conservative Government are forcing parents to make impossible choices such as that. It is a scandal that a free school meal may be the only hot meal that a child eats in a day in this country. In a country such as England, families are struggling with this basic human need, and it is appalling. The Government should hang their head in shame.

Children are going hungry. In January 2024, the Food Foundation's latest tracking found that 20% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity. Given those statistics, it is not surprising that the use of food banks has skyrocketed. Three per cent of all individuals in the UK used a food bank in the financial year ending 2022, and there are over 2,500 food banks operating in the UK.

Giving children in poverty a free school meal gives them the energy to learn in the afternoon and it saves parents money. When children go hungry, they make

[Munira Wilson]

less progress, and have poorer behaviour and worse health outcomes. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, more than 4 million children in the UK are living in poverty. That means that in an average classroom of 30, nine children will be living in poverty. It also calculates that 900,000 children—a third of school-age children living in poverty in England—miss out on free school meals. The £7,400 earnings threshold has not increased since it was introduced in 2018, but if it had risen in line with inflation it should be around £9,300.

Parents are trapped in poverty by a system that punishes them for working more hours. When universal credit was introduced in 2010, the Government promised that people would be better off for each hour they worked and for every pound they earned, but under the Conservatives that is no longer true. If someone is earning just under the £7,400 limit, taking on extra hours or getting a pay rise could make them worse off, as their children would lose free school meals, and if someone is earning just over the limit, they could be better off taking a pay cut. Surely that is nonsense.

Not only must we feed more children in poverty who are currently not eligible for free school meals; we must also make changes to ensure that every single child who is entitled to a free school meal takes one up. In 2013, the Department for Education estimated that around 14% of pupils entitled to free school meals were not claiming them. The DFE does not routinely collect information on the number of pupils who are entitled to free school meals but do not make a claim. It is therefore largely unknown how many children are not currently receiving the benefit, but it is estimated that around one in 10 pupils eligible for free school meals in England are not registered, so are missing out. The kicker is that as well as these children missing out on their meal, schools are unable to claim the pupil premium and other important disadvantage funding that goes with it. I commend the work of the FixOurFood programme, led by the University of York together with the Food Foundation, which has set out to test and evaluate the Sheffield model of opt-out automatic enrolment with at least 20 local authorities. Auto-enrolment is an important step on which I would welcome movement from the Government.

Free school meals cannot and should not be produced from cheap, substandard ingredients. We have all seen pictures of frankly disgusting-looking school meals in some of our national papers. Although Jamie Oliver has pushed the Government to improve the nutritional quality of our school meals, there is still more work to be done, but I am afraid that the root of these problems is money. I appreciate that there are some hon. Members in this place who think it is possible to provide a meal for an entire family for just 30p a day, but those of us living in the real world are aware that food inflation has been particularly pernicious. We all know that funding for free school meals has not kept up with inflation. The national funding formula value for free school meals in the 2023-24 financial year is £480 per pupil—up just £10 from the previous year—yet food prices have risen by 15%.

Funding increases for universal infant free school meals would have been laughable had the matter not been so serious. The increases have been pitiful. In 2020,

the funding rate for universal infant free school meals was increased by just 7p per pupil, and that increase was only the second since the policy was first introduced in 2014. The first increase was just 4p; overall, that is an increase of just 11p in universal infant free school meals since 2014. The economy has taken a hammering and inflation has been sky high, but infant free school meals have got just 11p—not even enough for a lettuce. The resulting shortfalls and cuts to other parts of the school budget mean that children are losing out, or higher prices are being paid by parents of junior pupils who pay for their meals.

Finally, I pay tribute to the successful campaign led by my constituent Natalie Hay on changing free school meal guidance for disabled children, who have been let down. They have often been excluded from free school meal provision because they cannot physically attend school. They may be waiting for a placement at a specialist school or may not be able to eat the school meal provided due to dietary requirements or sensory processing difficulties. Instead of getting a supermarket voucher so that an alternative meal can be provided, these children are often forgotten. Thanks to Natalie's tenacity in fighting the system, with the support of the charity Contact and CrowdJustice, the legal guidance in this area has gone from just three pages to 19, including food vouchers as an acceptable adjustment. I hope that other families will not face the same prejudice and discrimination that Natalie and her son did.

In conclusion, the Government's adviser on the national food strategy, Henry Dimbleby, said:

"Hungry children cannot learn and cannot thrive. It is unconscionable in 2022 that this situation has not yet been addressed."

We are now in 2024 and nothing has changed. Teachers are increasingly having to act as a fourth emergency service, consuming so much time, energy and resources dealing with these issues beyond the school gates, including hunger. Extending free school meals is one way that we can restore the support network around our young people by ensuring that they have at least one hot, cooked meal a day, giving them the energy to learn in the afternoon. No child should go hungry at school. The Liberal Democrats would extend free school meals, beginning with every child in poverty, to save parents money, encourage healthy eating and give children the energy to learn. It is a no-brainer.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): As quite a lot of Members wish to speak, the Front Benchers have kindly agreed to keep their contributions to eight minutes, which means that I can allow six minutes to Back-Bench Members. That is advisory, but please do not go over; if Members go over that limit, I will start to intervene to keep us to it.

4.43 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Betts, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the debate.

I believe that access to sufficient, nutritious food is a basic right. It is essential to the development and growth of our children—our future generations—and the provision of free school meals is fundamentally important to that. Guaranteeing children at least one hot, healthy meal a

day is a vital way of enabling young people to develop, and there is strong evidence that it improves their health and wellbeing, their academic performance and our economic prosperity as a country. The Government like to say that they have increased free school meal provision, but the low household income threshold of £7,400 means that close to 1 million children living in poverty in England are not eligible for the Government's free school meals scheme. Furthermore, as the National Education Union highlights, the divisions inherent in a means-tested system mean that stigma remains a barrier to accessing free school meals, even for parents who are aware of their children's entitlement. It has been estimated that as many as 215,000 eligible children missed out in 2020. As well as being in the interests of children and their families, expanding free school meal provision makes sense economically. Research conducted by PwC has found that expanding free school meal eligibility in line with universal credit has economic benefits.

I am proud to say that in Wales we are leading the way in many regards—alongside the other devolved nations, I hasten to add. I have been fortunate to be involved in a grassroots campaign that has led to free school meals being provided in all primary schools in Wales. That is part of the co-operation agreement between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru. As of last month, all primary school children in Wales, including in my constituency of Cynon Valley, are receiving free school meals.

It is time for England to catch up. I commend the campaign work that the Food Foundation has done through its Nourishing the Nation campaign. I also commend the NEU's Free School Meals for All campaign. I thank them for their briefings ahead of the debate today. England can start to catch up with Wales by ensuring that at least the 900,000 children living in poverty who do not have access to free school meals can have that.

We can do a lot more, including in Wales, and I want to mention the excellent work that the Bevan Foundation has recently been doing on provision for those currently subject to no recourse to public funds. Eligibility assessments for children rely on receipt of benefits that parents subject to no recourse conditions cannot access, so Welsh Government guidance encourages local authorities to exercise their discretion where children are affected by no recourse. However, many children from low-income households are not entitled to free school meals, so the Bevan Foundation recommends that the Welsh Government introduce automatic eligibility for free school meals for those children, and England should be doing that as well.

To go further, I passionately believe that free school meals should be an entitlement for all children and young people. I started by saying that access to sufficient nutritious food is a basic right, so ensuring that every woman, man and child has a right to nutritious food should be enshrined in law.

I want to finish by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and thanking him for the sterling work that he is doing. My colleague and friend is working tirelessly in demanding that the right to food be enshrined in law, and I am pleased that I am able to support that. We can afford it. We are the fifth—the fifth—richest nation in the world and we could introduce a wealth tax and end tax evasion and avoidance by the rich.

There is another way, and we have to start getting our priorities right as a country. I am determined to continue to work in collaboration with colleagues in this House but also, crucially, with grassroots organisations and individuals to end the scourge of child poverty.

4.49 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, am very pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this very welcome debate.

In 2022-23, 30% of children were in poverty after housing costs. That is 4.3 million children, the highest number since 1998-99, reversing all the progress that had been made in the years following that time. The Government's family resources survey found that one 10th of all households and 15% of households with children were food insecure; that is the Government's own data. The Food Foundation has been mentioned by both previous speakers. Using a different methodology, taken from the USA's food security survey model, it found that 17% of all households and 23.4% of households with children were either moderately or severely food insecure in June 2023. Those figures make it absolutely clear that child poverty in the UK is much too high. We are limiting our future potential by keeping it at this high level. The most immediate benefit of free school meals is tackling the scourge of child poverty.

As we have heard, according to the Child Poverty Action Group, a third of school-age children in poverty are missing out on free school meals at the moment. Free school meals are provided to children with parents in receipt of a number of benefits, most importantly universal credit, but only if their household income is less than £7,400 a year. That threshold has not been uprated in six years. I would be grateful if the Minister would comment on that, because it ought to be uprated annually, along with other benefits. The Government estimate that, once other social security income is considered, the threshold equates to a total household income for those families of around £18,000 to £24,000, but that is below what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that a single person needs for a minimum acceptable living standard, let alone a couple with children.

We have heard about the cost-benefit analysis produced by PwC on extending free school meals to all those who claim universal credit. The analysis took account of research from Sweden to the Department for Education, and from the Association for Young People's Health to Ofsted, showing that free school meals reduce obesity and absenteeism, improve academic attainment and raise lifetime earnings. Those are all advantages that we need to capture.

The hon. Member for Twickenham referred to the 2009 pilot in the London Borough of Newham. I am pleased to be one of the Members of Parliament who represent that borough, and I am glad to see my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) in her place today. The assessment of the pilot showed that it led to improvements in classroom behaviour, concentration and attainment. Parents also reported that their children were more willing to eat healthily at home. I am pleased to say that Newham has continued to provide free school meals to all primary school pupils ever since, defying waves of Government austerity in the last 15 years. I want to pay tribute to the impressive commitment of

[Sir Stephen Timms]

my colleagues on Newham Council to maintaining that very important provision. I also pay tribute to Juniper, the council-owned company that provides the meals and is very well-known to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who works with it each year at a free school meals event.

Last year the Mayor of London provided funding to help all London boroughs follow suit, and I very much applaud that decision. It is a very popular policy and no doubt one of the reasons for his welcome re-election last week. Now that he has been re-elected, provision across London is thankfully secure for the next four years. Richard Parker and Kim McGuinness, the new Mayors in the West Midlands and the North East, have committed to moving in that direction too.

Free school meals help alleviate poverty and improve children's health and educational attainment. Let us use this lever much more widely to tackle the scourge of child poverty.

4.54 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the work they do in this area.

Newham has been a pioneer in universal free school meals for over a decade now, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) has described. As has been mentioned, 900,000 children in England live in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals. Many of those children may well live in Newham, but thankfully at primary schools in our area they receive that important hot and healthy meal, even though the Government's criteria seems to suggest that they do not deserve it. I continue to believe that our local universal free school meal offer is so important for child welfare because so many families in our communities are enduring hardship, thanks to incomes that simply do not pay the bills and a massive shortage of decent affordable homes.

We have the second highest child poverty rate in the country and the highest homelessness rate. More than 8,500 children in Newham are growing up in temporary accommodation, which is often damp, cold and mouldy—awful conditions. Last week, we learned that across the country that statistic has risen by 15%. Our families, whether they are technically in poverty or not, and whether they can pay their rent or are struggling to do so, have been massively impacted by the cost of living crisis over the past years. That has increased child hunger and stress caused by financial worries to simply appalling levels. The rise in child hardship and child homelessness makes that one free school meal a day all the more essential—sometimes it is that child's only meal.

Teachers I speak to locally tell me ever-worse stories of how children are coming in hungry day after day and the strategies the children use to hide it. A hot decent lunch is a lifeline that helps children concentrate. It makes school the haven it should be, away from the stress and worry that often awaits them at home. But rising homelessness costs to the council create risk for Newham's new universal free school meal programme.

Without support, it could become less and less affordable, even as the need for it grows higher and higher. That is because just a fraction of free school meals in Newham are paid for by this Government, who have done so much to increase need by driving down council funding, eroding our stock of social homes and cutting family incomes from social security.

Our Newham programme has always been paid for by local people through our council budget and, in recent years, by our Mayor of London. Thankfully, that should continue following Sadiq Khan's victory at the weekend, which ended the financial threat posed by the Conservative candidate. For Newham, widening national eligibility for free school meals would have a double impact on child poverty: it would free up resources to meet the wider needs, including those that have been caused by homelessness. The council and now the Mayor of London would save £6 million a year, which could be reinvested in other services if the free school meals programme was fully funded by the Government.

