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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 8 May 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin questions, I wish to make a short statement about the House's sub judice resolution. Members will be aware of the recent deaths at HM Prison Parc, including two more deaths overnight. A coroner's inquest has been opened into some of those deaths. These proceedings are now sub judice. While the sub judice rule can be waived, it is not to be done lightly, and for the time being no reference should be made to those proceedings in the House.

Members may ask about related issues to do with the health and safety of prisoners, and the security of the prison estate. But I urge hon. Members to exercise caution in what they say, and particularly to avoid speculating on the causes of the deaths of these men.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

20 mph Speed Limit: Impact on Road Users

1. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the impact of the 20 mph speed limit on residential roads and pedestrian streets in Wales on road users. [902647]

6. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport on the impact of the 20 mph speed limit on residential roads and pedestrian streets in Wales on road users. [902652]

9. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the impact of the 20 mph speed limit on residential roads and pedestrian streets in Wales on road users. [902655]

Mr Speaker: Mr Rosindell is not here, but will the Secretary of State answer his question, as it is the lead?

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Before I do so, Mr Speaker, may I fully support your ruling and send my deepest condolences to the relatives of all those who have died in prison?

May I make it absolutely clear that I, Conservative MPs, Senedd Members and councillors are supportive of a 20 mph speed limit in certain areas, such as outside schools, hospitals, old people's homes or anywhere where there are vulnerable pedestrians? But the blanket 20 mph speed limit has had a detrimental effect on road users, users of public transport and businesses across Wales, and I call on the Welsh Labour Government to think again.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Clearly, there is a strong case for 20 mph limits outside schools, in shopping areas and in other areas where there is huge pedestrian activity, but a blanket ban is outrageous. Has he any detail as to the cost to the Welsh economy of this extremely damaging move, and, indeed, the cost of implementing it across Wales in such a blanket fashion?

David T. C. Davies: My understanding is that the vast majority of 30 mph roads are now 20 mph. I have seen a figure suggesting that it is around 96%—[*Interruption.*] Mr Speaker, it is a blanket ban on 30 mph roads and that is exactly what the Welsh Labour Government put out there. I can give my hon. Friend an indication of the costs, because the Welsh Government's own impact assessment suggested that this would cause a £4.5 billion hit to the Welsh economy and, on top of that, taxpayers have had to pay £30 million for 20 mph road signs.

Dr Evans: This is really concerning and I note that almost half a million people—a record number—signed a petition on the Senedd's move, because they were so concerned about the impact that the measure will have. It cost £33 million to implement and now it is estimated that an extra £5 million is needed to unwind the changes. What conversations is my right hon. Friend having with the Welsh Government to ensure that we do not see such policies again?

David T. C. Davies: We certainly do not want policies such as this. There is an anti-motorist agenda with the Welsh Labour Government that includes not only 20 mph speed limits, but legislation bringing in tolls on the M4 and a ban on any major new road projects being built. We have even had Monmouthshire Labour Council suggesting that it might want to campaign to bring back Severn bridge tolls. The lesson is that if people support motorists and support the right to drive a car they should vote Conservative at the next general election.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On this illogical decision to pursue a 20 mph limit, does the Minister agree that there is a lesson to be learned for a Government—in Wales or elsewhere—trying to pursue something that the general public quite clearly do not want at all?

David T. C. Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He raises a very good point, because this was clearly done against the wishes of almost half a million people—a record number of people—who signed a petition on this matter. The most recent announcement by the Welsh Government, which raises the possibility of their doing a screeching U-turn on the policy, suggests to me that they might be more interested in deflecting national press attention from the scandal involving the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff Bay.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the 25th anniversary this week of Welsh devolution—delivered by a Labour Government. It has helped to nurture a confident, modern and outward-looking Wales, and Labour Members are proud of it.

Not a single one of the hon. Members who have raised questions on this issue lives in Wales, and the speed limit is not blanket, as the Secretary of State well knows. It is a bit like the Conservative councillor in Sunderland who set up anti-20 mph Facebook groups while campaigning for the limit in his own area. Meanwhile, a mother whose 11-year-old son was hit by a car near his school in Flintshire said that the 20 mph speed limit likely saved his life. Does the Secretary of State agree that her intervention represents an important endorsement of the Welsh Labour Government's policy to protect lives, especially children's lives?

David T. C. Davies: I, too, acknowledge the 25th anniversary of devolution. We were promised that it would deliver better schools, hospitals and public standards. What we actually have are the longest waiting lists and the worst educational standards in the United Kingdom, and a First Minister who is willing to take a £200,000 donation from a twice-convicted criminal. That is the record of 25 years of Labour-run Government in Wales.

I said straightaway that I am in favour of 20 mph limits outside schools, hospitals and other places where there are vulnerable pedestrians. I do not like the blanket ban that has been imposed as part of the anti-motorist agenda of the Welsh Labour Government.

Jo Stevens: It is rich of Government Members to chunter about donations. How much of Mr Frank Hester's millions is bankrolling the Conservatives' general election campaign? This is a man who said that a black woman MP in this House "should be shot".

On roads, does the Secretary of State agree with his own association deputy chairman, writing in *ConservativeHome* this week, that politics in Wales is a "cul-de-sac" for the Tory party? The Welsh public do not like divisive politics, and they do not like Wales being constantly talked down by the Tories. Is that why they have not won a domestic election in Wales for over a century?

David T. C. Davies: I remind the hon. Lady that we just got more votes than the Labour party in my constituency of Monmouth in the police and crime commissioner elections. What people in Wales want is public services, waiting lists and education standards that match what is being delivered by this Conservative Government in England, and standards in public life that reflect what we expect from Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom. That is not what we are getting under the Welsh Labour Government.

Biodiversity: Rivers and Streams

2. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the biodiversity of Welsh rivers and streams. [902648]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): Water is a devolved matter in Wales, and therefore rivers and streams in Wales are the responsibility of the Welsh Government. The UK Government recognise that rivers are an essential part of our natural environment. That is why we are working on the UK national biodiversity strategy and action plan.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister fess up to the fact that the real scandal in Wales is that the UK Government keep denigrating a good Welsh Government that in terms of biodiversity and so much else are better than the rest of the UK? On biodiversity, they are three times better than England. Is it not about time that we got a few Welsh ideas and Welsh leaders to help us clean up our act and our rivers?

Fay Jones: That was a good attempt, but I simply cannot disagree with the hon. Gentleman more. It is this Government who forced water companies to provide £56 million towards investment in the storm overflow network, improving water quality across England. In Wales, the picture could not be more different. The average number of sewage spills per outflow is 38; in England, it is 23. Our record speaks for itself.

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

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for clarifying the sub judice rules in relation to Parc Prison. MPs across south Wales were disappointed that the urgent question was declined yesterday, but we understand why. We will continue to seek answers and to scrutinise Ministers over these deeply distressing events, and the way the prison is being run.

Thousands of Pembrokeshire residents continue to have their lives blighted by air pollution and fears about water pollution from the Wylfa Newydd landfill site. Given that the Ministers in Wales who are responsible for overseeing the public health and the environmental regulatory response both voted last week to block an independent investigation into the financial dealings between the owner of that site and the First Minister, how on earth can my constituents have confidence that their concerns will be addressed impartially and the problems resolved?

Fay Jones: My right hon. Friend lives this issue on a daily basis, and I commend him for highlighting the plight of his constituents, who have to endure the impact of such devastating environmental pollution. Any way we look at it, this donation stinks, and it is shameful that the Welsh Government are evading scrutiny on the issue. His constituents can have no confidence that this matter will be investigated. There is no independent scrutiny here. Labour Members should explain why they are scared of scrutiny on this question.

Cost of Living

3. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales. [902649]

8. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales [902654]

12. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of increases in the cost of living on people in Wales. [902658]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The UK Government fully recognise the challenges posed by cost of living pressures that have come about as a result of covid and the invasion of Ukraine. That is why they have committed to the triple lock on pensions for this Parliament, increased the living wage, benefiting 140,000 people in Wales, and put an average £701 back into the pocket of a typical worker in Wales through national insurance cuts.

Liz Twist: The Trussell Trust says that one fifth of people in Wales have cut back on or skipped meals in the last 12 months. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with supermarkets about holding down the cost of food for customers?

David T. C. Davies: I know that many supermarkets are supporting food banks within their local areas, and the UK Government have certainly supported those with the least by making sure that pensions, benefits and the minimum wage all go up in line with inflation, and making extra payments on top to pensioners, those on benefits and households where there is disability. However, if the hon. Lady is truly concerned about cost of living pressures in Wales, perhaps she ought to ask her colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government why, on this very day, Welsh Labour Ministers are supporting a plan to create dozens of extra Senedd Members at a cost of £120 million—all money that could be far better spent on supporting those with the least.

Wayne David: Is the Secretary of State aware of a study by Citizens Advice Cymru indicating that more than half a million people in Wales are struggling to make ends meet? If he is aware, what is he doing about it?

David T. C. Davies: I have already outlined the extra payments that are being made to pensioners and those on benefits and disability, and the fact that pensions, benefits and the minimum wage have all gone up in line with inflation. On top of that, the UK Government have delivered five towns funds, four growth deals, three rounds of levelling-up funding, two investment zones, two freeports, an electric arc furnace in south Wales and an electrified rail line in north Wales—and what are we getting from the Welsh Labour Government? We are getting £120 million spent on extra Senedd Members. While we level up the economy, they want to level up the number of politicians in Cardiff Bay.

Patrick Grady: The Secretary of State mentioned Ukraine and covid as contributing factors to the cost of living crisis, but he forgot to mention Brexit—or is he going to try to argue that Brexit has somehow improved things and made goods and services cheaper for people in Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I would be only too delighted to mention Brexit, which was voted for by a majority of the United Kingdom and a majority in Wales, and point out to the hon. Gentleman that since Brexit the UK has grown faster than France and Germany. I could also mention wasting money on Scottish embassies all around the world, trying to build ferries that have not yet been floated anywhere, raising taxes and trying to shut down the oil and gas industry in Scotland as measures that are unlikely to help with cost of living pressures in Scotland.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): The Development Bank of Wales is supposed to be aiding businesses through cost of living pressures. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unacceptable that one company received £400,000 from the bank, and was then able to give the First Minister of Wales £200,000?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point here. The Development Bank of Wales, which is owned ultimately by the Welsh taxpayers, should be there to support businesses through cost of living pressures. It was able to make a £400,000 loan to a company that was then able to turn round and add £200,000 back into a political donation to enable the First Minister to win the Welsh Labour leadership election. It is a very good question, but it is not a question for me; it is one that should be answered by those on the shadow Front Bench. On this matter, they have been very silent indeed.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Small businesses, particularly those in retail and hospitality, are directly affected by cost of living challenges coming from covid and the energy price spike from the Ukraine conflict. The Chancellor has, therefore, introduced a 75% business rate relief scheme in England, which is supporting businesses in England. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State share my concern that that funding is not being used to the same degree in Wales, and that business rates in Wales are only being relieved at a rate of 40%, so businesses are paying more in tax?

David T. C. Davies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK Government made certain that the money for the business rate discount was passed on to the Welsh Labour Government, but instead of passing it on to the pubs, restaurants and small businesses that are so vital to communities in Wales, they have decided to spend it on other matters, such as the one they are voting on today. As a result, the average pub in Wales is paying thousands more in business rates than a pub just across the border in England. That is absolutely scandalous, and I urge the Welsh Labour Government to think about where their priorities are.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): No contrition, then, in any of those answers from the Secretary of State, whose party has, by freezing tax thresholds, piled on £960 extra on average to the tax bills of around 400,000 pensioners in Wales. The Prime Minister has now made a totally unfunded £46 billion promise to scrap national insurance. Will the Secretary of State tell us how on earth the Government will pay for that, and will he rule out raising income tax by 8p or scrapping winter fuel payments to do so?

David T. C. Davies: We have made it clear that we want to keep the triple lock to ensure that pensions continue to increase in line with inflation. We will be able to afford that by ensuring that we get growth in the economy, which is why we wanted to end the double taxation system of making those in work pay extra money through national insurance tax. We have also made it clear that we will make tax cuts only when we can afford them, because on the Conservative side of the House, we do not believe in making unfunded promises in order to buy votes.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): More than one in four children in Wales lives in poverty. Devolution has the capacity to transform people's lives, but the current First Minister is distracted by questions about his integrity, deleting messages and taking dodgy donations. After 25 years since the start of devolution, does the Secretary of State agree that Governments at both ends of the M4 need to recommit to integrity and transparency?

David T. C. Davies: I can absolutely assure the right hon. Lady that this Government, and the Conservative party, are completely committed to integrity—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members are laughing, but their own First Minister took £200,000 from a convicted criminal—one who had received £400,000 from a bank for which the First Minister is responsible—and told the covid committee that all the messages on his phone had been accidentally deleted by the IT department, but now we see a screenshot in which he urges people to delete their messages so that they cannot be subject to a freedom of information request. Labour Members have the audacity to sit there laughing when people ask questions about standards. I say that the right hon. Lady makes a very good point: let us collapse the coalition and stop supporting the Welsh Labour Government, and then we can get a decent Government with decent values running Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts: My party seeks to make a difference to the lives of the people of Wales, but the Secretary of State and I are in agreement for once when it comes to his judgments in relation to the First Minister. It screams hypocrisy, however, because the Tories in the Senedd voted against a Plaid Cymru motion to set a cap on political donations, and his party has still not returned a £10 million donation from a man who made racist and misogynistic remarks. In that spirit of open democracy, will he support a cap on donations to political parties?

David T. C. Davies: I will not sit here and start making policy on the hoof, but I say to the right hon. Lady—and I think she would agree—that I would not have taken hundreds of thousands of pounds in donations from somebody who had been convicted twice of environmental offences. If Labour Members are happy with that, it is a matter for them.

River Wye Action Plan

4. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the River Wye action plan. [902650]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): I thank my right hon. Friend for his work as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. The UK Government's River Wye action plan will halt ongoing decline of the River Wye to preserve and restore that treasured river to the rating of favourable condition.

Philip Dunne: As the Minister has already said, the environment is a devolved matter, but nobody seems to have told the River Wye, which rises in Wales and crosses the border to merge into the River Severn in England. I very much welcome the River Wye action plan, which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced recently. Has my hon. Friend seen any action taken by the Welsh Government to match the UK Government's commitment to cleaning up the polluted River Wye?

Fay Jones: In the interests of time, I will give my right hon. Friend a very short answer: no. The Welsh Government have failed to come to the table time and time again on this issue, which is close to my heart as a constituency MP for the River Wye. That has been the missing piece of the puzzle, and it is why we are seeing no action in Wales.

NHS Waiting Times

5. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on NHS waiting times. [902651]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): Healthcare is devolved to the Welsh Government, who have received record levels of funding to deliver on all their devolved responsibilities, receiving 20% more funding per person than in England.

Theresa Villiers: So many people in Wales are waiting longer for NHS care than people in England, and in a 12-month period, 40,000 people had to go from Wales to England for elective care. Does that not show that Labour's claims to be better for the NHS are completely false?

Fay Jones: My right hon. Friend is entirely right: the NHS is not safe in Labour's hands, and we have living proof of that in Wales. It is a great shame that when the Secretary of State for Health in England offered the support of the NHS in England to alleviate pressures on waiting times in Wales, the Welsh Health Secretary turned that support down. That is Labour's record on the NHS.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of the problems that a lot of my constituents have raised with me is that when they do get a letter calling them for an appointment—including one for which they have been waiting for some time—that letter arrives after the appointment date, because the Royal Mail is now delivering such an appalling service. Is it not time that we had a strong word to make sure that people who are being called for appointments get a chance to turn up to them, because they have actually received their letter on time?

Fay Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and one that I will certainly investigate with colleagues, but I think the problem lies with the mismanagement of the Welsh NHS, for which his party must take responsibility.

Victims of Crime: Support

7. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support victims of crime in Wales. [902653]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): The UK Government recognise the importance of victims having access to the support they need to recover from the impact of crime. That is why we are quadrupling funding for victim services, up from £41 million in 2010.

Tonia Antoniazzi: As a recent victim of crime, I know that one impact on victims is that it makes you reflect on how many crimes remain unsolved. The latest figures show that nine in 10 crimes in Wales went unsolved in the past six months, so what can the Minister say to the victims of the 82,000 reported crimes that went uncharged last year?

Fay Jones: First, may I say how sorry I am to learn that the hon. Lady has been a victim of crime? I know the experience she has gone through, and I personally send her my huge sympathies.

This Government have a proud record of delivering for victims of crime, whether through new pieces of legislation or the record headcount of police officers. Unfortunately, it was the Welsh Government who chose to reduce the number of police community support officers last year, which is having an impact on victims of crime.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we are all victims when senior Labour politicians make false and misleading statements at public inquiries?

Fay Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is deeply concerning that a First Minister should reveal himself to have acted in such a way, which appears to be entirely contrary. I look forward to Welsh Labour Members calling for further scrutiny of that issue.

Future of Steelmaking

10. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the steelmaking industry in Wales. [R] [902656]

11. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the steelmaking industry in Wales. [902657]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of subjects, including steelmaking in Wales. The Government are investing £500 million to retain steelmaking at Port Talbot and other Tata sites including Llanwern and Shotton, protecting 5,000 jobs and thousands more in the supply chain while increasing our economic security. At the same time, the Government have put aside £80 million for the transition board to spend on supporting anyone who loses their job in Port Talbot or in the wider community.

Matt Western: Whether it be the transmission pylons and lines needed to upgrade our power grid as demanded by the Winsor report, or the prospect of building steel-based offshore wind platforms, the Welsh steel industry can and should be central to our transition to a net zero nation. When historic investments in green steel are being made by European competitors, does the Secretary of State recognise that the Government's lack of ambition for Britain has let thousands of skilled workers down?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the importance of making sure there is a grid connection to enable an electric arc furnace to work properly. I have raised this issue with National Grid, and it has assured me that the grid connection can be made on time.

The hon. Gentleman makes a second reasonable point about the importance of being able to use steel produced in Port Talbot for floating offshore wind turbines. That is not the case at the moment because, as some of his Front Benchers seem to be unaware, the steel made in Port Talbot is coil, which is too thin to make those turbines. However, he will be pleased to know that there are discussions going on with one major investor to try to ensure that the steel produced from the arc furnace can be made in a way that could support floating offshore wind structures.

Rachel Hopkins: The sustainability of domestic automotive manufacturing is vital to the future prosperity of Luton's local economy, so what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the UK's automotive industry about the effect of losing our sovereign virgin steel production on their supply chain costs?

David T. C. Davies: I have regular discussions with the automotive industry, and I have also had regular discussions with the steel industry across the United Kingdom. Some 90% of the grades that are currently produced by Port Talbot can be produced using an electric arc furnace, and there is work going on to ensure that the other 10% can be.

May I just remind the hon. Lady that we actually have a plan for Port Talbot? When Tata came to us, it was looking to close down Port Talbot and pull out of the United Kingdom, a move that would have cost 8,000 jobs and 12,500 in the wider supply chain. As a result of that, the UK Conservative Government stepped forward with half a billion pounds of investment to support an electric arc furnace, and a further £80 million to support retraining workers and infrastructure improvements in Port Talbot. We have had not one single penny from the Welsh Labour Government, who instead have decided today to prioritise spending £120 million on more Senedd Members. More Senedd Members or support for steelworkers—I know what my priority is.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902727] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 May.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I know the whole House will join me in congratulating John Swinney on becoming Scottish National party leader and Scottish First Minister. I look forward to working constructively with him to deliver for the people of Scotland.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Kirsten Oswald: At last week's Prime Minister's questions, I highlighted the shocking rise in the number of teenagers trying vaping, and I asked the Prime Minister if he would take decisive action to stop vape advertising on football strips. He declined to do that. Since then, I have had an exchange with the Scottish chief medical officer, Professor Sir Gregor Smith, during a sitting of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee, and he said:

"Where I become very uncomfortable, and I am not supportive, is where the massive attraction of sports companies is used in a way that promotes behaviours that are known to be unsafe or unhealthy."—[*Official Report, Tobacco and Vapes Public Bill Committee*, 1 May 2024; c. 80, Q11.]

Can I ask the Prime Minister again: does he still think it is right that vape companies should sponsor football kits?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the hon. Lady agrees with me and the Government that we should do more to tackle youth vaping, and that is why we are bringing forward measures in the new Bill to restrict the availability and appeal of vapes to children specifically, whether that is flavours or, indeed, marketing. As she knows, advertising of vapes is already heavily restricted by UK regulations, including a ban on advertising on television, radio and most places online. We have seen football take positive voluntary action in the past on issues such as this, but I will say to the hon. Lady that the Government will respond to her specific amendment in the usual way.

Q2. [902728] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I declare that my daughter is a serving officer in the armed forces.

In recent weeks, my right hon. Friend has announced plans to control welfare and get people back to work and to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, and has passed legislation to get flights off to Rwanda. Does he agree with me that these are all issues that real people such as my constituents in South East Cornwall care about, and that the Leader of the Opposition should do the right thing and back them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her local area, and can I also thank her daughter for her service in the armed forces? My hon. Friend is right: I am not surprised that Labour Members do not back our plans to stop the boats and I am not surprised they do not back our plans to get people into work and reform welfare, but I do think that they should do the right thing when it comes to the security of our nation, and that is to back our plans to increase defence spending and give our brave armed forces personnel the resources they need to keep us safe.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I warmly welcome my hon. Friend, the new Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb)? After the representation that fine town has had recently, it is good to know that it has a proper champion back at last.

May I also warmly welcome the new Labour MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), to these Benches? If one week a Tory MP who is also a doctor says that the Prime Minister cannot be trusted with the NHS and joins Labour, and the next week the Tory MP for Dover—on the frontline of the small boats crisis—says that the Prime Minister "cannot be trusted" with our borders and joins Labour, what is the point of this failed Government staggering on?

The Prime Minister: Can I join the right hon. and learned Gentleman in welcoming his newest MP for Blackpool? He looks a lot happier than the Member sitting in that spot last week. Let me also join the right hon. and learned Gentleman in congratulating all new and paying tribute to all former councillors, police and crime commissioners and Mayors across the country. I hope that his new ones do him as proud as I am proud of all of mine, including such great leaders as Andy Street. They leave behind a strong legacy of more homes, more jobs and more investment, in sharp contrast to the legacy left by the last Labour Government, which was a letter joking that there was no money left.

Keir Starmer: In addition to losing two Tory MPs in two weeks, the Prime Minister has been on the receiving end of some of the biggest by-election swings in history. He has also lost 1,500 Tory councillors, half of his party's Mayors and a leadership election to a lettuce. How many more times do the public and his own MPs need to reject him before he takes the hint?

The Prime Minister: This time last year, I reminded the right hon. and learned Gentleman of some advice from his own mentor, Tony Blair, who said at the time that he

"can be as cocky as he likes about the local elections; come a general election, policy counts."—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2007; Vol. 460, c. 152.]

One year on from that advice, what has he managed? He has £28 billion of tax rises, 70 new business regulations, 30 U-turns and a deputy leader under a police investigation.

Keir Starmer: I am surprised that the Prime Minister brought up a police investigation; his record is played one, lost—well, actually it is two, there was the seatbelt as well. His record is played two, lost two in relation to police investigations. The voters keep telling him that it is not good enough. Instead of listening, he keeps telling them that everything is fine, if only they would realise his greatness. He just does not get it, but at least after Thursday night he can go to the many places he calls home and enjoy the fruits of his success. In Southampton or Downing Street, he has great Labour councils. At his mansion in Richmond, he can enjoy a brand-new Labour Mayor of North Yorkshire. At his pad in Kensington, he can celebrate a historic third term for the Mayor of London. Now that he, too, can enjoy the benefits of this changed Labour party, is he really still in such a hurry to get back to California?

The Prime Minister: I must say that I was surprised to see the right hon. and learned Gentleman in North Yorkshire, although probably not as surprised as he was when he realised he could not take the tube there. I can tell him that the people of North Yorkshire believe in hard work, secure borders, lower taxes and straight-talking common sense. They will not get any of that from a virtue-signalling lawyer from north London.

Keir Starmer: It was great to be in Northallerton, where they have just voted to reject the Prime Minister's proposition. He has finally found something in common with the British public: no matter where he calls home, all his neighbours are backing this changed Labour party. They keep rejecting him, because they have sussed him out. They know there is nothing behind the boasts, the gimmicks and the smug smile. He is a dodgy salesman desperate to sell them a dud. Sixteen days ago, when he held a press conference claiming victory on Rwanda, he said:

"The next few weeks will be about action...people want deeds not words."

Let us test that. How many small boat crossings have there been since he said that 16 days ago?

The Prime Minister: Actually, just before we get on to that, the right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about a changed Labour party—[*Interruption.*] This is important. He talked about a changed Labour party; he talks about it a lot. He also talked about his Mayor in London. Just this morning, we learned that the Labour Mayor in London believes there is an "equivalence" between the brutal terrorist attack of Hamas and Israel defending itself. Let me be crystal clear: there is absolutely no equivalence between a terrorist group and democratic state. Will he take this opportunity to demonstrate that the Labour party has changed? Will he condemn those comments from the Labour Mayor?

Keir Starmer: I know that was the last run-out before the general election, but the Prime Minister is getting ahead of himself in asking me questions.

I notice that the Prime Minister did not even attempt to answer the question. He knows the answer: since he claimed victory 16 days ago, there have been a staggering 2,400 small boat crossings. That is a gimmick, not a deterrent, and those 2,400 will be added to the Tories' asylum perma-backlog, which is forecast to rise to 100,000 by the end of the year. The Prime Minister pretends that he will remove them all to Rwanda, but Rwanda can take only a few hundred a year. At that rate, his grand plan would take over 300 years to remove them all. There are tens of thousands of people with their claims going unprocessed, who will be here for their entire lifetime, living in hotels at the taxpayers' expense. It is absurd to call that anything other than an amnesty handed to them by the Tory party, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman had the opportunity to condemn the comments of his Mayor—a Mayor who said that there is an "equivalence" between Hamas and Israel—and he did not do that. Everyone will see: that is the changed Labour party right there.

Since I became Prime Minister, small boat crossings are down by a third. That is because we have doubled National Crime Agency funding, increased enforcement rates, closed bank accounts, deported 24,000 people

and processed more claims.¹ When it comes to border control, there is a crucial difference between us: the Conservatives want secure borders; the right hon. and learned Gentleman is happy with open borders.

Keir Starmer: The whole country knows that removing less than 1% of asylum seekers is not stopping the boats; it is granting an amnesty—a Tory amnesty. If the Prime Minister thinks the voters are wrong, that his own MPs who have joined the Labour party are wrong, and that anyone believes any of the nonsense that he spouts, why does he not put it to the test and call a general election?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about removing people—this is a person who campaigned to stop the deportation of foreign national offenders. That shows how out of touch his values are with the British people.

It is yet another week where we have heard nothing about the right hon. and learned Gentleman's plan to do anything on the issues that matter to the country. Meanwhile, the Government are getting on with reforming welfare and getting people into work—he opposes it. We are controlling legal and illegal migration—he opposes it. And, as we heard, we are boosting defence spending to strengthen our country—he opposes it. That is the difference: he snipes from the sidelines; the Conservatives are building a brighter future.

Q4. [902730] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): When it comes to small boat crossings, there is a lot of talk of human rights, but surely the only human right and life that matters is the life of children who are being taken across the channel. In that respect, will the Government now do the only thing that will actually be a real deterrent and arrest and detain all those who land illegally on our shores and then offshore them promptly so that, once and for all, we can save lives and end this cruel and callous trade?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that these crossings are incredibly dangerous and risk people's lives. Just weeks ago, a seven-year-old girl died attempting a crossing. That is why, as a matter of basic compassion, we must do everything we can to break the cycle of the criminal gangs.

That is why we need a deterrent. That is what the National Crime Agency says, and that is how we dealt with illegal migrants from Albania. It is only by removing people who should not be here that we remove the reason for them to come in the first place. That is how we will control our borders. It is clear that it is only the Conservative party that has a plan not only to stop the boats but to stop the tragic loss of life in the channel, too.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): May I begin by also congratulating the fantastic John Swinney on becoming Scotland's First Minister? Our opponents should be very careful what they wish for.

As we await the imminent Israeli incursion into Rafah, where 1.2 million people are sheltering, including 600,000 children, it has been reported that the United States has paused an arms shipment to Israel. The UK will now follow suit, will it not?

1.[*Official Report*, 14 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 4WC.](Correction)

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman may not realise that the UK Government do not directly provide or ship arms to Israel. When it comes to the situation in Rafah, I have been very clear that we are deeply concerned about a full military incursion, given the devastating humanitarian impact; I have made that point specifically to Prime Minister Netanyahu whenever we have spoken. I will continue to urge all sides to focus on the negotiations at hand, to bring about a pause in the conflict, to release hostages and get more aid in.

Stephen Flynn: Let us be clear: the confidence that Israel has shown in its military ambitions in Rafah stems from the silence of its allies on the Front Benches in this place and elsewhere across the world. We all know that UK arms and tech are supporting Israel's activities in Gaza, and will be used in any attack on Rafah. Knowing that, and the devastation that will occur, surely the time has come to end our complicity and halt arms sales to Israel.

The Prime Minister: Of course we take our defence export responsibilities extremely seriously. That is why we operate one of the most robust licensing control regimes anywhere in the world. We periodically review advice on Israel's commitment to international humanitarian law, and Ministers always act in accordance with that advice. That is crystal clear for the House to understand. Following the most recent assessment, our position on export licences is unchanged. I know that the right hon. Gentleman will join me in urging all parties to engage in the negotiations, so that we can see a pause in fighting to get more aid in, hostages out and bring about a sustainable ceasefire in this conflict.

Q5. [902731] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): My constituents in rural villages and on the fringes of the Grimsby-Cleethorpes urban area are very concerned about overdevelopment. They recognise that highway infrastructure and public services are already overloaded. Could my right hon. Friend consider amending planning guidance, so that local plans and decisions taken by local planning authorities are not overridden by planning inspectors? They would be greatly encouraged if he would agree to meet me and my colleagues from neighbouring constituencies, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), to discuss this further.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that sustainable development must be at the heart of the planning system. That is why we are committed to meeting housing needs by building the right homes in the right places, and protecting the environmental assets that matter most. The national planning policy framework is clear that we should be responsive to local circumstances. I know that the local plan in my hon. Friend's area is due for further consultation later this year, and that he will engage with that process, but I will happily meet him and colleagues to discuss the situation further.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The abuse suffered by 88-year-old Ann King at the hands of staff in her care home was captured on a hidden camera. The footage is stomach churning. Ann died in October 2022, and it took nearly a year for the Care Quality Commission

to launch a criminal investigation. Ann's children are working to protect other care home residents from being subjected to such appalling abuse. Her son came to see me, as his MP, to ask for my help with their campaign. Will the Prime Minister join me in backing Ann's law, a proposal for measures, including a national register, to professionalise the care workforce and hold abusive staff to account? Will he meet Ann's family and me to discuss this idea?

The Prime Minister: Let me first extend my sympathies to Ann's family for what she went through. Obviously that is not appropriate, and I will ensure that the Department engages with the right hon. Gentleman and Ann's family on the proposed law. He is right to say that we should have high standards across the care industry, and we are working towards more investment to support our care home staff, making sure that they have training qualifications and development, and that we have a regime that can hold everyone to account for delivering the high standards that we would all expect.

Q6. [902732] **Miss Sarah Dines** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest qualities that those on these Back Benches bring to Westminster is plain old-fashioned common sense? Derbyshire common sense led the good people of Ashbourne and surrounding villages to reject the Sadiq Khan ULEZ rules, and even the Welsh 20 mph rules. Will my right hon. Friend join me, and perhaps ask his neighbour the Chancellor if he will pay for the Ashbourne bypass?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has been a dedicated campaigner for the Ashbourne bypass. The Government are committed to investing more in the midlands, and in particular to putting every penny of the £9.6 billion from High Speed 2 back into the local area. My hon. Friend is right: we will focus on drivers and their priorities, rather than continuing the war on motorists that is being waged by the Labour Mayor in London, but also by the Labour party in Wales, with both the ultra low emission zone and 20 mph speed limits. It is this party that is unashamedly on the side of the motorist.

Q3. [902729] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Our cross-party child of the north all-party parliamentary group found that expectant mothers were terminating wanted pregnancies because they could not afford another mouth to feed. Recent figures show that infant and child death rates have increased in the most deprived areas, and 50 children have died alone in unregulated accommodation. Is this the Prime Minister's plan for a brighter Britain in action?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, what the hon. Lady has described is a tragedy. No one wants to see children grow up in those circumstances, and that is why I am proud that since 2010, with a range of measures, the Government have overseen a significant fall in poverty, particularly child poverty. I will ensure that, for the benefit of her constituents, the hon. Lady is aware of all the support that is in place—through the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions, and through local authorities—for the most vulnerable families in our communities.

Q9. [902735] John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Weston-super-Mare is a growing town, so local health services are rightly growing as well. Weston General Hospital is treating more patients for a wider variety of problems than before, GPs' surgeries are offering thousands more appointments this year than last, and our new diagnostic centre means faster tests and treatments. However, there is a fly in our NHS-prescribed ointment: dentistry is not fixed yet. The new dental recovery plan is very welcome, but when will it mean appointments that Westonians can book?

The Prime Minister: Our dentistry recovery plan will make dental services faster, simpler and fairer for patients, funding about 2.5 million more appointments. I was pleased to note that access is improving in my hon. Friend's area, with nearly 10% more children seeing a dentist in June last year than in the previous year, but we are going further: the new patient premium that was announced last year is ensuring that more NHS dentistry will be provided, and since then, at the end of January, 500 more practices have said that they are now open to new patients.

Q7. [902733] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is more than a month since the parliamentary ombudsman delivered the long-awaited report on pension injustices, but women born in the 1950s in my constituency, and indeed in every constituency across these islands, are still waiting to hear whether the UK Government will listen to its recommendations and deliver compensation. I was proud to see the Scottish Parliament support a motion last week calling for compensation to be delivered without delay, but utterly dismayed to see members of both the Conservative party and the Labour party abstain. Can the Prime Minister finally tell us when the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—the WASPI women—will receive the compensation that they rightly deserve?

The Prime Minister: I understand the strong feelings across the Chamber about this topic, and the desire for urgency in addressing them. However, following the ombudsman's five-year investigation, it is imperative that we take the time to conduct a thorough review of the comprehensive findings that have been published. An update will be given to the House once those findings have been fully considered. More broadly, we are committed to ensuring that pensioners have the dignity and security in retirement that they deserve. Most recently, we increased the state pension by £900 a year, thanks to the triple lock.

Q12. [902738] Sir Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Is the Prime Minister as appalled as I am by reports of militant civil servant and trade union political activists seeking to find ways not to implement the Rwanda deportations? Does he agree that if they are not prepared to implement the will of the Government and an Act of Parliament that was passed by both Houses, they should conclude that being in the civil service is perhaps not for them? Maybe they can look for alternative employment at other left-wing organisations that masquerade as being impartial. Maybe they could try the BBC or "Channel 4 News".

The Prime Minister: My expectation is that civil servants will continue to be committed to supporting our priority of stopping the boats, and will deliver, in accordance with the civil service code. My hon. Friend will know that we made specific changes to ensure compliance with that code as we push through with our plans. More broadly, I agree with him that we are the only party that has a plan to stop the boats. We will face down all the obstacles in our way to deliver on this crucial priority for the British people, whoever stands in our way—whether it is the Labour party or others. We will deliver for this country on this vital issue.

Q8. [902734] Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): China has now hacked the data of defence personnel, the Electoral Commission and various other public institutions, and has targeted many Members of this House, yet plans by China's largest wind turbine manufacturer, Ming Yang Smart Energy, to build its largest European facility right here in the UK advance at pace. The facility is set to be built in Scotland. Given widely shared concerns about the involvement of hostile states such as China in the UK's critical national energy infrastructure, does the Prime Minister not agree that now is the time for this project to be paused and reviewed by the Government on national security grounds? If not, what message does he think that sends?

The Prime Minister: As I have said repeatedly, China is a country with different values from ours, and is acting in a way that is increasingly authoritarian at home and assertive abroad. It is right that we take firm steps to protect ourselves against that, particularly in the area of economic security. This Government passed the National Security and Investment Act 2021 precisely so that we can screen transactions—without commenting on individual ones, of course—to protect this country. We have used those powers, not least to block Chinese investment in a sensitive semiconductor company, but also to ensure that the Chinese state nuclear company had no part in the future of our nuclear plan. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we are alive to the challenges, and have passed laws that give us the powers to protect against them.

Q14. [902740] Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Five-year-old Benedict Blythe was a lovely little boy who attended a primary school in my constituency. Sadly, he died of anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction. The coroner's inquest has not yet reported, but on average, two children in every class have a food allergy, and more allergic reactions take place in school than in other setting outside the home. Severe allergic reactions are on the rise and can be fatal, yet there is no explicit legal requirement for schools to have allergy medication and an allergy policy, or for other recommended safeguards to be made available; there is only guidance. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Benedict's parents, Helen and Pete, so that we can discuss a way forward to ensure that children who suffer from allergies can be safer in school, including by ensuring that schools have an allergy policy, adrenalin pens, and staff who know how to use them?

The Prime Minister: First, may I extend my sympathy to Benedict's family? It is always tragic to hear about the loss of a child. We fully understand the seriousness

of severe allergies, and believe that children with medical conditions should be properly supported to enjoy a full education and be safe at school. There is a legal duty on the governing body of schools to make arrangements for supporting pupils, including setting out what needs to be done, symptoms and treatment, but I will ensure that my right hon. Friend gets a meeting with the Health Secretary to discuss how we could further support pupils with serious allergies.

Q10. [902736] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Yesterday, the Chancellor confirmed that it is Government policy to abolish national insurance, at a £46 billion annual cost, with no indication of where the money will come from. Can the Prime Minister rule out further freezes in tax allowances or an 8p increase in income tax to pay for it?

The Prime Minister: That is total nonsense, and of course I rule that out. There is no unfunded policy. What we have said is that we have a long-term ambition to keep cutting national insurance to end the unfairness of the double taxation on work. We will make progress towards that goal in the next Parliament, just as we already have in this one by cutting national insurance by a third in six months, delivering a £900 tax cut, at the same time as increasing investment in the NHS and increasing the state pension. It is increasingly clear what this reveals: the Labour party opposes tax cuts for working people.

Q15. [902741] Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Empowering local pharmacies is a key part of this Government's plan to cut waiting lists. In Guildford, we have recently lost two neighbouring pharmacies, but there is good news. I am pleased to report that, by working diligently with local pharmacists, concerned residents, the Minister and the integrated care board, I have helped to secure a new pharmacy in Burpham. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming this new pharmacy and does he agree that it is vital that residents should have access to a good, efficient and, above all, local pharmacy?

The Prime Minister: I care deeply about the future of our community pharmacies, and I am pleased to hear about my hon. Friend's success in securing a new one for her constituents, joining the 10,500 others across the country. She is right about the important role that our local pharmacies can play, and that is why we are backing them with £645 million of additional funding through Pharmacy First, so that people can now go straight to their pharmacist and receive treatment for seven of the most common ailments, saving patients' time and ensuring that they get the care they need quicker and closer to home.

Q11. [902737] Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Last Friday, *The Guardian* reported major structural deficiencies at Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport. Stepping Hill's major out-patients building, the radiology department and the critical care unit have all been condemned. In March, I met with senior officials at Stockport NHS Trust and they were clear that a sustained lack of capital investment was the root cause of problems at my local hospital. Does the Prime Minister believe that our hospitals quite literally crumbling is the price worth paying for 14 years of successive Conservative failure?

The Prime Minister: We fully recognise the need to invest in health infrastructure across the country, including at Stepping Hill Hospital. That is why we are currently spending around £4 billion a year for trusts to spend on necessary maintenance and repairs, on top of the £20 billion new hospital programme and the additional funding that was put aside to deal with RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—maintenance. The hon. Gentleman talks about a legacy of the NHS; all he needs to do is look at his party's record in Wales, where people are currently experiencing the worst A&E performance and the longest wait times anywhere in Great Britain.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Nottingham City Council is expecting to fall short of its housing target by 6,000 new homes. Last time this happened, Rushcliffe, as a neighbouring authority, was forced to take thousands of homes on top of its own housing target, which led to huge pressures on our green spaces and public services. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me and my constituents that the changes we have made to the planning system will mean that this time we will be protected from Labour's failure in Nottingham?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. While on this side of the House the Conservatives believe in building the right homes in the right places with local people having a say, all that Labour would do is impose top-down housing targets on areas, decimating our precious countryside. In Nottinghamshire, as she says, we can see the difference between the well-run Conservative county council and the bankrupt Nottingham Council, which has left residents to pick up the bill for its profligacy.

Q13. [902739] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Untreated sewage was pumped into English waterways for more than 3.6 million hours last year, and into the sea off Sussex beaches three times in the last 24 hours alone, yet since privatisation the water companies have been allowed to rack up debts of over £64 billion and their shareholders have been allowed to pocket £78 billion in dividends. The majority of the public, including 58% of Conservative supporters and 80% of Labour supporters, want to turf out of the profiteering polluters. They want water brought back into public hands. When is the Prime Minister going to listen to them and end the legalised scam of privatisation?

The Prime Minister: Our plans to tackle this go further than those of any previous Government. In fact, we now monitor 100% of overflows, up from just 7% under the Labour party; we are investing a record £56 billion into our water infrastructure; and we have enshrined strict targets in law and introduced unlimited fines for water companies, holding them and their bosses to account. It is crystal clear. The record shows that only one party has a clear plan to tackle this issue for the environment: the Conservative party.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Everybody knows that Stockton is a great place with great people and a great football team. My right hon. Friend recently visited the mighty Stockton Town to see the incredible work they do in the local community, and he heard about their promotion battle. I am sure that he will want to join me in congratulating Micky Dunwell and the mighty Anchors on their promotion.

The Prime Minister: It was fantastic to visit Stockton Town football club with my hon. Friend, who is a brilliant champion for his local community, which I see at first hand on a weekly basis. I join him in congratulating

everyone at the club on their well-deserved promotion, and I hope that some of their good luck rubs off on Southampton in the coming weeks.

End of Custody Supervised Licence: Extension

12.37 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the expansion of the end of custody supervised licence scheme.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question.

Protecting the public is our No. 1 priority, so it is right that we take tough and decisive action to keep putting the most serious offenders behind bars, and for longer, as the public rightly expect. We are carrying out the biggest prison expansion programme since the Victorian era, and we are ramping up removals of foreign national offenders.

We have a duty to ensure that the prison system continues to operate safely and effectively, with offenders held in safe and decent conditions. This means ensuring that no prison exceeds a safe maximum operating limit. ECSL allows lower-level offenders to be released before their automatic release date. In March, the Lord Chancellor stated that we will

“work with the police, prisons and probation leaders to make further adjustments as required.”—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 157.]

This extension is in line with what he said.

ECSL operates only when absolutely necessary and is kept under constant review. I know that many Members of this House will be concerned about the early release of offenders into the community, but I make it clear that only offenders who would soon be released anyway will be considered for ECSL.

We have put in place safeguards, including that the Prison Service retains the discretion to prevent the ECSL release of any offender where early release presents a higher risk than if they were released at their automatic release date. There are strict eligibility criteria, and anyone convicted of a sexual offence, a terrorist offence or a serious violence offence is ruled out. Public safety will always be our No. 1 priority, and all those released will still be subject to probation supervision and stringent licence conditions.

Shabana Mahmood: Here we go again. Never in this country have a Government been forced to release prisoners more than two months early. This is the price that the public are paying for a justice system in crisis and a Government in freefall.

The early release scheme has now undergone three major extensions in just six months: it was quietly started in October, when the Government began releasing prisoners up to 18 days early; in March it was slipped out that it had been expanded from 18 to 60 days; and now it has emerged through a media leak that it has been extended once again, this time to 70 days. Worst of all, the Government are doing all of this in secret. They have not responded to any freedom of information requests, parliamentary questions or even the Justice Committee with any useful details about this scheme. The Government are releasing prisoners but not the facts. The strategy is clear for all to see: say nothing, try to get away with it and get to the other side of the general election. It is shameless and, frankly, a disgrace.

The public and this House rightly expect the Minister to be transparent and honest, so let us see whether he will answer these basic and simple questions. Why the increase of early release to 70 days? How many offenders have been released in the six months since the scheme became operational? How will they ensure that the probation service has the time and resources to adequately assess risk and protect the public? And will he give a guarantee to the House today that this secretive scheme will not be extended again?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for her question and would gently say a number of things to her. First, she suggests we were sneaking this out in October and March; that included statements to this House and was entirely transparent. On the hon. Lady's party's record, it operated an early release scheme for three years between 2007 and 2010, which leaves her on rather shaky ground. She talked about a media leak. This was an operational decision with operational guidance sent out to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and prison governors as well as other stakeholders, including, if I recall correctly, the probation union, for a minor change that was already reflected in the points made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Justice in March to this House.

The hon. Lady talked about data. The Secretary of State has been consistently clear that we will publish the data on an annualised basis, in exactly the same way as we do, for example, for deaths in custody and supplementary breakdowns of the prison population. We have been clear that we will always ensure that the prisons system has the spaces for the courts to be able to send people to prison. We are making an appropriate operational decision to ensure that continues to be the case.