Healthy free school meals impact on many aspects of our children's lives and on their opportunities. A University of Essex study, which included Newham, found that families receiving free school meals were saving £37 a month per child and that childhood obesity was reduced by 9.3% for children of reception age. That is obviously important for protecting children's lifelong health and for reducing costs to the NHS for decades to come, particularly in Newham where almost 30% of year 6 children are affected by obesity.

Even small expansions in eligibility for free school meals are estimated to have economic, social and health benefits. A £1 investment has been found to recoup £1.38 in returns from higher educational achievement, savings to school budgets and reduced NHS costs from obesity. Ultimately, this is a debate about whether we have a Government that are willing to take a long-term view and make an investment in our children that would more than pay for itself in the coming years. Surely that is the kind of investment we need to build a fairer, healthier and more prosperous future for Newham and all our communities.

4.59 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in the debate as a former recipient of free school meals. I know how important they are to support learning and attainment for children. I am extremely proud that in Scotland we have the most generous free school meal provision anywhere in the UK by some significant distance, with universal provision for all pupils in primary 1 to 5 and eligible pupils who are older. Last year, free school meal provision helped feed 231,967 children. With 29% of children in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran living in poverty, free school meals could not matter more.

Despite our progress, however, we in Scotland are not content. We are going to expand free school meals to all primary children, and that is actively in the works. The Scottish Government is working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to prepare primary schools and their infrastructure for a full, universal roll-out of free school meals for all primary children, which should be completed in 2026. That is supported by £43 million in capital from the Scottish Government in 2024-25 and

an additional £6 million in resource spending, with local authorities benefiting from £21.7 million allocated to support eligible children during the school holidays. This support saves families £400 per year and far outstrips the free school meal offers in any other part of the UK. That matters, because hungry children do not learn. Ensuring that children receive a nutritious free school meal is therefore a fundamental part of supporting attainment. How could it not be?

By contrast, the incoming Labour Government have ruled out universal free school meals despite previous commitments to that, just as so many of Labour's commitments have been dropped the more certain it becomes of forming the next Government. You would not know this from the comments made today, but in a matter of months we can be pretty sure that there will be a Labour Government with a significant majority, and we know, because we have been told, that there will be no movement on free school meals.

The arguments that Labour Members have made today to the Minister would be better directed to their own leadership, which refuses to deliver on free school meals. Indeed, that reminds me of the debate we had after the UK Government's Budget, when Labour MP after Labour MP condemned the Budget and then refused to vote against it. I think that may be what some people call gaslighting.

We cannot leave the matter there because, in a somewhat grotesque development, we have the incoming Labour Government committing to leaving bankers' bonuses uncapped. That appears to be sacrosanct. So, we appear to be balancing children's hunger against rich bankers' bonuses, and that, for the new Labour Government, which we can be pretty sure will be arriving, seems to be the way things are going to be. It seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Meanwhile in Scotland, we have a Scottish child payment of £26.70 per week per child for the poorest children. The cumulative impact of that, alongside other policies such as free school meals, seems to have reduced child poverty by 10% from what it would otherwise be. In other words, 10% of those children have not fallen into relative poverty as a direct result of those policies. Indeed, the Child Poverty Action Group referred to the Scottish child payment as "a game changer" when it comes to tackling child poverty.

One of the basic tasks of the state is to ensure that every child has access to opportunity, regardless of their family circumstances. Tackling child poverty and child hunger is a fundamental of that. We know that Labour speak with forked tongue on this issue, and frequently so in Scotland. The reality is that when it comes to supporting redistributive policies designed to create a fairer, more equal Scotland, the Labour party in Scotland continues to ape and mimic the lines from Labour in Westminster and fulfil its role as a branch office.

Austerity hits children hardest. People do not like to talk about this, but we suffered austerity under the previous Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and that has only been continued under the Tory Government. We know that it will be embraced yet again by the incoming UK Labour Government. There is no respite from austerity when Westminster is a parcel that is passed between two parties devoid of any so-called vision beyond austerity.

Scotland's children are faring better because the SNP Scottish Government choose to use their power to support them, and to govern is to choose. Sadly, neither of the Westminster parties today will choose universal free school meals for children. I am proud that in Scotland we are making a different choice for children in Scotland. I fear for the children in England.

5.5 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I want to thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing today's debate and for her excellent opening speech setting the scene. The topic of school food—and specifically free school meals—has been an incredibly important one for me throughout my parliamentary career. In fact, I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food, which I set up in 2010, and I am pleased to say that a number of colleagues here today are also very important members.

As we have heard, in the UK our devolved nations each have their own individual free school meal offers. In Scotland, all primary school children, regardless of family income, are eligible for free school meals and all secondary school students are subject to a means-tested offer. In Wales, all children who attend mainstream primary schools are eligible for a free school meal. In Northern Ireland there is no universal offer; however, the eligibility criteria for the means-tested offer includes families with an annual taxable income of up to £16,190 or net earnings of under £14,000 a year, which is almost twice as high as the same offer in England, and means that around 30% of the entire school population are eligible. The levels of poverty across the north-east, and indeed in other parts of England, are the same as in Northern Ireland, and yet such different levels of means-testing are used. That is just unfair.

In England, all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 currently receive a hot, healthy meal each day. Universal infant free school meals is a policy I am very proud of, having worked with Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent on the school food plan that helped convince them to put universal primary free school meals as one of their recommendations, which, as we heard, the former Deputy Prime Minister then enacted when they were in the coalition Government, which I think we are all very happy still exists to this day—the free school meals, not the coalition Government! However, from year 3 onwards, provision of free school meals is means-tested. Only children in households in England who receive universal credit and earn less than £7,400—excluding benefit payments—are eligible for free school meals. On that note, in today's short speech I will focus on how we must change the policy in England. For too long, England has been the poor relation. It is just not good enough. We have the least generous offers around school food, and the highest rates of children in poverty who are ineligible for free school meals.

We must also think about the quality of the food that we are providing to our students. The school food standards are a fantastic set of regulations that provide guidance on the nutritional quality and variety of food that children should have access to at school. When they are followed correctly, the school meal offers are some of the best in the world, and I work with

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

parliamentarians around the world, so I speak with some authority on this. However, sadly some schools struggle to do so, and they need support. In England there is no consistent assessment, monitoring or reporting of whether schools are meeting the standards for school food. There is no ring-fencing of funding, either. This means that the quality is very variable, with some children benefiting from nutritious, delicious food while others receive lower-quality meals.

We must discuss the structural issues surrounding provision that make delivering school meals unsustainable. For example, as has been talked about already, the funding per meal for universal infant free school meals is far too low. It is just £2.53 across most of England, despite the average meal cost exceeding this. The funding must be raised to £3 per meal to adequately cover the cost of the ingredients and the labour costs for school food. We all eat in restaurants; we know the prices have gone up. Schools are being asked to do an impossible thing at the moment. The rising cost of these meals and the dwindling funding means that, inevitably, quality is going to slip.

We need to revolutionise eligibility. I truly believe that the best school meal offer is a universal free school meal offer, as we have seen with the triumph of Mayor Sadiq Khan's universal free school meal offer for primary school children in London. It seems popular as well—I think he won, didn't he? But I understand that the road to a universal offer is a journey. That is why I am calling on the Government to, without delay, expand eligibility to all children whose parents and carers receive universal credit, so that we can begin to tackle the horrifying reality that, as we have heard, 900,000 children living in poverty are currently ineligible, according to the Child Poverty Action Group.

The next step on this road is to implement automatic enrolment as soon as possible. Local authorities like Sheffield are leading the way on this already, and prove it works. Every eligible child should be eligible from day one. This is not an expensive change. The Government already know exactly who is eligible and who is not, so families should not need to apply. It needs to be automatic from when the child is enrolled in school, or when their circumstances change. That will help schools too because they will get extra pupil premium, and that can then unlock access to resources and support as well as a hot meal for these children.

Free school meals are foundational to a fair and equal school experience. When we provide them, they leave inequality at the school gate and liberate children from the injustice of the haves and the have-nots.

5.11 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. Thank you to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important debate. I echo her praise for the fantastic campaign victory of Natalie Hay and Contact, for disabled children, their parents and guardians.

I start by sharing the words of the children of Monksdown Primary School in West Derby, who wrote to the Prime Minister last year to ask him to offer free school meals for all pupils. One pupil wrote:

I am writing to you because I believe all children deserve free school meals. The inflation over the past few months means some people have been starving at school because of the cost of living...so some parents have not had enough to get school meals."

Another pupil wrote:

"Parents might not have the money to pay for food for you. If your brain is hungry, you will feel unhappy and tired."

Another pupil wrote:

"We don't have a choice to go to school because it's the law but we have to pay for lunch."

Adam Gidwitz once wrote:

"There is a wisdom in children, a kind of knowing, a kind of believing, that we, as adults, do not have."

It has been almost a year since the children wrote to the Prime Minister, who unfortunately does not have that wisdom. Imagine the difference that would have made for families with their children's education, health and happiness if he had listened to the children at our primary and introduced free school meals like they asked.

Last year, over 4 million children experienced food insecurity, not having access to nutritious and balanced meals or having to skip meals. That includes many thousands in my constituency, where the relative child poverty rate is significantly higher than national averages and where, as a city, one in three people are in food poverty. This is devastating for children and families in West Derby and Liverpool, including the many who are hungry and do not fall beneath the Government's restrictively-low household income threshold of £7,400 to be eligible for free school meals. They are among the 900,000 children nationally who are below the poverty line yet still do not qualify.

It is imperative that the Government and politicians understand that children are going to school hungry as a result of the political choices made in this place. The evidence is clear. We do need universal provision: a nutritious free school breakfast and lunch provided to all primary and secondary school children as a necessity, as an investment in the future of our children, who are the future of our country. That is what it is—an investment. It should not be seen as a cost.

The right political choices cannot wait a moment longer. Universal free school meals would improve attainment and reduce pressure on teachers, parents and the NHS, and evidence has shown they could help drive local economies. Findings from the Government's own pilot noted improved academic attainment, with children making between four and eight weeks' more progress in maths and English. The statistics are astounding. Crucially, universal provision removes all stigma from school food and ensures that all children, regardless of their economic circumstances, have an equal opportunity to thrive and be healthy. Surely that is what we all want in this place.

The Government's own former adviser, Henry Dimbleby, wrote:

"When children sit down to eat with friends and teachers in a civilised environment, it cements relationships, helps them to develop social skills and reinforces positive behaviour throughout the day."

Backing that up, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs heard powerful evidence, including from the United Nations special rapporteur on the right

to food, about the benefits, and that such investment would more than pay for itself in the long run. This has been touched on, but it is important to reinforce that it would pay for itself.

PwC's cost-benefit analysis of universal free school meals showed the undeniable societal and economic benefits. It calculated that if this Government or future Governments made the investment, the "core benefits" over 20 years of providing universal free school meals would be worth £41.3 billion, compared with a total cost of £24.1 billion. It is an absolute no-brainer, regardless of where anyone sits ideologically.

We need political leadership to guarantee and realise all our children's right to healthy food. Well done to Sadiq Khan for showing us an example of that leadership in London—it is interesting what popularity it produced. We all knew that—we have been saying it for a long time—and it is great to see the new Mayors who have been elected taking it up. If we accept the universal and compulsory requirement that all children up to the age of 16 must be in school, why do we break the principle of universal care, nurturing and protection in relation to meals during the school day? We would think it absurd for children not to be provided with adequate shelter, heating, drinking water or sanitary provision while in school, so why do we take a different approach to the equally essential element of food?

I pay tribute to all the parents, educators and pupils in West Derby—and MPs—who have been fighting this good fight for a long time. Those good friends, and campaigners and trade unions right across the country, have been campaigning tirelessly for the expansion of free school meals, which is a fundamental part of our Right to Food campaign. Political choices define our time in this place, and I implore the Minister to listen and to make the right political choice by investing in universal free school meals for every child in this country.

5.16 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

We have heard how 900,000 children from low-income families are not in receipt of free school meals and about the adequacy of what many children are receiving, not least if they take a packed lunch—they are not being nutritiously fed throughout the day. In fact, only 1% of packed lunches reach nutritional standards. In York, that is very much the case. We have about 4,000 children who are entitled to be in receipt of free school meals, but only about 3,000—about 75%—actually receiving them, because we do not have auto-enrolment. I urge the Government to join up the data so that we see eligibility following through to receipt of free school meals. It can be done, it must be done, and it will ensure that those families are well served.

I want to talk in particular about York Hungry Minds. York has the lowest-funded upper-tier local authority in the country, yet, as a Right to Food city, it prioritised feeding hungry children when Labour came to power in the council last May. City of York Council put the first £100,000 into Two Ridings Community Foundation as a vehicle for sourcing and independently funding the programme. It then called for city partners, including in industry and business, as well as individuals from the community, to boost that fund.

The pilot that York is engaged in is based in two schools: Westfield, where there are already far better healthy lunch choices for the children at key stage 2; and Burton Green, which is investing in breakfast for children. The results are already incredible. Starting in January this year, the research piece by the University of York will follow the pilot through to the end of the year. Researchers are already seeing an improvement in attendance—an issue that the Government are wrestling with at the moment—and far better engagement in learning. These are the early seeds of what it means to have a full stomach and to be able to work in such an environment.

I really do congratulate those involved in the project, but we need to ensure that the funding continues and is available for roll-out across our city. That is certainly the ambition of the Labour council, but we need the support of Government. I am delighted that Labour is so committed to ensuring that children start the day with a full stomach. We know the difference that will make for them.

This is not just about what happens for a child in school; it is about resetting the life course inequality that we see across our society. We want to address that by ensuring that children are well fed. That inequality results in differentiations in exam results, in where children move on to, and ultimately in the career choices that they can make and in their incomes. If we are to break intergenerational inequality, that small measure of having high-value, highly nutritious meals at the start of the day—and, I trust, rolling into the middle of the day too—is so important. That can be the game changer that families need.

However, we need to evaluate as we go, and that is why I congratulate the University of York on its investment in not only the project that I described but in looking at child hunger. It is evaluating the difference that the project will make to the lives of those children by looking at how much healthy food is going to them as a result of the menu choices; by looking at the amount of food waste, which is another important factor; and by looking at any changes in readiness to learn, in absence due to ill health or in school attendance. Looking at the data, which I trust the Minister will do, will strengthen the opportunity to roll out these programmes.

It is also important that the programme looks at the stigma around the provision of free school meals. We must remember that no child wants to be differentiated because of the income level or socioeconomic disadvantage their family experiences.

Mrs Hodgson: One of the reasons that John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby, who authored the school food plan, said that they included recommendation 17 on universal free primary school meals is that, when they looked at the evidence, the children who improved the most when all the boats rose were those who were already entitled to free school meals. The only thing that had been removed was the stigma. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is very important?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend knows so much about this subject and could not make a more powerful point. We need all young people who have hungry stomachs to be able to engage, and taking away the stigma not only gives those children confidence but ensures that the issue of hunger is addressed.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

I would like to quickly reinforce some of the points that colleagues have made. It is important that we make sure that thresholds rise and are appropriate, and it is important that people can enrol in the holiday activities fund if their eligibility changes over the holiday period, rather than having to wait until the beginning of the new year. It is possible to do that, and I trust that the Minister will.

5.23 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for bringing this important debate to the House.

I want to declare an interest from the very beginning: I was on free school meals for quite some time as a young lad. With my four brothers, that was five of us all on free school meals for quite some time. We had a very difficult experience. As most speakers have mentioned, there is a stigma attached to free school meals, and we suffered that stigma. However, we lived in a very socially deprived area where the vast majority of people were on free school meals.

It was a terrible situation, but it is not until we grow older and get wiser that we begin to understand what actually happened when we were in that sort of position. We did not argue about what was relative poverty, what was abject poverty and what was absolute poverty. We knew we were hungry, but we did not argue about how hungry we were, and we did not quote politicians and say, “Well, it’s not as bad as it was last year under this Government. It’s not as bad as what it could be, and it’s not absolute poverty.” We were hungry.

If parents who are working have to use a food bank to put food on the table, what does that say for a nation like the UK? The top 1% of people in this country own as much as the bottom 50%. That is the problem: where the wealth of this nation is. Food poverty, child poverty, pensioner poverty—whatever we want to call these issues—are political choices. There is no doubt about that—they are political choices. If we want to feed the kids, we can feed the kids. If it means something else has got to stop, let it stop, and let us feed the kids.

I went to a school in my constituency a while ago—I have mentioned it before. The headteacher was slightly late. He came in and said, “I’m sorry, Mr Lavery. I’ve just had to send a little boy home. I’ve had to exclude him.” This was a child at a first school. I said, “Oh, what’s the problem?” He said, “Well, he went missing. He said, ‘I’m away to the toilet’—he put his hand up, went to the toilet—and didn’t come back.” So they went looking for this little lad. They found him in the cloakroom. He had been in people’s satchels. He had a sandwich in his hand that he had stolen from somebody’s bag. This was a four-year-old kid, who was that hungry he had to steal sandwiches from somebody else. This is 2024, in one of the richest countries in the world—one of the richest countries on this planet—and we have situations like that occurring in schools not just in my constituency but up and down the country.

We have choices to make. Do we want to feed the kids? Are we going to keep debating across this Chamber how many people are in this type of poverty or that type of poverty, and what improvements have been made? If

one kid in this country has not got the opportunity for a hot, nutritious meal every day, there is something sadly wrong with this country. It is as simple as that.

We can say what we want, but everyone in here, every MP in this House of Commons and every Member of the Lords—we can all afford as much food as we can eat. That does not mean that we should ignore what is happening out there. Universal free school meals would be very important to kids and very important to the nation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) said, it is an investment in the nation rather than anything else.

I conclude simply by saying that if we, every Member of the House of Commons, cannot agree on that, then you know what? We should bolt the doors of this place, give out 650 redundancy notices and bulldoze this building into the Thames.

5.29 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and always an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this very important debate.

After 14 years of Conservative Government, a record number of children in Coventry South and across the country are growing up in poverty, arriving at school hungry in the morning and going to bed hungry at night. In the west midlands, 11 children in every class of 30 are living in poverty. Due to the strict eligibility criteria for free school meals, by which families have to earn less than £7,400 a year to qualify, across the country nearly 1 million children in poverty are missing out.

We have all heard horror stories like the one we just heard—pupils turning up to school with just mouldy bread or a packet of crisps for lunch, or sometimes with nothing at all; kids bursting into tears because they are worried that there is no food at home, or stealing bagels from breakfast club or from their friends’ satchels just to get by. That is why, along with trade unions and other anti-poverty groups, I have long campaigned for universal free school meals for primary school children, so that every child in primary school throughout the country is given a warm, healthy lunch each day, and no-one is left learning on an empty stomach.

The benefits of this policy are clear. Research shows that free school meals boost children’s concentration, behaviour and attainment. They also have health benefits, improving nutrition and reducing obesity. It is also a great help to families, saving parents’ time and relieving financial pressure. As has been highlighted in this debate, it is important that free school meals are universal, giving all children the opportunity to eat, learn and grow together. Means-tested policies create stigma and they allow children to slip through the net. Too often, means-tested services are lower quality services, and services for the poor do indeed become poor services.

We see consensus growing on this issue, which is very welcome. In Wales and Scotland, all primary school children are set to receive a free, warm, healthy lunch each day. It is about time England did the same.

In last week’s elections, mayoral candidates up and down the country campaigned and were elected on a platform of supporting free school meals for all primary

school kids. In London, Sadiq Khan has already made this a reality and now pledges to make it permanent with funding from his mayoral budget. Mayors including Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, newly elected Richard Parker in the West Midlands and Kim McGuinness in the North East are calling on the Government to give them the funding they need to deliver it too. They know that this policy makes common sense and they know it is popular too, with 75% of parents supporting universal free school meals for primary school kids. That is why they have won their elections. Is it not time that this Government took a leaf out of the book of Khan, Burnham, Parker and McGuinness, and instead of ignoring children in poverty and resorting to desperate attacks on minorities to distract from their own failings, they start to deliver the popular, unifying, anti-poverty policies our communities need, starting off with universal free school meals for primary school children?

Mr Betts: I thank all colleagues for being so co-operative in terms of the time. I will call the Front Benchers now, starting with the Scottish National party spokesperson.

5.32 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham on bringing this debate forward. I think everybody here understands the importance of children being well fed in order to learn well. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), I was a teacher for over 20 years. We understood the difference it made to have children in front of us who actually had food in their stomachs.

Child Poverty Action Group figures show that child poverty is at a record high in the UK, with 30% of all children living in poverty. Significantly, 69% of these children are from working families. The issue around universal credit and eligibility has been brought up by a number of Members, notably the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). Families on universal credit are eligible only if their after-tax income is less than £7,400 a year. I wonder if any of us could get by on such a small amount. The problem with a borderline like that is that those who are just on the wrong side of it tend to be impacted the most harshly. The harsh means-testing in England, which the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) referred to, means that many children are struggling to learn and to get by, even though their parents are in work.

The problem of stigma was brought up by the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter). Stigma is always associated with means-testing for free school meals. In Scotland, it was important to us to have a universal policy for all children in primary school. At the moment it has been rolled out from P1 to P5, but as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran pointed out, it will be rolled out further over the next two years.

Scotland has the most generous free school meals offer of any UK nation. It saves parents and families around £400 per child per year, but it is not just about the money. It is about the value and importance that we place on children. In Scotland, children are seen as an asset, not an inconvenience. That starts from the very

moment that parents are expecting a child. They get a baby box with books and various lovely things to give them a great start. Then we have the Scottish child payment of £26.70 for every eligible child in Scotland, which has been described by the Trussell Trust as game-changing and has seen food bank use reduced dramatically. That is how we make a difference to child poverty.

Of course, those policies can go only a small way towards tackling the cost of living crisis, but they are part of the big picture. I was moved by the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) talking about his personal experience. He also talked about political choices, and this is indeed about political choices. I found myself nodding along and agreeing with Labour colleagues, but they need to take that to their leadership, because the party cannot have the policy in its manifesto in 2019 and then drop it for the next election. If the Labour party is in government after the election, I hope that Labour colleagues keep up the pressure on their own leadership.

The benefits of free school meals were highlighted when we heard about increased attainment, increased pupil scores and increased cognitive ability. Free school meals also increase school attendance, because it encourages parents to get their children to school if they know that they will get a meal. The hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) talked about the benefits of that. I was pleased to read that free school meals also reduce obesity. We know that childhood obesity carries health problems on into adulthood, which has economic problems for us down the road, so it is worthwhile investing at this point.

Some 80% of the public support free school meals for children in households receiving universal credit. At its annual conference this month, The National Association of Head Teachers called for children to get free school meals automatically if their families are eligible for universal credit. James Bowen, the assistant general secretary, said:

"I think it's an absolute no brainer."

I agree.

5.38 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate on an issue that affects so many of the poorest and most vulnerable children in our country.

We have heard powerful speeches from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), and my hon. Friends the Members for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for West Ham (Ms Brown), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana). They all touched on the impact of the cost of living crisis on families in their areas, the shocking levels of child poverty, which is a scourge on our society, and the rampant inequality in our communities, which is holding our country back.

The cost of living crisis is making more and more families worry about how to make ends meet. Energy bills, rent, and the cost of clothes and basic essentials

[Catherine McKinnell]

are leaving far too many children going hungry. School leaders, teachers and support staff are increasingly bringing food and supplies into schools and even washing uniforms to ensure that children have what they need and are ready to learn. In 2024 it is a national scandal.

Currently around 2 million pupils are known to be eligible for free school meals. The eligibility rate has increased sharply in the last few years—an indication not of the Government's generosity but of appalling economic failure—and now represents around a quarter of children attending state schools. There are significant regional variations: in my local authority of Newcastle, 39.6% of children are eligible; in Wokingham, fewer than one in 10 are. Labour in government will focus on lifting those children and their families out of poverty, making sure that families have the dignity and peace of mind to be able to provide for their families.

An important first step towards that will be Labour's plan to fund free breakfast clubs in every primary school, paid for by clamping down on tax avoidance and closing the tax loopholes in the Tories' non-dom plan. It will give all primary school children not only a healthy start to the morning, but additional time in school to play, socialise and be ready for the school day, because it really is as much about the club as it is about the breakfast. Crucially, it will also help parents to save money on childcare. It will put money back in parents' pockets directly and give parents greater flexibility at work so they can earn more for their families.

With clear evidence that our breakfast clubs would also improve children's attendance and attainment, they will be central to our determined drive to narrow the attainment gap as well as tackle child poverty. We are prioritising breakfast clubs and have a plan to fund them at a cost of £365 million a year, which includes Barnett funding to the devolved Administrations.