The hon. Lady also rightly asked about probation, and I suspect that in our exchanges the one thing on which we might find ourselves in agreement is paying tribute to those who work in our probation service. As she will know, since 2021 we have increased the budget for the service by £155 million, with 4,000 additional probation officers in training. We have worked with the leadership of our probation service on this scheme and the probation union was one of the bodies we notified on the changes to the operational guidance.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is a perfectly rational, sensible and pragmatic response to the pressures in our prisons, and the Minister should take credit for it. However, I do ask him to reconsider the point about the transparency of data—precisely because it is a sensible thing to do, there is no reason why we should not release the figures in better time. But the underlying problem, which all parties in this House must face up to, is that the pressures in our prisons, to which the Justice Committee has repeatedly referred, stem from decades of underfunding by Governments of all parties? Prison costs £46,000-plus per year for each place, so it is a very expensive way of dealing with people, and not always the best means for handling lower-level offenders. May we have a more intelligent debate on sentencing and the purpose of prison, and perhaps we could start with the Minister committing to bringing back the sentencing Bill, which would enable us to have a more nuanced approach?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for his questions. He rightly highlights the ongoing capacity challenges and a number of the drivers of those, one being that the average custodial sentence in this country has gone up from 14 months to about 21. In addition, the remand population has gone up from about 9,000 to some 16,500, partly as a result of the covid backlogs in the courts system and partly as a result of the Bar strike. On the publication of data, I gently and respectfully refer him to the answer I gave to his Committee and at the Dispatch Box just now. It is important that alongside recognising the pressures the system is under, we are taking steps to increase capacity, both by increasing the removals of foreign national offenders and doing it at a faster rate, and through having built almost 6,000 new prison places. That is in stark contrast to the record of the Labour party, which built not one of the 7,500 Titan prison places.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Court backlogs are sky high; prisons are dangerously close to capacity, which is why this policy had to be implemented; and the Government are claiming, as the Minister has just done, to be carrying out a big prison expansion programme, yet their record is appalling. In 2016, in response to the Taylor review, the Government committed to building two secure schools for young offenders. Since then, the budget has spiralled out of control and not one of those schools has opened. Does this not all just prove that the Conservatives cannot be trusted with our justice system?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady knows that I have a huge amount of respect for her, but even by Lib Dem standards that was stretching the bounds of credibility a little, not least because, as she will be aware, we have built two new prisons. We also have one in construction and two that have completed planning, and one that is subject to a planning appeal. As for the secure school, she should look forward to its opening in a matter of days.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend expand a little on the great improvements being made to increase capacity? Will he tell us a little more about the progress on ensuring that more foreign national offenders are removed to their own countries? Will he expand a little, as this seems to be badly understood by Opposition Members from all parties, on quite how much of a prison building programme the Government have? Will he say something on the number of prisons and the number of spaces that that will create, and on the consequent prospects for the rehabilitation of offenders and, in time, having fewer victims of crime?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that and I pay tribute to his work in the justice system not only in this House, but prior to his being a Member of it. I believe—I will, of course, correct this if I am slightly out—that about 16,000 FNOs have now been removed. It is timely that as I say that, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary appears in the Chamber, so that I can pay tribute to him and his Department for their work on delivering that. On prison places, I set out to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) the progress on the six new prisons. Alongside that, we have built a vast number of rapid deployment cells and new house blocks, so we are expanding our prison

capacity rapidly. As I say, that stands in stark contrast to the failure to deliver on the Titan prison places by the Labour party.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Napo has said that

“the ECSL scheme is an unmitigated failure and has not only been extended without parliamentary scrutiny but represents an increasing risk to public safety”.

The Secretary of State knows that our probation service is in crisis and cannot cope without a significant increase in support and resources. Will the Government be providing that?

Edward Argar: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. As I said to the shadow Secretary of State, I have great respect for the work done by those in our probation service. Indeed, I have met the probation unions in the past. Although we do not always agree, I have huge respect for the work those unions do in representing their members.

I would make two points. First, to say that it was done without scrutiny in this House stretches the bounds of credibility. There have been two statements by the Secretary of State and multiple oral parliamentary question sessions, and I have undergone a polite but thorough grilling at the Justice Committee by its Chair. I do not think it stacks up to say that this has not been subject to scrutiny.

On the hon. Lady's underlying point, I set out earlier that we are investing in probation. There is £155 million of additional investment a year since 2021 and there are 4,000 more probation officers and staff in training.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): A moment ago, the Minister set out the significant increase in the number of people being held on remand—I think he said it had increased from 9,000 to 16,000. What work are the Government doing to address court backlogs? What steps are being taken to look at other routes for monitoring people who are on remand, who could perhaps serve their remand period in the community under a tagging system?

Edward Argar: To correct myself, there are now 16,500 people on remand in the prison population. On court backlogs, we have increased the investment in our courts and the number of sitting days, and we are seeing progress. Obviously, courts take the decision on whether to remand or bail someone, and we can help that process by giving the courts the information they need. We continue to invest in the Bail Information Service, which gives sentencers reassurance about the information they need to make a judgment call about whether someone is safe to be bailed. We are increasing our investment in the community accommodation service, so that when someone is not bailed because they do not have a stable address, there is an increased opportunity for them to have an address, giving sentencers the opportunity to bail them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister and the Chair of the Justice Committee know, I have been in the House long enough to know when something is a sticking plaster. Perhaps the extension is necessary, but it is a sticking plaster. How many Queen's Speeches since 2010 have included a thorough look at the justice system with a royal commission?

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

That has never happened. We all know that building prisons does not solve the crisis. We need radical reform of the whole justice system, which will need extra resources and real motivation from an incoming Labour Government. Does the Minister agree with me?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have occasionally tussled across the Chamber. I agree with some of what he says. He will not be surprised that I do not agree with his last statement because, judging by the track record up to 2010, I fear it would be another case of being let down by Labour. I am grateful for his typically thoughtful comments and his looking at the bigger picture behind the challenges we face.

It is right that we are putting those who commit the most serious crimes in prison for longer to protect society and ensure they pay their debt to society, but it is also important that we look at how we rehabilitate people when they are in prison. We all want those who have served their time to come out and live their lives, within bounds, in the community, and to be constructive and positive contributors to society. That is why we are focusing on providing education in prison and getting people into employment. I am grateful to the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), for his work and focus on that area, both when he was Secretary of State for Education and as my predecessor. There are currently measures before Parliament, for example in the Sentencing Bill, that offer the House an opportunity to think about other ways to do things.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Llefarydd. This announcement comes after nine prisoners have recently lost their lives in HMP Parc in Bridgend. The Ministry of Justice says it will not step in. A private prison in Wales is an unaccountable anomaly that fails everyone—victims and prisoners alike. While we await the long anticipated devolution of justice, will the Minister tell me why, after 25 years, there is still no clarity over which ombudsman is responsible for health in Parc?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. We may disagree in our views on the devolution of justice to Wales, but she raises an important issue about

the deaths in the past few months in HMP and YOI Parc. I visited Parc recently and spoke to the governor and director, those in custody and those working at Parc. I have to be cautious about what I say, given that the matter will be before the coroner and the ombudsman. I will be appearing before the Welsh Affairs Committee next week, when I suspect some of the issues will be debated. I am happy to have a discussion with the right hon. Lady, but it is right that I do not stray at the Dispatch Box when these matters are before the coroner and the ombudsman.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Minister will be happy to have a discussion with the MP whose constituency the prison is in, as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to all the questions. The scheme was initially designed to allow short-term early release by a matter of days, yet some releases are now early by some 70 days. Does the Minister understand why victims of crime are anxious that so-called “soft crime” criminals are getting an easier time? Victims of crime are told that perpetrators have been released early, so the victims can prepare themselves to see those perpetrators down the town or at the local supermarket, for example, which can be extremely disconcerting, even if it is not unexpected.

Edward Argar: Mr Speaker, I reassure you that I was due to be meeting the Member whose constituency HMP Parc is in at this moment in time, but I am here at the Dispatch Box. The meeting has been rescheduled and there is a date in the diary. As I promised at the last oral questions, that meeting has been arranged.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is right to highlight that point. Our ECSL protections are significantly more stringent than those used by the Labour party when it ran its scheme for three years. Unlike its scheme, ours allows governors to veto the release of any prisoner when they think early release will create a risk to victims. There are a number of exemptions from the scheme and it allows for rigorous conditions to be placed on the release licence, be it tagging, exclusion zones or curfews. Prisoners will be well aware that if they breach those conditions, which are put in place to protect victims, they will hear the clang of the prison gate and be recalled.

Russia

12.57 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement to the House regarding measures that His Majesty's Government will take in response to the reckless and dangerous activities of the Russian Government across Europe and now suspected here in the UK.

As was reported on Friday 26 April, five individuals have been charged in connection with an investigation into alleged offences under the National Security Act 2023, as part of a counter-terrorism policing investigation. The offences relate to what was widely reported by the media as a suspected arson attack on a Ukraine-linked business in the UK. The Crown Prosecution Service has confirmed that the charges relate to alleged

“hostile activity in the UK in order to benefit a foreign state—namely Russia.”

I pay tribute to our law enforcement agencies for their quick and professional work to ensure these charges were brought. They are the first charges to be brought under the new National Security Act. Measures that this Government brought forward and this House passed are already being used to keep our country safe.

I thank the emergency services who responded to the fire at a commercial property in London where the suspected activity took place. The charges are serious and it is only through good fortune that nobody was hurt. I reassure the House that public safety is of the utmost importance, which is why the law enforcement response has been quick and decisive.

As Members will appreciate, I must not say anything further on this specific case, or any related case, to avoid prejudicing the outcome of ongoing criminal proceedings. I ask the House to respect that and to avoid using the debate to add to speculation about the incident. It is vital that justice runs its course.

However, I wish to highlight to the House a pattern of suspected Russian activity that we are seeing across Europe. This is not the first time that we have uncovered malign activity in the UK that is seemingly linked to Russia in the past year. In September, five Bulgarian nationals were charged with conspiring to commit espionage activities in the UK on behalf of Russia. A sixth individual was later charged and legal proceedings against all six are ongoing.

There is a much broader pattern of Russian malign activities across Europe. These include: plans for sabotage activities against military aid for Ukraine in Germany and in Poland; espionage in Bulgaria and in Italy; cyber-attacks and disinformation activities; air space violations; and GPS jamming with impact on civil aviation.

Over a number of years, we have witnessed Russia and its intelligence services engage in yet more open and brazen attempts to undermine our security, harm our people and interfere in our democracies. Such attempts involve Litvinenko, Georgia, Crimea, Salisbury, Ukraine and activities across Europe. Since the illegal invasion of Ukraine, the rhetoric, threats and accusations from Russia have only increased, as Putin seeks to justify the death and destruction that he has brought to the Ukrainian

people. These activities bear all the hallmarks of a deliberate campaign by Russia designed to “to bring the war home” across Europe, and to undermine our collective resolve to support Ukraine in its fight. It will not work.

As the Prime Minister said in Poland last month, we are at a turning point for European security. With our allies, we will stand firm in the face of Russian threats to the UK and to our way of life. It is why, after Salisbury, we took measures with our partners to make Europe a harder operating environment for Russian intelligence services, including the expulsion of 23 undeclared Russian intelligence officers from the UK. It is also why the UK has announced the biggest strengthening of the UK's national defence in a generation, with a fully funded plan to grow the defence budget to 2.5% of GDP by 2030.

The UK and our allies will not falter in our support for Ukraine, because it is existential to the security of Europe. This is why the Prime Minister has also announced an uplift in UK military aid to Ukraine, bringing it to £3 billion this year, and has committed to that level of support every year until the end of the decade, or longer if it is sadly still required. We have sanctioned more than 1,700 individuals, over 90% of the Russian banking sector, and more than 130 oligarchs and family members, with a combined net worth of £147 billion at the time of the invasion.

As of October, over £22 billion-worth of Russian assets were reported frozen as a result of UK sanctions. These assets can no longer be taken back to Russia to fund Putin's war machine. We consider Russia's campaign to undermine our support for Ukraine as unacceptable and it is destined to fail. We must wait for the ongoing criminal cases across Europe, including here in the UK, to conclude, but given these allegations, the Government will not wait to take further action to send a strong deterrence message to Russia and to further reduce the ability of the Russian intelligence services to threaten the UK. That is why today, in conjunction with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, I am announcing a package of measures to make it clear to Russia that we will not tolerate such apparent escalations.

I can tell the House that we will: expel the Russian defence attaché, an undeclared military intelligence officer; remove diplomatic premises status from several Russian-owned properties in the UK, including Seacox House, a Russia-owned property in Sussex, and the trade and defence section in Highgate, which we believe have been used for intelligence purposes; and impose new restrictions on Russian diplomatic visas, including capping the length of time that Russian diplomats can spend in the UK.

The measures that we and our international partners have taken in recent years have already made the UK an extremely challenging operating environment for the Russian intelligence services. These further measures will serve only to strengthen our resilience to the Russian threat.

Our NATO allies share our view of Russia's alleged behaviour, as seen in the North Atlantic Council statement of last week. Russia has failed to provide any explanation of these events. In the coming days, we should expect accusations of Russophobia, conspiracy theories, and hysteria from the Russian Government. That is not new and the British people and the British Government will not fall for it and will not be taken for fools by Putin's bots, trolls and lackeys.

[James Cleverly]

Russia's explanation was totally inadequate; our response will be resolute and firm.

Our message to Russia is clear: stop this illegal war; withdraw your troops from Ukraine; and cease your malign activities. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: As the Secretary of State himself noted at the beginning of his statement, he has referred to a live case. This case is sub judice and I ask other Members not to refer to it in their questions. I call the shadow Home Secretary.

1.5 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement.

It is the first job of any Government to keep our country safe from those who wish to do us harm, not least those who wish to undermine our democracy and everything that we stand for. We pay tribute to the remarkable work of our intelligence and security services and our law enforcement agencies—at home and abroad—which strain every sinew to keep us safe. We will always work with the Government on those national security issues.

The arson attack that the Home Secretary describes was a very serious one. The charges now laid are important. We support the work of law enforcement in this case, and it is immensely important that nothing is done to cut across that criminal justice case. I simply ask for the Home Secretary's reassurance that a investigation is under way not just into the specific offences, but into the wider context and any wider threats to our national security that might be linked with this incident.

The Home Secretary has been clear in linking these charges to Russia and we echo his strong condemnation of Russian interference and hostile activity here in the UK and throughout Europe. Repeatedly, we have seen a brazen disregard by Russia for the rule of law, for the UK, for our allies and for our domestic security. As my right hon. Friends, the shadow Secretaries of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and for Defence have made clear, we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government in our support for Ukraine. Any change in Government will not change that strong cross-party support, as we stand with our allies. Putin must be defeated in Ukraine, and Britain must stand four-square behind our Ukrainian friends.

Russia under Putin is a long-term, generational threat to the security of Europe, which requires a long-term response. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary said just yesterday, the defence of the UK starts in Ukraine, but as the Home Secretary has made clear, these challenges are also to our homeland security, which is why we support wholeheartedly the measures that the Home Secretary set out today. Just as we worked on a cross-party basis with the Government to pass the National Security Act 2023, so we will work closely with them in going further. May I ask the Home Secretary a few further questions about these and any further measures that the Government may be able to take and ask him whether he expects there to be a diplomatic response from Russia?

As we saw in Salisbury to an appalling extent, there is a willingness of Russian-sponsored actors to put the safety of British citizens and British residents at risk through cyber-threats—threats to undermine our democracy and our economy. I am concerned that we have known about the scale of these threats for some time, and that, in some areas, we have been too slow to respond. The Home Secretary has been too slow to rid the UK of illicit finance. He will know that concerns have been raised about prohibited imports of Russian-origin oil through third countries making their way to UK shores. Can he tell me what action is being taken to ensure that sanctions are being enforced?

The Home Secretary will know that there is real concern that the UK is still too easy for lawyers and accountants and for the laundering of Russian money through the UK that potentially aids and abets Putin's war. The US has seized huge amounts of Russian-related assets as part of the sanctions evasion and charged more than 70 individuals in that regard. Can he confirm that no one has yet been charged with sanctions evasion in the US and set out what is being done to address the issue?

The Government said that in principle they support the seizing of Russian assets to fund the reconstruction of Ukraine, but there have been no proposals to take that forward. Will the Home Secretary tell us what is happening there? We have also still not had a full account of the scale of risk from golden visas. He will know, too, that there are threats to our democracy. The work of the defending democracy taskforce is far too limited. While the Security Minister is working on that, what engagement has the Home Secretary had, and has it been discussed at the National Security Council?

Finally, the update to the Government's integrated review warned in March last year that

"the transition into a multipolar, fragmented and contested world has happened more quickly and definitively than anticipated."

From the Iranian-sponsored kidnap and kill threats on UK soil to the repression of Hong Kong protesters outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester, the UK has undergone, because of behaviour not just from Russia but more widely, a fundamental shift in the threat landscape, as increasingly aggressive state actors feel emboldened to target the UK, often in co-operation with serious and organised crime. I urge the Home Secretary to look at the work that was done after the huge shift in the terror threat that we faced following 9/11 and 7/7 to draw up the Contest strategy. We do not have a similar strategy for state actors and state-sponsored threats. The work is far too fragmented. The Labour party would like to see a comprehensive equivalent to Contest. I urge him to look again at that. We will work with him on that too.

James Cleverly: I thank the right hon. Lady for her party's commitment to the ongoing support for Ukraine's self-defence. She was right to read that into the record. There is no doubt about her commitment among Government Members. I reassure her that we do look at the wider threats emanating from Russia. We liaise closely with our international partners. We suspect that other countries in the coalition of support for Ukraine are being targeted by Russia. Those countries will take discrete, domestic actions, but I draw the House's attention to the shared commitment set out in the North Atlantic

Council statement. I do not have the precise quote in front of me, but from memory it said that nations will take both individual and collective action.

Our response is calibrated. It is designed to send a very clear message, as well as hampering Russia's ability to conduct espionage here in the UK. We will look closely at Russia's response and whether it seeks to escalate matters. We will always ensure that we protect our ability to have lines of communication with Russia, even during these most challenging of times. Routes for de-escalation, error avoidance and the avoidance of miscalculation are very important. We recognise that, and I believe that Putin's regime in Moscow recognises that. We will seek to maintain lines of communication, even while we take these decisive actions.

With regard to the extensive sanctions, we moved quickly, in concert with our international friends and allies. Those sanctions are having an effect. Of course Russia seeks to evade sanctions where it can. While sanctions enforcement is primarily the responsibility of the Treasury, it is a cross-Government piece of work. All parts of Government—this was very much the case when I was Foreign Secretary, speaking with our international counterparts and interlocutors—try to close off opportunities for sanctions evasion.

The defending democracy taskforce is incredibly important, particularly as we head towards a general election. We will of course adapt, and seek to work cross-party, because it is in all our interests that we defend democracy. I will continue to ensure that both the Security Minister and I work closely with the shadow Front Bench and other Opposition parties' Front-Bench teams to protect something that is incredibly valuable.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the update from the Secretary of State. The United Kingdom has led the world in supporting Ukraine—militarily, economically and diplomatically. Our key ally, the United States, has introduced legislation, put forward by Congressman French Hill, my counterpart in the British-American parliamentary group, on seizing Russian assets and using them to rebuild Ukraine. I introduced a similar Bill in Parliament, which is due for a Second Reading on 17 May, and I have written to the Foreign Secretary about that. Will the Home Secretary clarify whether the United Kingdom will support the measures that the United States has introduced? It is crucial that we do everything that we can to cut off Putin's finances and ensure that he pays for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

James Cleverly: We work very closely with our international allies to put pressure on the Russian regime. We will look closely at the detail of the proposals going through the United States system. There is a very big difference between freezing and seizing of assets. Going from one to the other would need close international co-operation and co-ordination to ensure that we always act within the rule of law. We do not want to inadvertently find ourselves on the receiving end of criticism from a regime such as Putin's that we are stepping outside the bounds of international law, but we have made it clear that we will be incredibly imaginative and will work hard to ensure that the regime and people who have funded the brutal attack on Ukraine are also those who fund the rebuilding of Ukraine. We will work with our international partners to ensure that is the reality.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Like him, I pay tribute to those in law enforcement who work so diligently to counter these types of threats, which are extremely well known, and understood right across Europe. Disinformation and other types of hybrid threat are now a feature of democratic life in this country and elsewhere. We need a comprehensive sea change in how we approach that threat—a new whole-of-society approach to dealing with hybrid threats. I am fine to support the Government's increase in defence spending, but what we really need is new thinking, new doctrines and new institutions in order to compete against threats that are ever evolving, becoming more sophisticated, more aggressive, and extremely well funded.

I will focus in particular on the threat of disinformation, especially because we are in an election year. The Government used to provide Parliament—I cannot quite recall when this stopped—with a six-monthly update on the threat posed by Daesh. Can we have a similar type of statement on hostile disinformation—a written statement to Parliament on a regular basis, informing Members of where the threat is and what is being done to meet it? I echo the comments about pressing the Government to ensure that sanctioned money is converted into Ukrainian hryvnia to allow that country to rebuild. I will not press the Home Secretary on that any further—he knows our views—but while I welcome the seizure of the assets that he mentioned and the expulsion of the defence attaché, I can tell him that there are tons of assets in Scotland, including land, estates and much else, that could also be seized. If he chooses to look into that any further, he will certainly have our support.

James Cleverly: It is important that we are precise in our use of language. The Russian assets have been sanctioned and frozen, and there is an important difference between freezing and seizing. As far as I am aware, no one has seized or liquidated Russian assets. However, of course we abide by our commitment to ensure that the people who funded the brutality fund the reconstruction. We are absolutely committed to that.

I have taken note of the hon. Gentleman's point about regular updates, particularly as disinformation and distortions of our democracy and society have a more direct and immediate effect in the UK than perhaps the activities of Daesh do. I will take on board the practicalities of how much detail we might be able to put in the public domain, but the Government have set aside significant amounts of money to the Defending Democracy Taskforce and the workstreams that flow out from that, to help parliamentarians and candidates at the forthcoming election to defend themselves both physically and digitally against assaults that might come for them. We are looking at ways to ensure that that is as effective as possible. With regard to the point he made about international co-operation, of course we will continue to work closely with our allies; our self-defence has to be collective if it is to be fully effective.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support every word the Home Secretary has said today. He is right that Putin has been engaged now for at least 10 years—arguably longer—in a sustained, hostile and

[Sir Chris Bryant]

malign set of actions against the UK and our allies. On occasions where we have not been as overt in our opposition, I think he has taken advantage, so I am glad that the Home Secretary has taken this action. He knows all the things I will ask about: why is there still Russian oil coming into the UK? Why is Russia still exporting the same amount of oil as it did before sanctions were introduced? Why have we still not gone as far as the Americans and Canadians in seeking not just to freeze, but to seize Russian state assets so that they can be used for the development of Ukraine? Why has the Abramovich money still not gone to Ukraine? That would be more than £3 billion, more than the amount the UK has so far devoted. Finally, can he say a word about Vladimir Kara-Murza, a man many of us have met? He is very brave and we want to make sure that the UK Government are doing everything in their power to ensure that he is protected in Russia.

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions, some of which fall within the remit of the Foreign Secretary; the Deputy Foreign Secretary will answer in this House on the Foreign Secretary's behalf, but I can let the hon. Gentleman know that the answers that I and the Foreign Office have previously given him remain unchanged. We work with our international partners, because both sanctions evasion and the fight against it are by nature international acts. As I say, enforcement is predominantly a Treasury competency and the international co-operation falls within the remit of the FCDO, but we all work to ensure that sanctions evasion does not happen.

I have to correct the hon. Gentleman. Although a number of countries are investigating what a regime for the seizure and liquidation of Russian assets might look like, and we will continue to work with our international partners to explore ways of ensuring that the people who paid for the brutality pay for the rebuilding, it is not accurate to say that other countries have seized and liquidated Russian assets.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I say what a pleasure it is to see that we are taking this seriously? The words of the Home Secretary filled me with renewed optimism, because we need both optimism and action. Does he agree that we can never underrate the Russians and Vladimir Putin? The fact is that they are very clever; they are using both financial strategies and dupes in Europe and other places to channel their influence. We must be wary at every level.

Does the Home Secretary think our intelligence services are equipped to cope with the real challenge that we now face from Russia, and indeed from China? Has he been picking up what I am picking up from a lot of my old friends in Washington? Not only are they very disturbed about Russian influence on American elections, but I have heard very strong information that they believe that some of the influence is coming from Russia via London and from the United Kingdom. That is a real problem.

The Home Secretary knows I have a bee in my bonnet about this, but there are people in this Parliament who have been named as very close to Russia. We had a member of the House of Lords featured in a main article in *The Times* only two weeks ago. Surely we must

make our House and our Parliament as clean and above board as possible, and if there are such groups or individuals in this place, we should know about it.

Mr Speaker: I presume there was a question?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great knowledge and passion about these important issues. He will of course understand that I will not go into detail about intelligence and security matters, but I can reassure him and the House that our intelligence services, the external-facing services and our security services, are incredibly effective. They are without doubt amongst the best in the world, and I would—perhaps rather arrogantly—suggest that they are the best in the world. In my experience both as Home Secretary and in my former role as Foreign Secretary, I have seen the positive diplomatic influence that our agencies exert on our behalf; they are regarded very highly by our allies and international partners. Without going into detail, I hope that he and the House can feel reassured that we are in good hands.

However, we must recognise that, as the hon. Gentleman has said, Russia takes pride in its long history of disinformation, propaganda and kompromat. It wears that history as a badge of honour and it is constantly evolving its threats towards us, so we have to constantly evolve our defences. I can reassure him that we are doing that; the National Security Act 2023 is part of that, but that we reserve the right to take further action, were Russia to be foolish enough to escalate or to attempt once again the actions that we believe it has taken in our country.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Neither prosecutions nor penalties have been applied to those importing Russian oil that is refined in, and branded as coming from, India and other countries. At the same time, the threat of closure hangs over Grangemouth refinery. The world knows that this activity is ongoing, and Grangemouth is aware of the threat facing it and industrialisation in Scotland. Is it not time the Minister spoke to colleagues to ensure that not just state security, but energy security is considered, that our refinery capacity remains in Scotland and that, at the same time, those profiting from bringing in Russian oil are prosecuted?

James Cleverly: This Government are committed to ensuring security. While they have not been universally applauded, the licences that we have awarded to ensure that there is a vibrant hydrocarbons industry in Scotland are important for jobs, for the Scottish economy, for the UK economy and for our energy security. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House that energy security will remain at the forefront of our minds. On sanctions evasion—particularly oil and gas sanctions—I assure him that my noble friend Lord Cameron, as I did when I was Foreign Secretary, raises these issues internationally with those countries still trading with Russia, at every opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and very much welcome his clear commitment, which encourages all of us in this House and across this great nation. Bearing in mind the overnight raid on Ukraine's energy facilities and the continued aggression carried out while our eyes are

turned towards the middle east, does he not believe that we must send the swift and strong message to Putin that we are approaching the point when decisive action must be taken by the allies, and that we have both the capacity and the will to intervene against the despicable war being waged against the Ukrainian people?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that I want to reinforce. It was quite clear that Vladimir Putin thought that the UK and our wider allies would be either distracted or dissuaded from supporting Ukraine when he initiated his full-scale invasion. Nothing could have been further from the truth. If he thought that the evolving situation in Gaza—the terrorist attack against Israel and Israel’s military action to defend itself—would distract us from our support for Ukraine or our self-defence against Russian malign activity, he was again mistaken. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House that, although of course we are very focused on the situation in Gaza, south-west Israel and the wider middle east region, we will not lose sight of our commitment to the Ukrainians in their self-defence and to re-establishing the fact that national borders cannot be redrawn by force.

Passport e-Gates Network Outage

1.31 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about disruption at the border.

At around a quarter to eight last night, the Home Office became aware of a significant IT outage. Investigations determined that the incident was caused by technical issues within the Home Office network. The relevant teams quickly swung into action and a technical response was under way within six minutes. Once the fault was identified, officials worked closely with partners to rectify the problem and restore service. I joined a gold call with the lead officials at midnight last night, and the issue was resolved shortly before half-past midnight.

My information this morning is that all impacted systems have been restored and the incident has been formally closed, with all due diligence checks completed. At this stage, I can assure the House and the wider public that all security checks were maintained throughout. Border security was not compromised at any point, and there is no indication of malicious cyber-activity. Police access to operational systems was unaffected.

As a result of the outage, there were delays at some airports, as Members will be aware. The queues remained manageable and within health and safety parameters. Staff on the ground supported passengers, including through the provision of water, and ensured that welfare needs were met. Although undoubtedly inconvenient, the delays were necessary to maintain the integrity of our border. That is not to minimise the impact of the disruption; I realise that it will have been frustrating for all those affected. I offer my thanks to passengers for their patience as urgent activity was mounted to resolve the incident. I also place on record my gratitude to all the personnel who were involved in the response, including staff within the Home Office and Border Force, and at airports.

I realise that a number of questions will arise from this occurrence. I will, of course, do my utmost to provide as much information as possible, with the caveat that detailed work to understand the circumstances is ongoing. As the House and the public would expect, comprehensive activity to ascertain all relevant information about what happened will be undertaken in earnest in the coming days. Any incident involving our border systems causes concern—that is perfectly understandable. It is worth putting this into context, however. Border Force facilitated over 132 million passenger arrivals last year, consistently processing over 90% of passengers within service standards. As I have said, security was maintained at all times, an urgent response was mounted, and the issue was fully resolved in a matter of hours. None the less, I sincerely apologise for the disruption that occurred.

I can assure the House that the Home Secretary and I will be unswerving in our determination to ensure that every possible lesson is learned and that this does not happen again, and I know that will be the objective of everyone across the Home Office. The security, integrity and effectiveness of the UK border is paramount. It is my foremost priority, and will be for the entirety of the time that I have in this role. I commend the statement to the House.

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

1.35 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it. I join him in paying tribute to the staff who responded swiftly to resolve last night's e-gate network outage, whose actions should be commended. It is also right to pay tribute, as he did, to the passengers who waited patiently for hours—some after very long flights.

Our border security is not and should not be a dividing issue. The Minister has done the right thing by coming to the House today with the aim of providing clarity and reassurance on this extremely important matter. However, I am sure that the House will agree that the chaotic scenes across many of the UK's major airports last night were unacceptable, not least because e-gates have failed on several occasions in recent years. The system collapsed at the start of the late May bank holiday weekend in 2023 because of a failed system upgrade, and technical issues in 2021 caused the gates to fail three times in two months.

That is unacceptable, and it brings into sharp focus how the current high-capacity e-gate system is no longer reliable enough and risks further damaging public trust in the Government's management of our border security. Furthermore, although the Minister has made it clear that last night's e-gate failure was down to technical issues rather than malign activity, the Home Office and Border Force must make every effort to ensure that any such technical issues do not expose vulnerabilities in the system that could be exploited by our adversaries, be they state or non-state malign actors. Britain's border system should at all times allow lawful entry into our country and stop illegal entry. The safety and security of our country depends on it.

I would be grateful if the Minister answered the following questions. First, at this stage, is he able to confirm whether the same technical issue responsible for previous e-gate failures is behind last night's events? If so, what urgent action will be taken to ensure that it is finally resolved? Secondly, does he believe that the contingency plan for a national e-gate failure worked last night, and what does he deem to be an acceptable wait time for processing entries into the UK when e-gates fail? Thirdly, is he able to share figures on how many Border Force officers were redirected from other vital duties to manually process entries in the UK last night, and were there backlogs in other parts of the border system as a result?

While he is answering questions about mobility and security at the border, can the Minister give a guarantee that full preparations are in place at Dover to avoid queues when the European entry and exit checks are introduced in the autumn? Finally, will he take this opportunity to give an assurance that no other national e-gate failure will happen on his watch? I hope that the Minister will take those questions in the constructive spirit in which they are intended. If he is not able to answer them today, will he write to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and to me?

There cannot be another repeat of the chaos seen at Britain's border last night. The Government must do everything they can to resolve these persistent problems for once and for all. The public must have faith that the UK's border security system still works.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the shadow Minister for the tone with which he has approached today's statement and the response on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. I reiterate the thanks and appreciation that were reflected in his remarks on Border Force staff and the teams within the airports, who worked alongside the airlines to support passengers during this period of disruption. Again, I place on record my sincere apologies to all passengers who were affected by this issue last night. I can understand their frustration, and I sincerely apologise for it.

The hon. Gentleman specifically asked whether the contingency plan that was in place worked. Of course, we will always learn lessons from contingencies, evolve those models and make sure we are responsive to feedback. However, I think it is fair to say that overall, the contingency plans did work last night, with that strong partnership underpinning them—working with the airlines and airports, with leadership from Border Force teams. He also asked whether border security was compromised. I can confirm that it was not: proper checks were undertaken in the way that we would expect, just not in the automated manner that people would wish to see, with greater manual processing of cases but relying on the underlying systems. Again, that demonstrates that the contingency plans that we put in place for incidents such as this one were robust and did work. The response was triggered within six minutes; the operational contingency then began within an hour. That has subsequently been assured as well, to ensure that the integrity of the border was maintained at all times.

Turning to the security breach aspect of this issue, let me again be clear that this was not a cyber-attack, but the hon. Gentleman is right about the need for us always to be vigilant when it comes to border security and making sure that the IT systems that underpin it are able to withstand those sorts of pressures. We continue to factor that into the work that we are taking forward through our future borders endeavour. When it comes to the root cause of what has happened—how we got to this point in the first place—as soon as the fix was put in place, the posture changed to getting us to a place where we better understand that root cause. That work is ongoing, and it would not be right for me to speculate on it, but I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we will get to the bottom of this issue.

As for the specific technical issue last night, I am assured that the technical team are confident that there is now a permanent fix to that issue. When it comes to e-gate reliability in general, more than 90 million passengers use e-gates each year, and we are world leading in their use. This is an extremely rare occurrence; as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, one can never guarantee that any IT system will be 100% reliable 100% of the time, but that is why it is imperative that robust contingencies are in place to underlie all those systems, to maintain the integrity of our border.

As a Government, we are clear that we must never compromise border security, and we did not: the border was operational, albeit slower than any of us would like, for which I am sorry. This incident also demonstrates why automation at the border and e-gates are such an important part of the way in which people enter the country: without them, we would see the sort of operation that we saw last night all the time. In fact, last year, over 90% of people cleared the border within 30 minutes,

which demonstrates just how integral e-gates are and why we place a real emphasis on making sure they are available. As I have said, we will get to the bottom of this.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the EU entry-exit system. In recent weeks, we have had a number of opportunities to debate that system in the House. An enormous amount of cross-Government work is going on at the moment to ensure we have the best possible plans in place. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman)—who is in his place—and I are working very closely together on this matter, alongside colleagues from across Government, as well as engaging thoroughly with our EU and French counterparts. We have made real progress in recent weeks, and we will continue to sustain that effort.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I press the Minister a little further on the reliability of the airports' contingency plans when we have failures such as this one? As he has alluded to, this is not the first time that this has occurred. I would be interested to know what lessons learned from previous handlings were deployed on this occasion, particularly for supporting passengers who are elderly, have disabilities or young families, or require additional care and support, so that they do not suffer unduly during delays.

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Transport Committee is right to raise those concerns about passengers and their experiences. As I say, this was a highly regrettable situation, but the response swung into action very quickly. It is fair to say that we always iterate and always learn. We probably will not have got everything 100% right in the immediate response, but there was a genuine effort, co-ordinated by Border Force, with the airlines and airports, to support passengers, particularly vulnerable ones. Individuals who were at airports last night have said to me that they were impressed by the contingency arrangements that were in place, but there are always things that we can learn from these efforts, and we will do exactly that. Our contingency plans always have to be iterated; we always have to be responsive. The integrity of our border is of the utmost importance, and supporting people—particularly vulnerable people—when things go wrong is at the forefront of our considerations.

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

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As was said by the Labour shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), this is the third e-gate failure in a year, and just weeks ago, travellers in Edinburgh, Manchester and Bristol faced hour-long queues. It sounds like the Minister is conducting a thorough investigation; could he confirm that, and also confirm that he will report his findings to the House in a future statement?

This time, the problem appeared to affect not just e-gates. Belfast international airport, which does not have e-gates, said that the Border Force systems had been impacted. Could the Minister please clarify that issue? Finally, the Home Office has been talking for a long time about introducing other technological innovations in order to carry out its business. What lessons does the Minister think this example provides?

Tom Pursglove: I thank the SNP spokesman for the constructive tone he has taken in asking his questions. He has raised a number of points. I can absolutely guarantee him that a thorough investigation is ongoing to establish exactly what went wrong. The technical team is confident that the fix that has been put in place addresses the issue, but of course, we want to understand the underlying causes of what went wrong last night to ensure that the system is as robust as it can possibly be, so that it can withstand any technical challenges going forward. I will gladly take away his point about updating the House, and will consider how that can best be achieved.

The hon. Gentleman has raised a point about Belfast airport. If he does not mind, I would like to take that point away, speak to Border Force officials about it, and provide him with a written update. As for the wider point about delivery of a considerable programme of change at our domestic border over the coming months, he will recall that we are rolling out changes through the electronic travel authorisation scheme. We have been delivering that in phases, and the early indications have been good. That scheme gives us much greater information upstream about passengers before they arrive at our border. That helps us to tackle threats before passengers travel, which is an improved situation, and allows us to understand more about passengers whom we currently know very little about before they set off for the United Kingdom, as opposed to trying to deal with issues at the border. We have also introduced e-visas, which are another important part of our programme to digitise the border.

It is important to say that there will always be a physical Border Force presence at our airports. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) remarks on that point; I wanted to make it clear to the House, because although there is always a place for technology, and automation has an important role to play, it is right that there always be a physical presence as well, to support people who arrive at our ports, and to ensure that we can respond to any issues. Automation will allow us to focus increasingly on risk, and to deploy more Border Force officers to deal with it, as well as to improve the passenger experience, so the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is right to raise the issue. Any and all learning will be taken forward as we develop processes and programmes, but I am confident that our plans for them are robust. We will get on with delivering on the commitments we have made.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Whenever there are malfunctions of the e-gates at the UK border, it is the airport operators, including Gatwick in my constituency, that have to bear the brunt of the congestion caused by the delays that result. As the Home Office updates the e-gates system with new technology, what assurances can the Minister give me that he and the Home Office will engage with the airport operators, so that they are very much part of ensuring that we have a secure and free-flowing border?

Tom Pursglove: I know that my hon. Friend recognises the importance of the digitisation that we are undertaking of our border from a security, efficiency and customer service perspective. All of those are very important to airlines as well as airport operators. My understanding

[Tom Pursglove]

is that there has consistently been significant engagement with our work on the future borders programme, in addition to routine engagement with Border Force officials. That was reflected in the work done on the ground last night in responding to the issue; it showed how strong those links and connections are. However, we must never be complacent, and when it comes to the programmes that we are developing and have made commitments to deliver, I guarantee my hon. Friend that we will sustain that drumbeat of engagement. I am keen to lean into that as the Minister, and officials will continue to do so as well. I am very grateful for his efforts in raising Gatwick airport's issues and concerns. He is a very diligent representative of his area, and I am really appreciative of his input.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I commend the Minister for making the statement; it is good to see such transparency. Can he clarify how long it took from the moment the service went down to its restoration? Was it one, two, or three hours? What is the longest period that passengers had to wait? If it was not a cyber-attack and there was no malicious activity, as he said, what was the problem? Was it with the IT, was it some kind of glitch—a Horizon kind of glitch—or was it the physical operation of the barriers?

Last night was not the day with the largest number of travellers in the UK. We will have days later on this year when we could have significantly larger numbers—for instance, the Whitsun bank holiday. What is the Minister putting in place to ensure that there are sufficient contingency measures, just in case the system goes down again?

Tom Pursglove: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he puts his questions. Many passengers saw waits of two to three hours last night as they were processed at the border. As I set out in my statement, the fix began to take effect at around half-past midnight, so there were several hours between the issue first becoming known—the response kicked in around six minutes later—and the fix beginning to make a difference at around 12.30 am.

The hon. Gentleman asked what more we can do on the contingency side. I think that there will be learning that comes out of last night. We will take that on board, and there will be opportunities for us to discuss and evaluate it, working with the airports and the airlines. As I have consistently said, I think the response last night proved that there is robust contingency planning in place. It did make a difference, and it meant that the integrity of the border was maintained, but I am sorry that passengers had a longer wait than any of us would want.

On the technical issue, I will not pre-empt the work ongoing at pace in the Department to get to the bottom of the specifics, but we will of course respond to that issue, and any learning required that flows from that will take place.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): The British are world-renowned for their patience in queueing, but I thank the Minister for his statement, and for his apology, especially for my Dudley constituents. I think the part

that my constituents would struggle with more is his saying that it is a No. 1 priority to make sure that our borders are 100% secure, when the same constituents can see hundreds of people, if not 1,000 a day, landing on the beaches with no documentation whatsoever, and being allowed to stay in this country; if they go on to commit a crime, several years later, they may still be allowed to stay in this country. It is a very real frustration, and something that even I cannot reconcile.

Tom Pursglove: I think my hon. Friend will recognise that there are proper checks in place when people arrive at our airports, as there were last night. Those people were arriving in our country and going about their business perfectly legally. The work we are taking forward—initiatives such as the electronic travel authorisation scheme—will only enhance the security of our border, which I think his constituents would welcome. That is akin to what we see in the United States and countries such as Australia.

However, my hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of illegal migration. I can assure him and his constituents that proper security checks are carried out when people arrive clandestinely. People should not be making small boat crossings of the channel, and should not be coming to the United Kingdom in the backs of lorries. It is completely unacceptable, and that is why his constituents so strongly support the work that the Government are taking forward, particularly focused on making channel crossings unviable. Those crossings happen at the hands of evil criminal gangs, who take people's money, put them in small boats, and have no regard to whether they get safely to the other side. It is heinous, and that is why we are determined to put them out of business.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I think travellers last night were given an authentic introduction to life in Brexit Britain under this UK Government, where absolutely nothing works whatsoever. That is the churlish point over, but clearly passengers in Glasgow were impacted by this issue. However, the fix at 12.30 am came just before whole slew of 12 flights arrived, so Glasgow in many ways was a lucky airport, as were the passengers arriving there.

The Minister speaks about the contingency plans working. What he is doing to reach out to individual airports, and to look at how their contingency plans worked last night? What resources are available to those airports for improving those contingency plans?

Tom Pursglove: On the first part of the hon. Member's question, what a load of rubbish. E-gates were an important part of our border infrastructure when we were a member of the European Union, and they continue to be important now that we are a non-member of the European Union, so I think we can discount that perspective.

However, the second half of the hon. Member's question was very valid. That is precisely why I want operational teams to spend time engaging with airports and airlines following the incident last night, to make sure that we capture any and all learning flowing from it. As I have said, I think it is fair to say that across those organisations, working in partnership, there was a robust response. The contingency plan did work, but there will be things that we can learn from the incident. That is as

relevant to Gatwick as it is to Heathrow, Stansted, Belfast and other airports. We should and will have those conversations.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is probably worth reminding ourselves why the expansion of the use of e-gates, including to families with children aged 10 and over, has been useful, not just from a passenger comfort and convenience point of view, but because there is a range of security benefits to the checks that machines can perform, particularly biometric checks, but I am sure that the Minister will be grateful to me for not going into that on the Floor of the House of Commons.

On this type of outage, inevitably, when a technology is being relied on, there is the potential for something to happen. It is reassuring to hear that in this instance the problem was not caused by a malign influence. If it later emerged that it had been, I am sure that the Minister would come back to the House, but I can imagine the type of assurance that has been given in the Home Office before he came here to give his assurance from the Dispatch Box.

For me, it is about further exploring the opportunities for other agencies and authorities to support Border Force in delivering the border. It seems clear from the Minister's statement that at all times people are still being checked, but just by an officer, rather than through an e-gate. What further work could be done on rapid deployment through support agreements, potentially with officers from other parts of the civil service who have the training to operate the border, but are not necessarily routinely positioned on it? We must consider the fact that our core goal for the border, particularly as the electronic travel authorisation scheme comes in, is to stop people who are a threat or who we do not want to allow into the country from getting on a plane in the first place to come to the United Kingdom. We should increasingly be declining them at the place where they check in, rather than at the UK border.

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend speaks with real authority on these issues, having been the architect of so much of the change we are introducing at the border. He is right that the possibilities of automation are enormous, for improving the passenger experience and having a greater understanding of many of those individuals who are travelling to our country and being able to prevent some of that travel in the first place, rather than responding to that at the border, where risk is involved.

My hon. Friend asked about contingencies. There is always a place for ensuring wider training and opportunity within the organisation to surge capacity when there are challenges. We have done that in responding to a number of different challenges over the years. It is fair to say that last night there were Border Force staff members who are perhaps not on the primary control point ordinarily who were surged in to support the team working on the PCP to help get people through the border as quickly as possible. In particular where there are protracted issues affecting our ports, we should always look at what we can do to provide additional support from other parts of the Home Office and perhaps even elsewhere.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I pay tribute to the staff who worked so hard to respond to the crisis and to every traveller who waited so patiently. The episode says a lot about the Government's priorities when it comes

to controlling our borders properly. Instead of chasing headlines on immoral and expensive policies to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, can the Minister assure me that he will focus on ensuring that my Bath constituents can travel freely, safely and without huge delays?

Tom Pursglove: That is always the priority of the Government. I have set out the focus on security, efficiency and ensuring that passengers have the best possible experience of the UK border. I have been able to set out the fact that in so many instances—a very high percentage of occasions—the e-gates work successfully. Some 90 million passengers pass through the e-gates quickly every year. When it comes to border security, I am probably right in saying that the hon. Lady voted against the sorts of measures, such as the electronic travel authorisation scheme, that we legislated for through the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. That is a cornerstone of our efforts to help improve security at the border, improve that automation and be able to bring passengers through more quickly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Lastly, I call Patrick Grady.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you perhaps saw the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) handing me the wooden spoon on his way out of the Chamber earlier.

None of this will surprise those of us who think that the Home Office's default position is to make entering the UK as difficult as possible, because this is essentially a manifestation of the hostile environment writ large. May I press the Minister on the contingencies and redundancies? When people are processed manually at the border, is it essentially the e-gate system with a human being doing the verification, or is it sufficiently separate that people can be processed manually through the border while the e-gates are down? What is his relationship with the airlines and the airports? Is there awareness, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, when large numbers of flights are expected, so that the e-gates are fully operational and fully staffed? Certainly in my experience and that of some constituents, that is not always the case.

Tom Pursglove: I rather wonder whether the SNP reshuffle is on the minds of SNP colleagues here this afternoon, and their prospects, because we have heard some rather bizarre angles in some of the questions. On the more serious points that the hon. Gentleman raises, when it comes to how we dealt with this incident yesterday, there was underlying system availability to support manual checks to get people through the border as quickly as possible. We also work closely with the airlines and the airports to ensure that we maximise the staffing on the primary control at peak times to ensure that people can be processed as quickly as possible. There are people who pass through having face-to-face interactions with Border Force officers, and there are people who pass through the e-gates. We make sure that we take proper account of the flows through our ports and that staffing reflects the demand at any given point of the day.

BILL PRESENTED

MEDICINES (VITAMIN B12 INJECTIONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jane Hunt, supported by Peter Aldous and Anthony Mangnall, presented a Bill to provide that vitamin B12 injections may be sold, supplied or administered by a registered pharmacist without a prescription; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 June, and to be printed (Bill 213).

Assistance Dogs and Pavement Parking

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

2.6 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove exemptions from requirements to provide access or services to a person who is accompanied by an assistance dog; to make the undertaking of disability equality training in relation to assistance dogs a condition of holding a licence to drive a taxi or private hire vehicle; to prohibit the parking of motor vehicles on pavements and footpaths; and for connected purposes.

Just imagine how hard life would be if you could not see. There are amazing people, however, who can use a dog to help them go about their daily life—dogs trained so skilfully that they can transform opportunities for blind people. Sadly, almost a third of people with sight loss are reluctant to go out on their own, and almost half of guide dog owners are forced to change or restrict where they are willing or able to go. As we see assistance dogs able to help more people with more and different disabilities, this Bill will solve some of the problems that these dog owners face.

We have all felt for a light switch in a dark room at home, and we can understand those feelings of frustration, helplessness or even panic. If that is what it is like to turn on the lights in our own homes, imagine trying to do so somewhere strange, where a mishap could mean cracking one's head on a kerb or, worse, being hit by a truck. No shop, no restaurant and no supermarket should be turning away someone with an assistance dog. No taxi driver should be worrying about dog allergies when they see a blind person, because they must and will know how to look after them, because they have been trained to deal with those customers. No pavement should be an obstacle course, blocked by parked vehicles.

I am proud that in North Herefordshire people with sight loss have an especially esteemed place. Hereford is home to the Royal National College for the Blind, where young people with visual impairment receive training and education. It is wonderful to witness these individuals learning not to cope, but to thrive. However, figures suggest that 74% of people with assistance dogs were turned away from food and drink outlets between July 2021 and July 2022; that 53% experienced a refusal when visiting a shop; and that 37% were told “No” by hotels and bed and breakfasts. All of that is in spite of the Equality Act 2010, under which the vast majority of such refusals are already illegal. The Equality Act protects the assistance dog, not the person, so it allows for far wider opportunity for access.

It is the plight of these people, however, that is of the greatest importance to me, because of how the Royal National College for the Blind is located in Herefordshire, but also because I am a Royal National Institute of Blind People champion and the owner of a former guide dog, Warwick. There is no reason why anybody should be turning away assistance dog users. “Angry”, “embarrassed”, “disappointed” and “isolated” are the words used by respondents to a Guide Dogs UK survey to describe such bad experiences. But, of course, the dogs say nothing.

At a time when the RNIB reports that only 56% of blind and partially sighted people have received vision rehabilitation support and 26% of local authorities have left people waiting more than a year for assessment and support, it is critical that we do more, and we must do it now.

Working assistance dogs receive up to two years of intensive training—and that is before the further training they get during their working lives. They are not disruptive, because they are so highly trained. I have tested this on our family dog, Warwick. When we—the owners—go for a walk with our dogs, we lead our dogs across the road, but Warwick can lead me across the road.

These dogs are hygienic. The fact that the Food Standards Agency has confirmed that assistance dogs should be allowed entry to food shops and premises proves that. I have seen the facilities for blind owners to be trained on how to maintain the high standards of grooming required for these dogs, and vets regularly check them.

Because most blind owners keep their retired guide dogs, my Bill will go further and allow retired assistance dogs to have that same universal access. Those retired dogs are often still owned by their original users and are just as well trained as working assistance dogs. It is already recognised that they are well disciplined and that they present no risk of disruption or hygiene issues, so what reasons are there to refuse them and their handlers access? There is none.

Even if permitting access to assistance dogs were a burden on business owners—as I have outlined, it is not—the numbers involved are so small that any negative effects would be negligible. Just over 7,000 people in our country rely on assistance dogs, of which about 4,500 are guide dogs. That is just one person in every 10,000.

Currently, taxi and private hire vehicle drivers can be issued with exemptions from carrying assistance dogs on medical grounds. Some people are allergic to dogs—that is an unavoidable fact—but only taxi and minicab drivers can hold exemptions due to allergy. There are only 7,000 assistance dogs out there, so surely we can accommodate everyone. If it is a legal requirement for owners and employees in small shops to accept assistance dogs, why should taxi and PVH drivers be allowed a total exemption?

Since covid, protective screens for drivers have become widespread and are easy to fit. We need drivers to be trained to think ahead so that they have a solution to their dog allergy rather than refusing to carry a blind person. It is what we all do—we give consideration to how we can accommodate disability rather than reject disabled people—yet 81% of guide dog owners, according to research by Guide Dogs in 2022, have been refused access to taxis. Almost 63% had experienced that in the previous 12 months.

In 2016, a private Member's Bill contributed to the formation of a Department for Transport task and finish group looking into that. Three years later, the Government agreed to make it a requirement for drivers to undertake disability equality training, yet, despite Government commitments, last year only 62% of authorities required disability equality training for taxis. In Northern Ireland, where training is required, instances of access refusals for taxis are rare. Training and forethought are the solution.

Equally clear is the solution to the problems that face assistance dog owners on foot. In 2019, 80% of blind or partially sighted people reported that pavement parking made it difficult for them to walk on pavements at least once a week, and more than 95% of people with sight loss stated that it had forced them to walk in the road. Consequently, one in five people with sight loss have been injured because of pavement parking. We should be helping these people, not impeding them.

The England blind football team train in Hereford. They stand as a testament to the fact that people with sight loss can do almost everything that someone who does not suffer visual impairment can. The next time someone thinks that they need to park on the pavement, they should try shutting their eyes when they try to take a shower and see what a mess they make. In London, where pavement parking has been heavily restricted since 1974, only 26% of people with sight loss face daily problems, while, in the country at large, that figure is 45%.

There are already ways for the police to fine obstructive vehicles, but enforcement is the issue. Prohibiting pavement parking would do a great deal to help people with sight loss. It has been done London, in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, so it is possible and it does work. The Transport Committee's report of September 2019 recommended it.

I know that the Government are committed to the wellbeing and equality of people who use assistance dogs. The Bill would make the lives of people with assistance dogs easier. It would also encourage and support people who use dogs—or perhaps want to use a dog—but are afraid of being made to walk home in the rain, barred from using a taxi or restaurant and forced off the pavement and into the traffic by pavement parking. Just imagine if that person was you.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Sir Bill Wiggin, Henry Smith, Greg Smith, James Gray, Selaine Saxby, Mr David Jones, Dame Tracey Crouch, Mr Mark Francois, Dr James Davies, Bob Blackman and Rachel Maclean present the Bill.

Sir Bill Wiggin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 214).

Finance (No. 2) Bill

(Clauses 1 to 4, 12 and 13, and 19)

Considered in Committee

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the morning of 12 March 2024, on the Budget 2024, HC 625; oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the afternoon of 12 March 2024, on the Budget 2024, HC 625; oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 13 March 2024, on the Budget 2024, HC 625; correspondence from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Treasury Committee, on the Budget 2024, reported to the House on 1 May 2024.]

[DAME ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

Clause 1

INCOME TAX CHARGE FOR TAX YEAR 2024-25

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 2 to 4 stand part.

New clause 1—*Review of impact of section 2*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish a review of the expected impact of section 2 of this Act.

(2) The review must include analysis setting out the number of individual taxpayers facing a marginal tax rate in the tax year 2024-25 of—

- (a) the basic rate of 20%, and
- (b) the higher rate of 40%.

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must take account of—

- (a) equivalent actual figures to those in subsection (2)(a) and (b) for the tax years 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24, and
- (b) equivalent projected figures to those in subsection (2)(a) and (b) for the tax years 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28.”

This new clause requires a review of how many people will be liable to pay income tax at 20% and 40%, and would compare figures for the current tax year with those for the three preceding and three subsequent tax years.

New clause 4—*Review of impact of section 1 on pensioners*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish a review of the expected impact of section 1 of this Act on those over State Pension age.

(2) The review must include analysis setting out, for the tax year 2024-25—

- (a) the total number of people over the State Pension age paying tax under section 1, and
- (b) the average tax liability per person of those in subsection (2)(a).

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must take account of equivalent projected figures to those in subsections (2)(a) and (2)(b) for the tax years 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28.”

This new clause requires a review of how many pensioners will be liable to pay income tax this year and in each of the next three years, and what the average pensioner's tax bill will be in each of those years.

New clause 5—*Impact of income tax and corporation tax provisions on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish an analysis of the impact of the measures in sections 1 to 4, 12 and 13 of this Act on—

- (a) Wales,
- (b) Scotland, and
- (c) Northern Ireland.”

This new clause requires an analysis of the income tax and corporation tax measures in the Bill on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

New clause 6—*Report on impact of section 2*—

“Within three months of this Act being passed, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report setting out—

- (a) the number of taxpayers that will pay income tax at each rate during the tax year 2024-2025 under section 2;
- (b) the number of those taxpayers that are pensioners or are of State Pension Age;
- (c) comparative figures for each tax year since 2021; and
- (d) comparative projected figures for each tax year to 2030.”

2.18 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): It is an honour to open the debate. I will start by setting out how, because of the progress the Government have made, we have been able to cut taxes as part of our plan to reward work and grow the economy.

The Government cut national insurance at both the autumn statement and the spring Budget and have made above-inflation increases to thresholds since 2010, with the basic rate threshold rising from £6,475 to £12,570 today. Taken together, those measures mean that an average worker on £35,400 in 2024-25 will save £1,500 more in personal taxes than they otherwise would have done. Due to the significant real-terms increases to the personal allowance, it is estimated that 1.8 million people will be taken out of income tax altogether by 2024-25, compared with the threshold rising in line with inflation from 2010-11. All workers can now earn £1,000 a month before paying any tax, due to the significant increases to the national insurance starting threshold, which we changed in July 2022.

Let me turn to the first four clauses of the Bill. Income tax is the largest source of Government revenue and helps to fund the UK's schools, hospitals and defence, and other essential services we all rely on. In 2024-25, it is expected to raise more than £302 billion. Each year, the Government must legislate to charge and set rates of income tax, which is why we are all here today. Clauses 1 to 3 impose an income tax charge and set the rates of it for 2024-25. The rates are not changed by the Bill; rather, we are confirming that they will remain the same.

Clause 1 imposes a charge on individuals to pay income tax for the year 2024-25. Clause 2 sets the main income tax rates—namely the basic rate of 20%, the higher rate of 40% and the additional rate of 45%—for non-savings and non-dividend income of taxpayers in

England and Northern Ireland. Those rates are set separately from those in clause 3, as the income tax rates for non-savings and non-dividend income, such as earnings from employment, are devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and are set by their respective Parliaments. The decision to separate savings and dividends from other forms of income was made as part of the devolution settlement. It ensures that the UK system works effectively and coherently, recognising that dividend and savings income is generally more mobile and generated across the UK, and has some interactions with corporation tax, which is not devolved.

Clause 3 sets the default income tax rates at the same levels as the main rates—namely 20%, 40% and 45%—across the entire UK. These rates apply to the non-savings and non-dividend income of taxpayers who are not subject to the main rates of income tax or to Welsh or Scottish rates of income tax, such as non-UK resident individuals. The clause also sets the savings rates of income tax for all UK taxpayers, again at 20%, 40% and 45%.

As I mentioned, income tax is a vital revenue stream for our public services, without which we could not fund our schools, hospitals, defence and more. It is important that we keep it at its current level.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I receive emails from constituents asking me why the Government are not unfreezing the personal tax thresholds.

Nigel Huddleston: We all know that, because of the level of intervention that we had to take, out of necessity, during the pandemic and in response to the cost of living challenges, Government intervention was far greater than any of us anticipated—to the tune of £400 billion in the pandemic and £100 billion for the cost of living challenges. That money has to be paid back, and I think most of our constituents know that. We have seen the same pattern right around the world, where tax levels have had to be higher out of necessity. That means that thresholds have not been able to move in the way that we would normally like. However, now that economic circumstances are changing, we have turned a corner and we are able to reduce taxes, such as for the 27 million people who will receive on average an extra £900 through the national insurance cuts.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. He started by talking about some of the fiscal measures that the Government have taken to reduce tax, but by not unfreezing the personal allowances, are the Government not taking money from one pocket and putting it back in the other?

Nigel Huddleston: No. I advise the hon. Member and others to look at their wage slip from a few months ago—say, in December last year. They will see a direct impact because of the national insurance changes that we made in January and again in April. People will see that they are paying less national insurance than in the past. That is transparently and clearly a tax cut. We are able to reduce taxation because the direction of travel is changing.

Taxes have increased across the whole of the western world. Our tax level is projected to increase to about 37%, compared with around 39% in Germany, around

42% in Italy and around 46% in France. This is a phenomenon whereby Governments have had to intervene and spend more money and, as an obvious consequence, they have had to increase taxation to a greater level than anticipated or desired.

However, now that we are back to growth and on a firmer footing, the economy has turned a corner, and we are able to reward the hard work of the British public by reducing taxation. We are doing that in the form of income tax cuts. As the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have said on multiple occasions, we wish to continue in that direction of travel. As I said, people should look at their pay packets. I recognise that it is one thing to talk in the Chamber about implementing laws, but people will now see that in their pay packets in a meaningful way. An average worker on £35,400 will be £900 better off as a result of the national insurance cuts. That is a meaningful amount for constituents right across the country, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Another principle of taxation is fairness. Income tax is fair: those with the most contribute the most. The income tax system is highly progressive, with different rates of tax sitting above an internationally high personal allowance. The top 5% of income tax payers are projected to pay nearly half of all income tax in 2023-24. The top 1% are projected to pay more than 28% of income tax. Thanks to the personal allowance, almost a quarter of individuals will not pay income tax at all in 2024-25. It is important to note that the percentage paid by the top earners is greater than it was under the last Labour Government. In other words, the tax system is more progressive under the Conservatives.

Income tax is also internationally competitive. According to the OECD, the UK has some of the most generous starting allowances for income tax and social security contributions in the OECD, and the most generous in the G7—more generous than in France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan and the US. According to the OECD, in the United Kingdom the average single worker faced a net average tax rate of 23.7% in 2023, compared with the OECD average of 24.9%. In other words, in the United Kingdom, the take-home pay of an average single worker after tax and benefits was 76.3% of their gross wage, compared with the OECD average of 75.1%.

I have talked a lot of statistics, but what they mean is more money in people's pockets to spend as they wish—a fundamental Conservative philosophy. We have also been able to return some money to taxpayers now that inflation is falling and the economy is improving, by reducing national insurance contributions. We have put money back into people's pockets. We have prioritised tax cuts for those in work, and we believe that that is the best way to stimulate growth in the economy overall.

Clause 4 continues the theme of maintaining the income tax arrangements by keeping the starting rate limit for savings at its current level of £5,000 for the 2024-25 tax year. Many colleagues may be familiar with this but some may not, so briefly by way of explanation, the starting rate for savings is an extra £5,000 tax-free allowance for interest from savings, specifically for individuals who have earned incomes of less than £17,570. That supports in particular people with low earned income, such as pensioners who are reliant on savings interest.

[Nigel Huddleston]

The Government made significant changes to the starting rate for savings in 2015, when they raised the threshold to get the starting rate for savings from £2,880 to £5,000, and lowered the starting rate for savings from 10% to 0%. As many Members will be aware, the starting rate limit for savings must be legislated for each year to confirm the band of savings income to which it applies. Again, that is what we are doing today. This clause will ensure that the limit is held at this level. It ensures simplicity and fairness in the tax system, while maintaining a generous tax relief and supporting the public finances by taking fiscally responsible decisions. As well as benefiting from the starting rate for savings—whereby, as I have said, individuals with earned income of less than £17,507 can earn up to £5,000 in savings income free of tax—savers are supported by the personal savings allowance, which provides up to £1,000 of tax-free savings income for basic rate taxpayers. They can also continue to benefit from the annual ISA allowance of £20,000. Moreover, in the spring Budget 2024 the Government introduced the British ISA, which will provide a new allowance of £5,000 in addition to the existing ISA allowance, along with a new tax-free savings opportunity for people to invest in the UK. Taken together, those generous allowances mean that about 85% of savers pay no tax on their savings income. The Government are committed to continuing to help people on all incomes and at all stages of life to save. The significant increase in the starting limit in 2015 means that the taxation arrangements for savings income remain generous, and the Government therefore believe that it is appropriate to retain the starting rate for savings at its existing value at this time.

The Government are managing the public finances in a balanced and responsible way. Our approach to delivering fiscal sustainability is underpinned by fairness, with those on the highest incomes paying a larger share. By maintaining the current rates of income tax and the starting rate limit for savings thresholds, we will ensure that the highest earners contribute more to the revenue, helping the Government to take a balanced approach to revenue raising while still supporting vital public services.

2.30 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak on behalf of the Opposition to new clauses 1 and 4, which stand in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq).

“This remains a parliament of record tax rises.”

Those are not my words but those of Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, following the spring Budget from which this Finance Bill derives. However, the IFS was not alone in its view. In response to the Budget, the Institute for Government was clear as well, saying that taxes were set to rise

“to a post-war high as a result of decisions made by Conservative chancellors over the past 14 years.”

Meanwhile, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research described the Chancellor’s announcements in March as a

“low-key budget...unlikely to unlock the UK’s growth and productivity problems”.

The verdict is clear. People in Britain are facing higher taxes, squeezed living standards and weaker public services, and they have a Government who are unable to undo the damage that they have caused. No matter what the Conservatives now say or do, the truth is that the tax burden is set to rise to its highest level in 70 years. The decisions taken by Conservative Chancellors in this Parliament—and, let’s face it, there have been a few of them—mean that the average family will face a tax bill that is £870 a year higher by 2028-29. For pensioners, it is even worse: people over the state pension age do not even benefit from any changes in national insurance, which means that pensioner taxpayers will pay an eye-watering £960 more a year by the end of the forecast period.

People across Britain are struggling to make ends meet as they find their wages squeezed and taxes rising relentlessly, yet the Conservatives have decided to tell the British public that they have never had it so good. I note that Ministers are trying to do that again today, telling us that their plan is working, although that is not the reality of life for people who, at the next general election, will be asking themselves whether they and their families feel better off than they did 14 years ago. It is that reality that new clauses 1 and 4 seek to expose: as the Conservatives gaslight the British people, our new clauses are there to call them out.

New clause 1 does that by requiring the Government to come clean over how many people will be liable to pay income tax at 20% and 40% in the current tax year, how the number has changed over the last three years, and how it will change in the three years ahead. We want the Government to admit the impact that their six-year freezing of the income tax personal allowance and the higher rate threshold will have. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, 3.7 million more people will be paying tax by 2028-29, and 2.7 million more will be paying the higher rate, as a result of the Government’s threshold freezes. Will the Minister repeat those figures and admit that they are correct? We believe that the Chancellor should be honest about this too, and that is what new clause 1 seeks to achieve.

We know that the outcome of the Conservatives’ decisions during the current Parliament is hitting pensioners who pay tax especially hard: because taxpayers over the state pension age do not benefit from any of the changes in national insurance, they will feel the impact of the Conservatives’ tax rises even more. That is why we tabled new clause 4—again, requiring the Chancellor to come clean about the impact of his and his predecessors’ policies. The new clause requires the Chancellor to set out the number of pensioners who will be liable to pay income tax this year and in each of the next three years, and what the average pensioner’s tax bill will be. Pensioners deserve to know the truth about how the Government’s decisions will affect them, and they have good reason to be concerned about this Government.

While Labour has guaranteed that the pensions triple lock will be in our manifesto and protected for the duration of the next Parliament if we win, the Conservatives refuse to say what impact on pensioners their £46 billion unfunded pledge to abolish national insurance altogether would have. As the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said yesterday, it is a tax bombshell aimed squarely at Britain’s pensioners. The Conservatives are refusing to

say how they would pay for this massive commitment, so it is hard not to suspect that they are concealing their plans to make pensioners pay the bill. Perhaps they will pay for the revenue lost through the abolition of national insurance by making changes to pension rates or to the state pension age, but if they are planning to keep pensions the same and make up the revenue by raising the basic and higher rates of income tax, that would mean an 8% increase in income tax rates.

My colleagues and I have asked Ministers time and again to come clean about how they would pay for their plans, but they resolutely refuse to do so. They could clear this up right here, right now, by either abandoning their unfunded commitment or explaining how they would pay for it. I would happily give way if the Minister would like to do that, but I suspect that he will not. We know that the Conservatives find the reality of their tax-raising record so hard to bear that they would rather hang on to a reckless, unfunded plan to abolish national insurance to make them feel better about themselves and to desperately try to keep their divided party together. It is crystal clear that for the Conservatives it is party first, country second.

We also know that the Conservatives' high tax record goes hand in hand with their record of low growth in the economy. Indeed, one of the reasons taxes are so high is the fact that economic growth has been so weak over the past 14 years. Again, no matter what the current set of Ministers say, the idea that the economy is turning a corner is simply not reflected in reality. The truth is that our economy is smaller per person than it was when the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) became Prime Minister. Our country is forecast by the OECD to have economic growth of just 1% next year, weaker than that in every other G20 country except Russia. If, under the Conservatives, the UK economy had grown at the average OECD rate, it would now be £140 billion larger—and that growth would have provided an extra £50 billion in tax revenues to be invested in our public services. Instead, economic growth is on the floor, taxes are going up, and public services are falling over. That is the Conservative doom loop that we are in. We know that the only way out of the doom loop of ever-rising taxes with nothing to show in return is to get the economy growing with Labour's plan.

Labour's plan for economic growth is driven by the need for stability, investment and reform. Stability, something so sorely lacking in the recent years of Conservative chaos, must be the basis of a secure and responsible approach to the economy, and with strong fiscal rules, a new fiscal lock and respect for independent institutions, we will put stability at the heart of our approach.

Jonathan Edwards: At the beginning of his speech the hon. Gentleman mentioned Paul Johnson, whom the press has quoted today as saying that the Government and the Opposition are tied to the same fiscal path. Is that an ideological decision or a general election tactic? I am genuinely interested in hearing the answer.

James Murray: We in the Labour party believe that having fiscal rules that are iron-clad is essential to being trusted to manage the economy in a responsible way that puts family security and family finances first. Having strong fiscal rules and stability underpinning every other

decision that we make is absolutely essential to everything that a Government might hope to do. Indeed, that stability forms the foundation for getting the economy growing, because with stability we will be able to work in partnership with businesses to remove the barriers to investment, using catalytic public investment to unlock more than £20 billion from the private sector to invest in the industries of the future. To support that investment, we will reform the systems that our economy needs to thrive, from reform of our planning system and employment rights to devolving powers to elected Mayors on transport, skills, enterprise, energy and planning. That is how Labour will begin to grow the economy if we win the next general election.

We know that a new approach and a new Government are needed, because that is what people across the country are telling us. People want a new approach whereby they can feel better off, rather than struggling to make ends meet as their taxes rise relentlessly. The Conservatives are desperate to distract from the mess they have created. They go from the simply unbelievable, like the Chancellor claiming yesterday that they had abolished low pay, to the unbelievably reckless, like their £46 billion unfunded plan to abolish national insurance. But no matter what they say, or how hard they try to pretend that their plan is working and that people in Britain have never had it so good, people know the reality of life. People know that taxes are at record levels.

Today we want the Conservatives to at least come clean and admit how many more people are paying tax as a result of their decisions in this Parliament, and how hard they are hitting pensioners in particular. Frankly, however, no matter whether they come clean, come the general election, people across Britain will ask themselves whether they and their family feel better off today than they did 14 years ago. The answer to that question is the reality from which the Conservatives cannot hide.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I rise to speak in support of tax-cutting proposals. We are not discussing the national insurance reductions in this group of clauses, but both previous speakers have spent some of their time discussing them because they are relevant, as they are the other side of the issues related to the correct levels and thresholds for income tax, which are the proper matter of our current debate. I wanted any kind of tax cut in the Budget, because we are over-taxed and the right kinds of tax cuts can speed up growth, which all the major parties in this House want, although there are some disagreements about the exact mix of policies that might create it.

The first thing we need from the Treasury is for its official forecasts and those of the OBR to have greater belief in the fact that if we promote more growth by cutting some tax rates, we may end up with more tax revenue. The best generator of more revenue to pay for our public services is a growing economy. The best generator of more growth is productivity improvements, and there is particular scope for such improvements in the public sector. The public sector was badly damaged by the covid experience. We lost a lot of productivity through the hasty and unnecessary reorganisation of

[Sir John Redwood]

public services during the pandemic, but we are finding it hard work and slow going to get the lost productivity back.

I welcome the fact that, in the latest set of Budget numbers, the Government have put in future productivity recoveries over the next few years, but it is slow progress, even to get back to the levels of productivity in 2019. I put it to the Government that they do not need to spend extra money on new technology, such as artificial intelligence, to get back to the levels of 2019. They may wish to recommend schemes for AI investment to get above 2019 levels but, by definition, we were able to get to 2019 levels of productivity without AI, because it had not been invented at that stage.

There should be more common agreement about the urgency of productivity recovery in public services. We are missing out on at least £20 billion due to the productivity problems that have developed since 2020 and the lockdown experience. However, there is also a source of extra revenue from lower taxes, because if we cut tax rates in the right way, we will generate more cash, rather than less. I think everybody now agrees that cutting certain taxes has that effect, because it is quite obvious that if we impose certain kinds of turnover or activity taxes, they will lower turnover and activity. Indeed, many taxes are imposed with a moral wish to lower activity or usage rates. For example, alcohol and tobacco attract higher taxes because the wish is that people buy them less or, in the case of tobacco, do not buy them at all. We get the same effect with things that we should be promoting.

2.45 pm

One of my proposals to the Government is that they should be extremely worried about the large decline in the number of self-employed people since 2019. Some of that the inevitable consequence of lockdown, which led to older people who were working for themselves being unable to work and deciding to retire a bit earlier, but quite a lot of it is not. Some of it is due to people of younger ages being deterred by their experiences, and some of it is because young people are not coming forward to replace those who were self-employed. It was not just lockdown or the disruptions around that time that caused this problem; it was also the IR35 tax changes, which went through in two tranches, culminating at about the time we experienced the problems of lockdown.

We have lost more than 800,000 self-employed people, partly through a self-inflicted tax wound. The decision was taken in two stages to introduce the idea that a person acting as the customer of a self-employed contractor has a duty to satisfy themselves about their tax status, and can be liable if they have made a mistake in their tax status. That meant it became extremely difficult for quite a lot of self-employed people to get contracts from both smaller and bigger businesses, because why would the executive take the risk that they could, in the end, be tied up in a dispute with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs that they did not want? It was simpler not to allow a self-employed person to win a contract, because there was tax bureaucracy and an investigation that could put them both on the wrong end of a tax bill and on the wrong end of a moral issue where it looked as if they were helping someone to fiddle their taxes.

HMRC has always had issues with how to define someone as a genuinely self-employed person. There are lots of obvious requirements, because none of us wants to see people who are effectively employed by a single employer taking advantage of tax breaks that were designed to deal with the extra risk of being self-employed, including the lack of benefits that someone gets if they are genuinely self-employed. If they are not getting sick pay and paid holiday, they are in a rather different category from those of us who are employed, who get such benefits from our employer built into the overall package.

The normal sorts of tests include whether someone is working for more than one employer. Do they have a contract for services or an employment contract? Do they have sick pay? Do they have holiday entitlement? Do they have other benefits? These are the tests that we would normally apply to decide whether someone is genuinely self-employed. We have got too tough from the revenue side, and we have lost a lot of self-employed people. We are not recruiting the extra self-employed people we want, who are vital to the growth and vitality of an economy. If we had a few hundred thousand more self-employed people, they would be the innovators, the price cutters and the people who go the extra distance to provide an additional service. They would find customers and be useful challengers to the big businesses. They would not destroy the big businesses but would keep them on their mettle and make them understand that they, too, have to listen more to what customers want, because customer service improvement is often generated first by the self-employed or a small business.

I turn now to small businesses themselves. If a self-employed person takes the giant bureaucratic step of taking on an employee or two, they will have all the bureaucracy and the extra tax that goes with that. We need to make it as easy as possible for them to grow their small business, and I am very pleased that the Government have now said that they can raise the VAT threshold, because registering for VAT is a colossal additional commitment that a small business has to make. It means diverting a lot of energy into tax compliance, rather than finding more customers and serving them better, so we should seek to delay that until the business is rather bigger than the level that is currently recommended. I urge the Government, who I know are interested in a growth strategy, to allow people to put off the day when they have to register for VAT, so that they can concentrate rather more on that period of growth.

Turning to the issue of national insurance versus income tax, which we are about to vote on, I began my remarks by saying that I was happy to support the national insurance reduction. It will help those in employment and promote higher real incomes and more spending, which is what we need for a growth strategy and to cheer the country up a bit. However, we need to hear a bit more of the Government's thinking before we turn the wider proposal—it is not yet proper policy, because it has not been given a budget or a timetable—into a firm manifesto pledge on our main priority for future tax changes. For example, we need a statement from the Government on how people will earn their entitlement to the state retirement pension if there are no longer any employee contributions, because our current entitlement to the state retirement pension is based on the number of years of contributions we

have made through NI. We can change that; this Parliament can do anything it likes on those sorts of issues, but it has not changed it yet.

I think this needs some kind of Green Paper or White Paper—some kind of thought-through model of what the state retirement pension scheme will look like if we want to end up with no employee national insurance contributions at all. It might require the abolition of the national insurance fund and having just a payroll tax on employers in the future, because the fund would not look quite the same without the employee contributions. At the moment, broadly speaking, the fund pays for the state retirement pension, with a little balance on top. Long gone are the days when it paid for the health service and many of the other benefits. If we read the details, we can see that there are just a few rather modest residual contributory benefits left. We need some kind of new presentation or analysis of what might happen to the fund.

It is also important to ensure balance and fairness in the distribution of tax reductions, so I think there have to be some tax reductions for those who have completed their working lives and are no longer in receipt of employment income. It would be wrong for the Conservative party to rule out tax reductions that help those who have retired—those who now have investment income because they saved hard and worked hard during their working lives. There needs to be some balance in how we allocate those reductions.

I would also say to the Government that, as they think forward to their next fiscal event, as I think we now have to call them—an autumn statement, a mini-Budget or whatever the latest terminology is—there is more scope in the numbers to have a better return of money to taxpayers than this quite cautious Budget we are voting on tonight gives us the opportunity to do. I do not think we can afford the incredibly expensive habits of the loss-making Bank of England. I fully understand that the Bank of England is completely independent in setting the base rate, setting out its inflation forecasts and conducting its monetary policy through the Monetary Policy Committee, and nothing I am suggesting would in any way interfere with that.

However, we have a parallel policy, which began under Chancellor Darling and the Labour Government and continued under successive Conservative Chancellors. It was always a joint policy of the Treasury and the Bank to create money to buy bonds and to create a jointly held portfolio. Successive Chancellors of the Exchequer needed not only to give their authority to do that—proving that it was not an independent Bank policy—but to give an indemnity to the Bank against all losses. I say to those on the Treasury Bench that we, as a country, have now paid the Bank of England, I believe, £49 billion for losses over the last year and a half or so, and if we believe the OBR numbers, there are many tens of billions in losses to come over the next five years. Those losses come from three different sources, and some, although not all, are avoidable.

The Treasury and the Bank need to discuss those colossal losses and to understand that the United Kingdom and the Bank of England are now very much out of line with the practice of, say, the European Central Bank, which followed a similar policy of creating money and buying bonds in the bad days, but which is not trying to get rid of them all as quickly as the Bank of England.

The ECB is not selling them in the market at colossal losses, particularly the long bonds that are sitting on very large losses, because there is no need to sell them. Also, the ECB is not paying its full overnight rate on bank reserves, which would create a bigger running loss. The Bank of England never used to pay any money on reserves prior to 2006. The ECB has reinstituted zero interest on minimum reserves and has a lower deposit rate than the base rate. So I think there are things to learn from the European Central Bank so that the Bank of England could come back without such huge losses that substantially distort our fiscal policy.

The principle of independent monetary policy setting the base rate and forecasting inflation is important, but so too was the independence of fiscal policy from Bank and other outside interference. Now, however, the Bank of England is a dominant influence on our fiscal policy because its losses are so enormous, and that obviously affects what is available to spend or to offer by way of tax reductions. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench are in listening mode on these matters, because if sensible changes were agreed, we could look forward to a little bit more tax reduction and flexibility, and maybe a little more spending where we are hurting—on some features of the health service, perhaps—so that we could reinforce our growth policy with appropriate policies that were eminently affordable.

Members of the House who are interested will know that I am critical of the current control mechanism. I do not think it is very good. It would be much better to have something more like the American system, which has both an inflation and a growth control over the economy. I am suspicious of an economy that is effectively guided by a single five-year forecast by the OBR. I do not believe that the OBR or anybody else has much idea of what the budget deficit is going to be in five years' time, because there are so many different things that can come along to change it. So, far from that being an iron rule, it is an arbitrary rule. Almost the only thing we know about that number is that it is likely to be wrong.

We need rather more concern about how much we are borrowing in-year and in the next year, because those two things are much more forecastable. I am not in favour of any expansion in the amount of borrowing planned for this year or next year. We have quite a lot of debt, which is why I have tried to identify ways in which the budget arithmetic and the fiscal arithmetic could look rather better if we cut the taxes that can generate more revenue and those that have a cost, but balance that with reductions in expenditure. I have looked at two big pots: Bank of England losses and productivity shortfall.

There is a third area to look for savings, which I know the Government are actively pursuing: getting people back into work and helping, supporting and encouraging those who feel that they cannot return to the workforce to be able to do so. I trust that this is generally supported around the Committee. It could enrich those people's lives and raise their standard of living, but it could also add to our tax revenues and therefore make lower taxes or better public services that much more affordable. My only criticism of the Government's efforts on this is that I would just like them to speed up. This needs doing more quickly and on a bigger scale.

The ideas that we have heard and the work that has been put in are, on the whole, very sensible, but we need better results, because a large number of people do not

feel that they can be part of the workforce at the moment, and I am sure that some of them could be better off if they felt they were getting the right support. Working has to be worth while, and that also requires the policy changes that are now going through to say that we are not always going to invite people in legally from abroad to do low-paid jobs when what we want is better-paid jobs in Britain and more jobs that engage the potential British workforce who are definitely out there.

I do not think we need the two new clauses kindly proposed by Labour, which probably already has quite a lot of the knowledge that the new clauses seek, as the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) implied. If we do not increase the thresholds, of course more people will end up paying tax. I do not want too many more people paying the higher rate of tax, but to get an upward shift in the thresholds in due course, we will need to go over the issues to see where we could free up some cash. The Government should look at the losses, the employment situation and productivity to find their crock of gold, and then we can all be happier.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesman.

3 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As we scrutinise the Finance (No. 2) Bill in detail, starting with clauses 1 to 4, we see that the legislation serves as a profound symbol of a Government who have run aground. The Bill starkly exposes the UK Government's complacency in the face of the cost of living crisis that continues to devastate homes across Scotland and, indeed, the other nations of the UK. Households are still reeling from the catastrophic decisions made by this Westminster Government.

As we have heard from the Government, clauses 1 to 4 are about household incomes, but the Bill falls dramatically short of meeting the urgent needs in our communities. I am used to this place lacking in humanity, but where is the humanity? It is never shown on these domestic issues. People in our communities need and want help. They want to know how they will pay for their soaring mortgage bills, their food bills—up by more than a quarter in the past two years—their ballooning car insurance premiums, their energy bills, which are still nearly 60% higher than in the winter of 2021-22, according to Library research, and much else. The clauses before the Committee do not really get to that issue.

The shadow Minister is right to talk about the per capita GDP issue in the UK, which is an utter disgrace, but what is Labour's plan? More Brexit, more austerity and more being wedded to the fiscal rules that got us into this place. This is a damp and ineffective piece of navel-gazing from folk who had the wrong idea in the first place. Time and again, that idea has failed, but they have repackaged it and put it forward once more. Austerity is bust. It does not work, and it is madness for both the Conservative party and the Labour party to continue pursuing it, but that is what they do. This broken institution is not listening to people.

Clauses 1 and 2 could have invested in the economy. The Minister talks about devolution, but instead of devolution of investment, we are getting the devolution of his cuts. The spring Budget slashed Scottish capital

funding by 16.1%, severely restricting Scotland's aspiration for new hospitals and more. I note that the shadow Minister was happy to quote the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and Labour and the Tories are both maintaining what the Institute for Fiscal Studies has called a "conspiracy of silence" on the magnitude of the cuts required in the coming Parliament.

The former Labour leader in Scotland, Kezia Dugdale, makes it clear in an article published today that voting for Labour in Scotland would mean that people have to pay for tuition fees, and possibly for prescriptions and personal care. They are likely to see fewer child poverty interventions such as the Scottish child payment, an SNP initiative that is already lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. If they vote for Labour, people in Scotland are likely to see those things scaled back. That is the reality of the future under Labour: more austerity. Voting for a compliant, so-called Scottish Labour will have real-life consequences for the people of Scotland.

Although we will support Labour's new clauses 1 and 4, which would offer some scrutiny of what is going wrong with the Government's policy, Labour is ultimately only slavishly following this horrible, extremist, worn-out and clueless Tory Government, who are hollowed out by their right wing. It is testament to a Government devoid of ideas and vision, in this fag-end Parliament characterised by minimal legislative activity, that the Bill contains a mere 26 clauses, compared with last year's 352.

Sir John Redwood: Can the hon. Gentleman tell us why Scotland grows less quickly than England, despite having more public spending per head?

Drew Hendry: Had the right hon. Gentleman done any real research, he would know that the figures for the UK are skewed dramatically by the overheated economy of London and the south-east, which buck the UK trend. If he looks at the figures for all the counties of England, including those in the north of England, he will see how the Government are letting down the people of England across the piece. But of course he does not want to do that. He just wants to make a lazy characterisation of what is happening, saying nothing about people's potential, which is being ignored and run down by this place, this Government and the official Opposition, who have no idea how to change that.

Clauses 1 to 4 aim to maintain the current rates of income tax, including the savings rates, for another financial year. However, they do little to mitigate the Government's broader fiscal missteps. In contrast, Scotland's progressive approach to income tax under the SNP—I almost choked when we heard about progressive taxation earlier—has not only shielded public services from Westminster's austerity but enhanced them, generating approximately £1.5 billion in additional revenue. We are protecting those on lower incomes, because most people in Scotland pay less income tax and dramatically less council tax than people in England.

All the scare stories about people leaving Scotland because of its progressive policies have proved to be rubbish. The report from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has shown that more higher-rate taxpayers have moved to Scotland. The revenue that the Scottish Government are attracting supports a wide array of social benefits, from free prescriptions to university

tuition, which significantly reduces the cost of living for Scottish residents. Those are all things that this Parliament would attack, and Kezia Dugdale has today posted a warning about what would happen if Labour got its hands on the Scottish Parliament.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): New clause 5, in my name, would require the UK Government to review the impact of the tax measures announced in the spring Budget on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Committee will, of course, recognise that the nations and regions of the UK differ in key respects—in their strengths, their weaknesses and their needs. To a large extent, the UK tax system operates as though economic and social conditions are uniform across these isles, so I would like the Government to consider what impact this universal approach to central taxation is having on different parts of the UK, in the hope that a better understanding of such matters will help to inform and improve tax policy decisions.

The laudable ambition to level up the nations and regions of the UK is testament to the different circumstances prevailing across these isles. The Welsh tax base is different from others in the UK. Wages in Wales are much lower than the UK average, productivity is lower, and our proportion of elderly citizens is higher. We should ensure that the tax system reflects that reality and, at the very least, we should make sure that we fully understand the differential impact of tax decisions, whether it be the freezing of the personal allowance, reductions to national insurance contributions, or decisions on corporation tax, on different areas.

I concede, of course, that some fiscal devolution has taken place and that the Welsh Government have the power to set supplementary Welsh rates of income tax. However, these powers are not as advanced as those possessed by the Scottish Parliament, which allow the Scottish Government to create new income tax band thresholds to better tailor their tax system to the specific needs of the Scottish people.

A review of the impact of income tax policy specifically on Wales could include looking at how it interacts with the current Welsh rates of income tax and inform the debate on any further devolution of tax-raising powers to Wales in the future. Extending the reviews to other devolved nations would allow for a comparative study on how UK tax policy interplays with the different fiscal devolution settlements in place across these islands, which would also be to the benefit of future tax policy decisions and any Government levelling-up strategy.

Jonathan Edwards: Following Brexit, the UK Government could have been extremely radical: they could have devolved corporation tax to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and they could have fully devolved income tax and VAT. Is it not amazing that following Brexit, and all the pain that it has caused, there is a complete lack of ambition about using any powers that Brexit enables?

Ben Lake: I could not agree more. We were told that one of the supposed benefits of withdrawing from the European Union would be the liberty to tailor our tax powers; to devolve them to different parts of the UK in a bespoke way, so as to promote growth and better reflect the needs of the people. I agree that it is remarkable that the UK Government have thus far failed to make

real the supposed benefits of Brexit. This review of tax policy could touch on those things. It would also be useful given the important link between tax decisions and public spending and, indeed, economic growth.

Sir John Redwood: Were a future Parliament to grant these tax powers to Wales, would the hon. Gentleman think that in order to promote faster growth in Wales he should cut taxes below English rates, or would he put them higher than English rates?

Ben Lake: I am not one to make up policy on the hoof, but the review could look at that, and if the evidence shows that tax decisions could be made to promote growth and to level up, which I think the right hon. Gentleman is in favour of, we should follow that evidence and do so.

Our continued reliance on the Barnett formula to allocate funds between the UK's nations is problematic not only due to its flaws, but because of its inconsistent application in recent years, which has meant that Wales has lost out on billions of pounds of much-needed public investment. Members will be familiar with the concerns raised by communities across Wales regarding the way in which HS2 spending has been classified. Although not a single inch of track or rail was to be laid in Wales itself, it was categorised as an England and Wales project under the statement of funding policy, thus depriving Wales of significant consequential funding that the Barnett formula would otherwise have provided. The latest estimates suggest that Wales has lost £4 billion in consequential funding—money that could have transformed the country's public transport infrastructure.

I understand that there will be reluctance within Government to move away from the Barnett formula, not least because devising a needs-based formula is far from simple. However, if we are to retain the Barnett formula, the funding floor should at the very least be updated to use census data from 2021 rather than the 2001 data it currently uses. I am sure the Minister will agree that much has changed since 2001—when I was actually still in primary school. The needs and population of Wales have changed considerably, so it is only reasonable that the funding floor element of the Barnett formula is at least brought up to date.

Such a consideration could be included in the review that I propose, as well as a review of the implications of UK tax policy in Wales. Again, all of this analysis and information could help inform debate for future tax policy decisions and ultimately ensure that we have a tax system that is fit for purpose and meets the needs of people in Wales.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Members who have spoken for their contributions to the debate. As we have discussed, the Government have shown their commitment to keeping taxes low in order to support people to keep more of what they earn. That is why we have nearly doubled the income tax personal allowance since 2010, ensuring that some of the lowest earners do not pay income tax, while also benefiting higher-rate taxpayers.

The Government have shown that we are also committed to ensuring that older people can live with the dignity and respect they deserve, and the state pension is the foundation of state support for them. Thanks to the Government honouring our commitment to the triple lock, the basic and new state pensions increased by

[Nigel Huddleston]

8.5% this April—one of the largest ever cash increases in the state pension. Those on the new full state pension will therefore be £900 per year better off. That £900 figure is significant, because of course that is the average amount by which 27 million employees will benefit from the national insurance cut: £900 additional for many pensioners and £900 additional for 27 million workers. I think most people will agree that is fair.

3.15 pm

Of course, the tax system treats pensioners fairly. Pensioners whose sole income is the full rate of the basic or new state pension do not currently pay any income tax. Individuals working above the state pension age also do not pay national insurance contributions, meaning they already pay a lower rate of tax on their income from work. This means that someone over the state pension age earning the average salary of £34,500 pays £1,826 less tax than someone underneath the state pension age as no national insurance contributions are paid on that income.

Turning to the amendments to the income tax measures, new clauses 1, 4 and 6 would require the Government to publish reports providing information on the number of income tax payers by their marginal rate, the number of pensioners paying income tax and their average tax liabilities. These reports would cover past years and forecasts for future years. The Government consider these amendments to be unnecessary given the information that is already publicly available. HMRC publishes statistics for past years that cover the number of income tax payers, including breakdowns by marginal rate and age, and the Department for Work and Pensions publishes figures for pensioners' average incomes. The Office for Budget Responsibility is the Government's independent forecaster, and most recently it published projections of the number of income tax payers for future years in its "Economic and fiscal outlook"—EFO—at the spring Budget. These also include breakdowns by marginal rate.

New clause 5 would require the Government to publish an analysis of the impact of the incoming corporation tax measures in this Finance Bill on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As Members will know, income tax rates for non-saving, non-dividend income in Scotland and Wales are set by their respective Parliaments. HMRC regularly publishes income tax statistics that include breakdowns by country—for example, it publishes the number of taxpayers in each nation and breaks this down by their marginal rates of income tax and by their age and sex. Corporation tax, which will be more substantially covered by the Exchequer Secretary later in proceedings, applies UK-wide, and clauses 12 and 13 maintain the current approach from April 2025. The OBR produces regular forecasts on the impact of the current policy being applied in future years and HMRC analyses receipts and liabilities in its annual corporation tax statistics publications. We therefore believe that these new clauses are unnecessary.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Sir John Redwood) for his comments—he always makes considered and thoughtful contributions. He rightly pointed out the importance of the low-tax strategy adopted by this Government, which is of course an instinct of all Conservatives: we increase taxes out of

necessary but always reduce them where possible out of choice. He was also right to point out the necessity of ensuring that we increase public sector productivity given that, as he recognised, it has fallen by about 5.9% since the pandemic. We need to get that productivity level up again and go further. He will be aware that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is very focused on this area.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham raised many other comments that we have spoken about directly, relating to the self-employed and the innovators of the UK economy, which I always take on board. He also mentioned the Bank of England, which of course is independent, and the separation of fiscal and monetary policy is a key feature of the UK's economic framework. The Government do not comment on the conduct or effectiveness of monetary policy, but I am sure that many people will have heard his comments.

With the greatest respect, I will turn to the comments made by the Scottish National party spokesperson, whom I know well and like very much. I think even he will regret making comments such as a "right-wing extremist Government"—he knows better than that. We are not a right-wing extremist Government.

Drew Hendry: Just to be clear, I was saying that the Tories have been hollowed out by the extremists on the right wing within their Government, not that we have an extremist right-wing Government—that is, of course, for people out there to make their mind up about.

Nigel Huddleston: I think the hon. Gentleman just dug even deeper there. As I say, I like him but I do not always like what he says. On income tax, I do not think that everybody in Scotland would share his enthusiasm for the Scottish tax system, given that the thresholds and rates are higher, to the tune of up to 5%.