In a report last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies argued that making free school meals universal for all primary school pupils would cost £1 billion a year; offering them to all children from reception through to year 11 would cost £2.5 billion a year. In the current economic environment, we must focus on more targeted measures.

The Conservative Government have done precious little for children from the poorest families. The failure to develop a good childcare and early years support system means that children eligible for free school meals are already five months behind their peers by the time they start school. Once in school, the attainment gap between children on free schools meals and their peers is the widest it has been for a decade. That is why Labour has committed to ensuring that inclusivity is a new focus for Ofsted, ensuring that inspections look at how schools support the attainment and inclusion of pupils eligible for free school meals, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, to ensure that they do what they can to break down the barriers to opportunity.

Patricia Gibson: Does the hon. Lady agree with me that one aspect of inclusivity is universalism when it comes to free school meals? She is quite rightly talking up the benefits of breakfast clubs and the importance of children starting the day not feeling hungry, but does

she share my view that feeling hungry after lunchtime, if they have not had a lunch, is also a problem, and some children will miss out unless free school meals are universal?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes. I have focused on the role that Ofsted should have in ensuring inclusivity for children who are eligible for free school meals, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, but the focus of Labour's policies is to put money back into parents' and families' pockets, so that we can break down the barriers to opportunity that far too many people in this country face.

I also want to comment on the quality and, in some cases, quantity of school food, as I know that concern is also expressed up and down the country. The Government produce guidance on school food that looks at issues such as foods high in fat, sugar and salt, healthy drinks and starchy foods. However, there are still concerns around schools and the quality of school food, and there is an evident need to ensure that all schools and food suppliers are ensuring that the highest standards of school food are in place. Especially considering our breakfast clubs policy, Labour would look at the guidance for school food again to ensure that they truly deliver the healthy start to the school day that we know children need.

I thank every Member who has contributed to today's debate and assure them that the next Labour Government will be committed to reducing child poverty, which is a blight on our society that must be urgently addressed.

Munira Wilson: Breakfast clubs are a lovely idea, but does the hon. Lady recognise that, as a number of colleagues have said, many children live in temporary accommodation, have an extremely long journey to school and often miss breakfast, and will therefore lose out altogether? She talked about targeted intervention, so why would her colleagues in the other place not support the Liberal Democrat amendment to make sure that every child on universal credit got access to a free school meal, or, at the very least, Henry Dimbleby's recommendation of raising the threshold to £20,000?

Catherine McKinnell: The breakfast club offer, which we have fully costed and will deliver, is a first step on the road to making sure that we put money back into people's pockets, break down the barriers to opportunity and deliver a cross-Government strategy to tackle child poverty. Free breakfast clubs are the first step on that road.

However, we also want to see the costs of uniforms come down for all families. We want to give children the best start in life to set them up for life and set them up to learn. As the hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out herself, after 14 years of Conservative Government we have a situation where an average of nine children in a classroom of 30 are growing up in poverty. That is why we will introduce a cross-Government taskforce aimed at breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child in every community. We will focus the limited resources we are set to inherit where we believe they can impact the most.

Mrs Hodgson: I will be very brief; I think my hon. Friend is just coming to her big wind-up moment. I know she is in an invidious position—an impossible position. I am sure that, like the rest of us, she would

like to stand here and announce universal free school meals, and obviously she cannot, because that is not in her gift today.

One thing that I notice has not been raised at all today—I know she will be concerned about it and could take this back to the Front Bench when they are developing policy—is the issue of dinner money debt. She talked about putting money back into parents' pockets, and there are so many families who struggle with dinner money debt. Universal free school meals would obviously solve that. When the policy is being developed and talked about, I hope she will feed that in.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is such a passionate campaigner for children in her area, and indeed the country. I did not want to let this moment pass without her getting the chance to add in that final additional measure that she would like to see.

I am conscious that the Government need to respond to this debate, so I do not want to take up any more time. I want to finish by emphasising that child poverty in this country is pernicious, but does not demand a simple fix. It needs hard work, focus and prioritisation across Government Departments. It needs a targeted approach to tackle the root causes of poverty and break down the barriers that are holding far too many people back. The next Labour Government will take on that mission, and like previous Labour Governments, we are determined to deliver on it.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I join colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this important debate. I thank everybody who has taken part alongside her: the hon. Members for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for West Ham (Ms Brown), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who spoke for the SNP, and the spokesperson for the official Opposition, whose speech contained a short section on free school meals. This is an important subject on which we have heard striking and compelling speeches from Members, and the debate has been important and useful.

The Government are determined to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has the best start in life, and nutrition and school meals are important in that. Not only do they support the development of healthy eating habits that can pave the way to lifelong wellbeing, but they help pupils to concentrate, to learn and to get the most from their education in the immediate term. For those reasons, the Department for Education spends more than £1.5 billion annually on policies to deliver free and nutritious food to children and young people; that is on food provision alone. On top of that, we allocate money to schools to support the education and opportunity of disadvantaged children that is driven by their free-school-meal status, such as through the pupil premium and the deprivation factor in the national funding formula.

I am proud that this Government have extended eligibility for free school meals more than any other. We spend over £1 billion per annum delivering free lunches to the greatest ever proportion of school children: over a third. That is in contrast to the one in six who were receiving a free school meal in 2010. This change is despite unemployment being down by a million, more than 600,000 fewer children being in workless households since 2010 and the proportion of people in low hourly pay having halved since 2015.

Mrs Hodgson: I just want to point out that that is, of course, because of the introduction of universal infant free school meals, which, it has to be said, was a coalition Government policy; the Conservatives cannot really take full credit for that because I doubt it would have happened without the coalition Government.

Damian Hinds: When the hon. Member for Twickenham was on her feet, she claimed that the 2014 Act was entirely due to the Liberal Democrats. Of course, it was not; it was a coalition Government at the time. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West is partly right. There have been multiple extensions to free school meal eligibility, including the provision of free school meals to disadvantaged children in further education colleges. The big factor has been the extension of protections under universal credit, which of course has happened since the coalition Government.

Sir Stephen Timms *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I want to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who speaks with great authority on these matters. I am worried about the time; if he is quick, I will be quick in response.

Sir Stephen Timms: Has the Minister thought about the prospect of uprating that £7,400-a-year income threshold for eligibility for free school meals?

Damian Hinds: The right hon. Gentleman has been in these positions himself, so he knows that, of course, we keep that under review. However, I gently point out that it has been under the current system that this much greater proportion of children and young people are eligible for free school meals than was the case when other Governments, including one of whom he was a very distinguished member, were in office.

Overall, more than 2 million pupils are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. In addition, as we have just been discussing, 1.3 million infants in reception, year 1 and year 2 get a free meal under the universal infant free school meals policy, which was introduced in 2014. Further to that, more than 90,000 disadvantaged students in further education receive a free meal at lunchtime. Together, this helps to improve the education of children and young people; it boosts their health and saves their parents considerable sums of money.

We have also introduced extensive protections, which have been in effect since 2018. They ensure that, while universal credit is being fully rolled out, any child eligible for free school meals will retain their entitlement and keep getting free meals until the end of the phase—in other words, until the end of primary or secondary—even if their family's income rises above the income threshold such that this would otherwise have stopped.

[*Damian Hinds*]

We all know the saying that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and the evidence does back that up. It shows that children who do not have breakfast are more likely to have issues with behaviour, wellbeing and learning. That is why we continue to support the provision of breakfast, by investing up to £40 million in the national school breakfast programme. The funding supports up to 2,700 schools in disadvantaged areas, and means that thousands of children from low-income families are offered a free, nutritious breakfast, to better support their attainment, wellbeing and readiness to learn. I say gently to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North that we think it is important to target that breakfast investment where it is most needed, which does not mean only in primary schools.

Ms Lyn Brown *rose—*

Damian Hinds: I am going to ask the hon. Lady to forgive me, because we have less than five minutes to go, and I must reach the conclusion.

Further to that, we recognise that nutrition does not cease to be an issue outside of term time, and that holiday periods can be particularly difficult for disadvantaged and low-income families. That is one reason why we continue to support the delivery of enriching activities and provision of nutritious food through the holiday activities and food programme. It has been backed by more than £200 million in funding, and now sees all 153 local authorities in England taking part.

The success of the programme is plain to see. Since 2022, it has provided 11.3 million HAF—holiday activities and food—days to children and young people in this country. Across 2023, more than 5 million HAF days were provided during Easter, summer and winter delivery. Based on reporting from local authorities, over winter 2023 more than 290,000 children attended the programme, of whom more than 263,000 were funded directly by the HAF programme and more than 229,000 received benefits-related free school meals. In response to the hon. Member for York Central, there is a degree of flexibility for individual school provision for eligibility for that facility.

The HAF programme brings me to this point, which the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North made in a different way. Of course, we have to see everything in the round—the full support given to families. In that context, the wider package of support, particularly for the cost of living difficulties the country has been through, is very relevant. That has been worth more than £100 billion over 2022-23 to 2024-25. It remains the case that pursuing policies that facilitate work and create jobs is the single most important poverty-tackling policy that a Government can have.

Colleagues, including the hon. Members for Twickenham and for Washington and Sunderland West, brought up the important question of auto-enrolment. We do want to make it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility and for families to apply. That is why we have the eligibility checking service. I am also aware of some of the innovative things local authorities are doing to look at auto-enrolment. We think there is merit in those projects, which we will look at closely. We know that historically it has not been straightforward to achieve auto-enrolment, but it is definitely something we want to study further and learn from.

I am running short of time, but the hon. Member for Twickenham asked about disability. We debated that subject in this Chamber a few weeks ago, with some of the colleagues here today, and that included reference to children receiving EOTAS: education otherwise than at school. I am pleased to reiterate that we have done what we committed to do: update guidance in that area, particularly regarding children with disabilities, to make clear the duty to make reasonable adjustments under relevant legislation.

I hope I have conveyed the extent of free-meal support currently in place under this Government, and how vital a role it plays, ensuring that the most disadvantaged children receive the nutrition they need to thrive. I again thank the hon. Member for Twickenham for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall today and all colleagues for taking part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the provision of free school meals.

A226 Galley Hill Road

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

6.1 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will call Gareth Johnson to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for repairs to the A226 Galley Hill Road.

This debate relates to the road named Galley Hill in my constituency of Dartford. It is part of the A226 route, often referred to as London Road, which runs from Dartford, through Gravesend—represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), who would also like to contribute to the debate—to the A2 in Rochester. It is a vital thoroughfare that is relied on by local residents, businesses and haulage serving the local community and beyond. On 10 April last year, a stretch of the road that sits on a chalk spine collapsed, taking the road, footpath and utilities down on to business premises, and rendering the road completely impassable. To understand what may have caused the collapse, it is necessary to look at the road's recent history.

In the September prior to the collapse, I met Kent County Council and Thames Water to discuss the road. A significant number of water leaks were taking place in London Road at the time, which was causing mayhem for people living in the area. At that meeting, I discovered that there had been no fewer than 47 serious water leaks in the previous four years, which is possibly the highest number of leaks on any stretch of road in the whole county of Kent. I do not know for certain whether the leaks caused the collapse of the road or whether the road itself was responsible for damaging the water pipes; that is an area of contention between Thames Water and KCC, and an issue that must be resolved to establish liability. I had hoped that they would resolve the issue of liability quickly; alas, they have not.

What we do know is that the road being closed for over a year has caused misery for people just trying to go about their daily business. Heavy goods vehicles have been using the narrow Swanscombe High Street; KCC has put in a temporary traffic order to stop them doing so, but that has not entirely solved the problems. A significant number of businesses in the area, on either side of Galley Hill, have seen their takings reduced because of the lengthy diversion to circumvent the collapsed road.

I met the previous Roads Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), to ask for his assistance and show him the road. He agreed, and came down to Galley Hill to have a look at the road and see the problem for himself. At that stage, it was hoped that liability could be established and that a contractor could get on with repairing or replacing the road. The current Minister, who is in his place, has met with me numerous times and with Kent County Council. I pay tribute to him for the keen interest he has shown in this issue and for trying to find a solution, which is typical of his attitude to such issues, and I am grateful to him for that. What we cannot have is for

nothing to happen while Kent County Council and Thames Water resolve their dispute. It is highly likely that one of them will have to pick up the bill, but the residents of Swanscombe, Greenhithe and Northfleet should not be held to ransom while that is decided.