Turning to my opposite number, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), I will try to avoid the déjà vu all over again—we seem to have the same debate again and again. Yet again we have heard a Labour party spokesman constantly talking Britain down, as if we are in some declinist environment of failure upon failure. That is not a characterisation of the UK, its economy or our constituents that I recognise. I wish he had greater optimism and enthusiasm, and could support the UK economy and the workers to a greater degree. After all, the UK is doing incredibly well.

The hon. Member for Ealing North was right to recognise that all of our constituents are facing extraordinarily difficult times, but he is wrong to believe that is something unique to the UK economy; it is as a result of the pandemic and the cost of living challenges, which have had an impact right the way around the world. Given the extraordinary circumstances that the whole developed world has found itself in, what is extraordinary is how the UK has performed so well. I wish he would recognise the great optimism and the potential future of the UK economy.

For example, the International Monetary Fund has forecast that this country will grow faster than Germany, France, Italy and Japan over the next few years to 2028-29. The hon. Gentleman should also recognise that since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, the UK economy has generated an average of 800 jobs per day. Since Brexit, the UK has gone up the global export league tables, from seventh to fourth. We are the second

largest exporter of services in the world and have reached record levels of service exports recently. We have overtaken France to become the eighth largest manufacturer in the world. We have the third largest tech economy, after the United States and China. We have the largest film, TV and creative industries sector in Europe, and one of the world's leading biotech and life sciences industries—again, it is the largest in Europe.

We are leading the world in renewables, with the first, second, third and fourth biggest offshore wind farms in the world. I could go on, but I will not detain the Committee too much longer, Dame Eleanor. If the hon. Gentleman could recognise just one or a few of those success stories, he might have greater confidence in the UK economy and be able to talk it up. Anybody aspiring to be in government must champion the UK around the world, instead of talking us down. Otherwise, the impact they would have on investment in the UK economy is appalling.

Let me deal with the scaremongering in what the hon. Member for Ealing North and others have been declaring in the past few days about national insurance and the impact on pensions—I found that behaviour deplorable. It could be complete scaremongering because, as we have said, he is not aware of how NI impacts health and pensions. The amount of money spent on pensions is about £130 billion. Welfare spending is £260 billion. NHS spending is £160 billion. That is far higher than the total amount paid for by NI. So to try to suggest some direct correlation and say that reducing NI puts pensions at risk all of a sudden is either economically utterly incompetent or it is sheer scaremongering—neither are particularly attractive attributes in somebody aspiring to be in government. I therefore hope that he will have the decency to take that back. As I said, this scaremongering of pensioners, from the whole Opposition Front Bench, is despicable, although we can perhaps expect it from the Opposition.

Moreover, it is utterly hypocritical, because when we had the NI debate not so long ago, the Opposition spokespeople, the Opposition Front Benchers and the Leader of the Opposition said that they supported our NI cuts, but when it came to a vote they did not. That should make the British people ask: why would the Opposition say one thing and do another. First, I should say that is not a surprise to me, but could it also be that at some future point they might hope to be in a situation where they could reverse that decision and say, “We did not actually vote for it, after all”? Again, they should be straight with the British public.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions—some more than others. The debates will continue, but I hope that I have explained why we do not accept the new clauses. I ask that the clauses we have put forward should stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

REVIEW OF IMPACT OF SECTION 2

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish a review of the expected impact of section 2 of this Act.

(2) The review must include analysis setting out the number of

individual taxpayers facing a marginal tax rate in the tax year 2024-25 of—

(a) the basic rate of 20%, and

(b) the higher rate of 40%.

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must take account of—

(a) equivalent actual figures to those in subsection (2)(a) and (b) for the tax years 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24, and

(b) equivalent projected figures to those in subsection (2)(a) and (b) for the tax years 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28.”—(*James Murray*.)

This new clause requires a review of how many people will be liable to pay income tax at 20% and 40%, and would compare figures for the current tax year with those for the three preceding and three subsequent tax years.

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

The Committee divided: Ayes 211, Noes 276.

Division No. 146]

[3.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Cruddas, Jon
Abrahams, Debbie	Cryer, John
Ali, Rushanara	Cummins, Judith
Ali, Tahir	Cunningham, Alex
Amesbury, Mike	Daby, Janet
Anderson, Fleur	Davey, rh Ed
Antoniazzi, Tonia	David, Wayne
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Davies-Jones, Alex
Begum, Apsana	Day, Martyn
Benn, rh Hilary	Debbonaire, Thangam
Blackford, rh Ian	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Blackman, Kirsty	Dodds, Anneliese
Blake, Olivia	Doogan, Dave
Blomfield, Paul	Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Bonnar, Steven	Doughty, Stephen
Brennan, Kevin	Dowd, Peter
Brock, Deidre	Duffield, Rosie
Brown, Alan	Eagle, Dame Angela
Brown, Ms Lyn	Eagle, rh Maria
Bryant, Sir Chris	Eastwood, Colum
Buck, Ms Karen	Edwards, Jonathan
Burgon, Richard	Edwards, Sarah
Butler, Dawn	Efford, Clive
Byrne, Ian	Elliott, Julie
Byrne, rh Liam	Elmore, Chris
Cadbury, Ruth	Eshalomi, Florence
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Farron, Tim
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Fellows, Marion
Carden, Dan	Fletcher, Colleen
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Foxcroft, Vicky
Chamberlain, Wendy	Furniss, Gill
Champion, Sarah	Galloway, George
Chapman, Douglas	Gardiner, Barry
Charalambous, Bambos	Gibson, Patricia
Cooper, Daisy	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cooper, rh Yvette	Grady, Patrick
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Grant, Peter
Cowan, Ronnie	Green, Sarah
Coyle, Neil	Greenwood, Margaret
Crawley, Angela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Griffith, Dame Nia
Creasy, Stella	Gwynne, Andrew
	Haigh, Louise
	Hamilton, Fabian
	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette

Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate

Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Sarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webb, Chris
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Samantha Dixon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie

Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote*
cast by Sir John Redwood)
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti

Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir
 Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir
 Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike

Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote*
cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-
Price)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Fletcher and
Robert Largan

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 4

REVIEW OF IMPACT OF SECTION 1 ON PENSIONERS

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish a review of the expected impact of section 1 of this Act on those over State Pension age.

(2) The review must include analysis setting out, for the tax year 2024-25—

- (a) the total number of people over the State Pension age paying tax under section 1, and
- (b) the average tax liability per person of those in subsection (2)(a).

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must take account of equivalent projected figures to those in subsections (2)(a) and (2)(b) for the tax years 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28.”—(*James Murray.*)

This new clause requires a review of how many pensioners will be liable to pay income tax this year and in each of the next three years, and what the average pensioner's tax bill will be in each of those years.

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

The Committee divided: Ayes 212, Noes 274.

Division No. 147]

[3.42 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy*
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote*
cast by Marion Fellows)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy

Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote*
cast by Marion Fellows)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast*
by Marion Fellows)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive

Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Galloway, George
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu

Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webb, Chris
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew

Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
 Whittome, Nadia

Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Samantha Dixon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert

Coutinho, rh Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon

Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie

Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tracey, Craig
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt

Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wiggins, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Fletcher and
Robert Largan

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 12

CHARGE AND MAIN RATE FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2025

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 13 and 19 stand part.

New clause 2—*Review of impact of section 12*—

“(1) The Chancellor must, within three months of this Act being passed, conduct a review of the impact of section 12 of this Act.

(2) The review must consider how the rate of corporation tax provided for by section 12 affects—

- (a) investment decisions taken by businesses,
- (b) the certainty of businesses about future fiscal and market conditions.

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must include an assessment of how the factors in subsection (2)(a) and (b) would be affected by maintaining corporation tax at a rate no higher than that set out in section 12 until the end of the next parliament.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor to conduct a review of how the rate of corporation tax set by the Bill set out in clause 12 affects business investment and certainty, including what the effect would be of capping it at its current level for the next Parliament.

New clause 3—*Analysis of the impact of the energy security investment mechanism*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish an analysis of the possible impacts of the energy security investment mechanism on—

- (a) revenue from the energy profits levy, and
- (b) investment decisions involving businesses liable to pay the energy profits levy.

(2) The analysis under subsection (1) must consider how the impacts in (1)(a) and (1)(b) would be affected by amending the definition of a qualifying accounting period, as set out in section 1 of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022, to be one that ends before the end of the next Parliament.

(3) In this section, the “energy security investment mechanism” means the mechanism introduced by section 17A of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022, as inserted by section 19 of this Act.”

This new clause seeks to establish the impact on revenue and investment decisions of the energy security investment mechanism being introduced, and how this impact would be affected in a scenario where end date for the energy profits levy was amended to be before the end of the next Parliament.

[The Second Deputy Chairman]

New clause 7—*Review of impact of section 13 on small and medium enterprises*—

“(1) Within 3 months of this Act being passed, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report assessing the impact of section 13 on small and medium enterprises.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must consider the extent to which paying corporation tax at the small profits rate, rather than a higher rate, enables small businesses to manage cost pressures including those arising from—

- (a) energy costs;
- (b) staffing and recruitment costs;
- (c) borrowing costs;
- (d) raw material costs.”

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): We now move on to debate clauses 12, 13 and 19. Before I delve into the detail of the clauses, however, let me first briefly set out how they fit into this Finance Bill.

The Government remain focused on taking long-term decisions to strengthen the economy by driving productivity, increasing the number of people in high-wage, high-skilled jobs, and boosting investment. The Government are also ensuring that the tax system is as competitive as we can make it under very difficult economic circumstances. We have some of the most generous investment incentives among major economies, including full permanent expensing, which the OBR has forecast will generate almost £3 billion of additional business investment each year, or £14 billion over the next five years. It has forecast that that additional investment will increase GDP by 0.1% by the end of the forecast. In addition to full expensing, we have an internationally competitive corporation tax rate—the lowest headline rate in the G7—which this Bill legislates to maintain.

I will now turn to clauses 12, 13 and 19 in more detail. Clauses 12 and 13 set the charge for corporation tax from April 2025. This includes both the main rate and the small profits rate, as well as the thresholds at which those rates apply. The charge for corporation tax must be set every year. It is important to legislate annually in advance, as this provides certainty to large and very large companies that pay tax in advance on the basis of their estimated tax liabilities. These clauses maintain the current main rate of 25% and the small profits rate of 19%, as introduced in April 2023. Tax certainty is of great importance to businesses—I think that is something we can all agree on—and clauses 12 and 13 ensure that they will continue to benefit from stable and predictable tax rules. By maintaining the current rates, the Government have struck the right balance between remaining competitive and raising vital revenue.

Clause 19 makes changes to ensure that the energy profits levy will no longer apply if oil and gas prices return to historically normal levels for a sustained period of time. It does so by introducing legislation to give effect to the energy security investment mechanism, or ESIM. The EPL was introduced in 2022, at a time of near-record high oil and gas prices, but it is right that should those prices return to historically normal levels, the additional tax would cease to apply. The detail of how the ESIM operates was set out in the

technical note published alongside the 2023 autumn statement; this Bill simply puts that detail on a legislative footing and provides for secondary legislation to legislate for the administrative details of how that check is made.

Current oil and gas prices are higher than normal, and OBR projections indicate that high prices will persist over the next five years. The ESIM is a mechanism that switches off the EPL if, for a period of six months, the average prices of both oil and gas fall below set thresholds. Those thresholds are currently \$74.21 per barrel for oil and 50p per therm for gas, and are based on a 20-year historical average to the end of 2022—before higher energy prices began—and are adjusted each April based on the annual change in the preceding December’s consumer prices index.¹ By providing certainty on the conditions under which the levy will be disapplied, the Government are supporting investor confidence in the sector and helping to protect domestic energy supply, the economy, and of course jobs.

Clauses 12 and 13 provide certainty to businesses by maintaining the current rates of corporation tax, and clause 19 has been welcomed by the oil and gas operators and their investors, with the ESIM providing the sector with certainty to support future investment in the UK—in jobs and in our energy security—while also ensuring fairness to taxpayers. I therefore commend these clauses to the Committee.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Minister.

James Murray: Thank you, Mr Evans, for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Opposition to new clauses 2 and 3, which are in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq).

Earlier this afternoon, we pressed the Government on the impact of tax rises, particularly stealth tax rises, on families and pensioners. Of course, it is not only taxpayers and their families who are struggling to make ends meet under the Conservatives. Businesses in Britain are struggling too, and when I meet those from businesses across all sectors, of all sizes and in different parts of the country, they are clear that they want a Government who support them to succeed and grow. What the people I speak to from businesses want from Government, first and foremost and above all else, is stability, predictability and a plan for growth. Stability is greatly prized by businesses, which want to make decisions about investment and growth, which are critical to creating jobs and making people across Britain better off.

4 pm

That stability is nowhere to be seen under the Conservatives, who have been governing, in a fairly loose sense of the word, through chaos and U-turns. That needs to change if Britain is to reach its potential, and it will change if we win the next general election. If we do, Labour will bring the stability that businesses need to plan ahead. One of the key ways that we have pledged to offer businesses the stability and predictability that they need is through our plan for a road map for business taxation. As the shadow Chancellor has set out, Labour would publish this road map in our first six

1.[Official Report, 24 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 15WC.](Correction)

months in office to give businesses the stability, predictability and long-term plan that is so important to making investment decisions.

We have already pledged that our road map will include our commitment to capping corporation tax at 25%, and with that in mind, we have tabled new clause 2. It sets out our commitment, if we win the next general election, to bring certainty back for businesses by capping the rate of corporation tax at 25% for the whole of the next Parliament. We would take action if tax changes in other advanced economies threatened to undermine UK competitiveness, but we believe that the current rate of 25%, the lowest in the G7, strikes the right balance between what our public finances need and keeping our corporation tax competitive in the global economy.

I hope Treasury Ministers accept our new clause, or if not, perhaps they would like to take this opportunity to follow our lead and also commit to a 25% cap on corporation tax for the whole of the next Parliament if they win the next general election. This is an opportunity for Ministers to show that they understand the importance of stability and certainty. If the Minister would like to intervene to match our commitment to capping corporation tax, I would be happy to give way. No? Why not? Maybe his boss does not agree. Let us not forget that two years ago, the current Chancellor went from advocating a four-point cut in corporation tax to advocating a six-point rise within just a few months. No wonder the Conservatives struggle to make any commitments on tax certainty now.

The truth is that the Conservatives have become unable to offer the stability and predictability that businesses need to invest. That stability is crucial to encouraging private sector investment and getting our economy growing. Our pledge on capping corporation tax and publishing a business taxation road map sits alongside our wider approach to offering stability, not least through our iron-clad fiscal rules, our new fiscal lock, and our respect for independent economic institutions. I know from our conversations with so many businesses that there is huge potential for private sector investment in Britain, and I know how vital a stable Government are for that to be realised, because businesses want and need a Government who will offer them a partner in growth. They need a Government who will offer stability, provide strategic public investment and reform the way our country works, in order to bring down the barriers to growth. That is how Government should be working with businesses to help them grow, create jobs and make people across Britain better off.

Alongside clauses 12 and 13 on corporation tax, this group focuses on clause 19, which introduces a new energy security investment mechanism in relation to the energy profits levy or windfall tax. As I set out on Second Reading, we fully support the mechanism. We very much welcome the signal it sends, which will help with investor confidence in the UK's offshore energy sector. As we have set out, if we win the next general election, Labour will make the windfall tax stronger, in order to raise more revenue to support our country's energy transition. However, as we have also set out, we want to give as much certainty as possible to the companies affected. That is why our new clause 3 sets out our commitment that if we win the next election, the energy profits levy will end no later than the end of the next Parliament. We made that commitment when we announced our plans, and it is now in the new clause before us. We

recognise that, by its very nature, the windfall tax is a one-off levy in response to extraordinary profits, so it is right to be clear about when it will come to an end.

Let me be clear that our reason for wanting to extend and strengthen the windfall tax is to raise revenue that we need to support our country's transition to clean energy. This critical transition will create jobs in the industries of the future, bring down bills for households and businesses, and give us energy security and independence. Our plan is to make this transition by 2030, and we need to work hand in hand with the private sector to make that ambitious aim a reality. Many of the firms paying the windfall tax are the same ones that are and will be investing in the clean energy industries of the future. Many of those firms' employees will work in the clean energy industries of the future, too. We are committed to working closely with all those businesses and employees affected, including through Great British Energy, which will be our new national energy champion, based in Scotland, and through our new national wealth fund to manage this important transition together.

As I have set out, if Labour wins the next general election, we will form a new Government who can once again be a reliable and effective partner to businesses, to help them grow. We will offer stability with our corporation tax cap, our road map for business taxation, and our commitment to unbreakable fiscal rules. That stability will help businesses considering investment decisions, as will our strategic public investment, part funded by the windfall tax, which will help crowd in private sector funding. We will make sure that investment can achieve its potential by reforming the way that our country works. From planning to pensions and grid connections, we will remove barriers that stand in the way of economic growth. That is how we will get the economy growing after 14 years of economic failure from the Conservatives.

As I said earlier this afternoon, if the UK economy had grown under the Conservatives at the rate of the OECD average, it would now be £140 billion larger, providing an additional £50 billion in tax revenues to invest in our public services. Instead, the legacy of the Conservatives' time in office is one of low growth, working people worse off and taxes rising while public services decline. Ahead of the general election, people will ask themselves whether they and their family feel better off than they did 14 years ago. They will ask themselves whether our hospitals, our schools or our police work better. Frankly, they will ask whether anything in Britain works better than it did when the Conservatives came into office 14 years ago. The choice at the general election will be between five more years of chaos with the Conservatives, or stability with a changed Labour party, and our long-term plan to make working people better off. The Conservatives may try to claim that Britain's economy has turned a corner, but the truth is that the British people want to turn the page. It is time for a general election.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman. I wish to speak briefly on clause 12 stand part and the new clause to which he has just spoken.

Clause 12 is a simple clause. The title is "Charge and main rate for financial year 2025", and it states:

"Corporation tax is charged for the financial year 2025...The main rate of corporation tax for that year is 25%."

[Sir Christopher Chope]

Just over four years ago, I was re-elected to this House on a Conservative party manifesto that said that we would keep corporation tax at 19% and would not increase it. As the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) just reminded us, the Chancellor of the Exchequer thought that 19% was far too high, and he had a radical proposal to reduce it to 15%. At the time, I did not buy into that leadership bid of his, but it is clear now that it was an extraordinary gesture, completely at odds with what he must believe, because I presume that he supports clause 12, which sets corporation tax for the following year at 25%. That is far too high. I voted against the increase originally, and if clause 12 stand part was pressed to a Division today, I would certainly vote against it.

It was with some incredulity that I listened to the hon. Member for Ealing North. His new clause 2 talks about reviewing the impact of section 12. The incoherent subsection (1) says:

“The Chancellor must, within three months of this Act being passed, conduct a review of the impact of section 12 of this Act.”

Obviously, section 12 will not come into effect until the 2025 financial year, while the Bill will be on the statute book within a couple of months. What would be the point of conducting, within three months of that date, a review into something that will not come about until next year? If the new clause mentioned reviewing the impact of the current high levels of corporation tax, I would be with him. [Interruption.] He is shouting at me from a sedentary position. I will happily give way to him, so that he can make his point. Let us have a debate. If he does not want to engage in debate, so be it.

All I am doing is reading out the terms of the hon. Gentleman's new clause 2. If he wishes to resile from that, let him say so. I am sure that, even at this late stage, Mr Evans, you would accept him withdrawing the new clause because its terms do not bear out what he is telling us.

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman invites me to respond. The key point of the new clause, as I am sure he realises, is to make it clear that Labour would cap corporation tax at 25% for the whole of the next Parliament. Does he agree with that?

Sir Christopher Chope: No, I do not, because that would be capping corporation tax at far too high a level. I would like to see it reduced, ideally back to 19%, as soon as possible. I certainly would not support any notion that we should stick with a 25% rate for the duration of the next Parliament.

That intervention was interesting. If that is the purpose of the hon. Gentleman's new clause, I think we can say that it is rather opaque, because it does not say, for example, “Between 2025 and 2030, corporation tax shall be set at the rate of 25%”. It says that there should be

“a review of the impact of section 12 of this Act.”

What would the review look at? One thing would be how the 25% rate of corporation tax provided for by section 12 had affected

“investment decisions taken by businesses”.

Surely we know—I think he said so in his remarks—that having corporation tax set at 25% adversely affects businesses making investment decisions, including decisions on whether to increase their investments, or whether to invest in the United Kingdom for the first time. It is because such adverse investment decisions have been taken by businesses that, as he accepts, we have low growth, coupled with rising taxes and a stagnant economy.

It surprises me that more of my colleagues do not wish to engage in this debate. I very much support those Government Members who believe that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's main objective should be to grow our economy, rather than stifle it through high taxes and more regulation, which seems to be what is happening.

In a sense, the hon. Gentleman has answered his own question—high rates of corporation tax adversely affect investment decisions taken by businesses—so why do we need a review to establish that? How can he both want a review because he does not know the answer to that question, and be so confident about its results that he can announce today that corporation tax will be at 25% for the next five years? It seems a pointless exercise. One is left with the feeling that the main parties have very similar policies on many aspects of taxation.

Drew Hendry: That is what I have been saying.

Sir Christopher Chope: Both parties support very high levels of tax. They are not as high as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) would like them to be, but who knows? If there is a Labour Government, then where Scotland leads on taxation, I am sure that the rest of the United Kingdom will follow. When he responds, I would like the Minister to take up the challenge from the hon. Member for Ealing North and tell us whether he supports 25% for the next four or five years. I would like him to say, “No, 25% is far too high. Perhaps we have to put up with 25% for 2025, but thereafter, if re-elected, we the Conservatives will reduce corporation tax steadily back to 19%, or even to 15%, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer aspires to do.”

4.15 pm

Drew Hendry: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's contention that there is no real difference between the Tories' proposals and those of the Labour party—a point I have made many times. Does he agree that progressive taxation in Scotland has seen the majority of taxpayers pay less, and those who have a bit more pay more? More higher-rate taxpayers have moved to Scotland during that time, which has protected some of the services. That is not on offer on either side of this House.

Sir Christopher Chope: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the dynamic effects of taxation. I was privileged to be in this House when the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the late Lord Lawson of Blaby, announced the dramatic reduction in the top rate of tax to 40p in the pound. As a consequence of that reduction, the overall tax yield went up. The burden on individuals was reduced, thereby causing them to work harder to retain their energies for what was happening in our economy, rather than taking their talents overseas. The hon. Gentleman talks about wanting a progressive tax rate in Scotland, but that leads to people becoming

collectively poorer. We can see from recent statistics that the Scottish economy is stumbling and failing, because of the misguided policies of the Scottish National party.

That is a bit off the point of whether we support keeping corporation tax at 25%. I certainly do not, and I hope we get confirmation that the Government have aspirations to reduce corporation tax. When my hon. Friend the Minister opened the debate, he said that we need to be stable and predictable. He praised our system of complicated allowances against corporation tax. I would support more tax simplification. If we keep the basic rate down and reduce the allowances, that makes taxation simpler and reduces the need for extra people in His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to deal with all that. It probably undermines the burgeoning accountancy profession, but that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Whatever happened to tax simplification? A specific committee was set up to deal with tax simplification and measures used to be brought before this House. That has all been abandoned in favour of evermore complex tax arrangements. Far from being stable and predictable, they are unstable and unpredictable because no one knows how those extra complications will be avoided or exploited by those affected. Hon. Members can tell that I am not a happy bunny on this issue, because we are not committed to reducing corporation tax in the long term. We do not seem to recognise the adverse impact that it has on our productive economy and our ability as a nation to grow that economy and thereby provide the extra revenue we need for public services.

I also despair that there are so few of my own colleagues who wish to reinforce the point and get the message out to our constituents and to businesses in our constituencies. That message is “Stick with us, because we find the current levels of corporation tax intolerable. We introduced them because of extraneous circumstances over which we say we had too little control, but do not worry: as soon as those extraneous circumstances are removed from the equation, we will revert to being a low corporation tax party.” Let us have an announcement to that effect today. In the meantime, however, let me say that if clause 12 is put to the vote, I shall vote against it, and I shall certainly vote against new clause 2 for the reasons I have given.

Drew Hendry *rose*—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Given that we are not really pressed for time today, unless Mr Hendry intends to speak for up to four hours—

Drew Hendry: I do not intend to do so.

The Second Deputy Chairman: Yes, I can see that.

As both candidates are present, I will now announce the results of the ballot held today for the election of the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee: 290 votes were cast, two of which were invalid, and Dame Jackie Doyle-Price was elected with 161 votes. She will take up her post immediately. I congratulate her on her election. The results of the count will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and will be published on the internet.

We now come to the four-hour speech from Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mr Evans. I will do my best to accommodate your request, as usual.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to clauses 12 and 13. The fact is that these clauses maintain the status quo on corporate taxation while failing to support sectors in dire need, such as our hospitality industry, which has seen more than 500 closures in the past year alone. The SNP has repeatedly called for measures such as VAT relief for that sector to alleviate the pressures, but the UK Government have consistently ignored our calls, thus demonstrating a clear disregard for the economic challenges facing Scotland.

Where is the support for our town centres and high streets? Enterprise initiatives such as “VAT-free streets” could help to breathe new life into our vital centres. The SNP has called for urgent help, but again Westminster just shrugs its shoulders and ignores its responsibilities for the damage caused through its calamitous but—as we have seen, and it is worth repeating—unanimous devotion to a disastrous Brexit, to waste and to mismanagement.

The proposed energy security investment mechanism, adjusting the parameters for windfall taxes on the basis of oil and gas prices, represents a missed opportunity to genuinely bolster our energy security and accelerate our transition to net zero. Rather than leveraging these revenues to mitigate energy costs for households who, as I said in our previous debate, are struggling under the current punishing cost of living crisis, or to invest in sustainable growth—and probably the only industrial strategy available to us is investment in renewable energy—this mechanism is poised to jeopardise up to 100,000 jobs and hinder our environmental goals.

Moreover—and there is no hiding place—the Labour party's screeching U-turn on the £26 billion a year required to stimulate the industrial green transition, which its members know their own advisers have said is the minimum required, and on its proposal to intensify the windfall tax to fund nuclear projects in England is entirely unacceptable, meaning the utilisation of Scotland's resources for projects that contravene our national interests.

We will support Labour's new clause 3, because at the very least it will show the opportunity that has been wasted, and the squandering of Scotland's natural resources, in a clearer light. However, the Bill underscores a critical disconnect between the needs of the Scottish people and the actions of this Government, and indeed this place of Westminster. It is a Bill that perpetuates inequality, neglects economic innovation and leaves our most vulnerable citizens to bear the brunt of its failures.

Having debated these clauses today, let us be mindful of the stark reality: only a Government attuned to the aspirations and challenges of Scotland can genuinely deliver the change we urgently need. That Government should have all the powers to make the changes needed to represent the values of the Scottish people. That needs to be the Government of an independent Scotland that seeks to regain our equal seat at the centre of the European Union.

Gareth Davies: I was waiting for a four-hour speech and it never came—that was four minutes, but what a four minutes!

[Gareth Davies]

Let me thank hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate. I will respond to some of the points that have been raised at the end of my remarks, but before doing so let me directly address some of the new clauses that have been tabled.

New clause 2 seeks the publication of a review into how the rate of corporation tax set by the Bill, as set out in clause 12, affects business investment and certainty, including what the effect would be of capping it at its current level over the next Parliament. I agree that it is important to regularly review and evaluate policy, and the Government keep all tax policy under review. The Office for Budget Responsibility produces regular forecasts, including of projected corporation tax receipts and business investment. These forecasts are based on the rates and thresholds that currently apply, and which clause 12 maintains from April 2025 to provide advance certainty to businesses. The latest of the forecasts already looks as far ahead as 2028-29 on the basis of the corporation tax rate, which currently stands at 25%, so no further action is required from the Government.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Bill maintains the small profits rate of corporation tax at 19%, but does the Minister not agree that this is a drop in the ocean compared with spiralling costs in energy, staffing, borrowing and a host of other areas? The Chancellor could have used the opportunity to give small businesses a boost by reforming business rates, or by helping them with their energy bills through a proper windfall tax. Does the Minister support new clause 7, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, which would ensure that the Government must lay before the House a review of the impact of the small profits rate to look at whether it really helps small businesses to manage their costs.

Gareth Davies: I will give the hon. Lady the courtesy of addressing new clause 7 in due course. She is right to highlight that the new rate for small businesses will keep around 70% of businesses in the country at 19% when those that are most profitable move to 25%, but look at the entire package of support for small businesses. It shows that the Government are supportive of our high streets and small business entrepreneurs across the country, whether that is through the increase in VAT thresholds, the 75% rate relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, or all the support that we provided during the covid pandemic and throughout the energy shock, including the energy bill relief scheme and the energy bills support scheme. I put it to her that we are behind our small businesses. We regard them as the engine of our growth, and we will continue to do everything we can to support them. I will come on to new clause 7 in a moment, if I may.

New clause 3 would require a review of the possible impacts of the energy security investment mechanism on energy profits levy revenues, and on investment decisions in the oil and gas sector. It would require this assessment to be made on the basis of the end date of the EPL falling before the end of the next Parliament.

The Government have already published the tax information and impact note, which sets out the anticipated impact of the energy security investment mechanism—the ESIM. This indicates clearly that the mechanism will

give operators and lenders to the oil and gas industry confidence in the fiscal regime while the EPL remains over the next Parliament. Based on the OBR's current price projections, the ESIM is not predicted to trigger before the end of the EPL in March 2029, and is therefore expected to have no impact on EPL revenues. In addition, should there be interest in calculating forgone revenue if the EPL were to end in a particular year, the OBR has published projected EPL revenues over the forecast period, and the impact of the EPL ending early can be calculated from this publicly available information that is there for all to see.

4.30 pm

Regarding the assessment of the investment decisions within the oil and gas sector, the Government have been clear that they want oil and gas companies to reinvest their profits here in the United Kingdom, and by legislating for the ESIM we are giving these companies and their investors the confidence that if prices fall, the EPL will cease. This allows the sector to continue investing in the economy, in jobs and in UK energy security while ensuring fairness to the taxpayer, as I said earlier. Indeed, when the ESIM was first introduced, the Offshore Energies UK trade body agreed that the ESIM was a step in the right direction to support confidence and investment in the sector. However, it should be noted that there are of course commercial decisions to be made, and it is not possible for the Government to make an assessment of the impacts of the ESIM on the decisions of commercial organisations.

New clause 7 seeks the laying of a report before this House within three months, assessing the impact of clause 13 on how small and medium enterprises manage their costs. The introduction of the small profits rate last year kept the rate of corporation tax at 19% for companies with profits of less than £50,000, and the availability of marginal relief means that companies with profits between £50,000 and £250,000 pay below the main rate of 25%. This ensures that companies have greater post-tax profits to reinvest, to distribute and to retain to cover future costs and any shocks in the economy. Clause 13 simply maintains this approach from April 2025 onwards, providing advance certainty to taxpayers.

More broadly, it should be noted that our corporation tax rules are based on the fundamental principle of taxing profits net of costs. HMRC already releases its corporation tax statistics publication annually, which breaks down data on corporation tax liabilities by the size of company. Once tax returns covering the period since the small profits rate was introduced come in, this will be reflected in the data, but I am afraid that that will not happen within the next three months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) made a typically colourful speech. He made some very valid points, with which many in the Committee will agree. We all want tax to come down. As I said to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), we have included a provision and a rate to ensure that 70% of businesses—the smallest, least profitable businesses—maintain a rate of 19%. We had to increase the rate in the face of an incredibly challenging environment on the back of covid and the war in Ukraine, when the Government stepped in with significant support for businesses, families and individuals

across the country. I can tell my hon. Friend that the extension to 25% will raise £85 billion, which will help to reduce our debt over the long term.

We have introduced full permanent expensing, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and I think it is fair to say that he was sceptical of that. However, it was called for directly and clearly by the CBI, Make UK and a number of businesses that want to reinvest their profits into other endeavours and into plant and machinery. I put it to him that we should be looking at the effective rate of taxation for a business, not just the headline rate, but that our headline rate for the largest, most profitable businesses is, at 25%, still the lowest in the G7, which is the most comparable mix of countries to look at.

Of course we want to see tax simplification in all our fiscal statements, which is why we decided to abolish multiple dwellings relief in our last fiscal event. It is also why the Chancellor has set out his long-term ambition to abolish national insurance contributions, which would simplify our tax system substantially.

This is all in the context of a country that remains one of the most competitive in the world, but it is not just about taxation; it is about planning, our rule of law and our amazing educational institutions. That is why Tata recently invested in a 40 GW gigafactory in Somerset, it is why Ørsted has decided to build the world's biggest offshore wind farm in this country, and it is why AstraZeneca has decided to invest £450 million in a new R&D centre.

Investors look at a range of factors. It is not just about taxation; it is also about regulation. It is remarkable that the shadow Minister did not mention the Labour deputy leader's obsession with introducing 70 new regulations on business, which would hinder business investment. It is the certainty of a Labour Government's introduction of regulation that will hinder business investment, not anything that this Government have done in office. Looking at our achievements when it comes to business investment, the facts remain clear.

Sir Christopher Chope: Looking ahead to the next Parliament, and hoping that there will be a Conservative Government, can my hon. Friend say to all those in the business community who are watching eagerly that a 25% headline rate of corporation tax is too high, and that we want to lower it?

Gareth Davies: We agree. We want taxes to come down, but we are not going to announce tax decisions from this Dispatch Box outside fiscal events. It is clear for all to see that this Conservative Government believe in lower taxes. We have reduced national insurance contributions for 29 million people by some 30% in just the last six months, and the record is very clear on that.

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are not in the habit of making policy commitments outside the normal fiscal process. Does that mean the £46-billion unfunded black hole created by the promise to abolish national insurance is no longer a policy of this Government?

Gareth Davies: It is neither unusual nor incorrect for a Government, or any party, to set out a long-term ambition to let the public know where we stand on taxation and what we want to see in the future. In 2010,

for example, we said that we wanted to increase the personal allowance for income tax to £10,000, and we met that. Actually, we exceeded it. It is now over £12,500, so a person in this country can earn £1,000 every month without paying any tax at all. That is a long-term ambition that we have delivered.

James Murray: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I notice that he is keen to talk about a long-term ambition to abolish national insurance. Yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said at Treasury questions that

“our policy is to abolish employees’ national insurance”.—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 437.]

Was the Chancellor wrong?

Gareth Davies: As I said, it is a long-term ambition. It is right for a party that is serious about governing to set a direction for the country. I know it is an unusual idea for the hon. Gentleman that having a plan for government is the right thing to do, but we have made it very clear to the British people that, if they vote for a Conservative Government at the next general election, their taxes will come down.

The amendments before the Committee propose that we publish information that is already publicly available. They are not needed, so I urge the Committee to reject them.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 12 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 13 and 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 2

REVIEW OF IMPACT OF SECTION 12

“(1) The Chancellor must, within three months of this Act being passed, conduct a review of the impact of section 12 of this Act.

(2) The review must consider how the rate of corporation tax provided for by section 12 affects—

- (a) investment decisions taken by businesses,
- (b) the certainty of businesses about future fiscal and market conditions.

(3) For comparative purposes, the review must include an assessment of how the factors in subsection (2)(a) and (b) would be affected by maintaining corporation tax at a rate no higher than that set out in section 12 until the end of the next parliament.”—(*James Murray.*)

This new clause requires the Chancellor to conduct a review of how the rate of corporation tax set by the Bill set out in clause 12 affects business investment and certainty, including what the effect would be of capping it at its current level for the next Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

The Committee divided: Ayes 195, Noes 266.

Division No. 148]

[4.40 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Anderson, Fleur
Abrahams, Debbie	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ali, Rushanara	Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Ali, Tahir	Begum, Apsana
Amesbury, Mike	Benn, rh Hilary
	Blackford, rh Ian
	Blackman, Kirsty

Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Galloway, George
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew

Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve

Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily

Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webb, Chris
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and
Samantha Dixon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Bristow, Paul
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa

Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth

Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon

Kearns, Alicia
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine

Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tracey, Craig

Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Fletcher and
Mr Gagan Mohindra

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 3

ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE ENERGY SECURITY INVESTMENT MECHANISM

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act being passed, publish an analysis of the possible impacts of the energy security investment mechanism on—

- (a) revenue from the energy profits levy, and
- (b) investment decisions involving businesses liable to pay the energy profits levy.

(2) The analysis under subsection (1) must consider how the impacts in (1)(a) and (1)(b) would be affected by amending the definition of a qualifying accounting period, as set out in section 1 of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022, to be one that ends before the end of the next Parliament.

(3) In this section, the “energy security investment mechanism” means the mechanism introduced by section 17A of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022, as inserted by section 19 of this Act.”—(*James Murray.*)

This new clause seeks to establish the impact on revenue and investment decisions of the energy security investment mechanism being introduced, and how this impact would be affected in a scenario where end date for the energy profits levy was amended to be before the end of the next Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

The Committee divided: Ayes 198, Noes 269.

Division No. 149]

[4.54 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur

Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul

Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Galloway, George
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel

Howarth, rh Sir George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt

Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webb, Chris
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Samantha Dixon and
Mary Glindon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa

Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias

Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy

Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill

Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry

Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tracey, Craig
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wiggan, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Gagan Mohindra and
Mark Fletcher

Question accordingly negated.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill (Clauses 1 to 4, 12 and 13, and 19) reported (Standing Order No. 83D(6)), without amendment, and ordered to lie on the Table.

Business of the House (13 May)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, at the sitting on Monday 13 May, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Penny Mordaunt relating to Risk-Based Exclusion not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Joy Morrissey.*)

5.7 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): We have, I think, another hour and three quarters, or a little longer, in which to debate this motion. The point I want to make at the outset is this: why are we wasting so much valuable sitting time because of the way the Order Paper is being arranged? Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who I hope will respond to this short debate, can explain to us how it comes about that we have the best part of two hours to debate this motion, yet the motion states that we have two hours maximum to debate a much more important motion on Monday. That motion is in the name of the Leader of the House and relates to the exclusion of MPs. We had, I think, four amendments tabled to the Finance Bill, but there are already eight amendments tabled to the motion for Monday, which shows that there is quite a lot of interest in it. Those amendments include one from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who wishes us to go back to the situation that pertained in the original motion relating to the risk-based exclusion of MPs.

The original proposal was that Members could be excluded just on the grounds of suspicion. I tabled amendments against that proposal, together with colleagues, and it is to the credit of the Leader of the House that she has come back with a revised motion that makes it clear that exclusion would not begin to apply unless or until somebody had been charged with a violent or sexual offence.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As one of the colleagues who signed my hon. Friend's suggested amendment, I found alarming the suggestion that an MP could be suspended on the basis of an allegation. It does not require much imagination to see certain circumstances in which an MP could be targeted by someone making a serious allegation with no factual underpinning whatsoever, and then having to be suspended. It is astonishing, frankly, that we could be put into such a situation on so flimsy a basis.

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend, to whom I am grateful for supporting my amendments to the original motion. I am sure that it will be of concern to him that the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) has tabled amendment (h) for debate on Monday, which would effectively take us back to the original motion by suggesting that, instead of having to be charged, a Member would only have to be arrested on suspicion of committing an offence in order to be excluded from this House.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On the previous intervention, I do not know how many rape, sexual violence or violence arrests the right hon. Member

for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) have handled, but an arrest does not happen on the basis of "flimsy" allegations; it takes weeks. I just put that on the record, as someone who deals with this week in, week out. The idea that somebody gets arrested just on someone's say-so is for the birds.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before we resume this debate, I point out that the motion before us is incredibly narrow. I fear that we may be having the debate that we will have on Monday, and we do not want that. This is just about the amount of time that will be allocated. The debate that we are sort of having now is really for Monday.

Sir Christopher Chope: I take that point absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think we have already had a taste, from the couple of interventions, of the fact that this is a controversial subject, for which two hours of debate on Monday is inadequate. The purpose of this debate is to decide whether we believe that a motion limiting debate on Monday to two hours is the right or wrong course, and I would suggest that it is the wrong course.

Sir Julian Lewis: While fully accepting your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, I must say in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that I said nothing about somebody who had been arrested. The original wording to which I objected did not refer to someone having been arrested; it was simply about whether somebody had been accused of something. On the point about someone having been arrested, I might well agree with her interpretation; it would depend on factors such as the bail circumstances.

Sir Christopher Chope: One issue is that people can be arrested and not know whether they will be charged for months, if not years. During that period, they are in limbo and under suspicion, but are, under the principles of justice in this country, innocent until proven guilty. I think it is reasonable, if somebody is charged with an offence, that the matter is moved on, and that their identity is known. However, quite often, people may be arrested and their identity will not be known.

The point I am making is that this is a controversial subject. The new motion that the Leader of the House has brought before us is more in line with what is proposed in the other place, which probably has even more legal wisdom than this House. It decided in a similar debate that it would be wrong to exclude Members from the parliamentary estate on the basis of suspicion or mere arrest, and that a charge was needed. I submit that it is desirable to have consistent rules across the whole parliamentary estate, because people can move freely between the different parts of the estate, so if somebody in the other place is subject to a different regime from somebody in this place, that will create extraordinary anomalies.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): However many hours we spend debating this, is the fundamental problem not that the aim is to do this by motion, rather than by legislation, and that any exclusion of a Member except by a specific vote on that Member needs to be a legislative requirement for attendance of the House, not a mere motion?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. Indeed, that point could be made in Monday's debate without the need to discuss the amendments to which I have been referring, but why are we placing a restriction of two hours on a debate on an issue of such fundamental importance? My right hon. Friend's point is another reason why we should not support a two-hour restriction on Monday's debate. I do not really understand why that limit is necessary, because Monday's Order Paper looks very light, as indeed today's Order Paper has been. At the moment, just a couple of motions have been tabled, dealing with regulations. Why is it proposed that everybody should again have an early night on Monday, and that we will arbitrarily impose upon ourselves a time limit for debating the important issue of risk-based exclusion?

It is quite a straightforward point. The Leader of the House has tabled the motion and is faced with a number of amendments, including one on a very controversial topic: the issue of whether we should contaminate the whole proxy voting system in this House by allowing somebody who has been charged with a sexual offence to benefit from proxy voting. Why should they be allowed to vote by proxy? What is the justification for that? If somebody is charged with a sexual offence, they would potentially have bail conditions or custody conditions imposed as a consequence, and provided that there are no bail conditions excluding that person from participating in the proceedings of the House, they should be able to continue that participation. Should that not be the natural consequence?

Instead, the motion tabled for Monday proposes that a person would be entitled to a proxy vote in those circumstances. The reason I say that is controversial is because it would contaminate the whole proxy voting system. At the moment, a person with a proxy vote is a person who has a condition—either a medical condition, or they are expecting a baby or are the father of a new baby, and so on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman's speech is getting to the substance of Monday's debate. This debate is simply about the business of the House motion before us; it is not about what we are going to be debating next week. Can we be absolutely clear about that? I know that Mr Evans has already made that clear, so I am just reinforcing the point that we need to discuss what is before us, not the substance of next week's debate.

Sir Christopher Chope: Madam Deputy Speaker, I absolutely agree. My purpose in speaking to this motion today is to try to illustrate by example the scope of the motion that is down for debate on Monday, and why two hours, in my submission, is an inadequate amount of time in which to discuss such a motion.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: The motion before the House today suggests that Standing Order No. 41A, on deferred Divisions, shall not apply. I wonder whether my hon. Friend thinks it is wise to put before the House motions that randomly suspend Standing Orders, or whether it is not important to maintain the integrity of Standing Orders, which, Madam Deputy Speaker, is clearly a legitimate part of today's motion.

Sir Christopher Chope: My right hon. Friend makes another very good point. We know that the Leader of the House—and he is a distinguished former Leader of the House—has two hats: they act as a member of the Government and on behalf of the Government, but they also defend the rights of Back Benchers to have issues such as this properly debated. That is why I express openly my disappointment that the Leader of the House has chosen to table a motion that would limit the amount of time for debate, instead of providing reasonable time for such a debate, which could be three hours. That would not be unusual, taking into account the complexity of the issues.

To give another example of the complexity of the issue, this has been debated in the House, at business questions, in Committees, and by the House of Commons Commission, for the best part of a year. Why has it taken so long for it to be debated in those forums? Because it is a complex and controversial subject. It just seems to me that such a controversial and complex subject demands more time than has so far been allocated.

However, there is no point in my repeating my points any more, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I certainly do not want to get myself in a position where I cannot be called in the substantive debate on Monday, but I certainly look forward to that debate.

5.21 pm

Sir Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I will follow on from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who I thought made some fantastic points. However, I want to start by commending the Leader of the House for listening to the previous concerns and coming back with a revised motion. We are particularly grateful that she has been, as my hon. Friend said, a representative of the House. She has listened and come back, and I commend her for it.

None the less, I think my hon. Friend is absolutely right when he says that two hours is insufficient for this subject. This is not about the rights of Members of Parliament alone, although obviously it is to some extent. It is mainly about the rights of their constituents, who have a right to be represented in Parliament by the person they elected. The motion—I broadly support what is in it—is designed, in effect, to deliberately restrict the rights of those constituents to have their voice heard in Parliament. That is something that we in this House should interfere with only with great care, and certainly not on the back of a two-hour debate.

With a two-hour debate, by the time the Front Benchers have had a go, set out their stall and all of the rest of it, the time left for Back Benchers is limited. As anyone can see, the motion that has been tabled is quite extensive, with a number of different paragraphs, and eight amendments have been tabled, as my hon. Friend has said. If Front Benchers want to set out their views on the motion and address the amendments, how much time will Back Benchers get to speak? I suspect it will not be very long at all.

We are not really going to have time for a debate, but I think we saw earlier—through the exchanges of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch with my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips)—that there is quite a significant debate to be had, and people will have strong opinions on different

[*Sir Philip Davies*]

sides of the argument. The whole point of being here is that we have a debate, and surely we can all see from this timetable that we are not going to have time for a proper debate. That cannot be right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch made this point about the business on Monday. I have no idea how long debate will last on the various regulations down for debate on Monday, on public procurement and agriculture, or how many urgent questions and statements there might be and all the rest of it, but it is not impossible to envisage that those debates will not last very long. We could be in the absurd situation where we have business on a Monday that is supposed to run until 10 o'clock but we rise early because the two-hour limit for this debate has been reached, with hours still to spare. Why on earth would we unnecessarily restrict the debate before the normal end of the sitting day? We should at least make it clear that we can go on until the normal end of the sitting day, if that comes later. Why can the motion not at least make clear that we could carry on until 10 o'clock?

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my hon. Friend emphasise that the debate scheduled for Monday is not any ordinary debate? It is a debate to change the Standing Orders of the House. As was pointed out to me by Enoch Powell when I was first on the Procedure Committee in 1984, in the absence of a written constitution, the Standing Orders of this House are our constitution. Are we really saying that we should change our constitution in a time-limited debate this coming Monday?

Sir Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In some respects, I am perhaps arguing against my own self-interests here, because the changes that the Leader of the House has made to the motion mean that I am broadly content with it. I would prefer to see certain minor changes that we could perhaps tweak out, but there are probably other Members who do not like the changes that have been instituted since the measure last appeared before the House. Their opportunity to speak against those changes will now be severely curtailed, and that is unfortunate to say the least.

I simply ask that the Leader of the House think again about this measure. We can all see that two hours is not an adequate amount of time. There is scope to have more time for this debate on something that is of great importance to the rights of Members of Parliament, but mainly to their constituents, who want to be represented in this House by the people they have elected and for that to be curtailed only where necessary. I hope that the Leader of the House will indicate that she will not move this motion today, withdraw it and think again.

5.27 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The motion before us this evening protects time for the debate on risk-based exclusion on Monday 13 May. It also ensures that any amendments selected by Mr Speaker can be dealt with at the conclusion of the debate. It is an important debate, and we have had a little rehearsal of some of the issues that may come up, and I do listen to colleagues from all parts of the House about the substance, as do my fellow Commissioners, and how much time is allowed for the debate. As I announced last week, the

House will be considering secondary legislation earlier that day. The effect of this motion is to ensure that the debate on risk-based exclusion can take place no matter how late it starts, and it will have a guaranteed amount of time.

Turning to the specific points that have been raised, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) mentioned the integrity of Standing Orders. I hope, as recent history shows, that I put great emphasis on that point, having stood at this Dispatch Box and withdrawn my side of this House from taking part in an Opposition Day debate to protect the integrity of our procedures and processes and how Standing Orders operate.

I remind colleagues that this is the second time that the House of Commons Commission has brought this motion forward. I have tabled the motion on behalf of the House of Commons Commission, and this scheme has been arrived at by the House of Commons Commission with input from different political parties and a great deal of consultation. We have already had one debate on this matter that we did not bring to the Floor of the House for a vote. That was a lengthy debate, and we wanted to listen to all sides, and we took forward the issues that had been raised, put them back to the Commission and addressed the points of concern. That is why this amendment has come back in this form. In addition to that, all members of the Commission—the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who is in her place opposite me, and others—have taken time to talk to many colleagues both in this place and in the other place about concerns and suggestions they have for the scheme.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I do not think that what the motion aims to do is wrong, but I am concerned that we are using Standing Orders as a means of determining who can attend the House. We have never done that before. Either attendance at the House has been set out in legislation or an individual Member has been excluded from the House. Therefore, however much time we allow for the debate, we are allowing time for the wrong thing. If my right hon. Friend wants to go down this route, she should bring forward legislation, with a timetable motion for that legislation, rather than using Standing Orders in this way.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, which he has taken the time to make today and can of course make in the debate on Monday. He has not previously raised that point with me—I do not know whether he has spoken to the usual channels or other members of the Commission—but we have consulted and spoken to many colleagues about the motion.

This is the business of the House, and we are going to bring forward the debate. My right hon. Friend will know that this topic has been raised frequently at business questions and that Members are eager that the motion is brought forward. We have the debate on Monday. This motion will protect the time. I look forward to hearing from other colleagues. As the hon. Member for Manchester Central and I, along with Mr Speaker and other members of the Commission, have demonstrated, we will always listen to colleagues' concerns.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITIONS

Road network in Torridge and West Devon

5.31 pm

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): I have the honour to present a petition on behalf of some 4,000 of my constituents concerning the road network in Torridge and West Devon. Devon has the largest road network of any county at 8,000 miles. It has many unclassified and unnumbered roads serving isolated communities. While the substantial sums provided in recent Budgets are welcome, the patchwork repair of our roads is not the answer. The petitioners seek a predictable provision over the next five years to enable a planned scheme of comprehensive road repairs.

The petition states:

“Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to reallocate funds to Devon County Council to facilitate a comprehensive scheme of road improvements, including to improve the condition of unclassified or classified unnumbered roads which are vital for rural communities in Torridge and West Devon, as well as to prevent further, avoidable disrepair.

And your petitioners remain, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The humble petition of the people of Torridge and West Devon,

Sheweth, that Devon has the largest road network of any county, encompassing more than 8,000 miles; further that more than 5.77 billion vehicle miles were travelled on Devon's road network in 2022; further that many of these roads are unclassified or classified unnumbered and while acknowledging the welcome additional one-off grants of an extra £27 million in 2020/21 and of £9.4 million allocated to Devon County Council in the Spring Budget (2023); notes that the established funding model does not keep pace with the requirements of Torridge and West Devon's road network and that some of its roads, particularly the unclassified and classified unnumbered roads serving market towns and villages, after recent severe winters and rains, are in a state of dilapidation.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to reallocate funds to Devon County Council to facilitate a comprehensive scheme of road improvements, including to improve the condition of unclassified or classified unnumbered roads which are vital for rural communities in Torridge and West Devon, as well as to prevent further, avoidable disrepair.

And your petitioners remain, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.]

[P002956]

Youth Mobility Scheme

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition relating to the youth mobility scheme on behalf of the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk. One of the great constitutional injustices was the removal of Scotland from the EU against the wishes of the Scottish people by this Parliament. That situation has been compounded by the Government's rejection of a youth mobility scheme, which would have made it easier for our young people to live, to work and to study across Europe.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to show a willingness to negotiate with the European Commission on re-opening these opportunities for our young people.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares regret that the UK Government has rejected an EU-wide youth mobility scheme that would make it easier for our young people to live, study and work across the EU, as well as remove barriers to young EU citizens coming here to fill vital employment gaps.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to show a willingness to negotiate with the European Commission on re-opening these opportunities for our young people.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002974]

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents of Gower regarding the recommendations on the infected blood scandal. I pay tribute to the tireless campaigning of all those affected, and to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who has led the fight for justice and accountability here in this House.

Two victims of this scandal die every week. Those infected and affected have already waited far too long for justice, and the Government continue to delay. We need action. Justice delayed is justice denied.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gower,

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.

[P002975]

Coastal Communities: East Devon

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

5.36 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to talk about the east Devon coastline and some of the communities that are represented by two MPs—one for a constituency of the same name, and me, the MP for Tiverton and Honiton. The constituency I represent includes the coastal towns and villages of Seaton, Beer, Branscombe and Axmouth. My comments will relate mostly to those communities, although I cannot avoid referring to a town in the current East Devon constituency. I have notified the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) that I will refer to his constituency, given that some of the east Devon infrastructure that I will refer to affects people I represent. Last July and August, I carried out a summer tour of the villages and towns that I represent. As well as taking in some of the larger settlements such as Beer and Colyton, I visited coastal villages like Branscombe and Uplyme. I will mention some of the points that were made to me in the debate.

Before 2022, the Honiton constituency had not been represented by anyone other than a Conservative MP for over 150 years. Why do I raise that in a debate on Government support for communities on the east Devon coastline? I suggest that that Conservative rule of more than a century and a half helps to explain why there has been a tendency by the Conservatives to take east Devon for granted. The National Audit Office estimates that in the decade before 2022, the real spending power of English councils was reduced by 29%. That represented the removal of £10 billion of spending power. The levelling-up funding that replaced it represents less than half that amount.

If properly funded, local government can play a key role in helping our communities to thrive, yet the Government's levelling-up fund is an inefficient way to support local initiatives, leading to lots of nugatory work from already stretched council officers. Most councils have reached the limits of what can be achieved from efficiency savings. Further cuts will have to come from core services that are valued by the communities that councils serve, such as non-statutory services like public toilets, leisure centres and bus routes. The approach undermines local decision making and local democracy. Decisions about what to fund are made by bureaucrats in Whitehall, who are remote from the people affected by their decisions. Rather than devolving power, as the Liberal Democrats would, this move has further concentrated power here in London.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene. He makes a point about levelling-up funding; of course, we have had success with that in my East Devon constituency, which includes the town of Exmouth. What does he make of the fundamental fact that East Devon District Council had the opportunity to apply for money to support the swimming pools—in fact, I was asked to campaign for that money—but then was the only council in the county not to apply for any funding for our swimming pools, which includes an independent pool in his constituency in Axminster? Was it not a huge disappointment that the opportunity was there and was not grasped by our council? What a let down!

Richard Foord: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me an opportunity to talk up the great work that goes on in our leisure facilities in east Devon. As he says, the Flamingo pool in Axminster is brilliant; I take my daughter swimming there, and the volunteers who work there are fantastic. Given that he not only knows the Flamingo pool but has LED Community Leisure facilities in his constituency, the hon. Gentleman will know that we must do everything we can to help local authorities to apply for any funding that is available.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. Does he recognise the good work that levelling-up funding has done, and the fact that so many people and many councils can take advantage of it? Does he also endorse the view that whatever party may be in government in the future, it should be an integral part of the funding structure of every council in the United Kingdom?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Of 500 bids for levelling-up funding, only 111 were successful, and I am mindful of the 389 that involved so much work on the part of council officers. The Minister may correct me if I have got the number slightly wrong, but that is my understanding. We should remember that councils are not well staffed; in fact, they have many vacancies, because they are constantly having to cut staff numbers.

When the Conservatives talked of levelling up in their 2019 manifesto, they were talking to communities that were crying out for just that, but many of the east Devon coastal communities that I represent have been disappointed. Let me draw an analogy with a cream tea. In Devon, if someone talks about adding toppings to a scone, we immediately think “cream first”, and when someone talks about levelling up, we immediately think “investment in our communities”. Little did we know that in both cases, what the Conservatives actually meant was “jam tomorrow”.

The Government's approach of encouraging councils to use reserves and capital receipts to subsidise their revenue expenditure is unsustainable. Let us take, for example, the recent use by Devon County Council of £7.8 million of clawback money, which it had received from BT in connection with the provision of broadband internet. Rather than using that money as intended—to extend the provision of broadband to rural areas—the council used it to close its deficit. That got it through the 2023-24 financial year, but what will happen next March when there is no payout from BT, and what will happen to the thousands of my constituents who struggle to access the internet, which in the 21st century is an essential utility?

In the first round of levelling-up funding, the south-west region was ranked ninth out of 12 regions of the UK for the amount of funding received. It amounted to just £23 per person, which is less than the price of a single railway ticket from Honiton to Plymouth. We might as well buy a round of ice creams with the money, given how far levelling-up funding for east Devon will not stretch. The west country received less than 8% of all levelling-up funding from round 1. Even London received more than half that proportion, despite the fact that it was London's levels of wealth and infrastructure to which other regions of the UK were supposed to be levelled up.

Given that we are talking about the coast, let me draw another analogy, this time with building sandcastles. If my eldest child had a bucketful of sand and my youngest child had half a bucket, I would expect levelling up to enable them both to have full buckets with which to make grand sandcastles. Instead, what we seem to have found under this Conservative Government is that levelling up has meant that children have to make sandcastles on east Devon's beaches by half-filling their buckets, and anyone who lives locally will know that that will be with pebbles. If we are lucky, central Government will give us a flag to go on top, provided that we accept that the flag will have to have a blue tree on it.

East Devon District Council has submitted a bid in each round of the levelling-up fund since I have been the MP for Tiverton and Honiton. Had it been successful, the bid for the Axe valley would have supported £15 million-worth of projects. It would have transformed Seaton seaford and provided new opportunities for decent jobs. East Devon District Council was looking to provide three new employment sites: in Colyford Road and Harepath Road in Seaton, and at Cloakham Lawns in Axminster. Together, these could have provided around 3,000 square metres of employment space and created up to 140 decent jobs for local communities. However, rather than choosing this proposal or, indeed, the absolutely essential proposal for a town centre relief road in Cullompton, which was submitted by Mid Devon District Council, the Government chose to support Dinan Way in Exmouth. I do not doubt the merits of that proposal, but the costs of Dinan Way have ballooned.

Devon County Council's cabinet met earlier today. It considered a successful bid to round 1 of the Government's levelling-up fund, which awarded over £15.5 million for Destination Exmouth. East Devon District Council put in additional funding, as did other local councils, making a local contribution of £1.75 million. We learned today that the gateway project around the station in Exmouth will not go ahead, and that roughly £4.4 million that had been earmarked for schemes to help with active travel will be shelved. Instead, the more than £4 million will be rolled into the cost of the bypass in Dinan Way to offset the inflation that we have seen since the bid was submitted. If decisions around that investment had been made locally, we might have made different decisions, and we may have prioritised the funding and investment differently.

An increasing proportion of east Devon's communities are older, which is particularly true of coastal towns and villages. An ageing population is increasing the complexity of the care required. In Sir Chris Whitty's "Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report: Health in an Ageing Society", published last October, he wrote specifically about the tendency of older people to retire and move to coastal areas, such as east Devon. He said:

"We've really got to get serious about the areas of the country where ageing is happening very fast, and we've got to do it now. It's possible to compress the period of time that people spend in ill health...because otherwise we will end up with large numbers of people leading much more dependent lives."

His report says:

"Providing services and environments suitable for older adults in these areas is an absolute priority".

Sir Chris Whitty says that, specifically, we need policies to reduce disease and disability, and to help people to exercise, eat well and stay fit.

A report written in February this year by Beccy Baird from the King's Fund calls for a radical refocusing of health and care, with primary care and community services at its core. It says that

"progress has been hampered by an incorrect belief that moving care into the community will result in short-term cash savings. Other factors include a lack of data about primary and community services leading to a 'cycle of invisibility'".

Baird talks about

"urgent challenges such as A&E waiting times and planned care backlogs becoming the priority for politicians tempted by quick fixes instead of fundamental improvement."

In the face of that, the proposed closure of one whole wing of Seaton Hospital makes absolutely no sense to me or the constituents I represent, as I have said to various Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care, and to the Prime Minister himself at Prime Minister's questions.

How can we expect this Conservative Government to level up in respect of complicated services, such as health and social care, if they cannot even level up potholes? The annual local authority road maintenance—or ALARM—report reveals that the average cost of filling in a pothole is £46, which rises to over £70 for a pothole that is filled on a reactive basis, rather than having been planned. On my summer tour, constituents told me that they see repair vans coming to respond to a request to patch up a single pothole, rather than dealing with the whole road. Round 1 of the levelling-up fund awarded the west country £23 per head. That is the equivalent of half of one pothole filled per person. It is no wonder that when we drive in and out of Devon's craters, we sometimes think we are on the moon.

I contend that the levelling-up concept was designed to win over marginal seats in the midlands and the north of England in the run-up to the 2019 general election. Following that election, it has become apparent to the Conservatives that their 2019 electoral big tent has been shredded by the successive storms of partygate, the interregnum ruled over by the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and the crumbling infrastructure of our coastal communities, including those in east Devon. It will take Liberal Democrat influence in the next Parliament to devolve and restore services to our communities in east Devon.

5.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for bringing forward this important Adjournment debate about his area.

It might be helpful if I set the scene with a few facts and figures. I understand entirely the difficulty, the tensions and the problems for coastal and rural councils in delivering services. There is an additionality to cost that is often triggered by a heightening of the age demographic, as the hon. Gentleman said, and by the sparsity of communities. These are not great dense conurbations but small, picturesque villages and hamlets. They are attractive and they support our environment and make an area a lovely place in which to live, but it is not without challenge to deliver public services there. That is being experienced by a lot of councils in those areas.

[*Simon Hoare*]

That is why we listened carefully and closely to those who made representations to us during the evolution of the local government funding settlement. Pausing for a moment, I have made the point before to the hon. Gentleman that a record number of Members of Parliament from across the House came to see officials and me during the official consultation process, to advocate in the strongest possible terms on behalf of their areas. My hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) was one of them, but the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton was not. I politely say to him that if one is serious about trying to effect change, an Adjournment debate is an interesting platform on which to do it, but engagement in the proper channels of communication and consultation can often bring forward better results.

Simon Jupp: Let me run through a list of some successes in our part of Devon. They include: £15.7 million to help level up Exmouth, including the Dinan Way extension, which the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned; up to £30 million from South West Water to improve water infrastructure in Sidmouth; £1.4 million to address flooding on the River Sid and River Otter; a new school to replace Tipton St John Primary; our incredible Nightingale Hospital, which is still open and still bringing down waiting lists in my constituency; and, up the line in mid-Devon, which the hon. Gentleman sometimes pretends he represents, Cullompton is getting a new railway station. Meanwhile, Lib Dem-led East Devon District Council failed even to apply for funding for swimming pools, even though it asked me to campaign for it. It is the Lib Dems who are failing the south-west, not the Conservatives.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Maybe the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton is the sort of bloke who complains that he did not win the lottery even though he did not buy a ticket. How could he be expected to win the lottery? You have to be in it to win it.

Of course, not every council bid is going to be successful, but as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the dynamic effect of levelling up across the United Kingdom is being felt across communities, many of which had felt left behind, ignored, undervalued—call it what you will—by successive Governments of all stripes. If one talks to those in communities that are benefiting directly from the levelling-up initiative, the shared prosperity fund, the future high streets fund and others, there is a real sense of excitement about what can be done in partnership with the local authority, local businesses and the Government to deliver beneficial change.

Although I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon for setting out with such clarity the projects that have been delivered or part-funded, I am slightly annoyed, because he has stolen quite a lot of my remarks. He was a very distinguished local journalist, whose calls I used to relish taking—anything to get my views and thoughts on some local issue on the record. I now quiver slightly when my telephone rings and I see his name flashing, because I know he will ask for further things for his part of Devon and the wider

county. He advocates at the heart of Government to ensure that his constituents and others, including those of Tiverton and Honiton, see the benefit of the UK Government's commitment to levelling up.

We listened to local government and offered an additional £600 million in the local government finance settlement; I know that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton is aware of that. East Devon District Council saw an increase in core spending power of 5.9%, making available a total of £17.4 million for 2024-25. Mid Devon District Council saw an increase of 5.9%, making available a total of £11.6 million, and the county got an increase in core spending power of 7.8%, which is an additional £56.8 million, making available a total of up to £788.8 million for Devon County Council in 2024-25. We have invested £15 billion in a suite of complementary levelling-up projects to help grow the economy, create jobs, improve transport, provide skills training and support local businesses. Perhaps more powerful than even those things, as powerful and efficacious as they are, is the civic pride that the investment lights up in areas such as his—a pride in seeing what can be done, and starting a process that, if successful and guided and managed well, can provide no end of opportunities.

Richard Foord: Given the sorts of enterprises that the Minister just described levelling-up funding as being about, can he explain the decision to invest £50,000 in stone chess tables in north-west England?

Simon Hoare: There is a rubric for taking decisions. The Department's levelling-up initiative is, of course, handled by the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my excellent hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young). Each scheme is judged against fixed criteria; if it meets those criteria, it goes into the next round and can ultimately be successful.

I am afraid that I am not in a position to comment on individual schemes, whether successful or not, or on why they have been successful or not. That is something that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton would need to take up with the Under-Secretary, who always makes himself available to colleagues from across the House to discuss the exciting levelling-up initiative.

By my figures, £94.5 million of levelling-up funding has been allocated to Devon, excluding through legacy programmes, and that is in addition to significant long-term devolved funding and powers that we estimate to be worth up to £27 million, so I dispute as a matter of core principle the idea that the hon. Gentleman was trying to posit in my mind, and the mind of the House, that this Government and my party take for granted his part of Devon, or that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon—or indeed any other seat where we have a long history of representation. The Conservative party is a one nation party or it is nothing. We represent the views and aspirations of millions of people. It is why we have been the most successful political party, trying to do our best where we can for all our communities.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the terms of reference for levelling up have evolved since it was instigated. It was initially seen as primarily the preserve of post-industrial northern towns, but increasingly we see its power in our rural and coastal communities too. I have set out the figures on Devon's success with levelling-up proposals; the county is doing incredibly

well. Some £16 million in round-two levelling-up funding has been allocated for Destination Exmouth, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon mentioned. East Devon District Council received £1.8 million from the United Kingdom shared prosperity fund. East Devon will also benefit from the fact that the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership was the recipient of £35.4 million from the Getting Building Fund programme for 2020 to 2022. The community ownership fund has been very powerful in areas such as the hon. Gentleman's, as it has in mine. It supports initiatives that are of value, including sport centres, arts venues and precious community spaces.

The hon. Gentleman lost me, I have to say, in his speech. At first, I was building sandcastles with half a bucket. He then told us that the beach I was on had pebbles, so that would be a pebble castle, not a sandcastle. I was not entirely sure whether I was putting my jam or the cream on the top or the bottom of the scone. I confess, as I represent the Blackmore vale, the land of the small dairies as described by Thomas Hardy, that I always view cream as a substitute for butter. It is the glue that holds down the jam, so one always puts the cream on first, and tops it with jam, not the other way around. I am not quite sure where the hon. Gentleman was putting his cream or his jam, but I hope he was not putting it on his children or the beach, or in their buckets or all over their spades.

We then had the ad hominem comments about how life is always so much better under the Liberal Democrats, these little rays of buoyant sunshine that fleetingly shine through the clouds of the south-west from time to time, only to disappear behind the broken promises of their tuition fee pledge—and I have little or no doubt that the same will happen again.

This debate allows me to mention something else. I appreciate that this is nothing to do per se with the hon. Gentleman, but he extolled to the House, as his party often does, the sanctity of the Liberal Democrats, who have some sort of higher public calling. We had elections to Dorset Council last week, a neighbouring authority. A lot of people were saying to me how much better the roads are in Dorset than in Devon; we are very happy to exchange contractor details if necessary. One of the most distasteful aspects of last week's campaign was that a senior member of the hon. Gentleman's party—the leader, I am told, of a neighbouring authority—spent quite a lot of time telling people, on the doorstep,

that a Conservative party candidate had stage 4 lung cancer, was unlikely to see his term out, and would possibly not be as attentive as possible to his public duties as a result of having to receive chemotherapy.

That gentleman, who had served his community steadfastly for years, lost his seat. That is the democratic process, and I make no complaint about it. However, I have to say something that, by God, I have been waiting some years to say this from this Dispatch Box: I will take no lessons on the qualitative assessment, usually self-made by those in the hon. Gentleman's party, that somehow it is better than mine in instinct and delivery, and in its definition of “public service”. What I have just relayed to the House has come from more than one reliable source. I just hope that his party enjoys its temporary victory in Dorset Council; I am not entirely sure that it is the sort of victory I would have enjoyed.

Let me turn back to the matters at hand. In conclusion, the hon. Gentleman has spoken for his community, and I am grateful to him for doing so. I hope that I have given him, the House, his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon the figures and facts. I absolutely underscore our commitment to the hon. Gentleman's area, to the whole south-west, and to any and all of our communities in the UK where need is identified, and where the good offices of His Majesty's Government can be deployed to help things along.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the local government funding settlement in the round being more bespoke and digital, rather than analogue; it must also take account of the times and demands, given that, as he and I have discussed, there has been a change in the demographics in his part of Devon and elsewhere in the south-west. We are committed to doing just that in the next Parliament. If I am in post then, I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House. If, cross party, we can find a solution that holds water, can withstand scrutiny and can sustain local government, and all the good work that it seeks to do, for the next 10, 15 or 20 years, rather than having short-term fixes, the landscape of local government and public service delivery for our communities will be very much improved. I hope that my reply has been of help to him, and of interest to his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

6.7 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 May 2024

[VALERIE VAZ in the Chair]

Recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan

9.30 am

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on the recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. The debate is on pressing the British Government finally to recognise the sovereignty of Western Sahara as part of the Kingdom of Morocco. Morocco, of course, is our second oldest ally, a reliable partner and one that seeks our support in recognising Western Sahara as a part of the kingdom. The United States of America and Israel, two of our most important allies, have recognised the sovereignty of Western Sahara as Moroccan, and some of our other allies, Spain—the former colonial power in Western Sahara—France, the Netherlands, Germany and others, all recognise that the autonomy proposals that the Moroccan Government are putting forward for Western Sahara are the best option going forward, and yet we in the United Kingdom sit on the fence.

During the course of the debate, I intend to analyse why Morocco is such an important strategic partner for the United Kingdom. Ultimately, I will urge my own Government to get off the fence finally and to recognise the sovereignty of Western Sahara as being Moroccan, or run the risk of a major miscalculation in our geopolitical strategic approach, not only to Morocco but to the whole of north Africa.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am listening with interest to the case that my hon. Friend is making. In essence, he seems to be saying that, because Morocco is important to us, we should recognise that Western Sahara should be part of Morocco. Is it not better to say that Morocco is important to us, but so are the people of Western Sahara, and they should be allowed the self-determination that many other people are allowed?

Daniel Kawczynski: I gave way to my hon. Friend out of deference to the fact that he is Father of the House, but I will not give way to many interventions, because I have an awful lot to say in the limited time I have. Later in my speech, I will come on to the point that he so eloquently made.

The Arab League has 22 members, and I have visited 18 of them during the course of being a Member of Parliament and when I was in commerce, in exports, previously. When one travels across members of the Arab League, one comes across vast differences between those countries, whether it is Mauritania on the one hand, which I have visited on three occasions, or the United Arab Emirates on the other. There are huge

differences between those Arab nations, many of them our neighbours. Over the past three years, however, I have been writing a book on emotional intelligence in politics—

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Oh!

Daniel Kawczynski: As the hon. Lady will know, a key strand that runs through the whole concept of emotional intelligence is interdependence. That is a word that keeps coming back when one studies the concept of emotional intelligence. During the course of this debate, I intend to highlight our interdependence with the Kingdom of Morocco. Out of the 22, this is arguably the best Arab country to engage with. It has the most progressive society and one, most importantly, that shares our values. It is a reliable strategic partner, which pursues all the attributes of a modern democracy. We can and must build strong commercial, political and security links with this nation.

But we are in the process of jeopardising our potential with Rabat and falling behind our competitors—the United States of America, Germany, Spain and others—as a result of our refusal to understand from an emotionally intelligent perspective the huge importance that Morocco attaches to this issue. In the first part of my speech, I will examine why I feel so strongly about Morocco.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Daniel Kawczynski: No, I will not give way at the moment; I am going to talk about women's rights, religious rights and the rule of law—protection for citizens under the constitution.

When I visited Morocco, I saw at first hand its extraordinary protection of religious minorities. I have been visiting the country for many years, and I have seen a multi-faith, multicultural, inclusive society. I have visited many mosques, synagogues and churches during my visits. John Paul II visited Morocco in August 1985, when he was hosted by King Hassan; that was the Polish Pope's first visit to any Muslim nation. Pope Francis visited in 2019, and during that visit he praised King Mohammed VI's interfaith dialogue. I pay tribute to His Majesty Mohammed VI for his leadership and vision, and the way he pursues interfaith dialogue throughout his whole nation. It is not just interfaith dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims in Morocco; even more importantly, King Mohammed VI does important work in sub-Saharan Africa, supporting the nations bordering Morocco in trying to deal with the ethnic and religious tensions that have so blighted sub-Saharan Africa and caused so much instability in the region.

During the second world war, Mohammed V was pressurised by Vichy France and Nazi Germany to expel all the Jews from Morocco. I know there are hon. Members of this House with family links to Morocco. Mohammed V came under huge pressure by Vichy to do what some European countries did: shepherd their Jewish population into the clutches of the Vichy regime or Germany. Ultimately, we all know what happened to those Jewish people who were sent to Auschwitz.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentions Members of this House who have family connections to Morocco. Does he agree that the fact that my late great-uncle was the Jewish major of Tangier during the second world war proves the point he is making?

Daniel Kawczynski: I am very aware, through our discussions, of the hon. Gentleman's family connections with Tangier. I pay tribute to him and his ancestors and relatives, who played such a critical role in Morocco at a particularly difficult time.

Mohammed V, in response to Vichy and Adolf Hitler, said, "There are no Jews. There are no Muslims. There are only Moroccans." He refused to comply with the diktat of Pétain and Hitler and did not cave in to those demands. I think that is testimony to the way in which the royal family of the Kingdom of Morocco protects all religious minorities. I heard from one journalist that the late Yitzhak Rabin, the former Israeli Prime Minister, said that when he had difficulties with the Moroccan Jewish population, he sought the advice and support of the late King Hassan, who had such close links with that diaspora in his own kingdom.

Secondly, I want to talk about women's rights. During my many visits to Morocco I have met women who are far more empowered in Morocco than in many other Arab nations. Having met many female journalists, civil engineers, women who work in construction, female politicians and female diplomats, one gets the impression that Morocco, out of all of the Arab League members, understands and recognises that it will become a true modern society only if women are empowered and supported, not only through the education system but by being able to reach the very top of all sectors in society and the economy, including those that have historically been dominated by males.

Finally, I turn to democracy. On my many visits to Morocco I have witnessed and experienced what I perceive to be a greater freedom of the press than I have come across in any other Arab nation. There is greater protection of citizens under the constitution, a genuine Parliament, a genuine system of checks and balances, and genuine power of the opposition. Having spoken to many opposition MPs in Morocco, one gets the sense that it is a genuine thriving democracy where the rule of law is protected and people can debate and challenge one another in the most robust way without fear of retribution.

The key issue facing Britain today is the growing spread of the malign Iranian influence across the middle east and north Africa. That evil, despotic regime, which came about after the fall of the Shah in 1979, with the mullahs that control Iran—I visited Tehran when I was on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee—is one of the most dangerous, violent, authoritarian regimes in the region. It suppresses and abuses its own people and throws gay people off buildings. It is a very dangerous country and its malign influence is spreading across the region.

I will briefly mention the allegations of Iranian influence in the disturbances and difficulties that Bahrain faced in 2011. Iran filled the void in Iraq, which Mr Blair helped to create in the second invasion of Iraq, and its malign influence is growing there. Our miscalculations over Syria have given the Iranians the ability to enter the country. It supports Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas,

and the Houthis rebels in Yemen. Its influence is extending to north Africa, Libya and Algeria through its support of the Polisario movement.

In contrast, Morocco is a thriving democracy. When I went to Morocco, I saw the massive effort to stem the flow of illegal migration to Europe. I met many officials and heard how they have managed to prevent over 300,000 illegal crossings into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and the Canary Islands. Bearing in mind how we are getting increasingly agitated and frustrated about the illegal migration operating in the English channel, we have to pay tribute to the extraordinary support and vision that Morocco has in policing its own borders and making sure that illegal migration does not end up in Europe and ultimately through Europe to the United Kingdom.

With the restrictions in the Red sea and ultimately the Suez canal as a result of the conduct of the Houthi rebels, the waterway around the Moroccan coastline will be even more important for our security and defence capability.

There are of course huge commercial opportunities. Between 700,000 and 1 million British tourists visit Morocco every year. We also have a company, Xlinks—its chief executive officer is Sir Dave Lewis—that seeks to export green energy by funnelling solar and wind power from Morocco through an undersea cable to Britain. That aspiration could ultimately lead to 8% of British energy requirements being provided by Morocco through green energy.

Earlier this year I visited Western Sahara, including Laayoune and Dakhla, with General Sir Simon Mayall. We spent a week together in Dakhla and the wider area. The highlight of our visit was our meeting the Foreign Minister of Morocco, Nasser Bourita, with whom we spent an hour and a half. Instinctively, when we started to talk to him, although, of course, I am not going to reveal the intricate discussions we had—*[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) wish to say something?

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman does not need to go into the details, because we can read them in the press release that the Moroccan Government released after his meeting with the Foreign Minister, which I have just found online. I am not sure whether I caught what the hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his speech; his trip was paid for by the Moroccan embassy to the United Kingdom, was it not? And it is recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, is it not?

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes. That is why I just stated that I visited the Kingdom of Morocco on an official visit, and that is recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. That is correct.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please stick to the motion?

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes, I will. I was trying to explain why I feel so strongly that Morocco is a reliable partner for the United Kingdom. I am not sure what point the hon. Gentleman was trying to make. Yes, we do go overseas on visits where we try to increase our understanding of other nations. We do not have a budget in the House of Commons to pay for those visits; we are guests of the foreign country, which is recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

During our visit to Morocco, we had a very unsatisfactory discussion with the British ambassador on the telephone. As on many other occasions, the British ambassador tried to indicate that we cannot recognise Western Sahara because somehow it will impinge on or affect our relationship with our overseas territories, particularly the Falkland Islands. Yet, when I pressed the British ambassador to explain why and how that could be the case, no satisfactory response was forthcoming.

I seek clarification from the Minister on this point. Is it the fact that we cannot recognise Western Sahara as being Moroccan because there is some legal, constitutional or technical difficulty that might affect our relationship with our overseas territories? I cannot see that, given that France, which is in the process of recognising this issue, also has overseas territories. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain that point. We need to recognise Western Sahara, as Israel and America have done. At the very least, we should follow Spain, the former colonial power, along with Germany and France in recognising that the autonomy proposals are the only way forward.

I have mentioned women's rights; during my visit to Dakhla we had the opportunity to visit the new port that is being constructed in Western Sahara, and I was able to speak to Mrs Nisrine Iouzzi, who is the lady who runs the 1,600 engineers and construction workers at the port. It is going to be an extremely important link, not just for Morocco but for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, including Niger, Chad, Mali and many other countries.

One way to deal with illegal immigration in Europe and to support Morocco is through a programme of support for illegal migrants, which I saw at first hand in Dakhla. The Moroccan Government are helping illegal migrants to settle there, training them and giving them opportunities.

Only four Arab nations have signed the Abraham accords, of course. The first contact between the Egyptians and the Israelis in the 1970s was brokered by Rabat, leading to Sadat's visit to Israel and, ultimately, the peace accord. In 1994 the late King Hassan hosted a World Economic Forum, inviting Israelis and Palestinians to Casablanca for their first joint session at an international conference.

Professor Marc Weller, chair of international law and international constitutional studies at the University of Cambridge, has submitted a report to the Foreign Office. He was commissioned to evaluate the concept of why the United Kingdom may find it difficult to recognise Western Sahara, bearing in mind the intricate relationship we have with our overseas territories. I have met Professor Marc Weller here in the House of Commons on two separate occasions over the past few weeks. He submitted his report to the Foreign Office three weeks ago; I would be grateful if the Minister could recognise whether it has been received and say whether his officials will brief him on it.

Let us not forget that Professor Marc Weller, chair of international law and international constitutional studies at Cambridge, is one of this country's leading academics on international law and works in the sphere on which I am pressing the Minister directly. He says that when he took on the commission he found it a potentially daunting prospect, yet after the research he has done he has come to the conclusion that recognising Moroccan

sovereignty over Western Sahara, and indeed recognising the autonomy proposals, would actually strengthen our relationship with our overseas territories and with the Falkland Islands. Professor Marc Weller from the University of Cambridge says the direct opposite of what we hear from our own ambassador in Morocco.

During my visit to Western Sahara, we came across representatives of 30 countries that have set up consulates in Dakhla, and more than 90 countries around the world have recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The hon. Member has obviously done detailed research; did he have a chance to meet the Polisario, and has he visited the refugee camps in Algeria?

Daniel Kawczynski: I rather suspected that the right hon. Gentleman would ask that question. I will come to that later in my speech. I have not been, as yet, to the Tindouf camp in Algeria where the Polisario are, but I have received very serious allegations from various friends in the Moroccan Parliament. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman referred to the Tindouf camp, because we have received very serious allegations about the promotion of terrorism within it. We have received transcripts of audio discussions from the Tindouf camp in which various members of the Polisario Front urge young female fighters to plant bombs in Dakhla and to try to murder their way back to the Western Sahara. That is a great concern if it is true, and I strongly urge the Minister to take up the matter with his Algerian counterpart to seek the veracity of the situation.

We here in the United Kingdom have had to deal with terrorism ourselves during the course of our lifetime, have we not? We have experienced bombings in this country by the IRA. We have experienced innocent men, women and children being murdered and bombed in Manchester, London and other places. Indeed, there was an attempt to assassinate the leader of my party in the Brighton hotel bombing. So we, of all countries, should recognise the difficulties that Morocco is facing, if the allegations are correct and it is true that the Tindouf camps are still being used by the Polisario as a hotbed to promote terrorist activities across the border in Morocco.

Finally, there are allegations from organisations, even including Amnesty International, which I am sure the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) respects and recognises, of human rights abuses in the Tindouf camps. I will put those allegations into the House of Commons Library. Will the Minister take that issue on board?

I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for talking about Morocco rather than just Western Sahara. When we discuss Western Sahara, I do not think we can discount why and how certain parliamentarians have so much confidence in Morocco, because of the strategic bilateral relationship we are creating with the country. I pay tribute to the Moroccan ambassador, who works tirelessly and very effectively on behalf of his nation in trying to educate us parliamentarians about the Moroccan perspective.

I recognise and understand that there are hon. Members with views different from my own, and I am sure we will hear those views later in the debate. From my perspective,

[Daniel Kawczynski]

I want the Minister to realise and recognise that in the remaining time we have in government, however short or long that is, this issue will not go away. We are falling behind our main competitors, such as Spain, France, Germany and America, and unless the issue is resolved satisfactorily for the Moroccans and unless we recognise Western Sahara, we will be jeopardising our relationship with them.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I expect to move to the winding-up speeches at 10.28 am. I remind Members to refer to their entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests at the start of their contribution.

9.57 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing the debate. We should also put on the record our thanks to the Library for a very good briefing on the situation of the Western Sahara. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham had to say. It is unfortunate that the first 21 minutes of his speech were taken up by talking about Morocco and he barely mentioned the issue of the legality of Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara. That is the subject of the debate and the area we should be talking about.

I first raised the issue of the occupation of the Western Sahara in this House in 1984. I have had the good fortune to visit the refugee camps in Algeria on two occasions and to visit the part of Western Sahara that is controlled by the Sahrawi people—a small part of it—near the border with Mauritania. I have also visited the occupied territories and Morocco, and met many shades of opinion, both within the Polisario and within Morocco itself. I have done my best to take a view on the situation based on its history.

Western Sahara was occupied by Spain; it was a Spanish colony. On the return of democracy to Spain in the 1970s, Spain withdrew from Western Sahara. The United Nations General Assembly requested that, as part of a process of decolonisation, the people of Western Sahara—the Sahrawi people—should have the opportunity to decide their own future; they should have a choice they could make. The choice has now come down to the three options that have been put, which I will come back to in a moment: independence, autonomy or incorporation within Morocco.

We must recognise that if we just say, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham appears to be saying, that Morocco's illegal occupation of Western Sahara should now be confirmed and condoned and we should trade with Morocco absolutely normally, as though nothing had happened in Western Sahara, we are failing in our duties under international law. The issue was taken to the International Court of Justice in the 1970s, and an advisory opinion was issued requiring a referendum for the people of Western Sahara. That referendum has never taken place.

The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was established to ensure that there was a peaceful future for the people of Western Sahara. There has been conflict in the past, and there is a danger

that it will return. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham referred in his speech to issues surrounding Northern Ireland and to other issues. Surely, the way to avoid a conflict in the future is to look at the heart of the issue and to deal with it in a peaceful way, which is where the referendum comes in. The referendum has not happened.

UN representatives have tried hard over many years to get agreement on what an electoral roll would look like and who can vote on the future of Western Sahara—for example, the people in the refugee camps in Tindouf and the Western Sahara diaspora, as well as the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara itself. I hope that the UK Government will recognise the importance of international law in that respect and recognise the right of the people of Western Sahara to decide their own future. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham effectively is, effectively, denying the Sahrawi people any rights whatever. He is saying that the occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco on the departure of Spain should just be accepted as a done deal.

Daniel Kawczynski: In the right hon. Gentleman's logic, the United States of America, Israel, Germany, Spain, France and the Netherlands are all wrong that the autonomy proposals from the Kingdom of Morocco are the correct solution going forward. Is he saying that all those NATO allies of ours are wrong?

Jeremy Corbyn: What I am saying is that international law should come first, so the decision by Donald Trump, when he was President of the United States, to recognise Moroccan occupation, which few other countries have done, is a backward step for international law. It will obviously make a lot of people—particularly Sahrawi people—extremely angry, because they see in it no right of representation for themselves.

My argument is that the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion was in terms of a process of decolonisation. The issue has been taken to the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation in New York, and I was there myself on that occasion, speaking about exactly this issue. Surely, the position we should adopt as a member of the United Nations and the Security Council is to support the General Assembly decision, the Security Council's continued appointment of MINURSO, and the Secretary-General's appointee to try to bring about a process for the future.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham seems to be using the Morocco's huge economic advances as a reason for overriding international law in respect of Western Sahara. I respectfully say to him that the two things are not connected. Morocco's trade with Europe, its developing solar economy, the proposal for building an underground train tunnel to Spain and all those sorts of things are great and very welcome—many things in Morocco are extremely welcome and very good—but that does not take away the fundamental point that the occupation of Western Sahara on the departure of Spain remains illegal, and we should not be trading in goods produced in illegally occupied territories. That argument goes on all around the world.

What I hope comes out of this debate is a statement by our Government that we will continue to respect international law, engage with Morocco and Polisario and engage assertively with the United Nations to ensure

that this long-running conflict can be brought to a conclusion by giving the Sahrawi people a fundamental right to decide their own future. That right can be suppressed and wished away, but the desire for recognition and self-determination of the Sahrawi people, as with peoples all around the world, will not go away.

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman is making very positive points. Is he aware that, on 7 December 2022, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) secured a debate in Westminster Hall in which he called for the Chagos islanders to be given a referendum so that they could exercise their right to self-determination over their future autonomy?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have listened to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham speak on many occasions in the Chagos islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) all-party parliamentary group about the need for the Chagossian people to have a right to decide their own future. That issue is not for debate today but, in law, the Chagos islands are part of Mauritius that is decolonisation law that has been enacted. Let us be consistent about this issue and ensure that we, as a Parliament representing a country that was one of the founding members of the United Nations and that set up many of these international institutions, stand by them and abide by them, and give the Sahrawi people the chance to decide their own future.

The camps in Algeria have been there for a very long time. I have visited those camps on three occasions, and I have met many people there who are sad that they have been driven out of their own homes and cannot return. They are doing their best to make a life there, but people stuck in a refugee camp for decades and decades—generations of them—get very angry. Look at the Palestinian people in refugee camps in countries around Israel; they get very angry. The way to deal with their anger is to look at the issue of the justice that has been denied.

It is in the interests of Morocco to ensure that there is a proper settlement and not to allow the commercial interests of phosphate mining, the agricultural sector or those who wish to occupy Western Sahara at the expense of the Sahrawi people to take centre stage in policymaking, when our policymaking should be decided by the issues of decolonisation and law.

10.7 am

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to speak in the debate, Ms Vaz, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing it. By way of declaration, I am a former Foreign Office Minister and the Prime Minister's former envoy on freedom of religion or belief, based in the Foreign Office, and I have a keen interest in foreign affairs. Let me say at the outset that I have never been to Morocco or that part of the world, and what I will say is based on what I have read.

The subject of the debate is Government policy on the recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan, and my first question to the Minister is this: when was the Government position on Western Sahara last reviewed? I ask that because it is important to look at different challenges around the world with the latest available information. Therefore, there must be a process to say,

“We have reviewed this, and this is the United Kingdom's position. It is in line with what we said in the foreign policy, defence and security review of 2021.” For transparency purposes, the question then is, how do we make those decisions? What criteria do we take into account?

I am not going to get involved in the political arguments we have heard from Members on both sides. I respect colleagues across the board on the issue of international law, and I resigned from the Government as the envoy on religious freedom or belief over the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 because I did not agree with breaching international law. So I have huge respect—and I am a stickler—for a rules-based system.

The Prime Minister said in the Mansion House speech that the United Kingdom will lead the world and not be led. That means addressing some of the big issues around the world, rather than simply allowing them to be frozen conflicts. We will lead. The United Kingdom and France chair the UN Trusteeship Council, which looks at transitional governance and arrangements around the world, so we have a key role to play in this regard.

For today's purposes, I have a question for the Minister. Last week, along with the ambassador for Morocco, I attended a seminar on Morocco in Parliament, which was chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox). Professor Marc Weller, who has been referenced before, gave a presentation on the similarities in the international legal status of Western Sahara and the Falkland Islands. Professor Weller is chair of international law and international constitutional studies at Cambridge University, as well as a former senior mediation expert, and he has advised the United Nations in that regard.

My question for the Minister is this: has he seen the executive summary? It is about six pages long, but I will reference just a couple of points. The first part says:

“This study reviews the similarities and differences in the respective legal positions of Argentina and the UK in relation to the Falkland Islands on the one hand, and Morocco and in relation to the Western Sahara on the other.

More specifically, the study investigates whether UK support for the position of Morocco on the Western Sahara, and in particular, the autonomy settlement proposal put forward by Morocco in 2007, would negatively affect HMGs position vis-a-vis the Falkland Malvinas.

Towards this end, the study investigates the two principal branches of the claims advanced by the sides in both cases. These are underlying territorial claims to sovereignty and claims or arguments based on decolonization and self-determination.

It could be thought that the positions of Argentina and Morocco are quite similar. Both oppose what they claim to be the forcible acquisition of territory by a colonial power—Britain in the one case, and Spain in the other—during the period of high imperialism of the 19th century. Both seemingly demand restoration of this territory, now that the colonial period has concluded. Hence, it might be thought, supporting the Moroccan position or settlement proposal would automatically undermine the UK arguments concerning the Falkland Islands.

In fact, the positions relative to Western Sahara and the Falklands Islands are significantly different in several key respects. Endorsing the one does not distract from the other. Moreover, and perhaps surprisingly, it emerges that the UK actually shares a number of interests and positions with Morocco.”

There are 32 different paragraphs, but I will go to the final two, because I know that other hon. Members want to speak. Paragraph 31 says:

[*Rehman Chishti*]

“While the UK has already achieved full self-governance for the people of the Falkland Islands, Morocco’s autonomy proposal is rapidly gaining broad international acceptance as the means of realizing that prospect for the people of Western Sahara. This is also reflected in the increasing demand of the United Nations Security Council, General Assembly and UN Secretary-General that the sides in the Western Sahara dispute must now engage in a dialogue without preconditions, with a view to concluding a realistic, serious, credible and enduring settlement.”

The final paragraph says:

“Supporting the adoption and implementation of the proposal is very much in line with the position of the UK, which emphasizes the application of self-determination also outside of the traditional colonial context. Much like the Moroccan autonomy proposal, HMG is asserting that full self-government, freely endorsed by the affected people, is the ultimate aim of self-determination in such circumstances.”