Adding to the complication is the fact that, in order to survey the road to establish the cause of the collapse, Kent County Council has to enter private land. The road is adjacent to three separate plots of land, each with its own owner. Two of the owners have agreed to allow Kent County Council access, but one is refusing, making surveys almost impossible to carry out. I am pleased that Kent County Council has now agreed to take legal action to gain access, but I plead with it to hasten its approach to this issue. In short, Kent County Council needs to find out as quickly as possible what caused the collapse. Local Kent County councillor Peter Harman, from a residents' group, has been trying extremely hard to persuade the landowner to allow access but so far, unfortunately, to no avail.

I have secured this debate to formally ask the Government to step in to pay for the repair or replacement of the road while Kent County Council and Thames Water are arguing about liability. Whichever of them is liable can compensate the Government at a later date but, crucially, local residents would be able to see the prospect of an end to the misery they are suffering. I accept that the Government need to know what that liability is, so those surveys need to be carried out as soon as possible. The Government also need Kent County Council and Thames Water to agree to this course of action. My understanding—I will be corrected by the Minister during his speech if I have got this wrong—is that only Kent County Council has given its consent and that Thames Water has not responded to the Government. Just last week, I asked Thames Water for a meeting prior to this debate so that we could discuss the issues around liability and the way forward. I have had no response either from Thames Water, which is just not fair on local people, who are—we should not forget—its customers.

This is a very frustrating situation, and it has gone on for far too long. Kent County Council needs to carry out these surveys by legal action or otherwise. Thames Water needs to actually engage with people, and it cannot be surprised when people point the finger at it, given the history of leaks in the local area. I ask the Minister to do what he can to find a solution, and most importantly, for this road to be repaired or replaced so that local people can at last get their lives back.

6.8 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for getting this debate. This thing has been something of a nightmare for quite a few of my constituents, and it is ongoing as we have heard. I really apologise for my voice, and I will cut my speech slightly shorter.

I have received multiple complaints about the situation. This road is a very important part of our road network, and its closure puts a massive strain on the A2. Whenever there is a problem on the A2 or at the Dartford crossing, the absence of Galley Hill makes it impossible for local people to travel easily to and from Dartford. Bus users are particularly affected, and people travelling by bus from my constituency to the local acute hospital now

[Adam Holloway]

have their bus route split into two separate routes to cope with the congestion. Sometimes it also takes constituents up to half an hour to get out of Ebbsfleet International railway station car park, which more than doubles their journey time to London. The diversion for pedestrians and cyclists is also huge.

Getting the road open again is an absolute priority, and I am really grateful to the Minister and his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), for being so proactive on that. I know that his Department devolves transport matters to the local authorities, but it is vital that the Government step in when a local authority cannot reopen a road in a reasonable timeframe, as is the case here.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford suggested, the Government can and should act to get the road open again in a situation such as this, where there is a lack of clarity about liability and an impasse is created. The Government underwriting the works without waiting for legal disputes to be resolved would make a huge difference to businesses and residents in Dartford and Gravesham who rely on the road. It would be an excellent use of taxpayers' money, and the taxpayer would of course eventually get the money back through the water company or Kent County Council. I was going to speak about leaks, but to save hon. Members from having to listen to my awful voice, and because my hon. Friend has already mentioned them, I shall not.

I conclude by adding one more frustrating thing. Some of the problems that we have identified with traffic will remain even when Galley Hill Road reopens. That is because the Minister and his predecessors ignored my solution for the Dartford crossing, which was to have a long tunnel at Dartford for M25 long-term traffic and to use the infrastructure, bridge and tunnels that are already there for local traffic. The proposal from the Minister's Department for the lower Thames crossing will not solve the problem of the traffic in Dartford. My constituents and, more so, those living in Dartford will continue to be plagued by traffic problems because of that mistake.

Finally, I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford to pass on my thanks and my constituents' thanks to Councillor Harman for his efforts. I also thank the Minister, who has taken so seriously what is a relatively small thing in the scheme of things, given his huge portfolio, for so kindly engaging with us.

6.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) on securing the debate and speaking, notwithstanding what is clearly a pretty bad sore throat.

Let me start with one key point. At the end of his speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham said that this is a small matter inside the vast portfolio of the Department for Transport. It is not a small matter to the people of Swanscombe and the surrounding area; it is a massive issue. I accept that, I acknowledge it, and I appreciate it. All of us comprehend the scale of the problem. It is a bad day when Government in all their

glory—or not glory—start thinking, “Oh, this is too small for us to get involved.” I promise my hon. Friend, all colleagues and anybody who is watching or reading this debate that we take this seriously. We are here to help, and we believe that there are things we can do to facilitate a resolution. The Government's acceptance of this issue as significant—I put that on the record—is utterly vital. I give credit to both of my colleagues today and to Councillor Harman, who embodies the rich tradition of councillors who really get involved and go above and beyond to try to resolve local issues. Full credit to him.

I accept and acknowledge that Kent County Council has a difficult job. In the time that I have, I will try to both assess and analyse the extent of the difficulty and explain some of the causation of the ongoing problems and show some sort of light at the end of the tunnel we all face. In the first instance, what can the Department for Transport do? The first key point that must be accepted is that this is a significant road failure, which is not a standard thing that local authorities deal with. That is evidenced, bluntly, by the degree and number of surveys that are required to be completed before, first and foremost, the cause of the problem can be identified. Then, sadly, there will have to be an attribution of blame.

So how is the problem to be fixed? While it is the desire of everyone in this room or watching or reading the debate to fix the problem, solidifying a road on the base we are dealing with is clearly very technical and difficult, and there is no simple solution. To pretend otherwise is naive. However, I am very keen to ensure—it is already happening—that the technical experts at the Department for Transport, who build major roads and highways, are available to Kent County Council to work hand in hand with it.

Without getting too much into the nuts and bolts, the core funding for Kent has gone up considerably. It has received £181 million in funding for highway maintenance since 2019. It has also been a beneficiary of the Network North funding, following the Prime Minister's decision in October last year on the second leg of HS2. Kent will receive £135 million in total between 2023 and 2034, and that funding comes in addition to local transport funding from the last funding review.

I acknowledge and accept that this will be a very expensive process. The tricky part is that until we identify the cause, which requires the surveys that Kent is trying to do, we will struggle. I echo and endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford: it is vital that Kent progresses this matter. If it is required to take legal action, then so be it—legal action should be taken and it should be expedited. I will also put in a plea to the owner of the third property to consider the situation. While two of the properties have given their consent, the third property has not. This can be challenged and overcome through a legal process, but it will cost the taxpayer money and it will take time. I urge the third owner to reconsider and to be aware of the responsibilities we all need to discharge. I ask them to avoid the legal process that sadly will be necessary, but in which unquestionably—I cannot commit courts to this in the future, but I am confident, having been a lawyer for 20 years—Kent will be successful, although it will take time.

Once one has identified the cause of the problem—as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford set out, there are huge amounts of leaks and water egress relating to the demise of the road—the question thereafter remains:

was that caused by the collapse of the road or did it cause that collapse? None of us are structural engineers or water engineers who can assess that, so I am more interested in the long-term solution: how does one reconstruct a road on such friable land? That is not simple, but DFT is on hand to assist in whatever way it can.

The basic principle, which we cannot get around, is that under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980, which was passed by this House, all local authorities are liable for the maintenance and repair of their local roads. That obligation continues to this day, and it is in no way the norm for the Department for Transport to step in and say, “Do not worry about the statutory obligations that are set out under the Highways Act and have been acknowledged under repeated Governments; we will step in and fix this particular problem.” So that is not, with respect, what I would propose. Kent Council is unquestionably the organisation on the ground best able to ascertain the problem and find a solution to it.

However, it is unacceptable that not all the parties in the room are talking on an ongoing basis. I do not want to get into a “he said, she said” situation with Thames Water or its respective legal teams or the lawyers who represent everybody. What I want to do is to talk about the art of the possible and the art of the possible, surely, is this. I, as a Minister, can declare at the Dispatch Box that my door is open to convene a meeting with Thames Water and with Kent County Council. To follow up, I will write a letter tomorrow to the Thames Water chief executive, inviting him in the next few weeks to come in, if necessary with legal teams, to discuss the way ahead.

It is complicated, because self-evidently everybody would like the road to be fixed just like that. However, it is impossible to do anything until we can identify causation and what a structural engineer says good repair looks like. However, there is a clear middle ground, whereby if, and this is an “if”, one can enter a legal agreement with the respective parties, Kent County Council and Thames Water, such that all parties put aside any issue of blame for the present and allow any mediation to go ahead on a blame basis, in either a court of law or a standard tribunal, which is regularly done with these sorts of things, as there is a standard tribunal that can be entered into for the collapse of roads, either in a court or in mediation—if that process is allowed to go ahead, the Government will step in and assist in whatever way they can to try and resolve the issue as fast as possible. That, it seems to me, is the best way ahead.

It is not the case that Government can fund this unilaterally. There is no specific pot that exists that the Department for Transport can dip into to bail out individual local authorities in these circumstances. However, I can definitely see the potential, whereby, provided we have a legal agreement that party A or party B will meet the end costs at the end of the day, so that the taxpayer is not out of pocket, particularly—this is the key point—if Thames Water is liable for this, we would then be in a position where the Government can step in and assist.

Clearly, there are a lot of ifs and buts in all that, but I want to assure my hon. Friends for Dartford and for Gravesham that we will try our hardest to resolve this issue in that way. That would be going above and beyond anything that has ever been done before, frankly, and I think there is nothing more that one could do, over and above that.

I must also be very conscious, first, that I have the funds within my portfolio at the Department for Transport to pay for what could be a very significant project, because any project that the Department proceeds with is taking up the project money of something else that is not proceeded with. Secondly, because I am liable for taxpayers’ money, clearly I must ensure that that money is spent in an appropriate way, when the normal course of events is that a local authority and a transgressor—whether a water company or any other landlord, or whatever—have to thrash things out between the two of them.

That is what I propose to try and do. It is unquestionably the case that the local authority will assist on an ongoing basis. I will certainly write to Thames Water to back up the email that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has sent, and will make sure, as I have publicly stated, that our door is open to try and resolve this situation. Clearly, Thames Water has its own issues, which we are all acutely aware of. However, at the same time it is a water company serving all our constituents and it has obligations, just as much as anybody else; and, if it is a matter of law, then the law can be paused whilst we resolve this between ourselves. That is what I propose; that is what I hope we will be able to do.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has set out, my predecessor—the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden)—visited the site. My hon. Friend knows that he was in his constituency today, although I did not go to Galley Hill, to be fair. I am acutely aware of the wider impact, not only on his local businesses but on the daily lives of his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham. We will do what we can, going forward. That is my solemn pledge to this House. I genuinely hope—

Gareth Johnson: The Minister is, of course, responsible for National Highways. If the A226 was any bigger, it would come under the responsibility of National Highways. Does he therefore have any objections, when we come to construction or rebuilding, to Kent County Council’s highways department contacting National Highways in order to seek some of its expertise?

Guy Opperman: No. In fact, I would go further than that and say that that is what I would expect to happen on an ongoing basis. It is in the interests of National Highways that one of the key roads leading into the Dartford Crossing and the A2 is functioning properly. There is no doubt whatsoever that the breakdown of this particular road and the consequences of that impact upon lots of other things in the surrounding area. I want to make clear—if I have not done so, I will try again—that when I say DFT officials will give full co-operation, as far as I am concerned, that includes National Highways. It is in the interests of National Highways that this road is up and running as soon as possible, which is in the wider national interest, not just the interest of the good people of Swanscombe and the surrounding areas. We are very keen for this to happen, because there are clearly consequences if the matter is not resolved.

Question put and agreed to.

6.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cyber-security

[HANNAH BARDELL in the Chair]

6.30 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cyber security laws and tackling crime.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I am delighted to lead this debate on the important issue of cyber-security, particularly in relation to cyber-crime and the need to enhance the UK's national cyber-resilience.

Cyber-security has a significant impact on society, the economy and individuals, as well as on both national and global security. The UK faces cyber-threats from a number of hostile actors, whether they are states, state-sponsored groups or criminal organisations motivated by money. Cyber-crime itself ranges from complex ransomware attacks to less sophisticated cyber-threats such as hacking and phishing, which many in their everyday lives. In today's world, virtually every business, charity and public sector organisation is in some way digital, but, as high-profile incidents have shown, cyber-attacks exploiting that digitalisation can quickly undermine trust in our private and public sector institutions.

With a burgeoning cyber ecosystem, the UK is well placed to be a global leader on cyber-security, and I will come back to that point later. Often, however, we struggle to get the basics right, leaving citizens and businesses exposed as they move more and more of their lives and operations online. Last year, UK businesses experienced approximately 7.78 million cyber-crimes. Half of businesses and around a third of charities report having experienced some form of cyber-breach or attack in the last 12 months and such attacks have had a real impact on business and consumers.