The last three lines are:

“This is precisely what Morocco is offering for further discussion to the population of Western Sahara, along with option of a free and fair endorsement of the plan through a referendum among the original, indigenous population of the territory.”

I say to the Minister that that is one thing; the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has put forward another. Will the Minister put forward the United Kingdom’s position on this matter, so that everyone can see the evidence available? If the Prime Minister’s vision is to be enacted, Ministers must take steps to find solutions and lead, rather than being led, on these events. If the Minister has not read that report by Professor Weller, will he read it and other pieces of evidence and highlight when this matter was last reviewed? If it has not been reviewed for a number of years, it may need to be put on the Foreign Secretary’s desk.

10.15 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. It is a privilege to speak in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing it. The importance of this topic cannot be overstated. I see others in the room who are advocates on human rights issues, and that is what I wish to speak about. I have been an advocate of human rights for every individual in the world for quite some time, for I believe it is an obligation that I carry—indeed, it is an obligation that others in this Chamber carry too, as those who have spoken so far have indicated.

During conflict, human rights violations abound, and the conflict in Western Sahara is no exception. I wish to speak to that and, as I always do, to seek the Minister’s response. The Minister and I share a similar faith and obligation, and he has the power to respond to all our requests, so I look forward very much to his contribution. I am pleased to see the two shadow Ministers in their place. The hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who will speak for the Labour party, and I share the same platform on nearly every issue in this Chamber, and I look forward to her contribution.

The situation in Western Sahara has been deemed a frozen conflict due to decades of war and failed peacemaking between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Four years ago, the Front declared an end to the ceasefire that had previously kept tensions at bay since 1991, and the conflict has since escalated. That means the reality

on the ground is very different, but the question of the status of Western Sahara remains at the centre of the conflict. I want to take the time to address the human rights violations in the Western Sahara conflict, which unfortunately have not received the warranted awareness and action. Again, I look to the Minister to take my comments and those of others on board and to respond. I know that he will, but I urge him to recognise the problems on the ground.

I am grateful that the debate allows me and others the opportunity to speak about the human rights violations. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland must be clear on the need for advocacy and effective action towards mitigating the human rights crisis in Western Sahara. The ongoing fighting has resulted in the displacement and refugee status of more than 165,000 Sahrawis. Most of them reside in refugee camps on the border between Morocco and Algeria, according to the Algerian Government. The UN provides assistance to some 90,000 refugees. The conditions of those refugees are deplorable; others have made that comment, and it is only right that I do the same.

Fabian Hamilton: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most essential things for the resolution of any conflict is economic development and the reduction of inequalities between the richest and the poorest? Does he agree that what the Moroccan Government have done so far in taking \$1 in tax and returning \$7 back to the people of the region will actually help in that regard, and that the autonomy proposals should be clearly considered within the context of the economic development? I am one of few MPs in this place who have been to Laayoune—I know that others who have spoken today have too—and I saw for myself the effects of that economic development on the Sahrawi people and how it can benefit them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in order to end conflict, we need more economic development and that the Moroccan Government are providing just that?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman and I will refer to some of what he said shortly. Idle hands, by their very nature, create problems. People need a focus, an economic opportunity and investment—and they need the human rights violations stopped.

Over 80% of Sahrawi refugees are food-insecure, or at least face the risk of food insecurity—the issue the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) referred to. Some 60% are economically inactive, and one third have no income whatsoever. That is the magnitude of the issue, and it has to be addressed at its very core. If we want to solve problems, we have to address the key issues.

As my party’s health spokesperson, I must remark on the health situation in the refugee camps, where acute malnutrition rose from 7% to 11% between 2019 and 2022, and many women and children suffer from anaemia. Those are key issues, and if they are not recognised as part of the solution, then we have a serious problem. I will give an example to illustrate that. Bouna Mohamed, a refugee and the mother of two children residing with her family in one of the refugee camps, remarked:

“Life is tough here. We are very poor and everything is expensive...we spend the day drinking tea and dreaming of better times”.

In essence, these refugees reside in conditions that do not provide them with promising opportunities and the dignity they deserve. Instead, they wait with little optimism for a political solution to the conflict, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East mentioned.

For those who remain in Moroccan and Polisario-controlled territories, the human rights situation is also cause for grave concern. The Freedom House index gave Western Sahara four out of 100 for freedom in the territory. My goodness—it could hardly be much worse, could it? That really is the bottom of the pile. That illustrates the issues that need to be addressed. Political and civil liberties are severely restricted by both Morocco and the Polisario Front. It is worth noting that restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom are the most prominent ongoing human rights violations.

In 2021, UN experts called on Morocco to stop targeting human rights defenders and journalists raising awareness of human rights issues in Western Sahara. Many of those human rights activists face long sentences in Moroccan prisons and even degrading treatment and torture. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) referred to that, and it cannot be ignored. The Polisario Front is also known—no one is above blame here—for regularly cracking down on dissent and imprisoning opponents. Our concern is that the human rights situation in Western Sahara will continue to worsen if the United Kingdom and its allies do not take concrete action. I look to the Minister for a response on that.

The UK continues to support UN-led efforts to seek conflict resolution and stability in Western Sahara. In 2023, the UK ratified a UN Security Council resolution calling for co-operation and the achievement of “a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution”.

The solution has to be one that all sides can buy into, and one that gives hope, promise and confidence for the future. The resolution also requested that the Secretary-General and his personal envoy facilitate negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Can the Minister indicate whether there has been any opportunity for that, and how it went?

I believe in my heart that any political solution must address the humanitarian conditions I mentioned previously, especially those of the refugees. I am grateful to the Minister and the Government for encouraging the efforts of the envoy and regularly engaging in discussions with the Government of Morocco. It is now vital for those efforts to be broadened and deepened, and for human rights to take a central role. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has cemented its position as a leader in human rights advocacy worldwide. We recognise that the need to guarantee human dignity for every individual extends beyond our borders. It is my conviction that we must do more to promote human rights in Western Sahara by calling out abuses and working for change constructively and positively, and I call on the Minister and the Government to be strong voices in addressing the human rights crisis.

Our world is increasingly marked by international crisis, but the situation in Western Sahara has up to now been a low priority, given our preoccupation with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza. The ongoing conflict in Western Sahara has been forgotten by the

international community, but we in this House must not forget those whose most basic rights are being restricted. Let us reinvigorate our efforts; we must not only support a permanent and peaceful political solution but be a leader in advocating for human rights in Western Sahara. This debate achieves that; we can be the voice for the voiceless and improve the lives of people we may never meet.

10.25 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing the debate. I am not the most proficient user of the *Hansard* search facility, but the results it has shown me suggest that it is nearly eight years since he last had cause to speak about either Morocco or Western Sahara on the parliamentary record, and I could not find any parliamentary questions that he had tabled about the Government's relationship with those countries or their position on issues affecting them before November last year, but happily he has come to speak about the experiences he has recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The hon. Member is right that it is not uncommon for Members to lead or contribute to debates on issues affecting other countries when they have returned from visits. I have done so myself for Malawi and Colombia, but I think my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests will show that the organisations that supported those visits were charitable organisations working for the advancement of human rights, rather than the Governments of those countries pursuing their own national interests.

Whatever the motivation, this has been a useful opportunity to reflect on the situation in what is sometimes referred to as the last colony in Africa. As the turnout demonstrates, a number of Members take an interest in the area. I know that the chair of the Western Sahara all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), regrets that duties in Committee prevent him from taking part today.

We have heard about some of the historical background—in fact, we have had a first-hand account of some of it from the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). Many parts of Africa continue to experience hangovers from the colonial era, although they are not manifested as physically as the berm, which runs across Western Sahara and demarcates the areas administered by Morocco and those controlled by Polisario.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member will be aware, I am sure, that the African Union has always taken the position that Western Sahara is an issue of decolonisation, and it was on that basis that Morocco left the African Union.

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a long-standing issue that continues to be unresolved and has, to some extent, been frozen. At least in some respect, this debate is welcome, because it perhaps helps to move the wider debate along, but the obligations on Morocco and the other countries that are party to all this date to the Geneva conventions and that postcolonial legacy.

[Patrick Grady]

More recently, the Security Council has continued to adopt resolutions, and last year it called for a resumption of negotiations and movement towards

“a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution...which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.”

That is very important because, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, a failure to settle these disputes can lead only to more suffering, grievance, frustration, regional political and military tensions and conflict, and a spiral thereafter.

It is clear that, whether the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham and the Government who paid for his visit like it or not, Morocco is an occupying power in Western Sahara, which means it has obligations under the Geneva conventions to foster an environment that sustains human rights for all Sahrawi people, regardless of their political persuasion. That right to self-determination is fundamental. The Sahrawis are a distinct population group with their own heritage and history, and they deserve equal rights to peacefully determine their own future, as would any other similar people. Of course, the Scottish National party has a proud tradition of advocating self-determination. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham has himself used the opportunity in Westminster Hall to argue for the right of self-determination for the people of the Chagos islands, and that they should be allowed to determine their future in a referendum.

Various different solutions have been proposed. The autonomy plan published by Morocco in 2007 has been seen in some quarters as the basis for a way forward, but a settlement under the auspices of the United Nations and its representatives would surely have more success and legitimacy, particularly as, ultimately, any solution needs to be endorsed in a referendum.

At a bare minimum, international standards suggest that an autonomous region must have a locally elected Government that cannot be abolished by the central state, so an autonomous Western Sahara would have to be free to manage its own affairs without interference from the Moroccan state. Proposals for a system where the Executive of such a body were appointed by and responsible to the King of Morocco would not meet that standard.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the effects of the lack of autonomous self-governance in Western Sahara is that, despite being one of the most climate-stressed places in the world, it cannot access international climate finance. Some 200,000 Sahrawis have been driven into the interior of the desert, which is basically unliveable, and even more are in Algeria, in refugee camps that are constantly flooded and in completely unliveable conditions, such as in tents in the summer. Should not the Western Saharan—Sahrawi—Government be able to access that international climate finance and become part of the international community, as they have a climate-adaptation plan?

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and climate change is causing displacement around the world. Indeed, if the UK Government do not want people to make their way here by irregular means, then it is in their interests to help people who are displaced

and oppressed to tackle the climate crisis and be able to live fulfilling lives in their countries of origin—and to ensure that that happens through peaceful, democratically legitimate ways.

In some respects, it is remarkable that the UK Government have not simply followed the United States in recognising Morocco's claim to sovereignty, and presumably the Minister will not be announcing a change to that policy in response to today's debate. That clearly does disappoint some Members on the Conservative Back Benches. There are some Conservative Members who give the impression that they would happily outsource the UK's entire foreign and defence policies to the United States, irrespective of who makes up the Government of the USA at any given time, just as, at the same time, they would happily withdraw from the global conventions, treaties and charters that have maintained stability and defended human rights for the past 80 years or so.

I appreciate that that sometimes makes it difficult for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Ministers to call for the observation of international law and respect for the decisions of the global bodies that uphold and interpret that law, while many of their colleagues in other Departments are running around insulting international tribunals and dismissing them as foreign courts that the UK does not need to heed. Indeed, sometimes, the FCDO itself decides that it does not like the findings of such tribunals, such as the opinion of the International Court of Justice on the status of the Chagos islands. All that said, in this instance, the UK is wise to support the UN Security Council's resolutions relating to Morocco and Western Sahara, and the calls for self-determination and for freedom of expression and association in Western Sahara.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is repeatedly referring to the United Nations and other organisations. Bearing in mind that there are about 195 countries in the world, will he recognise that more than 100 countries affiliated with United Nations recognise and support the Moroccan autonomy plans for Western Sahara? Does he recognise that figure at least?

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman made that point in his contribution, but I think that the point is that the people of Western Sahara—the Sahrawi people—have to endorse whatever the ultimate autonomy arrangement is, so the UK Government are right to use not just the opinions of countries that are members of the United Nations and expressing their views, but the processes of the United Nations to reach determined conclusions. They also have to back up those words with action and, in particular, they need to be careful about the consequences of trade or other commercial arrangements that they enter into, or which they allow others to enter into. They will be aware of the decisions by the European Court of Justice to annul trade deals between the EU and Morocco that did not have consent from people in Western Sahara.

The Minister will have seen my recent written parliamentary questions, not least about the UK-Morocco strategic framework for co-operation on climate action, clean energy and green growth. It is important that that framework, and any other bilateral agreements, do not infringe the rights to self-determination of people in

Western Sahara, or are seen tacitly or otherwise to endorse any unilateral claim or declaration of sovereignty made by Morocco. The UK Government's position must be for a peaceful, democratic and negotiated settlement, agreed in a referendum. That could be a form of autonomy, or it could be full independence, which would by definition include obligations on any new nation state in Western Sahara to abide by the highest standards of democracy and peaceful international relations. Many of us in the SNP often say that independence is defined by our interdependence, a word that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham used—our peaceful coexistence and co-operation with other countries on the global stage, respecting the framework of the rules-based international order.

At the end of the day, it must be for the people there to decide, as has been said. It is not for the Government of Morocco or the United Kingdom Government—and certainly not in the commercial or economic interests of any individual Government, mining company or multinational conglomerate—to determine future sovereignty. As we often say in the SNP, that must lie with the people. That is the principle that the UK Government should seek to uphold, even perhaps against their instincts and their interests, not just in Western Sahara but around the world.

10.35 am

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a genuine honour to serve under you as Chair, Ms Vaz. I think it is my first time—if not, it has been a long time. May I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for bringing forward this debate? We have not had a proper debate in this place on the situation in Western Sahara since 2016, so I am glad that we can rectify that today at least.

I want to start by emphasising the importance of UK partnerships in north-west Africa. The Opposition strongly value our relationships with Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the shadow Foreign Secretary, was in Morocco only last month, and when I was 18, I spent a wonderful month travelling around that beautiful land. If we are elected, Labour will commit to deepening our relationships across the economic and security spectrum. Sadly, the current Government have deprioritised these relationships, with no UK Foreign Secretary visiting Morocco since William Hague did so over 10 years ago.

The economic potential of the entire region could offer much greater mutual benefits, based on strengthening trade and investment ties, building institutional capacity and developing new partnerships. One example is the prospect of reliable long-term clean power imports. Another is the rare overlap between the potential for green hydrogen production and the potash minerals that are common in the region. In the near future, this could allow for fertilisers to be made with lower carbon emissions, and could provide secure supplies of green hydrogen for export to the UK too. These are areas of huge potential, in which our economic and climate ambitions align.

Sadly, as we have heard, much of this mutually beneficial engagement is frustrated by the continued conflict in Western Sahara, which impacts on hundreds of thousands of lives. As we know, the status of Western Sahara has

remained unclear for almost 50 years, and it is more than 30 years since the Security Council resolution that established the promise of a referendum on the permanent future status. As we know, almost no material progress has been made towards that referendum. The people of Western Sahara have been let down, and the damage to peace, development and prosperity across the region is significant.

In 2020, sadly, the ceasefire broke down, resulting in renewed attacks across the line of control. While the violence has mostly remained sporadic and low level, we have to be clear that the damage done by the status quo is real. There have been civilian casualties, including one death and three injuries resulting from a Polisario Front mortar attack on the city of Smara in the Morocco-controlled area last October. There are also reports of human rights abuses in both Morocco-controlled areas and the Polisario-controlled Tindouf camps in Algeria. These include allegations of restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual violence in Morocco-controlled territory, and extrajudicial killings in the Polisario-controlled camps. Sadly, on both sides of the line of control, access for journalists and UN officials is restricted, which makes it all the harder for those abuses to be investigated properly and prevented. What steps are the Government taking to support access to the entire territory of Western Sahara and to the camps for UN human rights monitors?

The impact of continued ambiguity about the status of the territory has dire costs for the people of Western Sahara. About 190,000 people are growing up displaced, sad and angry, mostly in Tindouf.

Rehman Chishti: On that specific point, that everything must be done to find a solution to the Western Sahara issue, may I ask a question? In 10 months' time, if the hon. Lady is not in Opposition, but is sitting on the Government Benches, what would be her Government's position with regards to finding a permanent solution in Western Sahara? Everyone wants to know this Government's position is and what that Government would do in that regard?

Ms Brown: Should I be in the amazing position of being a Minister in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my current brief does not have Western Sahara under its belt, but who knows what the future may bring? We would look at the issue clearly because, as I said, the status quo is damaging—I think it damages British interests, as well as the interests of north Africa.

Generation after generation lives with precious little opportunity, almost entirely dependent on humanitarian aid, and they are understandably angry at how badly they have been let down. We need to recognise the potential for terrorist groups to exploit the situation. The security of Mauritania and Algeria is threatened by the worsening instability and violence that continue to plague the Sahel, and the constant tensions and distrust caused by Western Sahara make it harder for our partners to work together against the increasingly common threat of terrorism and jihadist insurgency. I ask the Minister to update us. Is the Department working towards an updated assessment of the risk of terrorism generated by the situation in Western Sahara?

[Ms Lyn Brown]

While the state of limbo continues, people living in Western Sahara are denied opportunities to develop their skills and economic resources that could turn poverty into prosperity, drawing on the region's vast resources from minerals and fish to renewable energy. As the Minister knows, the potential legality of trade and investment by UK companies raises many questions that cut across the disputed territory. I hope the Minister will be able to set out what work is being done to address such ambiguities.

Given the scale of the risks and the opportunities, the UK should play a stronger role in supporting the return to the ceasefire and progress towards a permanent peace. I fully appreciate the range of views that exists within the House about how that should happen. Our international partners, too, have differing views, and there is not yet consensus on the right way forward. All that makes it more important than ever for us to take our lead from international law and to stand up for multilateralism at a time when it is even more contested and undermined. That is why the Labour party continues to support the UN-led efforts to achieve a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

That is the starting point, but it is not the end, because we all need to recognise that creative solutions and compromises will be necessary to move the dispute forward after many years. Diligent diplomacy by United Nations envoys, including the Secretary-General's current personal envoy, has generated compromises that have been sadly rejected, often at the last minute, and this senseless conflict has persisted. In that context we need to be wary of those, like Russia and potentially Iran, who look at the continuing insecurity and instability and see opportunities to deepen the chaos and frustrate good-faith diplomacy. We call on our partners to engage constructively in discussions. We need to play our part in supporting creative ideas and building trust between interested parties towards a resolution within international law. I think we can agree across the House that we would like to see that resolution as quickly as possible.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): As always, it is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this debate. I am grateful to have heard the wide-ranging and quite different opinions that have been expressed today on a complex issue. I will seek to respond to the debate as best I can.

As hon. Members are aware—it has been well set out today—the history of Western Sahara is long and complex, marked by instability and conflict. As my hon. Friend pointed out, it is important to note that the UK's partnership with the Kingdom of Morocco also has a long history, stretching back over 800 years, and continues to go from strength to strength, with deepening collaboration across new and existing areas. The relationship is structured on four pillars: diplomatic, security, economic, and education and culture. The fifth iteration of the strategic dialogue in London will take place shortly.

The UK and Morocco are like-minded partners on several foreign policy matters, given the continued unrest in the middle east following the events on 7 October. The Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad, the Minister with responsibility for north Africa and the middle east, have discussed our shared concerns and avenues for co-operation with Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nasser Bourita. King Mohammed VI has played an influential role in providing humanitarian support for Gaza—for example, in March, Morocco sent 40 tonnes of food by the Kerem Shalom crossing at His Majesty's instruction.

The UK and Morocco also co-operate multilaterally—for example, at the United Nations, which has an important role to play in this context. We work together in many other areas. For example, there are over 40 planned defence activities over the year, including this year's iteration of Exercise Jebel Sahara, a long-running joint military exercise first held in 1989. On security we have enjoyed diverse engagement in many fields, supporting our shared interests through training and the exchange of best practices.

Our economic partnership gets stronger by the day. Trade has increased significantly since our association agreement came into force in 2021, bringing total trade to £3.5 billion a year. The recent appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Morocco will deliver a further boost. Our partnerships on language and education are increasingly significant aspects of our broader partnership. Others have highlighted the importance of the Xlinks power project. We are very interested in that and pleased to see that it has now moved to develop an outline business case.

On the status of the territory of Western Sahara and the focus of this debate—

Sir Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Before my hon. Friend the Minister goes on to his next point, may I question him on the issue of security? Clearly, stability in the region is in Britain's national interest in terms of our security. Morocco is a key partner in the interdiction of people smuggling, the prevention of illegal migration, and stopping Iranian or Islamic State influence in the region, which would lead to further instability. Many of us therefore find it inexplicable that the Government do not follow our partners and allies in other countries such as Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States in recognising that the autonomy plan is the only game in town, and the only way that we can create progress for those who live in the region and wish to see not only security and stability, but economic development and eventually democratic progress.

David Rutley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his points, and I recognise his interest and experience in this subject, but as I said, we have a really strong partnership with Morocco. It is built on several pillars, and as I have already highlighted, the fifth iteration of our strategic dialogue in London will happen very shortly. It is a very important partnership to us.

Hon. Members will be aware that the history of Western Sahara is long and complex, tragically marred by instability and conflict. Since 1963, it has been defined by the UN as a non-self-governing territory, without a defined administering power. Resolution of

its status, in keeping with the UN Security Council's commitment, which I will come to shortly, has yet to be achieved. We have long supported efforts to find a solution, including the initiation of a ceasefire brokered in 1991 by the then newly established UN peacekeeping mission for Western Sahara, MINURSO, bringing to an end decades of violent conflict.

As is repeatedly enshrined in the United Nations resolutions, the UN Security Council retains a

"commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."

The UK has consistently supported UN efforts to realise this commitment, approving UN Security Council resolutions, renewing MINURSO's mandate, and supporting the current and previous personal envoys to the Secretary-General. The UK's position is therefore aligned with our status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which informs our desire to see such a solution achieved under the auspices of the UN's political process. The UK believes that this is the best and probably the only way to secure a long-lasting and just settlement that all sides could accept.

As hon. Members are aware, in 2021, the UN appointed Mr Staffan de Mistura as the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy to Western Sahara, whose mandate derives from the Security Council's commitment to Western Sahara. We welcome his recent visits to the region, and indeed, Lord Ahmad met the personal envoy in March to support these UN-led efforts. The UK also supports the work of MINURSO, the UN peacekeeping mission to the Western Sahara, and in particular, its vital and ongoing work on de-mining.

The UK's position is balanced across several core national and political interests, and based on our political judgment on how best to protect these interests. It is critical that we support the principle of self-determination; we are strongly committed to this principle and the right for people to decide their own future, as enshrined in the UN Security Council resolutions on Western Sahara.

Hon. Members have referred to the Moroccan autonomy plan. The UK has not commented publicly on this plan, but that is not a judgment on its merits or otherwise. I can assure this House, however, that the UK would, of course, warmly welcome any solution that can secure the support of all parties to resolve this dispute.

Other colleagues have mentioned Professor Weller's legal study and asked whether we have reviewed our position. I can confirm to Members that our position on Western Sahara is constantly reviewed. I have not personally reviewed the study by Professor Weller, but I understand that officials in FCDO are aware of it and will review it in due course. It is in regard to the UK's position on Western Sahara that officials would examine and consider the report and its analysis.

Rehman Chishti: Noting the considerable interest in this matter, the line that the matter is "constantly reviewed" does not say anything. If the Minister does not have the answer to my question now, it would be helpful if he went back to the Foreign Office and put the response in the Library. When was the position reviewed last on the issue of Western Sahara? Will the Foreign Office review that position again after this debate in Parliament and

in line with all the evidence submitted, including Professor Weller's? The position to say that it is constantly reviewed does not answer the point for Members of Parliament.

David Rutley: It may not answer it to My hon. Friend's satisfaction, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this position is constantly reviewed. I have also highlighted our stance on other proposals that have been put forward. I am conscious of time, given what I would like to say on—

Jim Shannon: Before the Minister moves on, will he give way?

David Rutley: I will give way, but the reason I want to move on quickly is that I want to talk about humanitarian issues.

Jim Shannon: I understand. I will leave the Minister to follow on there.

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman is committed to human rights and freedom of religion or belief. I am also very clear that we want to help promote and protect human rights worldwide, including in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf refugee camps. Human rights form part of our regular bilateral dialogue with Morocco and we raise concerns with the Moroccan authorities as appropriate. The UK provides humanitarian assistance to the Tindouf refugee camps via our contributions to UN bodies such as the World Food Programme.

Our relationship with Morocco is important and growing. Morocco is a stable, friendly and important country in the region that is undergoing positive economic and socioeconomic reforms, guided by His Majesty King Mohammed VI. We look forward to developing our relationship further. We are convinced that finding a solution to the issue of Western Sahara would unlock enormous potential, not just for Morocco but for the whole region, as has been said on both sides of the House.

We strongly believe that the UN process is the best and perhaps the only way to solve the long-standing dispute over Western Sahara in a manner that is acceptable to all sides. We urge all those who have a genuine interest in seeking a resolution to the dispute to lend their support. That remains the best way to deliver a sustainable, just and prosperous future for the people of Western Sahara.

10.56 am

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful for the opportunity to have had this debate, which has encompassed some rather different views and objectives from various colleagues and parliamentarians.

I speak as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys. For me, exports are one of the most important things because they are about hard currency coming into the United Kingdom. We have just become the world's fourth largest exporter and I am extremely concerned, as can be seen in my written parliamentary questions to Ministers, that there is no UK Export Finance facility for Western Sahara because of the ongoing conflict. During my visit to Dakhla and Laayoune, I met many British companies working in tourism, construction, engineering and many other sectors that want to invest

[Daniel Kawczynski]

in Western Sahara. That is not possible because UK Export Finance is prevented from affording credit facilities for Western Sahara. That is why it is so important for us to resolve this issue and I am grateful for the opportunity of lobbying the Minister today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government policy on the recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan.

Road Safety: Headlight Glare

11 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety and headlight glare.

It is always a pleasure to serve when you are in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I know I am not alone in believing that modern headlights on cars can be too bright, causing discomforting glare for motorists and potentially increasing accidents. Many of my constituents have made their views known, following an article in my local newspaper the *Grimsby Telegraph*, which detailed the findings of a study by the Royal Automobile Club.

I am sure successive Ministers have been aware of and considered this issue, but I am disappointed that no action appears to have been taken until recently, when the Government decided to commission an independent study, following a public petition. I hope that by bringing this matter before the House, a meaningful series of exchanges with motorist organisations, road safety campaigners and others will follow.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. Back home, this is a big issue for many of my constituents, when they observe what they refer to as one-eyed monsters coming over the hill. These new headlights seem to have almost a searchlight quality. On another issue, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential that learner drivers learn to drive in the dark? For new licence holders, learning to drive at night when a car is coming towards them can be overwhelming. Does he agree that there should perhaps be time in the driving licence application and instruction process to practise nighttime driving?

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely valid point. Nighttime driving is very different from normal daytime driving. Perhaps consideration should be given to whether that should be part of the driving test.

It is a statement of the obvious that vehicle headlights are crucial in enabling drivers to travel safely in the dark or in poor weather conditions. They are required to identify signs, bends, obstacles and other road users, pedestrians in particular, and to make their vehicle visible to others. Over the last 20 years, however, vehicle lighting technology has changed rapidly, from halogen to high-intensity discharge to light-emitting diodes. I appreciate that they are slightly different technologies, but I will use LED as an all-encompassing shorthand for the various alternatives.

In general, LED vehicle headlights are advantageous for sustainability and the driver's view of the road ahead, but they do also cause problems. Although I intend to focus on high-intensity headlights, it is worth highlighting that dazzling taillights, front and rear indicators, fog lights and reversing lights may also cause concerns about glare in various situations.

Dr John Lincoln of LightAware explains that, although the human eye can adapt to a wide range of light levels, from bright sunlight to almost total darkness, it cannot adapt in a short space of time. Comfortable vision requires a limited range of light levels at any particular

time. LED vehicle headlights are much bluer and brighter than the halogen headlights of the past. Halogen headlights are usually around 3,000 lumens, but LED lights are commonly double that, with a colour temperature of 6,000 Kelvins, which is much bluer than that of halogen bulbs.

In January, the RAC published the results of research conducted with 2,000 drivers. It found that 89% of drivers think that some or most vehicle headlights on the UK's roads are too bright, while 74% said that they are regularly dazzled by them while driving. What is more, it has probably not gone unnoticed that there are a lot more large cars on the roads nowadays. Sport utility vehicles sit high off the ground and are particularly likely to cause glare. About six in 10 drivers of conventional vehicles blame the higher angle of SUV headlight beams. All that ought to suggest that vehicle headlight design needs a rethink.

Although the hazard caused by headlights is primarily due to unregulated luminance and blue wavelength light, as existing standards largely predate modern vehicle designs, some may argue that it would be best simply to enforce the highway code, rule 114 of which states:

"You MUST NOT use any lights in a way which would dazzle...other road users".

Personally, I would show caution here. Much of the issue is down to new, supposedly intelligent technology that largely takes control of the headlights from the driver. Although the driver can override the technology, it can be difficult to know when to do so. I would much rather see that resolved by fixing technology than by punishing motorists, who may be unaware of the issue that they cause, not to mention the fact that it would be practically impossible to police, as we know that officers cannot be on every corner.

In built-up areas, sleeping policemen, or speed bumps, cause oncoming vehicles suddenly to angle upwards, frequently shining their headlights directly into the eyes of oncoming traffic. Similarly, a driver properly in control on a dark country road can see vehicles approaching and dip their full-beam headlights, even if other vehicles are around the bend or over the brow of a hill. Matrix lighting systems are LED headlights made up of multiple units, and portions of the lamp can switch on and off automatically depending on road conditions, but they do not have human anticipation and switch off only when they directly sense the oncoming headlights, which can be too late to avoid blinding the oncoming driver.

Having set out to raise the issue, I consulted with a range of organisations, such as the RAC, the College of Optometrists and LightAware, which have done their own research into the matter. I also point to the noble lady Baroness Hayter, who has been campaigning on this issue in the other place. All of them told me that this is a very real issue for all motorists, but particularly those over 60, about half of whom, according to the College of Optometrists, have early-stage cataracts in one or both eyes, which make them even more vulnerable to the glare from bright headlights.

LightAware reports that, as a result of headlight glare, many drivers are restricting themselves to driving in the daytime and purposely avoid driving at night. The RAC's study found that as many as 14% of drivers aged 65 or over—more than one in 10—find glare such a problem that they have stopped driving at night. That has two primary impacts. First, the individual is less able to get out and less flexible in making medical

appointments or seeing friends, leading to increased social isolation. Secondly, it reduces the number of reports into the issue of headlight glare, making it appear to be less of an issue than it really is.

Data from the United States shows that up to 15% of accidents are caused by glare from headlights—which, given its stance today, makes the Department for Transport look like it is frankly in a state of denial. The DFT has stated that its statistics show little or no contribution from dazzle to collisions, despite the fact that official Government data shows that, since 2012, there has been an average of 279 collisions a year where dazzling headlights were a contributing factor. Of those, six were fatal collisions. Given that many are no longer driving at night to avoid the problem, the figures would almost certainly be higher if those people were to travel after dark. The DFT's stance is also unfounded given that, as far as I am aware, it has not undertaken any research. I am pleased that that is due to change once the independent study gets under way. When the Minister responds, I hope he will start by acknowledging the problem and expand a little on the Department's plans for that research.

The Minister will be aware that others have done their own research already. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents states that

"between the ages of 15 and 65, the time it takes to recover from glare increases from one to nine seconds."

When travelling at 30 mph, that equates to travelling 13 metres for a young person and 117 metres for someone aged around 65. At 60 mph, that equates to an older person travelling 229 metres. Imagine the potential damage that could be caused by travelling 229 metres while visually impaired.

Plainly, this is not a problem reported just by UK drivers. I have mentioned the case of the United States. Similarly, a number of RAC-equivalent organisations around the world have conducted their own studies and reached the same conclusions. Organisations in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are finding the same results across Europe, based on substantial levels of response from their club members, who are calling for effective measures to substantially reduce the glare caused by road vehicles.

I make that point to highlight the scale of the problem. However, I trust that the Minister will not present that as a reason why change is not possible. The UK can certainly play a part in addressing the wider issue, but it is also something we can address alone, using our own laws and regulatory frameworks. A group chaired by Baroness Hayter produced a report featuring contributions from drivers, light experts and consumer champions. They reviewed information from optometrists, medical experts and European specialists, as well as transport research, and made recommendations to Government—a number of which I will put to the Minister directly.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this timely debate. He will be aware that the investigation concluded that 44% of drivers think dazzle could be caused by badly aligned headlights. Does he agree with me that there is more that MOT centres across the United Kingdom could do to ensure that lights are aligned adequately?

Martin Vickers: That was a timely intervention from the hon. Member, as I was coming on to mention MOTs. The first point I put to the Minister is that he should bring together car manufacturers, the lighting industry, eyecare professionals, neurologists, driving organisations and other interested parties to gain a broader understanding of the problem of headlight glare and its true causes.

Secondly, the Minister should direct the National Institute for Health Protection, or another suitable body, to sponsor research to establish how vehicle lighting is causing discomfort in drivers, other susceptible individuals, and road users, such as cyclists and pedestrians. Thirdly, the research should be used to develop a set of realistic safety standards for headlights and other vehicle lighting, and to outlaw those that do not meet the standards.

Fourthly, legal limits should be set for the amount of blue light that vehicle headlights can have in their spectrum by setting standards for their colour temperature. Fifthly, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) has said, garages undertaking MOTs should be provided with guidance and training on how to recognise inappropriate after-market installation of LED bulbs and ensure that such cars fail their MOT. My sixth point is that the matter should be raised internationally, via the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Working Party 29, and a request made that the informal working group on glare prevention be revived.

Two things are clear to me. First, car headlights should be better regulated to reduce the dazzle they cause to oncoming drivers. Secondly, it is not sustainable for the Government and the car industry to say that there is not a problem when the vast majority of motorists know that there is one, not just here in the UK but around the world. Is the Minister going to do what eight out of 10 drivers tell the RAC they think he should do, and take action to reduce headlight glare? The RAC thinks that the Minister will probably reply by saying that the UNECE has agreed that all new vehicle models introduced from 2027 will need to have automatic headlamp-levelling systems.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. On that point, vehicle manufacturers are tied to a legal limit of 4,200 K, but bulbs can be retrofitted up to 6,000 K; there should be some legislation to ensure that that is addressed. I put a car through an MOT last week, and I know that all that is checked is that both lights are working and aligned within a certain parameter. That does not tell us the temperature of the light. Car headlights can be bought on eBay that go up to 6,000 K—they are illegal and not for road use, and that should be stated on the seal, but it is not in many cases. That is part of the problem.

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend makes the case that I previously mentioned: there need to be more regulations than the simple MOT test as it is at the moment.

The problem of glare is affecting people now; and with drivers holding on to their vehicles for longer, it is going to be well into the next decade before any benefits—if there are to be any—are seen by road users. The 2027 date only applies to new vehicles, so if a current model is not due to be replaced until several years after 2027, it will only be at that point when it is fitted with the technology. The RAC is not aware that new lighting

technologies, like LEDs, have been analysed in deciding that automatic headlamp levelling systems are the answer to glare. I hope that the Minister will give a positive response and say that the Department will indeed take the matter much more seriously than has been the case in the past.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): It is wonderful to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on securing this timely and important debate about headlight glare. To cut to the chase: he asked me a question, and the answer is yes—but I had better expand on that a bit. I notice glare as a driver myself, I get a huge amount of correspondence about it from Members and constituents, and I spend a lot of my time as a Minister answering letters about it, so I know that it is a real issue and one on which the Department has done quite a lot of work. I will come to that work in a moment.

A lot of interesting points have been raised in the debate. I will start by saying a couple of words about road safety in general. The UK already has some of the world's safest roads, as international statistics show, and we take road safety very seriously.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): According to the latest figures in my area of Leeds, there were 1,585 personal injury collisions in the last year. I am sure that people right across the House agree that far too often we contact our local councils' highways departments, but they will not even look at putting in speed cameras to prevent accidents due to speeding because they want an accident to happen first. Does the Minister agree that we need to look at new ways to prevent accidents and save lives?

Anthony Browne: I agree that we absolutely need to be proactive. I will take away my hon. Friend's comments and write to her on that point.

The Government have allocated £185.8 million local authorities via the safer roads fund to improve the safety of 99 of the most high-risk A roads. More widely, the Department is supportive of driving generally. We launched the plan for drivers in October last year, setting out 30 measures to help driving and with drivers' concerns.

Glare from headlamps is a perennial issue—it has been around for a long time—but there is a compromise between providing illumination with sufficient intensity and distance to enable drivers to see and anticipate potential hazards, and the propensity to cause glare for other road users. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes recognised, there is a clear balance to be struck. In order to strike the right balance, all vehicle headlights are designed and tested to follow international standards—developed, as my hon. Friend said, under United Nations rules to ensure that they are bright enough to illuminate the road ahead but do not affect the vision of other road users.

The standards define the beam pattern, and include maximum and minimum light intensities: down on the ground, at a higher level and what would be seen at the driver's level. The colour of the light is also regulated. The rules are neutral on the form of light, so they apply to LED lights as much as to halogen lights or any other

form of light. As I mentioned, lots of people are raising concerns about headlight glare, and we are told—I know this too from friends and relatives—that drivers choose not to drive at night because of the effects.

One challenge that the Department has, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes referred to, is that police collision statistics do not indicate an increase in accidents caused by headlight glare, although the concern is very real. My hon. Friend mentioned Baroness Hayter; she has written to me with many questions on the subject, which we have been answering. The actual figures are that in 2021, there were 208 accidents where dazzling headlights were cited as a partial cause. That was down from 373 in 2005. We have the statistics for Cleethorpes, which I thought my hon. Friend might be interested in: from 2013 to 2022—so in the last 10 years—there were five accidents where dazzling headlights were cited as one of the causes, which is obviously five too many. That does not mean that the statistics are perfectly accurate. My hon. Friend cited some statistics from the United States; I am not sure about that methodology.

Glare is, however, clearly problematic for drivers for all the reasons that my hon. Friend mentioned. The Department has not been inactive on the issue. Over recent years, it has raised the issue at the United Nations international expert group on vehicle lighting. Following lengthy and significant negotiations, proposals to mend headlamp aiming rules were agreed in April last year, together with requirements for mandatory automatic headlamp levelling, which is a system that automatically corrects the aim of headlamps based on the loading of a vehicle—for example, when passengers are sat on the backseat or there is luggage in the boot.

Some cars have manual headlamp levelling, but very few drivers know to set it, so when somebody sits on the backseat and the car lifts up slightly, they will not dip their headlights further. The point of automatic levelling is to correct that. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the new requirements are expected to take effect only on new vehicle types from September 2027, which is necessary to give vehicle manufacturers time to redesign their products and incorporate those designs into the manufacturing process. Vehicle manufacturing is a long lead-time industry, and it is basically impossible to make instant changes, but once the tougher measures are implemented, they will hopefully help to alleviate the number of cases where road users feel dazzled by vehicle headlamps.

There is still much that we do not know about the underlying causes, which my hon. Friend mentioned. In the Department, we accept that there is an awful lot

going on that we do not know about, which is why we have commissioned the research. I accept from the volume of correspondence I receive that concern about headlamp glare is rising, but we do not know why that is. My hon. Friend mentioned that older drivers are more susceptible to dazzle, which is probably true, and the number of older drivers is growing rapidly. The number of people over 70 who are still driving has risen by 50% over the last 10 years. Driving has become easier because of power steering, automatic cars and a whole load of other safety features, and people feel confident to drive later in life even though they might be more prone to dazzling.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, things such as road humps are a cause of dazzling as the car lifts up, and I am guessing that there are a lot more road humps now than there were 10 years ago. Various hon. Members mentioned retrofitting. There are rules on retrofitting: it is illegal to retrofit a lightbulb that is more powerful or a different colour. The question is whether those rules are fully enforced, which is something I want to find out through the research.

We will be commissioning the research shortly, so this debate is very timely because it is exactly now that we are thinking about the scope. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes made a lot of interesting suggestions about the sort of people who should be consulted and involved, and my officials will be taking on board everything he said. The research will include real-world trials to test the impact of different light technologies under different scenarios, and driver and vehicle characteristics, to fully understand the root causes of driver glare and how significant it is. We welcome input from relevant experts in the area and those taking part in this debate.

Once the research has been completed, the Government will consider the outputs fully and share them within the UK and with international lighting experts, as my hon. Friend requested. Once we have that research, we will look at whether there need to be any other changes to rules and regulations, and we will discuss that at international level. We will do everything we can to reduce the problems of driver glare, and ensure that our roads are safer and that people can continue to drive for as long as it is safe for them to do so. I am personally determined that the only way the people in the constituency of Cleethorpes should be dazzled is by the wit and wisdom of their Member of Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Countering Iran's Hostile Activities

[GORDON HENDERSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of countering hostile activities by Iran.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Henderson. I am particularly grateful to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for co-sponsoring the debate. My thanks also go to Redress and Labour Friends of Israel for the briefings that they have provided. Our focus is on the active role that Britain is wittingly or unwittingly playing in supporting Iran and its agents as they pursue their violent, repressive and hostile activities here in the UK and across the world. We have some practical asks of the Government, to which I hope the Minister will respond when she replies to the debate.

It is now almost a month since we woke up to the news that Iran had launched 300 drones and missiles at Israel, following Israel's attack on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leaders in Damascus. That was the first direct attack by Iranians on Israel's soil in the horrendous conflict that is taking place in the middle east, but it sits within a wider context of the threat that Iran poses not just to Israel, but to Britain and to our western allies. Iran is listed alongside Russia and China by our security services as a hostile state, and yet, in the words of the commissioner at the Commission for Countering Extremism, Robin Simcox,

"what is underappreciated is the scale of Iranian-backed activity in this country; and the extent to which Iran attempts to stoke extremism here."

Mostly, Iran works through its agents. At their heart is the IRGC, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. We all remember the protests in Iran following the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, arrested simply for refusing to wear a hijab. The widespread protests that followed her death, with women removing their headscarves and chanting, "Women, life, freedom", were violently crushed by the IRGC. More than 500 protesters were killed, more than 19,400 individuals were arrested and at least 27 protesters have been given a death sentence, of whom seven have been executed.

In Iran, the IRGC is renowned for its brutality and violence, for undermining human rights and democracy, and for being a terrorist paramilitary organisation that acts as the ideological custodian of the Islamic Republic. But its influence extends to Britain and to our allies. Since the fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989, the IRGC has targeted British nationals and Iranian opposition activists living in exile here on our soil. In 2022, the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, warned that Iran's intelligence services had made at least 15 credible threats to kidnap or even kill individuals living here in Britain. Such actions pose a significant threat to our national security.

Attacks on journalists who seek to hold the Iranian regime to public account are particularly horrific. Those journalists have been described by Iran as "enemies of the state". We had the terrifying attack on Pouria Zeraati,

who worked as a journalist for Iran International, a Persian-language opposition TV channel, and was stabbed in the leg outside his home in Wimbledon. We learned about the threat and harassment meted out to BBC journalists working for BBC Persian. For example, Rana Rahimpour, who worked for the BBC for 15 years, had her car broken into, a listening device installed in it and her phone tapped, and the conversations were misleadingly edited and broadcast in Iran to suggest that she supported the regime. That led to attacks on her from those who oppose the regime. In the end, she quit her job because of the pressure on her and her family, saying:

"They don't want fair, trusted or impartial news to reach the shores of my homeland."

A recent report by Reporters Without Borders says that London has become a "hot spot" for transnational repression. Iran also seeks to influence public opinion by spreading propaganda. There are concerning ties between the IRGC and local Islamic centres in cities such as London, Manchester and Glasgow. According to Policy Exchange, the Islamic Centre of England, which is located in a converted cinema in Maida Vale, is the centre of Iranian influences in the UK. The head of the centre is directly appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei. Senior clerical figures travelled freely from Iran to the centre in the UK to voice their repressive ideology, while at the same time Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was languishing in a prison in Iran.

Similarly, the Kanoon Towhid Islamic centre in west London is used as a meeting place for the Islamic Students Association of Britain. There, IIRCG commanders lecture students on the evils of Israel and its western allies. "Death to Israel," proclaimed one IIRCG commander, who also claimed the holocaust was

"a lie and a fake".

Another claimed that they are engaged in

"an apocalyptic war that will end the lives of Jews".

All that is going on within our shores, in our communities and places of worship in Britain. That is just a small part of the nefarious activities in which Iran is engaged, which also include providing weapons to Russia in Ukraine, and to Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis in the middle east. Even worse, our financial institutions are facilitating Iran's wrongdoing.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The right hon. Lady is making an excellent speech to which I am listening carefully. I would press slightly on one other issue. It is quite clear, through links that I will set out later, that the Hamas attacks were organised by the IRGC. That came at a time when Russia had been under pressure in Ukraine. Iran has links to the Russians and this has taken the pressure off them, as most of the focus has gone to Gaza. Does the right hon. Lady agree that, on a wider front, this is an absolute threat to us all?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I absolutely take that point. My attempts to condense everything I wanted to say in the time available did not allow me to give more time to that very important link.

Our financial institutions are helping Iran and its agents to pursue their evil objectives. Two banks—Bank Saderat and Melli Bank—sanctioned by the USA for supporting the IRGC and other military-related activities,

have active subsidiaries in London. They operate out of the heart of London in Lothbury and Kensington High Street, funnelling funds from Iran to the state-controlled agencies in the UK.

In February, the *Financial Times* revealed that two of the UK's largest banks—Santander and Lloyd's—had provided accounts for firms connected to Iran's state-controlled Petrochemical Commercial Company. US officials believe that that company has funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars to the IRGC, and that it has worked with Russian intelligence agencies to raise money for the Iranian proxy militia. Money in the hands of rogue states and terrorists is a deadly weapon. There is a real risk of the UK becoming a safe haven for Iranian perpetrators of human rights violations and international crimes. Those bad actors must not be permitted to seek shelter, threaten UK citizens and residents or accumulate funds and other resources to support their actions.

I am afraid that our response so far does not match the scale of the threat we face. We are working with our allies to counter Iran's hostile activities, but the Government must do more at home to target both the IRGC and its enablers. There are three key levers that I urge the Minister to consider. First, I call on the Government to act firmly and proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist group. Action against what is clearly a hostile state-sponsored threat is long overdue.

Secondly, the Government must ramp up their efforts to impose sanctions on the members of the IRGC. I recognise that significant strides have been made in sanctioning the IRGC as an entity and several of its commanders. Indeed, the Government's new Iran sanctions regime gives us the enhanced powers we need to target those involved in supporting the Iranian regime's human rights violations across the world. That includes those who finance or are associated with Iran's hostile activities, as well as any entities involved in the production and export of Iranian weapons. Imposing sanctions on IRGC agents, or other associated entities, would allow us to freeze their UK assets, deport those without UK citizenship, and prevent any UK persons from dealing with them. We must make full use of those powers and target a far broader range of agents, including networks of individuals and companies associated with the IRGC.

Thirdly, we must ensure full transparency over who owns or controls UK companies, properties and trusts so that all the assets and individuals associated with the IRGC can be appropriately referred to the enforcement authorities. Any UK companies or individuals dealing with the Iranian Government or the IRGC, by facilitating transactions on their behalf or by supplying them with military equipment or other resources, is likely to be in breach of the existing UK sanctions regime. Entities regulated by the UK's Financial Conduct Authority, such as Bank Saderat and Melli Bank, could be referred to the FCA for failures in their sanctions screening and failures in customer due diligence checks.

Those measures would send a message to Iran, to the IRGC, and to other hostile state-sponsored threats: the UK will not serve as a conduit for the financing of conflict and terror. The UK will not stand by as foreign agents intimidate and threaten people on our soil. Finally, the UK will not stand as a safe haven for perpetrators of human rights violations and international crimes.

2.43 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is always a privilege to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. I start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge)—my right hon. Friend, in this particular case—on her powerful and important speech. Today is about trying to recognise that there is a moment when attempts to be reasonable and engage in a normal, diplomatic and democratic way finally fail because the people we are trying to deal with are themselves utterly opposed to all of that. Today's debate should take into consideration all that has happened and all that has gone before.

I want to make a point very quickly before I get into the issue of the IRGC's work in the UK. As the right hon. Lady said earlier, we must recognise Iran's appalling behaviour to its own citizens in recent years, such as that towards campaigners following the appalling murder that took place over the wearing of a headscarf or hijab, which has literally been pushed on people against their will. That has subsequently become a sort of democracy campaign. As the right hon. Lady said, thousands have been arrested and many have been tortured, and we know that a significant number have been executed for that simple display—for something that we, in a normal society, would consider to be the expression of their human rights to change events. I reference that as a backstop, because we are dealing with a regime that brooks absolutely no dissent and no discussion with anybody in Iran, except for with those who are part of its brutal Administration. The sight of those people being arrested and rounded up, never to be heard of again—this, by the way, under the cover of all that is going on in Gaza at the moment—has accelerated the internal process of repression, and of execution and torture.

I return to the essence of the debate, which is looking at the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and how they work and proselytise here in the UK. That should be of considerable concern to us and should result in a change of policy. Beyond immediate threats to UK residents and their family members in Iran, recent media reports show that Iran is using UK-based institutions to spread propaganda and assert its influence. We have already touched on that point, but it bears emphasising.

In November 2023, *The Times* reported:

“Supporters of the Iranian regime have attended pro-Palestine marches in London, handing out leaflets citing the supreme leader's calls”—

the calls of Ayatollah Khamenei—

“for the eradication of Israel.”

The regime has never been other than utterly clear that it sees Israel, and Jews, as legitimate targets because it considers them to be appalling and therefore it wants to rid the world of them. He has been very clear about it and everybody else has been very clear about it—and there is his support of Hezbollah and Hamas.

Hezbollah's leader, in response to Iran, has also clarified the chant, “From the river to the sea.” I have heard some people say, “Well, that just means freeing oppressed peoples.” It is not that; it means clearing Israel—the Jews—out of Palestine completely. That message is, in those people's minds, absolute, so when others chant it, they need to recognise that that is essentially what they are saying. That is all to do with the propaganda used by the IRGC here in the UK.

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

As was mentioned earlier, there are concerns over links between the Islamic Centre of England in London, Manchester and Glasgow, and Iran's IRGC and the office of the Supreme Leader. As the right hon. Member for Barking pointed out, the head of the IRGC is appointed by the Ayatollah Khamenei himself, and therefore it is always going to be somebody who is completely on side with the IRGC and the authorities in Iran.

All the other entities exist within the Islamic Centre's network, reportedly including the Islamic Students Association of Britain, based in Hammersmith, which is owned by Al-Tawheed Charitable Trust. In August 2023, it was reported that the students association held online meetings where IRGC commanders had addressed students. We have seen videos, including some on the BBC, where people have been clearly lecturing while using the language that the right hon. Lady cited—about death to Jews and the eradication of Israel—and whipping up meetings to become more extreme than they might have been without such interventions. That should be a matter of real concern to my colleagues in Her Majesty's Government; they should be concerned that, at a time when the whole political atmosphere with regards to the middle east is so fraught, we see these people trying to pitch others in a singular direction—a violent one, at that.

The BBC report in 2024 into the students association named former IRGC commander, Ezzatollah Zarghami—who is sanctioned in the UK, by the way—as having been advertised as speaking to the student group. It was interesting that the BBC concluded that the students association, along with the Kanoon Towhid centre, had been used as platforms by IRGC agents in the UK to promote extremist antisemitic propaganda and incite violence against dissidents from the regime.

I want to come to the links with the City, which the right hon. Lady touched on, but I first want to say something very important. There is a distinct difference between sanctioning—the Government always say they sanction individuals—and proscribing, which means that if anybody here in the UK is involved in that organisation, they will be committing a criminal offence. Sanctioning is all well and good as far as it goes, but there are many people who operate, never get spotted and do not get sanctioned. The point of proscribing is to catch those who are busy fomenting violence and antisemitic tropes.

Rather than taking forceful action against the Islamic Republic and its associates, the UK Government seem content to allow those responsible for providing financial support for the activities of Iranian entities to operate freely in the UK. We have already cracked down on a number of banks and individuals as a result of the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine—there is more to be done there, by the way. We should have learnt a lesson by now. We were far too open in that regard, and remain too open when it comes to Iran.

We have long known that the Saderat and Melli banks—Iranian commercial banks subject to US sanctions for supporting Iran's IRGC and other military-related Iranian entities—have active subsidiaries, as mentioned earlier, in London. In October 2023 it was reported that both banks maintain links to Hamas and the IRGC's

Quds Force. They are operating here in London. I cannot stress that enough. In plain view, in open sight, we have Iranian banks providing money to those who wish nothing but harm to Jews here in the UK, to any representative of Israel, to the UK state itself and all those here in Parliament who believe in human rights and the rule of law. That is what is getting financed.

The state-owned National Iranian Oil Company, which was sanctioned in the US, is an affiliate of the IRGC and was in a building opposite us here. The UK financial services sector has also reported the failure to enforce UK financial sanctions on Iran. According to a February 2024 report by the *Financial Times*, Lloyds Bank and Santander UK participated in a sanctions evasion scheme backed by Tehran's intelligence services. That is absolutely astonishing. The banks are accused of providing accounts to British front companies secretly owned by a sanctioned Iranian petrochemical company based near Buckingham Palace, which the US believes has raised hundreds of millions of dollars for the IRGC Quds Force, working with Russian intelligence agencies to raise money for Iranian proxy militias.

The UK, together with its partners, must consider all forms of pressure, including targeted financial sanctions, to challenge Iran's hostile activities in the UK and abroad. If no such action is taken, I am sorry to say that the UK Government risk not only undermining the reputation of the City of London, but signalling to Iranian communities worldwide that the Government prioritise economic interests over safety and security. I do not believe that that is a principle running through the Government, but when it comes to Iran we have only to read what is happening to reach that conclusion. I hope that the Minister will explain to us how swiftly we are going to bring that to an end and change any sense that the UK Government care more about money than about lives.

Iran is a key ally of Putin and Russia. I have long believed—I made a speech in Washington about this quite recently—that we are watching a new axis of totalitarian states growing right in front of us. China is at the heart of it along with North Korea and Russia, and right in the middle of it is Iran. You can see the co-ordinated activity. Iran, as I said earlier in an intervention, is implicated in the co-ordinated attack by Hamas, which engendered a response resulting in the US focus being on that area, and not on Ukraine as it was before. That has led to a cooling off that mean Russia was able to go on the offensive, and it is looking very difficult for Ukraine. We can see that all of that has helped the axis. Right now we are watching Iran do all of that and still carry on here in the UK without hindrance.

Economically, Iran has the most robust sanctions evasion network, constantly cultivated over decades. What is of particular interest is Iran's ability to export petrochemicals through its dark tanker fleet and various shell organisations. Of course, that is hugely helpful to Russia, providing it with the wherewithal to buy many of the weapons that it needs.

Staggeringly, the total value of trade between Russia and Iran increased from \$1.4 billion in 2020 to more than \$3 billion in 2021. Over the summer of 2022, Tehran and Moscow held talks about using Iran as a backdoor for Russian oil. A 2022 cache of transaction data between Iranian clearing houses and foreign-registered front companies controlled by the regime, reviewed by

Politico, suggests quite clearly that the volume of sanctions-evading transactions handled by the network is at least in the tens of billions of dollars annually—tens of billions of dollars! That money is going to support the whole concept of war in Ukraine, to the fomenting of appalling terrorist groups in the middle east, and to the long reach of Iran through countries such as Syria and beyond.

Militarily, Iran also provides the key support for Russia. We know that—Iran's diverse drone and loitering munitions fleet has become integral to Russian strategy. Russia uses Iranian loitering munitions to bombard Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians. Iran has also sent technical advisers, who again are likely to come from the IRGC force, to train Russian operatives in Crimea. In addition, Iran provided Russia with 300,000 artillery shells and 1 million ammunition rounds between November 2022 and July 2023.

We can draw breath for a second, because it isn't over. The reality is that that is the scale of it so far, and it just gets a lot worse. We now know that Iran will expand its support for Russia's war in Ukraine to an even greater extent. Having already transferred drones to Russia, Iran is likely soon to begin transfers to the Kremlin of advanced ballistic missiles. In October 2023, under the joint comprehensive plan of action, or JCPOA, sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile exports will lapse, making such transfers legal under international law. Again, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to deal with that issue when she responds to the debate.

Iran's nuclear advancement and its military assistance to Russia increase the odds that President Putin, with the right incentives, will seek advantage in assisting Iran with nuclear breakout, transferring advanced military technology and supporting Iranian intelligence activity in Europe and the UK. We know what Iran is planning to do. We know that it is planning to have nuclear weapons; it is only a matter of when. It links with Russia will provide it with much of the technology that it needs, such as miniaturisation to allow nuclear weapons to be put on missiles. Such technologies are more often held in the developed nations that have nuclear weapons themselves, but these sorts of things are more open to Iran now. They can use them and we believe that that is very much the case.

I have talked about the new axis. As a long-standing ally of China, Iranian-Chinese trade has skyrocketed since the start of the Ukrainian war, as China takes advantage of illicit Iranian and trans-shipped Russian oil. Rebadged, that oil is going to China; they cannot buy enough of it. China has also expanded its economic footprint in Iran and its strategic footprint in east Africa. Interestingly, China imported 89% of Iranian oil in February 2024. Iran ships oil to China using dark-fleet tankers and receives payments through small Chinese banks. The dark-fleet tankers operate without transponders to avoid detection. Once oil shipments reach China, they are rebranded as Malaysian or middle eastern oil, and bought by small, independent refineries in China.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just this week in the press, I noticed a story that suggested that some of the dark oil that the right hon. Gentleman referred to is being shipped in unsafe boats and ships; they leak, they have engine problems and so on. That particular type of

movement of oil is dangerous not only because of the finance it generates but because it is environmentally dangerous for the rest of the world.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about that, but I have to tell him that this is going on all the time. All the points he made are correct, but the reality is that the oil is still going there, and I do not see any action at all being taken by the western powers to stop it. Perhaps they are fearful of upsetting China, but that is another issue altogether, by which I will not be sidetracked; this debate is not about that, but it is certainly a key element in why we seem not to do a huge amount to stop these things.

It is also worth pointing out that, in 2022, Iran bought \$2.12 billion-worth of machinery from China, as well as \$1.43 billion-worth of electronics. That tight exchange between these totalitarian states is being cemented and expanded as we speak. We also know that China's involvement in many countries across the middle east, many of which are totalitarian, is growing, along with its influence throughout the region. That is very much the case.

I will conclude with recommendations, which I offer to the Government in their interest as much as in mine and in everybody else's. The right hon. Member for Barking said this earlier on. I want to repeat it, and I make no apology for repeating many of these things because we are in agreement on this matter.

My first recommendation is to proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, which would make it a criminal offence for any UK citizen to deal with it. During the Prime Minister's campaign to be leader, he stated back in August '22 that the IRGC proscription

"must now be on the table",

and in December 2022, he vowed unequivocally that he and the Home Secretary would utilise

"the full range of tools at our disposal to protect UK citizens from the threat of the IRGC".

Hear, hear. He referenced the important actions of his predecessors, who proscribed Hamas and Hezbollah, and he indicated that IRGC proscription would be the very next step. Well, if it is to be the next step, we have been hovering on one leg for some considerable time. It is not a great place to be, it is physically difficult and it is also looks rather ridiculous.

My second recommendation to my hon. Friend the Minister is to use the breadth of the sanctions regimes to target the wide range of actors involved in human rights violations and other hostile activities committed by the Iranian regime, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and their agents in the UK and internationally. As I said earlier, proscribing is different from sanctioning. It affects the whole organisation; any activity associated with it becomes a criminal offence in the UK. That is why it has to be done, because to mop up these smaller actors that are running around the place proselytising this foul idea and ideology is important, and we need to put them beyond any further involvement with the UK.

My third recommendation is to encourage the prompt and effective investigation of any individuals or entities involved in human rights violations where there is a link in the UK, and highlight the legal pathways available to target those persons and confiscate any assets illegally obtained. My final recommendation is to increase resources for the UK's enforcement agencies to allow them to

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

build capacity for investigating and prosecuting entities involved in the commission of international human rights violations, as well as violations of UK sanctions against Iran and the link between the two.

When my hon. Friend the Minister responds to the debate, I do hope she is not going to say a few things that I have heard from various Foreign Office officials and the occasional Minister, including, first: “The reason why we won’t proscribe them is that it is important for us to be able to pick up the telephone and speak to the Foreign Minister in Iran”. I agree that it is important for dialogue, but dialogue with the deaf changes nothing, so that is not dialogue.

The second thing I often hear is this: “The United States needs a backchannel to get to Iran. We offer a backchannel.” Honestly, if America really wants to get in touch with Iran and needs the UK to be a backchannel, something has gone fundamentally wrong with America. We need to deal with policy that affects us and act for our citizens, rather than worrying about the Americans wanting to have a backchannel. Please, let us not hear any more about backchannels.

I have a huge amount of respect for my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden, and she knows that. She is a sanctionee of China, along with me and others, so I simply say that it is genuinely time for the UK to give a lead on this because many other countries in Europe would follow us. I have been in contact with many of them, as she knows, and many said, “Our Governments will move the moment the UK moves.” Some countries have already proscribed. I am convinced that the big countries like the UK that have capacity for this will move with us. That will have a huge effect on Iran and shockwaves would run right back to China as well.

It is long overdue that we call time on the proxy actor that sits in the middle east with the support of other totalitarian regimes such as Russia and China—on its behaviour, activities and foul funding of the most awful terrorist organisations we have ever seen, which absolutely devastate their own economies. Imagine how much the money that has been given to Hamas by various entities, including Iran, could have benefited the people in Gaza needing hospital treatment, roads and proper sewerage by now had it not been used for weapons, tunnel building and attacks on others. That is what we need to stop, and proscription is exactly how we have to do it.

3.5 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Henderson. I will start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate. They both gave very powerful opening speeches.

Very often, when the case is made for why the IRGC must be proscribed, we focus on the havoc it has wreaked across the middle east in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere. That is particularly understandable in light of the events of the last few months, as Gaza, Israel and southern Lebanon have become the scene of death and destruction, in large part due to Iran and its proxies. The case for proscribing the IRGC as a terror

group is made plain by its support for terror groups across the middle east. However, it also poses a growing threat to us here in the UK, as we heard in the opening speeches—a threat that transforms proscription into an urgent policy need to undermine terrorist and extremist activity in our own country.

In recent years, the Iranian regime has increasingly exploited the free and open society we all seek to defend here in the UK in order to pursue its own ends. Matt Jukes, the head of counter-terror policing, has made it clear that no fewer than 15 Iranian plots to kill or kidnap people on British soil have been uncovered in just the past two years. Meanwhile, MI5 has reported that Iran’s “aggressive intelligence services”, including the IRGC, have “ambitions to kidnap or even kill British or UK-based individuals perceived as enemies of the regime.”

Again and again, the Foreign Secretary and his predecessors have made formal representations to the Iranian regime that that behaviour is unacceptable, but again and again, that has not worked, and the IRGC continues to operate in our country.

Last February, the opposition news network, Iran International, was temporarily forced to relocate its headquarters from London to Washington—that is not Washington in my constituency, just for clarity—in response to threats from the Iranian Government against journalists based in our country. Scotland Yard was shamefully forced to warn staff that it could not safeguard them from Tehran-backed assassins or kidnappers on UK soil. As recently as March this year, the Iranian journalist Pouria Zeraati, who works for Iran International, was stabbed by three men on a residential street in Wimbledon.

Equally troubling is the fact that the IRGC and other Iranian agents are known to exercise soft power on behalf of the Iranian regime. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking mentioned, the Charity Commission has in recent years investigated the Islamic Centre of England in Maida Vale, giving it an official warning in 2022. That followed two events held at the charity’s premises in 2020 that eulogised Major General Qasem Soleimani, who was subject to UK sanctions, and that may have placed individuals present in breach of the Terrorism Act. We have also seen reports of IRGC commanders speaking to British students to encourage and incite antisemitic attacks. At least eight IRGC leaders have addressed British student audiences since early 2020. One commander who spoke said the holocaust was “fake”, boasted of training al-Qaeda terrorists and urged his audience to join

“the beautiful list of soldiers”

who would fight and kill Jews in the incoming apocalyptic war. Another IRGC commander invited to speak by the Islamic Students Association of Britain claimed Jews “created homosexuality” and that students should see themselves as “holy warriors”, promising that the “era of the Jews” would soon be at an end.

Just this year, a BBC report on the same organisation found that a former IRGC commander, Ezzatollah Zarghami, had spoken to students. He is reported to have previously

“boasted of training Hamas in Gaza prior to the 7 October attacks”,

and in an interview on Iranian state TV, he described how “he had provided Hamas with missiles.”

Evidence of the IRGC's support for terrorism across the middle east is abundant and undisputed. Indeed, it has been painfully clear since 7 October. Now we have growing evidence of the IRGC operating in our own country, under the Government's nose and seemingly at will. Today, the IRGC is a source, supporter and funder of terrorism, not just in Gaza and Beirut but increasingly in our very own Wimbledon and Maida Vale. If the Government have a strategy intended to deter that activity, it is just not working. We have had years of the Government refusing to proscribe the IRGC for one reason or another. However, it is increasingly clear to everyone else what needs to happen.

If it looks like a terrorist organisation, acts like a terrorist organisation and operates like a terrorist organisation, it is hard to understand why the Government, in the words of the current Minister for Security, the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), on 23 March 2024—indeed, I think all Ministers use the same quote—

“do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is or is not being considered for proscription.”

Thankfully, we in the Labour party—I hope I hear this from my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on the Front Bench—are a Government in waiting and we stand ready to do what this Government seemingly will not do, which is to finally proscribe the IRGC.

3.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Mr Henderson. I thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for her passion, which she quite clearly shows in the Chamber and today in Westminster Hall, for what is right in holding Government to account for the steps taken to secure this nation. Indeed, not just to secure this nation but to speak up for those in other countries, such as Iran, where people do not have the freedom that we have here. The right hon. Lady has done that exceptionally, and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has done similarly. Further, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—the other Washington, that is—clearly illustrated her point.

I look forward to the contributions from the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and for Dundee West (Chris Law), as well as that of the Minister. If she had the authority, I would love for her to proscribe the IRGC today. That is the ultimate demand that we all seek. The IRGC is an evil and wicked organisation, truly focused on one thing, which is to bring havoc, murder and mayhem across the world. It is instrumental for many terrorist organisations across the world, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, so that has to be done.

On 13 April 2024, Iran launched some 330 drones and missiles against Israel in a retaliation for an attack on what it said was a consulate. I was in Israel the week after Easter and had some talks with the Israel Defence Forces. That building in Syria was not a consulate; it was a terrorist organisation base where attacks across the whole of the Middle East were planned. What Israel did was destroy a terrorist building and those in it, and they were right to do so. By taking out terrorist organisations, such as the IRGC, it ultimately stops attacks on innocent people.

The Israeli Defence Forces say that 99% of drones were intercepted and that minimal damage was inflicted. One Israeli civilian was severely injured by falling debris. Let us not allow the fact that the Iron Dome and Israeli defences were successful in preventing greater loss of life distract from the fact that the message from Iran is clear: its evil intention is to destroy, maim and kill. It is not simply backing terrorist Hamas; it is involved, and as such our response must be clear.

I put on the record my thanks to our world-class Royal Air Force and armed forces for their reaction to the attack, but that, in tandem with a strongly worded UN memo, cannot and must not be the extent of the actions taken by the Government to address that unacceptable act—one among many—by Iran. Fortunately, the NATO forces, the United States of America and the Israeli Iron Dome protection scheme seemed to take out most of the drone and missile attacks.

I read with great interest an article by the right hon. Member for Barking about the banking institutions. The right hon. Lady set out that scene so well today, and others have and will refer to it. There are banking regimes that seem to be above the law, and working outside of the law quite blatantly, and the right hon. Lady was right to set that scene. We have failed to do all we can to sanction Iran for its continued and blatant disregard for its international obligations. This is a country that does not care about anything: it does not care how many people it kills or what mayhem it causes. I believe the day is coming when the international community in the west will have to consider Iran's position.

Melli Bank has been cited in American sanctions for allegedly supporting the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, while Bank Saderat Iran has been targeted by Washington over claims that it has provided financial services for Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Both banks were also found liable by the US federal court in 2021 for a Hamas terrorist attack in Israel in 2015 that left two people dead. These are not just banks but centres of terrorism operated by Hamas, Iran and others whose intentions are pure evil.

A judge ruled that the finance houses had been used by the Quds Force, an offshoot of the IRGC created to liaise with and fund Tehran's proxy militias and to pass funds to terror groups—they can move money around the world to where it needs to be—yet those banks continue to trade unopposed within the borders of this country. It absolutely astounds me that two banks with clear links to the Tehran military are operating in London at this time. It is clear that this is only one of the multiple ways in which we have not exercised our obligation to ensure that those who make money and profit in the UK have cognisance of their international obligations. There are rules and regulations that cannot be ignored, and our Government need to enforce them, as the right hon. Members for Barking and for Chingford and Woodford Green asked.

The report by the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, which was released just last month, clearly warned MPs and, by extension, the Government, that Iran was using financial assets abroad to advance its interests. I am minded of how the police eventually got Al Capone. They did not get him because of all the murders he committed; they got him on tax evasion. Iran needs to be brought to task for how it is able to move money around the world. We may not

[Jim Shannon]

get Iran for all the other things it has done, but if we do that we can stop it operating. It is important that action is taken.

We call for stronger enforcement of existing sanctions to deter rogue regimes. I add my voice to those calls, and not simply in respect of the two banks that are in clear view and getting away with it. Something needs to be done. I look to the Minister and ask her to take on board what the APPG has highlighted and called for: not words but actions. We need to see actions so that Iran understands that it is not above international law, so that Hamas are not emboldened to continue their evil acts of terrorism, and so that the world understands that the UN and NATO are not simply note-takers but action-takers.

I make this point as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief: Iran suppresses human rights and religious freedom to such an extent in that country. I speak up for those with Christian faith, those with other faith and those with no faith. There are some 1.2 million Christians in Iran, and their human rights are suppressed, as is their religious worship. There are restrictions with threats of arrests, beatings and murder, and mass arrests are probably taking place even as we sit here discussing this matter. Overall, the situation is risky. I am a Christian. I believe in a great God and a good God who is over all and who continues to grow his Church. We in this world also have a physical role to do, so I call on the Minister and the Government to take this matter on board and ensure that human rights and religious freedom are protected and spoken up for. I know the Minister will do that, as she always does, and we will not be found wanting.

I often speak for the Baha'is, because they are the most gentle people I have met in all my life, and I am greatly encouraged whenever I speak to them because they are just the most lovely people. They are intentionally and severely deprived of their fundamental rights. The IRGC and authorities have deliberately arrested, prosecuted and persecuted Baha'i members by preventing education, health opportunities, employment opportunities, the ownership of property and dignified burials. They even destroy the very graveyards belonging to the Baha'is—it is beyond all belief. Some 200 Baha'is have been murdered in the last few years and thousands more have been imprisoned and tortured. The hon. Member for Dundee West, who speaks for the SNP, and I are on the same page and, without reading his script, I know he will speak about that.

Women and girls have had their very right to exist taken from them. They have been denied education and employment, and there have been physical attacks and acid attacks on women just because they are not wearing the clothes that the IRGC wants them to, and just because they want equal opportunities. Come on guys: this is a country that suppresses their very right to live. I find that incredible. They have been beaten and sexually abused, and Iran should not be allowed away with it. The IRGC needs to be proscribed and it needs to be removed.

Iran supports world terrorism. Although others have referred to it, it is important that I say this for the record: Iran is the country that supports the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. It

has given Russia drones by the thousand to use in its battles against Ukraine. All those things indicate that Iran is the centre of the evil axis that also involves China, Russia and North Korea. It is the engine room of international terrorism and therefore must be sorted out.

I will conclude as I am conscious of the time. We need action to remind Israel that it is not to be left alone as it was in the six-day war, or at other times in the past when surrounding nations have attempted to wipe it from the face of the earth. We need action simply to do the right thing—that is what is required and what we ask for today. I ask for all those things. I commend the right hon. Member for Barking and look forward to the other contributions, especially the Minister's response.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I should point out that there are likely to be votes soon. I will have to suspend the sitting then, but will ensure that Members get their full time.

3.24 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank the right hon. Members for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for what has been a really important, detailed and excellent debate so far. May I say, before I begin, that it looks like we are all going to break out in a cross-party consensus here? I am looking forward to the cross-party response that we are all hoping to hear.

Since the revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has repressed the human rights of its own people, often in the most brutal and barbaric ways possible. The regime has continuously sought to destabilise its immediate neighbours and those in the surrounding region through both direct military action and its well-funded and well-armed proxy militias. It has exported terrorism throughout the world and repeatedly shown a blatant disregard for international law. Those are things we have heard from every single speaker so far.

Iranians Governments over the past 45 years have made no secret of their desire to spread the revolution and of their hostility to states that they perceive as their enemies, with the USA and Israel singled out in particular and referred to as the great Satan and the little Satan by the revolution's leader Ayatollah Khomeini. At this critical point in history, with enhanced regional and global instability, it is therefore no surprise to see Iran become increasingly involved through its proxies and its own forces.

In countering Iran's hostilities, the UK has two essential responsibilities. First, it must ensure that the escalating situation in the middle east is brought to an end. Secondly, it must ensure that Iran does not have the capability to fund, train and equip those who pose a threat to the rules-based order and global security.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. Sorry to interrupt, but the sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a Division in the House. I will allow 10 minutes for each subsequent Division.

3.26 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.49 pm

On resuming—

Chris Law: Thank you for giving us time so that we could all vote, Mr Henderson.

As we are discussing Iran, I will turn to regional escalation. I last spoke about Iran in June last year, and it cannot be denied that events in the middle east since October have changed the context completely; they simply cannot be ignored or discounted. Since November, Iran-aligned Houthis have launched repeated drone and missile attacks on ships in the crucial shipping channels of the Red sea, the Bab al-Mandab strait and the gulf of Aden in what they say is a campaign of solidarity with Palestinians against Israel's assault on Gaza. This has forced shipping firms to reroute cargo on longer, more expensive journeys around southern Africa, and has stoked fears that the Israeli war in Gaza could spread and destabilise the region. This week, the Houthis in Yemen confirmed that they will continue to target ships heading to Israeli ports anywhere within their range, and cited the looming "aggressive military operation" in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than 1.5 million Palestinians are now sheltering, as a reason behind the group's decision.

Significantly, last month, Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel in retaliation for a deadly Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria. The Iranian Government said they considered the issue "concluded", but warned that their next action will be "much stronger" if Israel retaliates.

The Iranian regime is looking to exploit the suffering of the Palestinian people. It has no interest in helping them. The cynical agenda in Tehran is to bring about as much instability in the middle east as possible. Our response, and our collective resolve, must ensure that that does not happen. Let us be clear: there will not be a military solution to the conflict in the middle east; there will be only a political and diplomatic solution. What is required now is the same thing that has been required since October: a regional de-escalation of tensions and conflict, and a sustained effort by the international community to bring some stability across the entire middle east.

No one wins from an endless cycle of violence or finger pointing over who started what. We simply cannot pick and choose our collective condemnation for those responsible for the regional escalation of this conflict, be that the bombing of Gaza, missile attacks on Israel, or the targeted killing of diplomats. All parties now need to prioritise de-escalation, to abide by UN Security Council resolutions, and to implement an immediate ceasefire. We in the SNP condemn all acts of violence and breaches of international law, and are steadfast in the opinion that there cannot be a military solution to the continuing and generations-deep—

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to stop the hon. Gentleman in full flow, but we are supposed to be talking about Iran, not the conflict in Gaza.

Chris Law: The point I am trying to make is that Iran is directly connected by its support of Hamas.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): I think not.

Chris Law: Okay. As mentioned, one of the most important elements of Iran's regional and international power projection is its deployment of militias in the region. Over decades, and with only limited effective pushback from regional states or the international community, Tehran has assembled an adaptive, layered network of regional militias with discrete organisational structures and leadership and overlapping interests and ties to Iran's security and religious establishments.

Furthermore, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is responsible for funding and developing terror cells, as well as plotting and participating in terrorist attacks in the near east, Asia, Africa, Europe and South America. It has been responsible for sea piracy, hostage taking, assassinations, kidnapping, the downing of a civilian airliner in 2020 in which its own citizens, as well as Canadian, Ukrainian, Swedish, Afghan and British citizens, were killed, as well as gross violations of human rights and acts that may be regarded as crimes against humanity.

As all Members present have said, the UK Government must take tangible action and proscribe the IRGC as a first step in countering its ability to support hostile actors in the region, and Iran's ability to act in a hostile manner in the region. Proscription would be a tangible step by the UK Government to stand up for the values of freedom and democracy. The UK Government have stated that Iran was involved in plans to kill journalists on British soil, with the Foreign Secretary recently stating that,

"The Iranian regime and the criminal gangs who operate on its behalf pose an unacceptable threat to the UK's security."

In January 2023, a Foreign Office Minister said that Britain was actively considering proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, but had not reached a final decision. Here we are, nearly a year and a half on, and no further action has been taken. Will the Minister update us today on the decision-making process on the proscription of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation?

With proscription, section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which criminalises terrorist financing and makes it an offence to raise funds for the purpose of terrorism, would see any individual in the UK who is accused of fundraising for the IRGC dealt with using the full power of the law. The UK Government need to commit to that, and to the continuation of sanctions against Iran.

Since May 2019, Iran has continued to violate the terms of the joint comprehensive plan of action agreement, following President Trump withdrawing the US from the agreement in 2018. In retaliation for that, and for deadly attacks on prominent Iranians in 2020, including one by the US, Iran resumed its nuclear activities. Iran has lifted the cap on its stockpile of uranium, which is now 18 times the permitted level. The International Atomic Energy Agency has been prevented from satisfactorily monitoring Iran's nuclear activities since February 2021, and UN inspectors reported in early 2023 that Iran had enriched trace amounts of uranium to nearly weapons-grade levels, sparking international alarm, as we have heard this afternoon.

President Biden has said that the United States would return to the JCPOA if Iran came back to compliance, but after more than two years of stop-and-go talks, the countries are nowhere near a compromise, and as of late 2023, provisions of the agreement have started

[Chris Law]

to expire. Transition day—a day to mark the eighth anniversary of the JCPOA's adoption and the date on which the sanctions were due to expire—was 18 October last year, but the UK, France and Germany have said that Iran's

“consistent and severe non-compliance with its JCPOA commitments” warranted the retention of sanctions.

The SNP is committed to the continuation of the sanctions, and urges the UK Government to be proactive in a concerted effort to tighten sanctions on companies to stop the export from the UK to Iran of dual-use materials that could be made into weapons.

In addition, we have all seen the devastating use of Iran's weaponry on European soil by Russia in Ukraine. The lifting of restrictions related to Iran's ballistic missile programme could allow Iran to “legally” increase its support for Russia in Ukraine, including the provision of Iranian short-range ballistic missiles. The UK Government should continue to urge Iran not to sell weapons to Russia to be used in the war in Ukraine, but that must be accompanied by a serious reconsideration of their own arms sales to Israel, which are also being used against innocent civilians in Gaza—a fundamental breach of international humanitarian law.

Finally, we should not forget the ordinary people of Iran, who suffer daily at the hands of the Iranian regime. We all condemn the ongoing flagrant violations of human rights in Iran, including the use of arbitrary detention and the death penalty, the suppression of the rights of women and girls, and restrictions of freedom of religion or belief. The international community must take every opportunity to bolster access to civil and political rights for all Iranians, including through access to international legal mechanisms and monitoring bodies, to ensure that perpetrators of crimes are held accountable and not granted impunity. We must not turn a blind eye to the systematic violations of international law and the denial of universal human liberties in Iran and throughout the world.

3.57 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Henderson.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on securing the debate, which she introduced in a customarily eloquent and forceful manner. I also thank the other hon. Members who have contributed: the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the SNP spokesperson, who talked about the danger of consensus breaking out. I think that there is a consensus breaking out, and that is very positive. The starting point for us all is surely the realisation that the Iranian regime is a brutal and repressive one.

I am sure that we all remember the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September 2022. She died in police custody after being arrested for not complying with a strict Islamic dress code. Following her death, there were widespread protests across Iran for a number of months. They were cruelly repressed by the regime, but

it is important that we remember those protests and pay tribute to the many thousands of women and girls who were brave enough to take part.

The protesters were subjected to appalling brutality. It has been estimated that at least 20,000 people, including many children, were detained by the authorities, more than 500 people were killed and many more were seriously injured. The repression did not come to an end with the end of the protests, and a large number of people have been arrested and detained for supporting the protests. We heard only last month that, appallingly, an Iranian rapper, Toomaj Salehi, has been sentenced to death following his first arrest in October 2022. According to Amnesty International, 853 people in Iran were executed in 2023 alone—an increase of 48% compared with 2022.

The hon. Member for Strangford accurately pointed out that the repression extends deep into society and that the lack of any kind of real religious freedom is a cause for concern. Christians and Baha'is are subject to persecution, as are those of other faiths.

As we have heard, if the Iranian regime is repressive at home in Iran, it is guilty of aggression abroad. In fact, Iran is among the world's foremost state sponsors of terrorism. Iran, through its so-called proxies, is guilty of helping to initiate violence across much of the middle east. Iran has supplied huge support to Hamas in Gaza. It has supplied and supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it still does. In Iraq, including in Kurdistan, and in Syria, Iran-sponsored militants have attacked US bases.

Last month, of course, Iran launched an attack on Israel. According to the BBC, the attack included 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles and at least 110 ballistic missiles. Thankfully, we are told that 99% of the incoming barrage was intercepted either outside Israeli airspace or over the country itself. There was successful co-operation between a number of states, and I am pleased that British armed forces were able to play their part in reducing the risk to life. The threat continues, however, and there is a need for a more detailed strategy from the United Kingdom and her allies to deal with Iran, especially as Iran is very close to developing nuclear weapons.

As we all know, the Houthis, who, again, are closely linked to the Iranian regime, have conducted missile and drone attacks on international shipping in the Red sea. Further afield, the Iranian regime has developed close links with Russia and has supplied a large number of drones that are being used in Ukraine. Co-operation is developing apace, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green pointed out. There is absolutely no doubt about the Iranian regime's malign influence across the middle east and, indeed, across the world.

We are also aware that Iranian activity in this country is increasing and is a cause of great concern. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking pointed out that the head of MI5 referred to potential threats by Iran in relation to the kidnapping or death of British or UK-based people. In 2015, police discovered an Iranian-linked bomb factory in London. Since the beginning of 2022, Iranians have been responsible for at least 15 potential threats to British or UK-based individuals. Again, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green gave a number of examples of how there is malign and malicious Iranian activity targeting British citizens in this country, especially in our capital city.

A couple of weeks ago, the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union organised an important event, chaired by the BBC security correspondent, Frank Gardner. A number of contributors highlighted how the Iranian authorities have been systematically targeting BBC News Persian staff and their families in Iran. BBC News Persia operates only from outside of Iran and the harassment is all too evident, sadly, on the streets of London. Only the other day we heard about the stabbing of a journalist, which was probably linked to the IRGC.

There are plenty of examples of the IRGC being active in a malicious way throughout the country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking and a number of Members stated, it is important that we are aware of that. In particular, my right hon. Friend should be praised for highlighting the influence of the IRGC and other Iranian forces generally, as well as the Iranian influence in the City of London.

Many Members might find it very surprising that Britain, one of the financial centres of the world, actually allows that kind of activity to take place. Two banks have been cited in particular. I would very much like to hear the Government's response because I believe that they should set out a clear plan of action as far as this issue is concerned. Also, the Financial Conduct Authority should be encouraged to fulfil what I consider to be its duty to ensure that the activities of those banks, with regard to their influence and involvement with Iran, are scrutinised and then curtailed. However, as important as that issue is regarding institutions, we also need to take further action against a number of well-known individuals.

Moreover, the question is: what do we do about the IRGC? I am of the view that legislation should be introduced so that the IRGC is proscribed. The legislation that we have was drawn up some 20 years ago to address terrorist threats, such as al-Qaeda, and if we are serious about addressing the problem of the IRGC, that legislation needs to be revised. The IRGC is a state-sponsored organisation and a new legislative base is required if we are to take action. Our bottom line must be about keeping this country safe, which is why the Opposition have proposed new security legislation to deal effectively with the operations of organisations and bring about the proscription of the IRGC. I am sorry to say that the Government have resisted our representations. That is unfortunate, because I believe, as this debate has shown, that there is a high degree of consensus in the House about the kind of action that is required.

I will be honest: at one time, I was sympathetic to the arguments being put forward by the Foreign Office. There was indeed a strong argument in favour of ensuring that channels of dialogue were kept open—at one time, that was certainly the Americans' point of view—but things have changed and we have to respond to the situation as we see it here and now. That is why it is very important that the Government respond positively to our overtures. We are more than happy to work together to ensure that we come forward with something that commands the consensus of the House. I believe that the starting point has to be that we proscribe the IRGC, and we need to work together to ensure that we find the best way to do that.

4.8 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I am

grateful to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing this important debate and to the debate's co-sponsor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). They both know that I respect them hugely, and as has been mentioned by other Members today, there is very little on which we disagree.

I am grateful to the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Dundee West (Chris Law) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their very thoughtful and accurate descriptions of Iran's regime, including its violence at home and its malign influence overseas. I will respond as best I can, but obviously, if I miss any points, I will respond in writing. I want to show how we are working to deter and respond to the threats alongside our international partners, and, of course, we will never be complacent.

As the right hon. Member for Barking mentioned, Iran's attack on Israel on 13 April was just outrageous. It was dangerous, unacceptable and the latest example of Iran's destabilising activity in the region. Almost all the missiles were intercepted, saving lives in Israel and the region, thanks to a co-ordinated international effort that included the UK. Yet we should be clear: this was a reckless escalation by Iran, and had this attack been successful, it is hard to overstate just how serious the fallout for regional stability might have been.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary both condemned the attack in the strongest terms. The Foreign Secretary also communicated directly to his Iranian counterpart that the destabilising activity must stop. In the aftermath of the attack, we imposed sanctions targeting key parts of Iran's military, as well as individuals and companies in Iran's drone and missile industries. We have also announced plans to introduce further bans on the export to Iran of components that could be used in drone and missile production.

Many contributions talked about the regional instability fuelled by Iran. Iran has been fuelling regional escalation through its military, financial and political support to its proxies and partners, including Hamas, Hezbollah and militia groups in Iraq and Syria. We are clear that Iran must cease that support and use its influence to prevent further attacks. That includes in the Red sea, where Iran has provided intelligence and weapons that have enabled the Houthis to target vessels. The UK is committed to working with the international community to support regional security, addressing weapons proliferation to non-state actors, safeguarding maritime security and maintaining a permanent defence presence in the region.

Many contributions referred to the link between Iran, Russia and China, which were all reflected on in the integrated review. We know that Iran's hostile activities stretch far beyond the middle east, and as the Minister responsible for Europe, a lot of my time is spent working on Russia and, of course, defending Ukraine. Iran is now one of Russia's top military backers and this has prolonged armed conflict in Ukraine, adding to the suffering of the Ukrainian people. In response, we have made 24 sanctions designations in respect of Iran's drone supply to Russia. That is in addition to our wider efforts on the Iranian missile and drone programme. At the UN Security Council, we have held both sides to account for their unacceptable collaboration, including sharing evidence with other members.

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

On the question of ballistic missile transfers, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green raised, let me be clear that this would be a significant escalation and a turning point in Iran's relations with Europe. That is something we have told Iran directly. Should Iran proceed with providing ballistic missiles or related technology, the UK is prepared to respond swiftly and in co-ordination with G7 allies.

There has been discussion around Iran's nuclear capability. Iran's continued escalation of its nuclear activities is threatening international security—that was highlighted perfectly earlier—and undermining global systems of non-proliferation. There is no credible civilian justification for the current state of its nuclear programme. It goes far beyond the limits set out in the JCPOA nuclear deal and we have made it clear to Iran directly that it must de-escalate. In October 2023, the UK and EU maintained nuclear sanctions on Iran that were due to lift under the JCPOA. That was a direct and calibrated response to Iran's non-compliance. We are committed to using all diplomatic options to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, including triggering the UN snapback if necessary.

There was a thoughtful and accurate reflection on Iran's threats in the UK. Since January 2022, we have identified at least 15 threats backed by Iran towards the lives of individuals based in the UK. The FCDO is working closely with the Home Office and law enforcement partners to actively disrupt and respond to such threats. The Foreign Secretary has made it clear to his Iranian counterparts that the threats are unacceptable and must stop. He summoned Iran's most senior diplomat to the UK in December in response to an ITV News report detailing plots to kill employees of Iran International.

In late 2023, we introduced a new Iran sanctions regime, which gives us more extensive powers to designate Iran-backed people and entities who threaten us and our allies. We have already used that to sanction members of organised crime networks and Iranian officials responsible for Iranian plots overseas. The National Security Act 2023 also gives us new powers to protect the British public, including new offences for espionage and foreign interference.

We have sanctioned more than 400 people and entities, including—as the right hon. Member for Barking will want to know—60 IRGC members. Sanctions have an immediate impact. They freeze and clamp down on economic activity, and they are very clear. The sanctions team within the FCDO spends a considerable amount of time looking at that particular country and its network.

On the point of proscription and the IRGC, I have been on record with where I stand on that issue, and that is already in *Hansard* for people to read. I recognise the strength of feeling displayed by hon. Members on the question of proscription, because they know where I stand on that issue. It is a long-standing position—as it should be, because these are very serious decisions—that we do not comment on any potential decisions. Yet as the Foreign Secretary outlined to the Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence last week, we recognise the malign threat posed by the IRGC and we are taking significant measures to counter it at home and around the world.

As I mentioned, we have already sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety and designated more than 60 IRGC officers and affiliated entities under our sanctions regime. That is not a point at which we stop; obviously, we gather evidence constantly to see how much further we can go. We are confident that we have the tools that we need to sanction, prosecute and mitigate the threats from Iran.

Chris Law: We have all laid out clearly the escalation that has been supported by Israel over the past seven or eight months, particularly around the middle eastern conflict. The Minister might not be able to tell us in detail, but what is the red line beyond which we will all understand that proscription will kick in? Each day that passes, the escalation gets greater. I understand her views on proscription, which we largely share, but what is the red line beyond which the UK Government will say, "Enough is enough, we're now going to take action," even if she cannot give us the date?

Ms Ghani: The power—the decision—to proscribe sits with the Home Office and the Home Secretary, so I do not want to speak without authority and without being absolutely accurate. I took care of the sanctions regime in the Department for Business and Trade, and I know that we had to meet an incredibly high evidence threshold within that framework. I assume that the same applies here. I accept that so many circumstances have taken place recently, but I cannot go any further in explaining where we are, because those decisions are taken internally. For us to speculate on who may or may not be proscribed does not help the discussion, but I fully appreciate the strength of feeling in the Chamber. I will see what more information I can provide in writing to the right hon. Member for Barking, who secured the debate.

Wayne David: I do not want to embarrass the Minister unduly, but it is commonly said that the Home Office is in favour of proscription, while the Foreign Office is not, so there are two conflicting opinions. Would the Minister care to comment on that? If indeed there is a conflict of opinions, how will that be resolved?

Ms Ghani: I can only be honest and say that that is not my experience of the Home Office, so no doubt that is just further speculation. We need to focus on the powers that we have and how we apply them appropriately.

Those powers are in the sanctions regime, and more than 400 Iranian individuals and entities have been sanctioned already. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation also has a role on behalf of the Treasury. OFSI does not comment on specific cases, but every instance of non-compliance with financial sanctions is taken very seriously. To touch on the issue of banks, UK businesses, including banks, are expected to perform due diligence checks on all customers and clients to ensure compliance with UK sanctions regulations. However, firms need to consider their own risk exposure. The Government are committed to ensuring that our sanctions are robustly enforced, potential breaches investigated and appropriate action taken.

I was surprised to hear, in two contributions, about reporting in the *Financial Times* referencing, in particular, Santander and Lloyds Bank. It was absolutely appropriate to then reference the Financial Conduct Authority and ensuring that those concerns are raised with it to see

whether it needs to explore any further. I took on board the other two banks that were mentioned, Bank Saderat and Melli Bank. The evidence presented in this debate is incredibly concerning, and I urge colleagues to raise it with the appropriate authorities.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am pleased with the Minister's remarks about the banks. Will she or her Department also ensure that the FCDO and other enforcement agencies are made aware of what is happening and what was said in the debate?

Ms Ghani: I am not sure what the process is, but because the right hon. Lady raised the issue with me and I am responding in the debate, I will ensure that correspondence is sent to tell the FCA what was said today, and that we would like a response to the issues raised, which are concerning.