A recent report by the think-tank the Royal United Services Institute brought to light some of the stark implications of cyber-crime, particularly in relation to ransomware, which is malware designed to deny a user or organisation access to their own data unless a ransom is paid to the attacker. RUSI's report revealed the extent to which ransomware can ruin lives, with the harm going beyond financial and reputational costs for organisations. Victims and incident responders have revealed that ransomware creates both physical and psychological harms for individuals and groups, which have caused individuals to lose their jobs, evoked feelings of shame and self-blame, seeped into private and family life and contributed to serious health issues. Furthermore:

"The harm and cumulative effects caused by ransomware attacks have implications for wider society and national security, including supply chain disruption, a loss of trust in law enforcement, reduced faith in public services, and the normalisation of cybercrime. Ransomware also creates a strategic advantage for the hostile states harbouring the cyber-criminals who conduct such operations."

Meanwhile, the threat landscape is changing and becoming more complex.

UK cyber firm NCC Group's latest insights show that ransomware attacks increased by 84% last year, with the UK the second most targeted country for such attacks, only behind the US. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence have the potential to enable

cyber-attackers to mount ever more sophisticated campaigns against organisations. AI is effectively lowering the barrier of entry into cyber-crime, making it easier for cyber-attackers to successfully target victims and widening the availability of voice cloning, deepfakes and social engineering bots. We are likely to see that manifest in a higher volume of cyber-attacks, an enhanced ability of cyber-criminals to generate malware and an improved success rate of social engineering and phishing attacks. With AI as an emerging threat, hacking as a service is being thought of as a growing market, whereby malware developers sell or lease cyber-attack tools and services to other cyber-criminals. Worryingly, such a business model extends cyber-attack capabilities to organisations and individuals that would not otherwise have known how to carry out attacks themselves.

Artificial intelligence is also advancing tactics that have been around for decades and, in its own way, evolving threats in line with technology. Deepfake phishing is just one example of a fast-growing threat that manipulates or confuses users in order to exploit their trust and gain access to their data. That can be done through emails or messages, video calls or voice messages, where personalisation and synthetic content can make the attack more credible.

Cyber-threats should be seen in the wider context of nation-state threats, too. The conflict in Ukraine has shown how cyber and kinetic attacks are increasingly interconnected in modern hybrid warfare. As thousands of lines of complex code control new and evolving physical functions and systems, such as in smart cities, cyber-security vulnerabilities can be exploited to effect change in the real world. Although we have not seen the so-called cybergeddon that some were expecting from the next big conflict on our globe, one thing is clear: cyber-warfare has proven itself to be a critical element in hybrid cyber-kinetic battlefields.

There is an opportunity here for the UK. To tackle cyber-crime, a close partnership between the public and private sectors is a critical part of the UK's whole-society approach. In particular, the UK's cyber industry is working closely with law enforcement, the public sector, academia and other private firms to ensure that the UK remains confident, capable and resilient in this fast-moving digital world. That includes vulnerability researchers, also known as ethical hackers, who identify security vulnerabilities in products, software and the UK Government. They rely on such researchers to identify bugs before they can be exploited by malicious actors for their nefarious purposes.

Meanwhile, threat intelligence researchers detect cyber-attacks and gain insight into attackers and victims. Researchers work with and pass on that important information to law enforcement and the intelligence agencies, enabling them to defend the UK against rising cyber-crime and geopolitical threat actors. Many of the recent takedown operations we have heard about, where law enforcement disrupted the servers or digital infrastructure that cyber-criminals used to conduct their illegal activities, were possible only because intelligence and insights about those cyber-criminals were shared across the public and private sectors. I firmly believe that there is an opportunity for the UK to play a significant leadership role in conducting the UK's response, with the north-west cyber corridor at its heart.

We are already seeing that public-private partnership in action in wider Lancashire and in my own constituency of Preston through the National Cyber Force, which will open its new home in Samlesbury, Lancashire, in 2025. It is a partnership between defence and intelligence, and already carries out cyber operations daily to counter and contest the actions of those who would harm the UK or our allies, to keep the country safe and to protect and promote the UK's interests at home and abroad. Furthermore, the Lancashire Cyber Partnership, or LCP, is a strategic collaboration between Lancashire County Council, the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership, the University of Central Lancashire, Lancashire University and BAE Systems. In addition, the National Cyber Force has its own role in shaping, supporting and promoting the county's world-class cyber strengths and fast-growing cyber ecosystem, becoming a destination for cyber businesses, investors, careers training, academia and, indeed, innovation. With a strong cyber industry, Lancashire and the wider north-west are fostering the growth of the technology, digital and defence sectors, as well as harnessing the investment, jobs and benefits that come with a thriving cyber economy.

We should be proud of the UK's role as a responsible global cyber power, and we should also remember that there is widespread cross-party and cross-societal consensus on the importance of cyber-security as fundamental for thriving and prosperous digital societies and economies. However, we cannot be complacent. Research from the NCC Group has shown that citizens—our constituents—expect us, as political decision-makers, to do what we can to keep them safe and secure in cyber-space. We have strong foundations to build on, but we must continue to do more to take our cyber-security to the next level. Indeed, much more can be done to ensure that regional cyber clusters, such as the north-west, can play their part in making us all safer online, while also enhancing national cyber-resilience.

I would like to move on to the issue of the UK's Computer Misuse Act 1990. First and foremost, that Act, which is the main cyber-security Act that regulates the UK's digital relationship between individuals and malicious parties, needs bringing into the 21st century. The Act was written more than 30 years ago when just over 0.5% of the world's population had access to the internet, and before the cyber industry—as we know it today—even existed. As a result, the UK's cyber-defenders, such as the vulnerability and threat intelligence researchers mentioned earlier, are held back by that outdated law from doing all they can to protect the UK. That is because the Act, which was written over 30 years ago, has a blanket prohibition on all forms of unauthorised access to computer material, irrespective of intent or motive. In this day and age, where an individual desktop PC is but a distant memory, where technologies are hyperconnected and where cyber-crime is rampant, that approach simply does not reflect the reality we live in. The legislation is no longer fit for purpose, and, worse, it might be detrimental.

There have been calls from industry, led by the CyberUp Campaign, to reform the law to include a defence for legitimate cyber-security work. Sir Patrick Vallance called for such a defence in the “The Pro-innovation Regulation of Technologies Review”, and he recommended amending the 1990 Act to include a statutory public interest defence that would provide stronger legal protections for cyber-security researchers and professionals. That would have

a catalytic effect on innovation in a sector with considerable growth potential. Countries such as France, Israel and the United States have already updated their regulations to provide that defence. I join Sir Patrick by agreeing that if the UK cyber industry is to compete on a level playing field, the UK Government should do the same. However, one year since Sir Patrick published his recommendation, and three years since the UK Government first launched their review into the Act, the Government are yet to set out how they will address the legal barriers that it presents to the UK cyber-security industry.

A second area where the Government must prioritise reform is in updating the network and information systems regulations, which set out the cyber rules for our critical infrastructure. Back in 2022, the Government announced their intention to legislate to enable new sectors to be brought within the scope of the NIS regulations, responding to the inevitable evolution of what constitutes the UK's critical infrastructure, but those reforms were not included in the most recent King's Speech. It is critical that there are no further delays in bringing forward the reforms, and that a Bill is prioritised. Failure to legislate would leave a core part of the UK's critical infrastructure exposed when others globally are already moving forward with new laws to ensure that all relevant entities are appropriately and proportionately regulated.

Outside the UK's critical infrastructure, we must look at how we protect small businesses and charities, the backbone of the UK's economy. Despite six in 10 small businesses being victims of a cyber-attack last year, many lack the skills and budgets to implement proportionate cyber-protections, leaving them exposed. They can also be disproportionately affected, with cyber-attacks sometimes posing an existential threat. A survey found that 90% of European small and medium-sized enterprises believed that cyber-security issues would have serious negative impacts on their business within a week of the issues happening; 57% said that they would most likely become bankrupt or go out of business.

It is unrealistic to expect small firms to adhere to and invest in the same cyber-resilience standards as larger firms such as critical infrastructure firms. However, that leaves a significant part of the economy vulnerable to cyber-attacks. To tackle that problem, the Government should work with technology providers to embed cyber-security in their products, particularly those most relied on by small organisations. The Government should also look at how they can support smaller firms' response to and recovery from cyber-attacks. That could include establishing a “first responder” service that provides proportionate—that is, free-at-the-point-of-use—support to small businesses that have been victims of cyber-attacks. That could include incident response services and the triaging of further steps, such as where victims could get the most effective help. Such a scheme could learn lessons from our counterparts in Australia, who recently announced a small business cyber-security resilience service.

Finally, the Government must look at how they enhance the UK's cyber skills. The issue of cyber skills is not just about addressing the cyber industry's significant skills shortage, although that is a critical part of it. It is also about equipping individuals—across organisations of all sizes and at all levels of seniority—with the cyber literacy that they need to make decisions about their personal, organisational and even national cyber-resilience.

[*Sir Mark Hendrick*]

A national programme of cyber literacy is needed to ensure that everyone, from preschoolers right through to pensioners, is cyber-literate, no matter where they are on their learning, career or retirement journeys. That could include commissioning “Cyber Beebies”—keeping with the concept of CBeebies, which

“helps pre-schoolers learn whilst they play fun games, watch clips, sing songs and make things”—

in order to start cyber education and awareness in the earliest years.

We could also look at including cyber-competence—covering safe and secure online behaviours, privacy and use of technology alongside broader technology and computing lessons—as a mandatory part of the school curriculum. That should be reviewed and tested with an industry advisory board regularly to ensure that it keeps pace with technological developments and industry requirements. Teachers must also be regularly supported to understand new developments and how they should be reflected in the school curriculum.

STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—programmes throughout the country have had a critical role in creating opportunities for today’s youth as they advance their education and skillset. In my own constituency of Preston, I am very proud of the work of Cardinal Newman College. One of the highest-performing sixth form colleges nationally, it has partnered with Lancaster University to harness the skills of young people with a passion and aptitude for the study of maths and science. In doing so, they have further developed the young people’s interest and education while providing them with opportunities for their future, including—especially—in the field of cyber at the new cyber defence centre.

I welcome the Minister, who is about to take his place in the hall. I should like to ask him four questions. Will he join me in praising and expressing pride in our UK cyber industry? Will he acknowledge, as we all do, the role that our industry plays in keeping us all safe and secure in cyber-space? Will he set out the Government’s further ambitions to take our cyber-security to the next level and beyond what has been announced as part of the national cyber strategy? Will he provide more information in particular on the Government’s plans to finally make progress on introducing legal protections for legitimate cyber-security activities as part of ongoing efforts to reform the Computer Misuse Act? Will he set out the Government’s views on following the Australian example of introducing a cyber first responders service for all our small businesses and charities, and set out the Government’s ongoing commitment to invest in our national cyber-resilience?

I thank the Minister for engaging with me on this important issue. It is good that there is cross-party consensus on a matter of such importance, but it is clear that much more needs to be done when it comes to cyber-crime and ensuring that Government policy keeps pace with technology in the ever-changing cyber landscape. The public need to be better educated and trained from an early age in the use of computers. That will add to the resilience the country needs to overcome the challenges of cyber-crime for the purposes of cyber-security.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I want to note that the Minister was not in his place, which is disappointing given the importance

of the issue and the effort put in by the Member in charge. We have been grateful to Minister Opperman for sitting in, who is fortified with the relevant information. I am sure he will let his colleague copy his homework, so he is able to respond, if the Member in charge is happy with that.

Sir Mark Hendrick: Yes.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): On that basis, we will proceed. I call SNP spokesperson Owen Thompson.

6.51 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Bardell. I commend the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this debate on such an important issue. The past few years have challenged us like no other time in recent history, but they have also served to highlight how critical digital technologies are to all our lives and to the functioning of society and the economy. Whether working or learning from home, running a business or keeping in touch with friends and family, digital technologies underpin and continue to support our critical national infrastructure. Nowadays digital appliances and smart tech are everywhere, and it is more and more common to find that a lack of an internet connection or a charger is becoming a major issue. When we consider the attacks, as outlined by the hon. Member, be they personal or on a national level, it is critical that we consider the resilience that each of us has individually in how we manage to protect ourselves from those who wish to do harm, but also collectively as we look to protect our society.

As the hon. Member has outlined, digital technologies cut across everything we do. The secure and resilient ways we use them cannot be an afterthought. Cyber-resilience cannot be viewed simply as an IT issue; it is the very backbone of every public service, business and community. It is also a critical part of our economic and societal recovery and renewal, especially in Scotland as we embrace new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, smart cities and 5G wireless networks. Those can all be positives, albeit there are clearly those out there who wish to use them to do harm.

Digital technologies are now at a stage where it is not simply enough to turn them off and on again to fix problems that arise. Cyber-resilience is key to operational resilience and business continuity, as well as our capacity to grow and flourish as we adapt to the demands of operating online. Our ability to deter, respond and recover from national cyber-attacks has to be a top priority, and we need a plan exercised and to reflect continually and collaboratively to ensure that we are prepared to withstand any such cyber-threats.

In Scotland, the strategic framework for our cyber-resilience sets out what we need to do to make us a digitally secured and resilient nation. It builds on the work of Scotland’s first cyber-resilience strategy published in 2015, and it expands on its achievements and addresses ongoing and new challenges because, as the hon. Member has outlined, the challenges are forever changing. This is an ever-changing landscape that we are dealing with.

The cyber-threats we face cannot be met by Government alone, and we have a role to play in protecting ourselves, our families and our communities. Our public sector, third sector and private sector organisations need to work together, with Government, to minimise the harm

and disruption that can result from cyber-incidents. As Members of Parliament, some of our colleagues have been targeted and directly impacted by cyber-attacks, and we have seen what that has meant for them, as well as what it means for the rest of us collectively. We need to make the very most of technological advances and use them to protect ourselves as those who wish to do harm look to exploit loopholes in the system.

The recent pandemic reminded us of the importance of resilience and agility. The Scottish Government pledged to review the implementation of the framework regularly, monitoring indicators against the four outcomes and the action plans that will guide delivery. Scotland's four key cyber-resilience outcomes are ensuring that our citizens have access to basic and specialist learning and skills to help keep safe and secure online; working with partners in the public, private and third sectors to enhance all our cyber-resilience; raising awareness of the importance of cyber-resilience and how to achieve it by providing easier access to advice and support; and taking advantage of the economic opportunities resulting from greater cyber-resilience. It is great if people have the knowledge and understanding to grasp those opportunities, but we have also to recognise that there are so many in our communities who want the massive benefits of taking advantage of our digital infrastructure but do not know where to turn. There is a massive job for all of us in making sure that that information is as widely available as it possibly can be.

On this issue perhaps more than many others, it is critical that any work is done in collaboration with other Governments. The problem is not unique to Westminster, Scotland or any of the devolved Parliaments; it affects us all, and it is only by working together that we can truly tackle it. The UK Government published the national cyber strategy in 2022. It describes the UK's overarching cyber policy and, as noted, takes a whole of society approach, arguing that Government must work in partnership with private sector organisations and cyber-security professionals to improve cyber-security. Between 2017 and 2021, the Scottish and the UK Governments allocated £10.28 million under the UK national cyber security programme to support a programme of action on cyber-resilience.

I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Preston that there is an urgent need to seriously look at the Computer Misuse Act; that is long overdue. With that in mind, what plans do the Government have to review the Act, and what steps does the Minister feel are most urgent? Certainly, there are many.

Cyber, digital infrastructure and technology are not there just for the specialist few; they are there in the day-to-day lives of everyone in our communities, all our families and all our friends. More than ever, it is critical that we take whatever steps we can as legislators to ensure that protections are in place and information is there for everyone, so that we can protect ourselves from those who would look to use them for ill ends. On that note, I again thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I am sure that it will not be the last we hear of it.

6.58 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Bardell. May I say how good it is to see the Minister in his place? I congratulate my

hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) on securing this important debate. He is a long-standing and dedicated servant to his constituents and Lancashire more widely; any compliment about Lancashire does not come particularly easily from my side of the Pennines, but that is certainly one that my hon. Friend deserves for his very long-standing service for his constituents.

I pay tribute to the men and women who serve in the National Cyber Force, soon to be based in Samlesbury, and to those who serve across the security and intelligence services and in the cyber-security sector. They fight on the digital frontline day in and day out to detect, disrupt and deter individual and state-sponsored adversaries that threaten our cyber-security.

The cyber threat is constantly mutating and spreading. The latest crime survey for England and Wales shows a staggering 29% increase in computer misuse between 2022 and 2023. Computer misuse disrupts services, obtains information illegally and extorts individuals, meaning that personal information can be published online without consent, entire life savings can be lost due to fraud, and individuals, including children, can be blackmailed. The Government need to be increasingly ruthless in their approach to countering those threats and legislate for the challenges of today, not those of yesterday. Doing so will give cyber-security professionals the means to retain the advantage over those who seek to harm us and protect more people and organisations from cyber-crime.

Therefore, as the right hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) rightly said, the Computer Misuse Act needs updating to reflect the challenges of the cyber age, not those of the CeeFax age. Accelerating technological change means that outdated legislation is struggling to catch up with cyber-threats posed by the likes of artificial intelligence. That is why, on this side of the House, we have already proposed criminalising the programming of chatbots that radicalise and spread terrorist material. We also welcome the Government's announcement last month of the criminalisation, through the Criminal Justice Bill, of the creation of sexually explicit deepfakes. Outdated legislation is at best restrictive and at worst punitive for cyber-security professionals in the UK who conduct ethical hacking to expose system vulnerabilities and protect us from harmful cyber-attacks.

The National Cyber Security Centre, which is home to exceptional men and women fighting cyber-crime, has said that ethical hacking reports by individual researchers provide valuable information that organisations can use to improve the security of their systems. That is why the Opposition tabled an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill that would reform the CMA by introducing a statutory defence for cyber-security researchers and professionals involved in ethical hacking.

Our amendment comes after the Chancellor's commitment to implement all of Sir Patrick Vallance's recommendations on the regulation of emerging digital technologies published alongside last spring's Budget, which included the introduction of a statutory defence. If this Government do not deliver, the next one should. Until that happens, the legislative lag will have consequences. Half of UK businesses and 32% of charities suffered a cyber-breach or attack in the last year alone. Breaches due to vulnerabilities in cyber-security drive some of the most pernicious types of criminality. According to the accounting firm BDO, fraud doubled in 2023.

[Dan Jarvis]

Furthermore, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy warned in December that the Government could face a catastrophic ransomware attack at any moment. The sobering reality is that such attacks are already happening on the UK's critical national infrastructure. Just today, it was reported that in response to a ransom not being paid, personal information illegally obtained by a ransomware attack on NHS Dumfries and Galloway has been published on the dark web—a truly despicable act that accompanies another deeply concerning development today: a hack into the Ministry of Defence's payroll records by a malign actor.

Those are only two of the most recent examples, and they show that the threat landscape has never been more dangerous. However, progress on reforming the CMA has been buffering for three years since the Government first announced their review of the legislation. Despite two public consultations, a Home Office industry working group and several public commitments, the Government have not yet made progress and, as the Minister will know, we are fast running out of parliamentary time. Though time is in short supply, there is consensus on acting in the national interest to update the CMA, and the Opposition are keen to play our part.

I would be grateful if the Minister would answer the following questions. He will know that they are meant in the constructive spirit in which we always seek to engage on these important matters. First, will he give an assurance that the proposed legislation, as outlined in the Government's response to the CMA consultation, will be introduced in this Parliament?

Progress on legislation requires political leadership. However, the JCNSS report on ransomware said that the leadership by a former Home Secretary did not treat it as a priority. The Minister will remember that I wrote to him in January about this matter and others identified in the JCNSS report. Can he give a further assurance that his Department and other Departments are now prioritising ransomware by confirming that they will finally respond to the consultation on unauthorised access to online accounts and personal data, which was published in September 2022?

On public sector payments to ransomware, the Deputy Prime Minister responded to me at Cabinet Office questions on 25 April by saying that that “is not something” that he would “rule out totally”. However, the Security Minister's written answer to me on the same question on the same day was much more resolute about the policy not to pay ransoms.

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Listen to me.

Dan Jarvis: I am listening to the Minister. I do not know whether the Deputy Prime Minister is; that is possibly the problem.

It would be really helpful if the Minister would say whether a new approach to the public sector paying ransoms will be included in any update to the CMA. These assurances and clarifications matter, as the Home Office is part of a cross-Government response to countering cyber-threats, joining the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the MOD, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Cabinet Office in driving policy to detect, disrupt and deter cyber-criminality.

As the Minister will know, the fulcrum of such activity is the National Security Council, but he will also know that, while it has a sub-committee for economic security, there is not a dedicated equivalent for cyber-security. Has consideration been given to the creation of a dedicated sub-committee of the NSC for policy responses to intermediate and long-term cyber challenges?

Another long-term challenge, which the Minister will be familiar with, is the retention of our best and brightest in fighting cyber-crime, both in the security and intelligence services and in the cyber-security sector. Do our modern-day Alan Turings, who play a vital role in keeping our country safe, feel that the most innovative and effective work can happen in the UK under current cyber-security legislation? The answer, sadly, is likely to be no: 60% of respondents to a recent cyber-ops survey said that the CMA is a barrier to their work in threat intelligence and vulnerability research, and 16,850 cyber-defenders—the equivalent of two GCHQs—are estimated to have been lost due to outdated cyber-security laws. The Minister knows that criminals profit the most from poor retention and recruitment, so has he considered how changes to the CMA could unlock the cyber-security sector's huge potential to protect our country's cyber-space better?

This debate has not just been about protecting our cyber-space through effective legislation; it has been about the principle of legislation retaining the advantage over malign actors intent on harming us. I said at the start of my speech that there are exceptional men and women working to defend our cyber-security, who are very much at the cutting edge of efforts to detect, disrupt and deter myriad threats. As legislators providing the legal framework for that crucial work, we must now all play our part.

7.9 pm

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): It is a great pleasure to see you this evening, Ms Bardell—as ever, the surprise only adds to the joy—and to respond to the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), who is quite right to have secured this debate. The challenge that he talked about and the ways of addressing it are fundamental not just to his constituents and the National Cyber Force, which he rightly paid tribute to and will be hosting in his constituency, but to the very nature of our country.

It is interesting to note that over the last 200 years, the British economy has been based on many things: the ingenuity and brilliance of our people; the rule of law and the ability to predict the future based on prior agreement; the genius of economic reforms innovated out of Edinburgh and Glasgow; and the ability to keep trade moving. For most of our existence, that trade has been maritime trade of various descriptions. It has been guaranteed not just by an extraordinary industry of sailors and shipwrights who have created the vehicles of commerce, but by the Royal Navy, which has kept the sea lanes open, the sailors safe and the goods moving.

The truth is that over the last few years, the nature of that commerce—that commercial gain and exchange—has changed. We have gone from sea lanes to e-lanes. We have gone from looking at the red ensign as a guarantee of security at sea, to looking at GCHQ and the National Cyber Security Centre as a guarantee of security on the internet and in cyber-space. Those changes have been

fundamental. They have enabled us to do things that are frankly quite remarkable. Look at the change in the way communication works that our country has been through in the four years since covid struck us. With so many of our lives going online—even this place went online briefly, although we seem to have forgotten how convenient that was—many of us have been able to transform the businesses that we were working in from local or national to global.

That change has been a phenomenal blessing, but none of it would have been possible without the dedication and brilliance of some remarkable individuals who have kept us safe. Those individuals started off being headquartered solely in Cheltenham. Those of who have had the privilege to visit Cheltenham know that the extraordinary brilliance and genius of those remarkable people has been fantastic not just for our country but for many partners and allies around the world.

What we see today is that it is not just the Government who need to be kept safe. The reality is that companies and individuals guarantee that security in many different ways. What we are talking about this evening is how the wider economy is defended. That is where the Government have made some important changes, which I hope will be built on in coming years. The cyber-security force that we have created is an essential part of keeping the UK's commercial interests safe. It is a fundamental building block of our economy not just today but for the future.

The way that has worked with the National Cyber Security Centre is essential, because the reality is that the economy of Britain is not guarded simply by the Government, and national security is not limited to the arms of the state. It is fundamentally true that many suppliers to Government and many different institutions that connect to Government are also important. More than that, every single aspect of our lives is a part of keeping our country safe. Although it is true that the Government do not provide the food, the supermarkets that feed us every day are part of our national security. Although it is true that the Government do not move the money, the banks that keep us fluid in that sense are absolutely part of our national security. It is therefore true that all those capabilities—all the cyber-defence that goes into the wider economy and into our lives—keep us all safe. Sadly, one of the things that has distressed me most in this job is discovering the level of abuse that I am afraid is now prevalent online. Hon. Members will not require me to tell them this, but we see an explosion in online bullying and abuse, and sadly we have seen an explosion in online harm that has taken not just many young people, but many people from across every walk of life, to dark places—and in some cases, very sadly, cost lives.

The cyber work that we do is about protecting not just the state, the Government or even the economy, but homes and families across the United Kingdom. That is why the work that we are doing in the reform of the Computer Misuse Act is so important, because, as the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and particularly as the hon. Member for Preston put it, the changes we have seen online in the last 20 or 30 years since the Act was passed are phenomenal. The Act was passed before the internet, the iPhone and social media. It is, in a modern sense, historical; it is dated and based on an era when to hold data was to hold it on a solid drive in a computer, not in the ether or on the cloud.

The nature of intervention to keep cyber-defences alive and test them was very different, and the Act was drafted for that era. That is why the work of Sir Patrick Vallance and the way in which he has approached it have been so important, and it is why we have been looking so carefully at what he recommends and at how to get the best answer out.

The truth is that any decision we make is going to be difficult. It is going to raise questions about the ways in which businesses work and partner with others around the world. The right hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) asked about ransomware and the way in which it is changing. That is where the direction that we take it so important—for example, the counter-ransomware initiative that the United Kingdom led and changed in various ways, and the approaches we have taken to ensure that we are properly structured to get its benefits. The reason I am confident that we are going in the right direction is that we are setting the agenda.

In the 18 months since I had the privilege of becoming the Security Minister, we have launched at least two actions. Forgive me as I try to remember how many were public and how many were private; hon. Members will appreciate that in this job it is probably best to get that distinction right. I will say that we have launched at least two public actions alongside partners on counter-ransomware actions. Noticeably, one from about a year ago was against various Russian targets who had decided that it was to their advantage to try to extort and exploit organisations in the United Kingdom and United States. Our reactions—the ways in which we have partnered with allies and friends—have ensured that we are able not just to defend ourselves, but to make the punishment fit the crime. We are putting in place sanctions, closing down accounts and ensuring that we have those resources in partnership with organisations like the FBI to resist those different areas.

This subject also raises some questions about the state, which were hinted at. I will go a little further into it, because this is not just about individual actors, those in the so-called troll farms or the Internet Research Agency, which was so famously used by Russia recently; it is also about states themselves. Sadly, we are seeing states trying to use these forms of exploitation as means of profit. We have seen one state in particular, North Korea, seeking to quite literally use them as a cash cow—as a way of paying for its nuclear weapons programme, extorting money out of individuals around the world to advance its own hostile interests.

This is where some of the changes we have been able to make—alongside the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, to whom I pay tribute, and with support from parties on all sides—will, I think, make a substantial difference in the years to come. Those changes include the National Security Act 2023, which, through the various different elements of co-operation with foreign states, makes criminal actions that formerly would have merely been assisting or would have been hard to define; they may not necessarily have been breaches of the Official Secrets Act, or empowering or profiting a foreign state in a direct sense and in a way that would have been criminal. The National Security Act has been essential in making sure that espionage is properly punished and that the support of hostile states is now criminalised. I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central and others, because that legislation has been an important change that has enabled us to make a difference.

[Tom Tugendhat]

We have seen various different ways in which states have used these sorts of powers. For example, I am afraid that we have seen the various different ways in which Beijing has been ordering different threats against us. I will not comment on things that are being gossiped about in different places—in main Chambers rather than in Westminster Hall—but I will say that the state-affiliated cyber group APT31 has been, and consistently remains, a threat targeted against the UK. I am afraid that we have seen that again and again, and we have had to take action to ensure that we are able to protect ourselves. This is one of those areas where the work of the National Cyber Security Centre has been so incredibly important in protecting not just the state but our wider economy—and that is where we have a wider mission, because the truth is that protecting the wider economy is about protecting not just all those areas, but families and individuals across our country.

I am proud of some of the work we have done alongside businesses, some of which are from the UK and some of which are international, which has enabled us to change some of the incentives and pressures on them. We have brought down fraud in the last year; 16% is not as far as I would like it to go, and I am sure that others in the House will recognise that there is further to go, but that is a hell of an achievement by some fantastically dedicated law enforcement professionals and their cyber partners to make sure that homes and families across the United Kingdom are safer.

We are moving further online. For instance, one can look at the national health service today, and see the amazing investment in technology and in the changing way in which we communicate with our doctors. As many of us know, the NHS app—which, I think I am right in saying, has been downloaded by about three quarters of all adults in the United Kingdom, although I will have to check that—is a fantastic way in which we can communicate across the medical professions. However, all of this means that we have wider vectors of attack, which means that it is enormously important to ensure that we are working together. That is why—I correct the hon. Member for Barnsley Central—although the National Security Council may not have a cyber element in that sense, there is a ministerial cyber board, which meets on a similar basis except that it is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and brings together Departments from all across Whitehall. That is an extraordinarily important place where we set the policy and make sure that it works together, because the UK Government are already doing a huge amount.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central asked about the policy of paying ransomware. We have set out that no public body should be using state money to pay ransomware. We have set out this agenda with the national health service and have been very clear to organisations, including the British Library, that it should not be happening. That policy has been made clear. It is

also clear that some ransomwares that are being used for profit are being closed down. I do not know if Members are aware of the LockBit sanctions, but they have been incredibly important; in the last few days we have not just taken over the LockBit site—a brilliant piece of work by the National Crime Agency and others, including the FBI—but exposed the people behind it. That is an extremely important way in which we are taking the fight directly to the criminals who are challenging us and making sure that the National Cyber Force, which is soon to be wonderfully homed in Preston—

Sir Mark Hendrick: Just next door.

Tom Tugendhat: Many of its people will be homed around there, I am sure, though they may work in other parts. That force is a fantastically important element in our national defence. While once we flew the white ensign to protect sea lanes, today we fly a different sign—a national cyber-security sign; and with wider British Government protection, we can protect our e-lanes of communication that keep us not just safe but free.

7.26 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick: I thank those who have taken part in the debate, principally from the Front Benches, for their contributions and thoughts on the way forward with legislation in this area. We did not get a direct response from the Minister on whether there would be any attempt to amend the Computer Misuse Act 1990 this side of the election, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) said, we look forward to that at some stage. I cannot remember all the questions I posed—*Hansard* may now have disposed of them—but they are still pending with the Minister, so I hope he can write to me with answers. I look forward to hearing from him again.

I do feel very strongly about this issue, because apart from British Aerospace—BAE Systems, as it is now—and the new cyber centre that people are working away at, many of the important educational, technological and industrial developments taking place in and around my constituency in Lancashire are very important for local jobs and the economy, and in the national context. As all the Front-Bench contributors have said, the industry is a key part of keeping Britain and our constituents safe, and making sure that we continue to thrive in economic, political and democratic terms.

Thank you for chairing this debate, Ms Bardell. I am pleased that it has taken place, and hope it is a seed for further action in the coming weeks and months.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cyber security laws and tackling crime.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Tuesday 7 May 2024

WORK AND PENSIONS

WorkWell

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Today, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, we are announcing the 15 pilot sites that will deliver WorkWell services.

Good work is good for people's physical and mental health, wellbeing and resilience. We want to make sure more people can reap these benefits by getting the timely health and employment advice and support they need to remain in work or return quickly.

Through WorkWell, this Government are spending £64 million to support 59,000 people to get the joined-up work and health support they need to start, stay and succeed in work.

Individuals who are out of work or at risk of falling out of work due to their health will be referred to WorkWell through their GP, employer, and a range of local and community services—they can also self-refer. Multidisciplinary WorkWell teams will provide an expert assessment of their work and health needs, create an action plan to ensure they receive personalised, accessible support in their local area, and offer regular follow-up support.

Following their work and health assessment, people will be able to access through WorkWell both physical and mental health services, employment support like universal support, employer engagement and advice on workplace adjustments. WorkWell services will also signpost or refer participants to external support such as health promotion programmes, council services and debt advice.

Every WorkWell pilot area will be locally designed, responding to local needs. As such the exact make-up of the WorkWell team and the local support offer will be decided by each local WorkWell partnership. In turn, each action plan will be tailored to that person's unique needs.

An example action plan might include in-house physiotherapy sessions, counselling from a mental health professional and advice from an occupational therapist. In addition, the participant could be referred onwards to local training opportunities to explore new career opportunities and get recommendations to join relevant local support groups, perhaps focused on financial advice, smoking cessation and physical activity.

The successful 15 WorkWell pilot sites are:

Birmingham and Solihull
Black Country
Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly
Coventry and Warwickshire
Frimley
Herefordshire and Worcestershire
Greater Manchester
Lancashire and South Cumbria
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
North Central London
North West London
South Yorkshire
Surrey Heartlands

WorkWell will remove existing silos between work and health to improve work outcomes, for the benefit of individuals, communities and the economy. This Government's recently announced plans to reform the fit note focus on that same goal. These reforms together work towards end-to-end system reform including in areas with some of the highest numbers of fit notes issued in the country. The reforms will be brought together by testing a new fit note process in some WorkWell pilot areas to offer better triage, signposting and support to those who need it. This will mean more people have easy and rapid access to specialised work and health support to help them stay in or get back to work.

WorkWell has employment at its heart; integrating work and health services locally to improve health outcomes, reduce health disparities, and help people get timely access to the support they need to return to and remain in work.

[HCWS440]

Petitions

Tuesday 7 May 2024

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Morecambe and Morgan Offshore Wind Farms project

The petition of residents of the constituency of Fylde in Lancashire,

Declares that the Morecambe and Morgan project should reconsider their plans for Transmission Asset cabling and proposed substations in Fylde; further declares that the proposed plans of the project will disrupt wildlife, communities and agricultural land.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to heed the residents' concerns and work with those leading the project to share all relevant documents and studies transparently, and seek alternative connections to the National Grid.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mark Menzies, *Official Report*, 4 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 734.]

[P002920]

Observations from the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson):

The application for development consent for the Morgan and Morecambe transmission assets proposal is at the pre-application stage of the planning process set out under the Planning Act 2008. The Planning Inspectorate's project page for the proposal states that the application is expected to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate between July and September 2024.

Once the pre-application stage is completed and the application is officially received by the Planning Inspectorate, it has 28 days to review the application and to decide whether or not to accept it for examination. It is important to note that when deciding if an application should be accepted for examination, the Planning Inspectorate considers whether an applicant has complied with the pre-application procedure. The adequacy of an applicant's pre-application consultation has a significant bearing on whether or not an application is considered to be of a satisfactory standard to be accepted for examination. It is also important to note that the panel of inspectors that will conduct the examination of the proposal, should the application be submitted to Planning Inspectorate as planned, are appointed by Planning Inspectorate, without involvement from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

Should the application be successfully accepted for examination, the Planning Inspectorate will publish all of the application documents on its project page for the proposal.

Furthermore, should the application be successfully accepted for examination by the Planning Inspectorate once submitted, we would encourage you to register as an interested party and to engage with the examination process.

Given the role of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero in determining applications for development consent, the Department cannot comment on specific concerns regarding a proposed infrastructure project to avoid prejudicing the decision-making process.

However, please be assured that in taking the decision, the Secretary of State (Claire Coutinho) will follow the relevant requirements in the Planning Act 2008 and have regard to a wide range of matters relevant to her decision.

Proposed Mallard solar plant

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the proposed Mallard Pass solar plant should be rejected; further that the inappropriate scale of this development would lead to irreversible damage to the community due to the loss of quality, productive agricultural land, the loss of the natural character of the countryside, lasting damage on biodiversity and the environment, damage to historical assets and identity, and the risk of a solar plant produced by forced labour in the developers' supply chain.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alicia Kearns, *Official Report*, 20 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 1010.]

[P002919]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Lord Callanan): The planning application for the proposed Mallard Pass solar farm was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate on 24 November 2022 and accepted for examination on 21 December 2022. The examination stage started on 16 May 2023 and closed on 16 November 2023. The Planning Inspectorate's examination report and recommendations were submitted to the Secretary of State on 16 February 2024.

The proposal is now in the decision-making stage and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has until 16 May 2024 to make a decision on the application or extend the statutory date if required.

Given the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role in determining applications for development consent for energy infrastructure proposals, it would not be appropriate to comment on specific matters regarding this proposal, as this could be seen as prejudicing the decision-making process.

In taking the decision on any application for development consent, the Secretary of State will follow the requirements of the Planning Act 2008 and have regard to matters which are relevant to her decision.

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