I have a few more points to make, which I think are the most important. We have talked about some of the major macro issues, but there are other issues that Iranians have to deal with day in, day out—in particular the human rights abuses that are mostly meted out to women and young girls. The case of Mahsa Amini was raised earlier. She was 22 years old and was arrested simply for refusing to wear a hijab. In the widespread protests that followed her death, women removed their headscarves and chanted, “Women, life, freedom.” The protests were crushed violently by the IRGC. I am a Muslim woman myself, and it should not be a privilege to choose to show my hair or life-threatening for me not to cover it up, but unfortunately that is the case for many women in Iran.

In any debate on Iran, we have to take into account its terrible human rights abuses at home—the repression of women and girls; the uninhibited use of the death penalty; violent crackdowns on dissenting voices—which will not go unchallenged. Just last week, we saw more reports of the regime's appalling treatment of protesters, journalists and those expressing their right to freedom of expression, including the fearless artist Toomaj Salehi.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend in her flow, but I want to check something. As I understand it, Iran is not specified as a threat in the integrated review; I think it is described as a “persistent destabilising” influence in the middle east. Does she agree with that?

Ms Ghani: I assume that my right hon. Friend was reading exactly from the integrated review. Obviously, I would agree with the exact words of the integrated review, or the integrated review refresh.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Worth a try.

Ms Ghani: Marvellous.

We were horrified to read the recent reporting surrounding the death of Nika Shakarami, who joins a long list of young women and girls who have lost their lives in the custody of the Iranian authorities. We express our deepest condolences to Nika's family and all the families who have lost a loved one during the crackdown on the Women, Life, Freedom movement.

At the recent 55th UN Human Rights Council session, the UK was in the core group for the Iran human rights resolution, which renewed the mandates of both the special rapporteur and the independent fact-finding mission on Iran. Those mandates are essential for continuing to hold Iran to account for its human rights violations. Since the protests began in September 2022, we have sanctioned 94 individuals and entities for human rights violations, including decision makers responsible for Iran's hijab laws and political and security officials involved in the crackdown on protesters.

In the two minutes I have left, I want to reflect on the points raised about universities. Interference in UK academia is unacceptable. That is why the Government have brought in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and the National Security Act 2023. Solid points were made about Islamic centres and the Charity Commission. The commission is conducting statutory inquiries into both the Islamic Centre of England and the Al-Tawheed Charitable Trust, and we welcome its robust action in taking on those inquiries. On the point raised by the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, the hon. Member for Strangford, he knows that I was with him in the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill Committee when we talked about making sure that the envoy has the resources to continue its work for as long as it is needed.

I could go on, Mr Henderson, but I know that I need to leave some time for a response. We fully understand that a better relationship with Iran depends on the Iranian regime changing its actions. There will be no improvement in our relationship until the regime takes action to reduce its malign influence and activity at home and abroad. We will do everything we can with the powers we have to continue to deter and disrupt the full range of threats Iran imposes on us regionally and internationally. We will continue to take action across Government and with the international community, and we will continue to stand up for our values and for human rights.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of countering hostile activities by Iran.

Universal Postal Service Order: Rhondda

4.24 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the universal postal service order in Rhondda constituency.

It is a delight to see you in the Chair for the first time, Mr Henderson. Congratulations on your elevation—some have greatness thrust upon them. I should say that I am here as a Back Bencher, although I am quite often up against the Minister from the Front Bench. It is a different kind of arrangement today.

The universal service obligation, which is an essential part of delivering many public services up and down the land, says that there should be letter delivery six days a week, next-day delivery for first-class letters—which we all know are now quite expensive—and delivery within three days for second-class letters. I fully understand that recent years have been tough for Royal Mail. Letters are down from 14.3 billion in 2011-12 to 7.3 billion in 2022-23, and parcels are up from 2.6 billion in 2018-19 to 3.6 billion in 2022-23. It would be very easy for Royal Mail to conclude that its future lies in parcels, not in letters, but I want to say on behalf of my constituents in the Rhondda—I suspect that MPs from every constituency in the land would say the same—that the service they are getting at the moment does not meet the universal service obligation. That is a problem for individuals, our public services and our economy.

Let me talk through some of the issues that my constituents have faced. In the past three years, my office has dealt with a vast number of cases that have come in by email, letter and phone. We have created more than 100 individual pieces of casework relating to Royal Mail issues. All those cases share some very specific issues: sporadic arrival of mail, sometimes no mail at all received for weeks, and large bundles arriving at once. These are not people complaining that they are not getting any letters from anybody because nobody loves them; they are people saying they know a letter is due and it does not arrive, even when it has a first-class stamp on it. The most common complaint is late delivery, resulting in missed hospital appointments and fines.

These are not isolated locations in the Rhondda; the issue affects the whole of the constituency. It is a persistent problem that residents have been reporting since 2019. I have tried regularly to get to the nub of these issues with local managers. I am endlessly promised that they will be sorted, and they never are.

Of course, all my constituents are full of praise for their local postal workers, who deliver in rain and sunshine—I worry about sunshine because I have had melanoma and I know the dangers of skin cancer, so I want to make sure there is proper protection for postal workers. Many of the issues that postal workers face are the same ones that my constituents complain about.

Postal workers have told us about the following issues. There are not enough base staff to cover all rounds. Staff holidays and staff sickness come at peak times, making it impossible to maintain the USO. Management prioritises parcels over post—I know the Business and Trade Committee has looked at that closely. There is clear evidence that that is still happening, and it is problematic. Rounds are far too big and undeliverable.

Vans are not large enough for parcels and the post, so postal workers have to go back to the sorting office and make multiple trips, and no overtime is offered for that.

I have met the Royal Mail management team at the sorting offices multiple times, and they always say that it is a matter of staff sicknesses and that it is all going to be sorted next time, but it never is. I have also been told anonymously that staff are paid overtime to clear the mail before I get there so that when I arrive at the sorting office, it is all perfect and there is no mail waiting to go out, but once I have gone somebody gets back in the van and it goes back into the sorting office. If that is true, it is obviously a deliberate attempt to mislead the Member of Parliament, and I am sure the Minister would want to condemn it.

I will just go through some of the specific cases we have had—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: Yes, I can—I think it is fine.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): As long as it is to do with the Rhondda.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely. I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this issue; he is right. Does he agree that there must be a greater obligation under the universal postal service order for availability in rural areas? I understand that that is an issue for him too. There is no substitute for a full-service post office, and those obligations should be clearly defined in law. I think the hon. Gentleman is pushing for that. If it were in law, that would be to his advantage and to everybody else's too.

Sir Chris Bryant: To be honest, I just want to get it sorted in my constituency. I want Royal Mail to do the job that it is required to do by law already, and I just do not think that that is happening. I suspect that 650 MPs could give exactly the same story.

Let me give one instance. Nicola Thomas wrote to me about the delivery of letters from the local health board:

"I received an invite to book an appointment, a reminder of that invitation, and a letter saying 'we've removed you from the list because we haven't heard from you' all in the same delivery."

That is clearly a nonsense.

Another resident told me that all her mail takes over three weeks to arrive. She received a letter on 15 April that was dated 19 March. She is disabled. She has had numerous hospital appointment notifications that have not arrived on time. When she called the hospital to apologise for not attending, they say everyone is having the same problem, and I can confirm that. She has tried to call the clinic and sorting office. Nobody ever answers. She has tried calling the main headquarters. Nobody ever answers. Her postie told her that his boss at Clydach said that parcels take priority over letters. That is manifestly wrong. Her partner, who lives in Porth, where I also live, paid £70 to have their mail redirected, but the new tenant is still bringing letters to him. They have also tried to complain, but they can never speak to a human.

A resident in William Street in Ystrad said:

"We only get mail every 3/4 weeks, this has been an ongoing issue since last November. They've now stopped delivering parcels too. Royal mail have said there isn't enough time for the post

person to deliver to William street at all, with no plans to resolve the issue. I have to go to the sorting office in Ferndale if I want to receive any mail which is sometimes difficult with the restrictive opening hours.”

I agree about the restricted opening hours. We all know the saga: one of those little notes has been put through the door saying that they tried to deliver a parcel and but no one was there. Sometimes it feels as if it is the five minutes that no one was in the house that they managed to find that moment to put it through, but now they have restricted the hours when parcels can be picked up from the sorting office as well. This is not a proper service that is effective or efficient for my community.

Ethan Jenkins says:

“Postmen are now delivering for Amazon and Yodel as well as their own. They are delivering stuff daily that can be picked up at your local store still delivering toilet rolls, crates of alcohol, crates of pop. What they’re delivering shouldn’t be delivered by Royal Mail but a courier whose only job is parcels.”

This is a real issue for Royal Mail. They must ensure that letters get through.

Gaynor Harvey said:

“I think that most of us are having difficulty getting our mail delivered. I’m not sure that there’s any difference between a first class or second class stamp anymore except for the price of the stamp. Mail locally can take up to a week to get where it’s supposed to.”

Nita Bianca from Trealaw said:

“We’re lucky to get post once every 2 or 3 weeks in Trealaw. I’ve missed numerous hospital appointments due to this, and I probably would have missed a lot more if I didn’t have the NHS text reminder to tell me I have an upcoming appointment”.

Letters will always be important for the local health board, for the simple reason that lots of people in my constituency do not have internet access at home. Because of GDPR, it is difficult to send appointment invitations via email, as it cannot be guaranteed that the only person who will open that email is the person to whom it is directed. Many people simply do not have smartphones, particular the elderly who rely on NHS services in my constituency, which makes it all the more important that we ensure that letters can get through.

Significant numbers of my constituents have been caught speeding. Whether the speed limit is 20 mph, 30 mph, 40 mph or 50 mph, it does not matter; people get caught speeding or get caught in a yellow box, and they are sent a notice by the local police force or safety team. Often these notices arrive three or four weeks late, long after the date before which it is possible simply to fess up and pay half the fine. That adds to the administrative burden and the cost to individuals, and sometimes these letters get completely lost, which is problematic for public services, local government and my constituents.

My colleague, Senedd Member for the Rhondda Buffy Williams, did a report on this a few weeks ago. It emphasised two things. First, this is a significant problem for a large number of my constituents—26% of the people who responded to her survey said that they had missed NHS appointments. I do not need to underline the issue because we all know that there is a problem across the whole United Kingdom with the backlog in the NHS. If the NHS is sending out invitations to appointments and people do not get them in time, and then do not turn up, that is a hideous waste of resources in the NHS. Ensuring that Royal Mail performs its function properly is part of ensuring that we get the NHS back on—

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: I think I am meant to take only one intervention in these short debates, if the hon. Member does not mind. I am not quite sure of my timing. Mr Henderson, you may want to remind me how much longer I should go on for—the Minister will always say, “Stop now”, but—[*Laughter.*] I heard that laughter over there.

Post matters. Letters matter. It is not just about appointments and fines but about banks. Quite often, they send out material that needs to get to the person in a timely fashion, including credit cards, bank cards and so on. That is all the more important now, because we do not have a single bank left in the Rhondda constituency, and several of the banks are now closing in Pontypridd. Any kind of physical contact with a bank might mean going down into Cardiff, which would be a considerable journey for many people in my constituency. Yet again, it is all the more important that we have a proper system.

Birthday cards also matter. It would be really nice if everybody in the Rhondda who was sent a birthday card with a first-class stamp got it on their birthday, rather than two or three weeks after. I cannot tell you how many constituents have told me how upset they have felt when no birthday cards have arrived at all, when they know that their family would always want to ensure that they arrived on time.

There are important things that Royal Mail needs to do. First, if it is true that it has been trying to obscure the problems it has locally, it should apologise, make it clear that it has done that, and not do it again. Secondly, it needs to employ enough staff to do the job properly, and it needs to value those staff, so that they feel enthused about coming into work, rather than feeling constantly battered into submission by a system that simply does not allow them the room to do their job properly. Thirdly, it needs to ensure that letters are prioritised and not treat them like second-rate citizens compared with parcels. Whatever Royal Mail’s future aspirations for the USO may be, I am not here to talk about that today. I simply want it to adhere to the USO today. That means first-class letters being delivered the next day.

I also want Royal Mail to have a proper process for complaints, so that it can log the issues that arise. If a customer cannot speak to an individual when they ring about not having any post for three weeks, and they are worried about whether there is a letter coming from the NHS, surely to goodness there must be a proper system of logging that and ensuring that it happens. Finally, I would dearly love for Royal Mail in the Rhondda to get back to the system we had maybe 10 years ago, when all of that functioned much more efficiently. That is in the interest of our public services, our constituents and our community. It would just be nice if it were easy to pick up a parcel. I note, Mr Henderson, that you are encouraging me to shut up. I shall shut up now.

4.39 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. Would you mind indicating what time we are due to conclude? I am a little bit lost.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): We will finish at 4.54 pm.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very grateful, Mr Henderson.

I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant)—I could not believe he is not a right hon. Member—for securing today's important debate. I will touch on the specific situation in the Rhondda, as well as the wider situation. If I may, I will talk about the wider situation first.

Clearly, we recognise the points that the hon. Gentleman made. Mail is very important to our constituents for all kinds of different reasons, ranging from hospital appointments to cards and letters, which are very important to our constituents and will remain so. In the last financial year, all postal operators delivered around 3.6 billion parcels across the UK, and Royal Mail delivered 7.3 billion addressed letters—I will come to the point about prioritisation shortly. The hon. Gentleman did not directly refer to any changes in the universal service obligation; he wants to leave that for another day.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a Division in the House. I will allow 10 minutes for each subsequent Division.

4.40 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.3 pm

On resuming—

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is resumed and the debate may now continue until 5.17 pm.

Kevin Hollinrake: Thank you, Mr Henderson. On the universal service obligation, I know the general obligation was not something that the hon. Member for Rhondda focused too much on, but it is important to say that we believe the six-days-a-week service should remain. We have been very clear about that. Ofcom has the primary duty to secure its provision. Despite the fact that letter volumes have halved in the last decade, which has put further pressure on making the service viable, it is right that the Prime Minister and I make it clear that the importance of maintaining a Saturday delivery service is that it provides flexibility and convenience. We will not countenance scrapping it, not least because of the impact that would have on the greeting card, magazine and similar industries.

I will come to Rhondda specifically, but on the main point the hon. Member for Rhondda raised about the general quality of service, we understand that we have had a number of complaints. It is one of the most frequent items that comes across my desk in correspondence or meetings with fellow Members of Parliament. Ofcom obviously has the powers to investigate and take enforcement action where failures are identified. It did so when it fined Royal Mail £5.6 million earlier this year for its contravention of conditions in 2022-23. Ofcom is obviously monitoring this to make sure that the service improves.

The latest published quality of service results for quarter 3 of 2023-24 showed that Royal Mail continues to fail to meet its first and second class delivery targets.

It is quite clear that the service is not at the level we want to see. I met Martin Seidenberg, chief executive of the parent group, and made that point to him clearly. He accepted that this was the case, and that things need to improve. One thing about prioritisation, which the hon. Gentleman referred to, is that—

Sir Chris Bryant: I did not.

Kevin Hollinrake: To be clear, the hon. Gentleman was referring to whether Royal Mail is prioritising parcels over letters. Ofcom looked at that to see whether it was a feature of some of the problems behind the service level, and it did not identify any suggestion that Royal Mail's senior management had directed the prioritisation of parcels. Nevertheless, I think we are all concerned about anecdotal stories at a local level that suggest it may be the case. We absolutely do not want to see that happen.

The strategy for Royal Mail that Martin Seidenberg set out gave me some comfort, although it is actions not words that we want to see. It included accelerated recruitment of permanent workers, reinforced operational management at regional and local levels, and tackling sickness and absence. Three thousand additional postal workers have been recruited, and Royal Mail has introduced new sickness and attendance policies, which it claims are playing a significant part in reducing absence.

Royal Mail recently delivered its best-performing Christmas period in four years, with more than 99% of items posted before the last recommended posting dates arriving by Christmas eve. It is encouraging that following an agreement with the Communication Workers Union, results are beginning to improve, with sickness absence reportedly down by about 25% by the end of December compared with 2022, and only 0.2% of the daily 54,000 walks could not be resourced on any given day by the end of December. Royal Mail advises that its most recent performance data from the start of 2024 is much stronger, particularly the service levels for first class mail, reflecting some of the changes that have been made.

As I say, it is actions we want, not words. I know that the hon. Gentleman will not be satisfied until he sees changes on the ground.

Sir Chris Bryant: I wonder whether the Minister could do me a favour. Could he ask Royal Mail to provide data for my area every month on how they are doing with the USO and how much they are meeting? I have tried to get that information myself, but I find it difficult. I am sure it would be more effective if he asked.

Kevin Hollinrake: I will take that away, and I am very happy to look at it, because I believe in holding Royal Mail's feet to the fire. There may be an advantage if we look at that at constituency level.

I note the hon. Gentleman's point that mail is sporadic and there is often no mail or it arrives late, resulting in missed appointments or fines and all those things. These are very serious issues, so I can understand his frustration. He said that he has had considerable contact with Royal Mail about those service issues, as is right—he is a very diligent Member of Parliament, and we urge other colleagues to do the same. Royal Mail reports that service in the area was disrupted due to sickness absence in some parts of his area being higher than average, and

it was not a good picture across the board anyway. The time taken to recruit staff has also contributed to gaps in the service.

Royal Mail has acknowledged that it has not been able to deliver a consistently high level of service to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I understand that the issues have centred around the Ferndale and Mid Rhondda delivery offices. In Ferndale I understand that last month there were six members of staff absent and that some customers may have experienced disruption to their deliveries. Royal Mail has now advised that absence levels have since been reduced, with fewer members of staff currently absent through sickness. In Mid Rhondda, there are currently three staff absent on sick leave and Royal Mail is currently recruiting an additional postal worker.

Royal Mail reports that it is currently delivering to all addresses served by both delivery offices six days a week when there is mail to deliver, and if postal workers cannot deliver on a given day, mail will be prioritised the next working day. We are assured that it is actively working on measures to restore service levels, and while it tries to tackle the local service issues, no address will go without a mail delivery for more than two days. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will update me regularly if that proves not to be the case.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman was due to visit one or both of those delivery offices in March, but that was postponed. He is looking at me very quizzically; maybe that was not the case. Royal Mail will be in touch with him to try to arrange a new date, if he would like to visit again. We would definitely urge Royal Mail to do that when constituency Members of Parliament are not happy.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about complaints. If he googles the Royal Mail customer service centre, which I am sure he has, there is a phone number and an online form to fill in. There is also an independent dispute resolution service—the postal redress service—which can try to resolve disputes. Citizens Advice can also provide assistance to constituents and constituency Members of Parliament to resolve these issues. He could also write to Ofcom to ensure that it is aware of the service difficulties he is experiencing. On his point about whether Royal Mail is obscuring the level of service, moving mail to a van outside and

bringing it back in, that would be totally unacceptable. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence of that, will he please raise it with me or directly with Royal Mail?

The hon. Gentleman raised a point about the lack of banks and available cash on high streets. We have legislated for that, and post offices play an important part. I also look after them, as he will be aware. Banking hubs might feature in the towns and villages in his constituency in the coming months and years. I have also just replied to his letter on counterfeit stamps, which he should receive. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman acknowledges that he has received a copy.

Sir Chris Bryant: Can I try again?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, of course.

Sir Chris Bryant: It suddenly occurred to me that there might be a general election later this year. One part of what the Post Office is required to provide is the freepost delivery. How confident is the Minister that the Royal Mail will be able to deliver that in a timely fashion to the right constituents in the right places across the whole of the country?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a matter close to both our hearts and those of others in the room today. Speaking from my own perspective, as someone who is not easily convinced or easily has the wool pulled over his eyes with reassurances, I was impressed by Martin Seidenberg, but people will be convinced only when services improve. I have set out some of the ways that they should improve. There is a personnel issue, as well as some management ones. There have been some steps forward, as I set out earlier. That should help to secure the improvements that the hon. Gentleman and I want to see.

As I said before, it is not words but actions that we want to see. I am happy to hear from Members across the House to ensure that service levels are where we want them to be. We are committed to ensuring that we have a financially sustainable and efficient universal postal service for all users in all constituencies. I would like to ensure that Members of this House are able to bring concerns to me whenever they or their constituents are disappointed with local services. I ask the hon. Gentleman please to ensure that I am aware of the difficulties that he sees on an ongoing basis. With that, I will conclude my remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

West Midlands: Transport

5.15 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government funding for transport in the West Midlands.

It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I am pleased to have secured a debate on this topic and I thank the House for allowing this time. I am grateful to all those who are present in the Chamber and ready to speak. I will start by explaining to anybody watching that I will confine my comments to Redditch, my constituency, and its connections to the major conurbation of Birmingham. It is a peculiarity of Parliament that the debate title must focus on the west midlands, not simply my constituency, but of course that allows other colleagues with wider geographical reaches to speak as well.

Every time I am out and about in Redditch and the villages of Inkberrow, Cookhill, the Lenches, Hanbury and Abbots Morton, it is inevitable that transport in all its forms is raised with me. That is because transport is key to our local economy, to levelling up, and to people's opportunity literally to get on their bikes and better themselves—something that we Conservatives believe in strongly, in line with our best traditions and values. That is why one of the key pledges I made to my constituents when I was elected for the first time in 2017 was to improve local transport. As an MP who represents rural, urban and suburban residents, I know that there is a range of transport needs, which vary widely depending on where people live.

People are often bemused when I explain that the constituency of Redditch county—that is its name, even though there is no county of Redditch, before everybody writes in—and areas in the new constituency, which will be up for election after the next boundary changes, include villages and rural and farming areas. In particular, the new constituency for which I will be the candidate at the next general election includes Wychbold, Dodderhill, Stoke Prior, Harvington and Norton. Obviously, their connections to Droitwich, Bromsgrove and Evesham are also important.

That said, we are close to Birmingham. It is the major economic centre. It is vital for people's work, study and leisure opportunities. Before securing the debate, I asked my constituents to give me their views on the transport network in Redditch. I asked them about roads, rail, bus and traffic issues around the constituency, and I will broadly structure my remarks around the answers that they gave. If people watching have missed sending me their thoughts, they can still do so, and I will post a link on my website and my Facebook page.

I will turn first to motorists. After all, Redditch is a new town that was constructed with the car at its heart. In fact, Redditch is the proud owner of England's only cloverleaf roundabout. Everybody is welcome to come to Redditch and experience driving round the cloverleaf roundabout and many others. Dual carriageways around the town allow for quick and easy access everywhere. Equally, my rural constituents living in more remote areas rely on cars to get around, especially where other transport options might be limited. The responses to my survey reflected the central part that cars play in my constituents' lives. Road quality was an issue that was highlighted, with 52% of respondents expressing their dissatisfaction with the quality of roads in their area.

The roads in Redditch, under the two-tier system of government that we have in our area, are managed by Worcestershire County Council, not Redditch Borough Council, which again can cause confusion. As a local MP, I know how irritating and dangerous potholes and other obstacles, such as flooding and debris, can be on the roads, and the damage they can do to a vehicle.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Was meeting net zero targets part of her questionnaire? If it was, if we have to meet net zero targets, we have to have the infrastructure in place. I think the hon. Lady is saying that if that infrastructure is not in place, we cannot meet our net zero targets. That will also mean that we cannot deliver on the buses she would like to have for the rural constituency she represents.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue. That was not specifically included in my survey this time around, but net zero is, of course, something we must aspire to achieve; in fact, we have legislated for it, and we are committed to it. However, at the same time, we have to accept that a reality of people's lives is that they need cars to drive around in, whether they are electric or petrol and diesel. We must make sure, therefore, that the infrastructure is there, whether to support the transition or the roads, which will be important, whether the cars and buses are electric or fossil fuel vehicles.

I know that the Government recognise the issue with road surfaces. We all know that some of the funding for High Speed 2 has been reallocated to improve roads locally. In Worcestershire, we have received more than £4 million—£4,000,766, to be precise—to repair and resurface roads over the next two years, which comes from the £139 million allocated to Worcestershire County Council as part of the Government's long-term plan to improve local roads. When he sums up, I would like the Minister to advise me how quickly that can be spent on our roads in Redditch, in our borough, and in Wychavon, which I represent, and how much of that county council funding can be allocated to Redditch Borough Council, so that I can ensure the council is hitting those targets and spending it in the right places.

While I am talking about roads, I would urge anyone who spots a hazard on their road or on a road they are driving on to raise it with the county council directly. It has a good reporting system, and I know that it does get crews out to fix the roads. If anyone is struggling with that service, they should contact me, and I will raise it on their behalf. The council can and do respond to road surface issues and potholes when they are raised. It has a website for that.

Moving on, another 43% of people responded that traffic was an issue in their area. Whether it is roadworks or school pick-up times, there are a number of reasons why we have traffic around the area. I know that the road surface funding I outlined previously can help with the speed of roads, as drivers will not have to slow down to avoid potholes, but I also know that traffic can build up at pinch points and pressure points, such as on the school run, which is something I experienced many times as a parent. We often see traffic building up around school gates, which can be dangerous for the parents and children and for the people who live around those areas. That is why I work hard with all local partners, in particular in the Brockhill estate near Holyoakes

Field First School, on the challenges for people getting in and out of their estate. I have had some very constructive discussions with the developers and with the school itself, and I stand ready to help any other school that experiences those problems.

Speeding drivers are not only a nuisance, but dangerous. They also create noise. I know that the Minister's Department is looking at noise cameras. Could he update me on whether it is rolling those out, and whether we will see them in use in Worcestershire? In the Headless Cross and Oakenshaw area in particular, noise is a real menace—I am happy to brief the Minister in more detail on that.

With the current cost of living challenges people are facing, it is important that we support motorists and remove prohibitive costs associated with driving. I support what the Government are doing by maintaining fuel duty at the current levels for a further 12 months, extending the temporary 5p fuel duty cut and cancelling the planned inflation-linked increase for next year. I am contacted by constituents who make the point that running a vehicle is a big portion of their family's budget, so I know that people will welcome these measures and that these savings do matter.

The other issue that has been the source of real debate and challenge is the 20 mph speed limits in England. I welcome the Government's pragmatic, proportionate approach to prevent their blanket use in areas where it is not appropriate, and to amend the guidance on low traffic neighbourhoods. What a stark contrast with Labour-run Wales, where there is a blanket 20 mph speed limit, which is having a massive impact on the Welsh economy, to the detriment of local people. Of course, we also see anti-driver and anti-car policies all over Labour-run London, where Sadiq Khan is punishing and penalising hard-working people for using their cars.

Of course, while Labour insists on those top-down, anti-motorist policies, we Conservatives know that cars are a unique means for freedom for people to fulfil their potential. We must tackle issues of poor driving and speeding. I welcome all the work my newly re-elected police and crime commissioner John Campion is doing. I have been helping him, in Astwood Bank in particular, to tackle dangerous speeding and I will renew my work with him now that he has been re-elected.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that nitrogen dioxide levels adversely affect people's health, especially that of children? Does she not agree that air quality needs to be fixed, but, rather than taking responsibility, the Government have pushed that on to local authorities? If they are serious when they talk about anti-motorist policies, is the overabundance of motorists using cars exponentially, with the detrimental effect on health and especially that of children, something that the Government are proud of?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I want to keep my remarks to my local area of Redditch and Birmingham. I was highlighting the shocking record of Labour-run London and Wales. I stand by those comments: they are anti-driver, anti-car and anti-growth.

While many people drive to and from work, a large number of respondents to my survey highlighted the challenges faced by those who walk, cycle or use a

wheelchair to get around Redditch. People highlighted the need to increase the amount of cycling and walking space and the number of crossings and to reduce the amount of time it takes to walk across the town more generally. The accessibility of footpaths was raised by those in wheelchairs and mobility scooters, who often have difficulty with high kerbs. I discuss such issues with the local borough and county councils on a regular basis. Will the Minister advise me what more I can do to make sure those issues are addressed on a practical level across our towns so we can help people who walk or cycle to work to get there faster and safer?

Bus services are key to the pledge I made to my constituents at the last election. People around Redditch and the villages rely on bus services to connect the rural areas to the surrounding towns. Covid presented an existential challenge to local bus services, with people obviously using buses less frequently. That means that certain routes have become unviable and have to be extensively supported by central Government funding.

Unfortunately, only 11% of those who took part in my survey said that local bus services were good. I caveat that, because it is not a scientifically representative sample of the whole town. Nevertheless, I know there are challenges in running bus services. Indeed, the Government have recently stepped in to award £3.4 million to support bus services in Worcestershire, bringing the total received since 2022 to more than £6 million. Additionally, the Government put in place the cap of £2 on bus fares, which has undoubtedly improved usage and provided much needed support for people who rely on buses, especially when families see their budgets squeezed.

In addition to the challenges, we have seen some success stories. Thanks to the hard work of the Conservative-run county council and backing from the Government, the No. 51 and No. 52 routes that serve Redditch are among the most commercially successful in the entire UK. I will, however, continue to work hard with councillors and Ministers to see what more we can do to support our bus network and to ensure it is reliable and delivers for residents. I appreciate the latest thinking from the Minister about what more he can do to support buses in areas such as Redditch as we move beyond covid.

I will make the point that anyone who would like to see better bus services—better funded, nationalised or subject to any of the other ideas we hear talked about—needs to explain how they would be funded. To my knowledge, only one bus route in Redditch makes a profit and that has been the case for many years because people are using buses less and less. Services must therefore be subsidised by the taxpayer. Anyone who advocates for buses being subsidised and brought under state ownership needs to explain how they will take funds earmarked for other vital services to deliver that for residents.

I mentioned at the start of my speech how, because of Redditch's fortunate position so close to Birmingham, it is essential we have a reliable connection so that my constituents can choose to work in or visit the city with relative ease while living in the town. Before covid, we had three trains per hour to Birmingham and for some strange reason that I am not clear on, we now have only two. We must return to the previous situation immediately; it is past time for that. The future of the train station is being discussed by the county council and the midlands rail hub and I will continue my

[Rachel Maclean]

discussions with all the relevant partners in this space. It is essential that any plans are aligned with the overall vision to level up and regenerate Redditch.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. On that specific point about trains, railway stations and the midlands hub, she will know that the former Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, had a vision for transport that involved funding for train stations, including Aldridge train station, and restoring train services for the first time in about 60 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that funding long-term transport objectives and projects such as the midlands rail hub and Aldridge train station remains imperative? It is incumbent on the new Mayor of the West Midlands to deliver these projects on time and on budget, and to publicly announce that he will back them.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point, because the issues she has highlighted in her constituency were the fruits of a healthy collaboration between ourselves as local MPs across the west midlands and the outgoing Mayor, Andy Street, to whom we pay tribute. We also welcome to his position the new Labour Mayor, Richard Parker. I would add to my right hon. Friend's plea that we can all work constructively together, especially on transport projects that cover a huge area. It is vital we have that collaboration for the benefit of all our residents.

Tahir Ali: On that point, will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: No, I am afraid I need to wind up. Despite the many challenges we face with local transport, I am pleased that the Government understand the inseparability of good transport networks and levelling up. Whether it is walking, cycling, wheeling, or using a car, train or bus, we must continue to work to improve transport locally so that we can deliver on our promise to level up towns like Redditch and the villages. I will continue working with my constituents and all the stakeholders so that we see improvements.

Finally, let me ask the Minister a few questions. What more can he do with his colleagues in Government to support local councils in tackling potholes and other hazards on our roads? Will he outline the steps the Government are taking to support motorists other than what I have already said, particularly in a time with a high cost of living? What steps is he taking with his colleagues to support bus services, so that we can ensure more routes are viable and sustainable, and move away from Government subsidies, which are ultimately only a short-term option? What steps is he taking to make active transport more of an option in towns such as Redditch, including for people with disabilities? I thank everybody for listening to my speech, I look forward to colleagues' contributions, and I thank the Minister in advance of his concluding remarks.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Given the earlier Divisions, I expect that this debate will finish no later than 6.17 pm. I expect to call the Opposition spokesman at 5.54 pm. It does not take a lot of working out to realise that you do not have much time to talk. I remind hon. Members to bob—I can see you are bobbing anyway—if they want to speak.

5.33 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this important debate. I know I only have a short time in which to speak.

North Shropshire is in the far-flung north-western corner of the west midlands. At the moment, it is a place where people really need a car to move around. I want to focus my remarks on public transport, because it is worth noting that moving around by car is becoming increasingly expensive and very difficult for people living in deprived, very rural areas.

In 2023, the all-party parliamentary group on rural business and the rural powerhouse found that rural households spend about £800 a year more on fuel than people who live in more urban areas. The average distance to their supermarket is much further, and things like insurance are going up. Young people in particular are struggling with car ownership, and currently do not have a viable public transport system to turn to instead. It is absolutely crucial to a healthy rural economy that people can move around. Mobility of labour is a really important supply-side issue, and if people cannot move around from their town or village to have a range of places where they can work or study, we are really putting in a barrier to a thriving economy. That is one of the most important points I want to make today.

Figures from the House of Commons Library show that between 2015 and 2023, the number of miles someone can travel in Shropshire by bus fell the most in England—by 63%. The real point is that bus services, once they start to decline, become unusable and decline even further.

We all understand the difficulties of funding and public subsidy for bus services, but the reality is that we will have to pump-prime them to make them commercially viable in future. Make them frequent, make them reliable, and people will be able to use them. At the moment, if there is only one bus a day into a destination and one bus a day home, that is not a usable service. If someone misses it, they are stuck—and do not suggest a taxi, because there are none of those in Shropshire either.

This is a real problem for my constituency. I might have mentioned before that we can only get one bus service in Shropshire on a Sunday, and that includes Market Drayton—the third largest population centre in Shropshire, which has no kind of Sunday service, while its Saturday service to Shrewsbury and Staffordshire is also at risk. That is a huge problem for young people: they cannot start a college course or get a job outside Market Drayton unless they make the huge financial investment of a car, which many cannot afford.

Older people struggle, too: they may not be able to drive for a number of reasons; they cannot access hospitals by public transport easily; and they have to rely on friends or pay extortionate amounts for unreliable taxi services to get about. If someone lives in Market Drayton in my constituency and wants to get to a college course in Telford, that will probably not work for them because there is no guarantee that the bus service will still be running next year. We need to provide rural communities with an incentive for young people to stay there. Public transport is one of the most important parts of that.

Lots of other people want to speak, so I will move off buses and on to trains. Last year, I was delighted to hear that Oswestry would be reconnected to Gobowen by a new train line. That project is to be fully funded under the restoring your railway fund but, since it was handed over from the original campaigners to the Department for Transport, we have heard no more. Similarly, we expect access for all at Whitchurch station, which does not have step-free access from the southbound platform at the moment. We were promised that the announcement of the funding would be made by the end of the financial year. We are still waiting, and it is starting to feel as if public transport projects go to the Department for Transport to die. Can the Minister give us an update on when we might find out about the step-free access at Whitchurch station and the timetable for the Oswestry-to-Gobowen line? I also add a plug for reopening the train station at Baschurch, to get into Shrewsbury. That would take a lot of people off the road.

Finally, I cannot emphasise enough how important mobility of labour—getting people around in a sensible way—is to our local economy. We need to have reliable bus services that run at appropriate frequency with initial Government subsidy, so that they become reliable, usable and then commercial, and people in places such as North Shropshire can get about.

5.37 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate. There is real interest, as can be seen in the fact that so many Members from across the west midlands are present.

I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Minister will be assailed with demands and requests, so I thought that before I got straight into those, I would start off with a few thank yous. We have seen some amazing investment in rolling stock and electrification on the Chase line, which has seen an amazing increase in the number of people using it. It serves Cannock, Rugeley and my own station of Landywood. There has been exponential growth in the number of people taking advantage of this service, which supports so many local residents in Great Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay. There are also more frequent services in Codsall and Bilbrook, which saw real growth in the number of passengers before the pandemic and a strong rebound post pandemic. I am deeply appreciative of that, but there is constantly an ever greater need for investment in our rail services.

I would like to put a request on the record. Although there have been improvements in the services stopping at Penkridge station in Staffordshire during the week, we would very much like those to be extended so that we have better services at the weekend as well. That is incredibly important for residents of Penkridge, whether they travel from Penkridge to Stafford or into Birmingham. Again, it would cement Penkridge not only as a great place to live but as a great place to visit and from which to commute to the surrounding areas.

I apologise to the Minister for assailing him with so many requests, but there is also the issue of Stone station; we have spoken about it in the past. There would be a real advantage for so many residents in Stone if direct services went straight to Manchester from there. I appreciate

that this debate is about services in the west midlands, but so many communities across Staffordshire look not just towards Birmingham and the west midlands urban conurbation but to commute and travel to other urban centres, such as Manchester. If the Minister is able to encourage his officials, Network Rail and the railway companies to consider this proposal as an option, I will be grateful, because I know that it would greatly benefit the residents of Stone.

I also make an additional plea. We do not have disabled access at Stone station, which means that the ability to access vital rail services is not available to the most vulnerable. Could the Minister ask his officials to come back to me about options for improving disabled access at Stone station?

I appreciate that the Minister does not have responsibility for roads, but can he take a message back to his colleague about the issue of potholes? We are very appreciative of the extra money allocated to Staffordshire, but it is a large rural county with many roads that could do with extra attention and resources. I urge the Minister to make sure that potholes are seen as a priority within the Department. They have a real impact on people's lives. So many of my constituents are unable to access a rail service without using their car in the first instance. Making sure that our road network is the very best is absolutely essential.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) raised the issue of bus services. Buses are very much the Cinderella of the public transport sector, but they are incredibly vital for many rural communities. I feel that Staffordshire has suffered from the over-generous approach towards subsidising public services to the urban west midlands: the rural counties that surround that region are sometimes forgotten. I encourage the Minister to take the message back to his colleagues that bus services are as vital, if not more vital—we do not have tramways and railway stations are often far away from the many villages across Staffordshire. Buses are essential for us, but there seems to be a disparity in funding between the rural counties and the urban west midlands. I encourage the Government to look at that situation and redress the balance.

5.43 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Mr Henderson, to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), or Redditch and the villages, on securing this debate on transport in the west midlands.

I will speak today about buses. In the past year, trains have undoubtedly dominated headlines in my region after the bungled scrapping of HS2. Buses might not be as glamorous as trains and might not justify expensive taxpayer-funded trips to Japan for the Transport Secretary, but for many of my constituents buses are the lifeblood of the community. They are indispensable for connecting people to jobs, opportunities, education, public services, and friends and family. They also disproportionately serve the more deprived in our society; half of the poorest fifth of families do not own a car.

As I have argued many times before, poor bus services are one of the key reasons why Birmingham underperforms in productivity when compared to similar-sized cities in Europe. I have received complaints about buses from many of my constituents; whether they are looking for work,

[Preet Kaur Gill]

meeting with family, or simply want a day or night out in the city, the public transport is not there to connect them.

In my time as the MP for Birmingham, Edgbaston, I have lost count of the times that routes on which my constituents rely have been reduced or axed altogether. I also use buses to get around, so I have first-hand experience of that. The directors of National Express West Midlands and Diamond Bus are probably fed up with my letters, but as we are hearing, it is not just us in Birmingham, Edgbaston. Across the country, thousands of services have been axed since 2010. In the west midlands region, the total length of our bus routes has dropped by over 30% since 2010. Since 2021 alone, when the Government announced their bus revolution, over 2,000 routes have disappeared across England.

I want to wish the outgoing Mayor of the west midlands well in whatever he does next, and I thank him for his support and for working with me. However, I must say that I have been underwhelmed by his record on transport; I am thinking not only of his public spat with the Prime Minister on HS2. While our economy is 24/7, our public transport system in the west midlands simply is not. The people of the west midlands voted for change this week, and with Richard Parker I am confident that they will get it. Everyone should have access to a bus route that takes them where they want to go, and they should not have to limit their life choices based on where they live.

Tahir Ali: For the record, West Midlands Combined Authority's medium-term finances represent a significant challenge to the authority, as a deficit of £29 million is forecast for this year, rising to £50 million for the year 2027-28. That will not be the responsibility of the incoming Mayor; that clearly sits with the outgoing Mayor and this Government. For the record, does my hon. Friend agree that the deficit proposed for this year, and up to 2027-28, will have nothing to do with the incoming Mayor?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, that is something I have expressed already in working with Andy Street when it came to the cuts to a viability assessment taking place in my constituency, which would have a Sprint network, for example. A lot of the finances from central Government and the delays directly impacted what he could deliver in the region and clearly what the next Mayor will be able to.

Richard Parker's plans are to bring the bus network into public control, allowing us to design routes that people need and making buses more affordable, more reliant, more frequent, greener and better connected. Crucially, he has pledged to work with communities to help design a bus network that works for them. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Richard Parker on his victory last week, and can he say whether he will support him in his plans to take buses back into public control? Can the Minister promise that he will not face the same six-year slog that Andy Burnham had to put up with in Greater Manchester due to the unnecessary barriers imposed by central Government?

Voters have seen what they get under a Conservative-run Government: paying more while getting less—whether that is 14 years and £16 billion wasted on HS2 before

scrapping it anyway, or whether it is Avanti West Coast's executives bragging about free money from the Government while cutting routes and running the worst-performing rail line in the country. Labour's plan to bring buses back into public control could create and save up to 1,300 vital bus routes and allow 250 million more passenger journeys per year. In the west midlands region, that would amount to nearly 160 bus routes created or saved, and 40 million more passenger journeys. I am delighted that we have a west midlands Mayor who wants to match my constituents' ambition. I hope that soon enough we will have the opportunity to vote for a Government who back him to do that, too.

5.47 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for securing this important debate. My constituency is three miles from the city centre of Birmingham, or about a 10-minute train journey. Trains are vital to our communities, but with the threats of closing ticket offices and the difficulties that people face in booking online, some of my constituents tell me that they feel locked out of purchasing tickets. One constituent told me:

"We have fine officers on trains rather than ticket officers. What this results in is a situation where people who are unable to buy a ticket at their station—be that due to faults in ticket machines or offices being unstaffed—are being fined rather than being offered the chance to buy a ticket on the train itself. It is clear that a great utility for Birmingham is changing its practices and signalling a disregard for basic human decency."

That is not a unique story. I am sure that colleagues across the room have heard similar things from their constituents.

If my constituents want to travel to the other side of the constituency, they can expect to wait for two or three buses, sometimes with long delays at bus stops. One of my constituents had to wait an hour and a half for a bus on a match day, and she says that she often has to wait an hour on a normal day. It is not too much to ask that people in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale and across the UK should be able to travel to work, school or college on a bus and expect to be there on time. However, that is far from the reality. Since Labour was last in government, there has been a 47% decrease in weekly bus services across the west midlands, and a 24% decrease in my constituency.

Public transport is an important investment in local growth for individuals and businesses, but we are not funding it well enough. If it were not for public transport, my constituents could not access their jobs. Nor have we seen the investment we need in active travel. So many people cannot afford to get around my constituency by car.

The west midlands has some of the worst air quality in the country. Some of the most populated areas exceed the UK legal limit for toxic nitrogen dioxide, and 80% of that is caused by road transport. Air pollution contributes to more than 43,000 deaths in the UK every year, and more than 2,000 in the west midlands. It is, of course, worse for our children, who are breathing in toxic air. That is why I am glad that our new West Midlands Mayor has pledged to bring buses back under public ownership, and that Labour has pledged to deliver the biggest overhaul to our railways in a generation.

5.51 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to respond on behalf of the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing the debate. I thank her for her contribution and for her dedication to such an important topic.

I will touch on some colleagues' remarks. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) is right that effective public transport is critical to a thriving local economy and to the mobility of labour. The right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) is right that regular and effective train services are really important. Several hon. Members mentioned concerns about the accessibility of our train stations, which is something the Opposition strongly believe in. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who spoke about the importance of buses and raised concerns about the significant cuts to bus services in her constituency. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton).

The Conservative record on buses can be summed up as delays, cancellations and cuts. We know how important buses are for accessing work, school and hospitals and for seeing loved ones. Labour knows that high-quality, accessible and reliable transport links are the difference between opportunity and isolation for millions of people. Naturally, our debate today has covered more ground than just buses, but as they are the most used form of public transport in Great Britain—58% of ticketed public transport journeys in 2023 took place on a bus—I hope that colleagues will bear with me while I focus on them.

Any discussion of transport funding in England must acknowledge that since England's buses were deregulated in the 1980s, countless bus services in regions outside London have collapsed. The statistics are stark. There were 1.5 billion fewer annual bus journeys in 2019 than in 1985, there have been 300 million fewer bus miles per year since 2010, and thousands of viable bus services have been cut since 2010. All of that happened on this Government's watch.

It is now widely accepted that the current bus funding system is not working, either for passengers or for the many operators trying to deliver services that people can rely on. The Government's own bus back better strategy openly acknowledged the need for subsidy reform and committed the Government to working towards it, but far too little progress has been made on that objective. Bus back better was launched two Secretaries of State and, by my calculation, seven Transport Ministers ago, back when the hon. Member for Redditch was a Transport Minister. Passengers now rightly expect far more progress than we have seen from this Government.

I must make it clear that I know that significant numbers of operators, local transport authorities and—through enhanced partnerships—local councils are doing their best to buck national trends on bus decline and deliver for local residents. There has been commendable progress across all of those. I have been on numerous visits to local bus depots to see those developments at first hand, but the national picture is undeniably still one of huge inequity in the quality of bus service provision. The passenger watchdog Transport Focus's 2023 survey

"Your Bus Journey" makes that crystal clear. An unavoidable statistic in it is that the west midlands has the third worst overall journey satisfaction rating in the country.

The west midlands, as is often pointed out, has enormous economic potential. It already contributes more than £100 billion in GDP, with the UK's youngest and most diverse population. But for the west midlands truly to fire on all cylinders, it must be underpinned by a high-quality transport network that connects the population to that economy. Whether it is connecting people to educational opportunities, to jobs or just each other, that transport network is vital. I was in the west midlands only last month, visiting the National Express depot in Smethwick with Labour colleagues, where we launched Labour's plan for better buses alongside the fantastic then candidate for Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker. I am delighted that he now joins the ranks of Labour's 11 metro Mayors after last week's truly seismic local and mayoral elections.

I cannot help recapping that the Mayor of the West Midlands now joins the Mayors of West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, York and North Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Liverpool, the North East, the West of England, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, London and the East Midlands as one of 11 of the country's 12 metro Mayors with a decisive swing to Labour—11 metro Mayors who are working in lockstep to improve their local transport areas and united in their readiness to work with a Labour Government, should we be lucky enough to serve, to deliver for their regions.

Richard Parker's vision for transport in the west midlands is of safer, healthier, greener and more efficient mobility across the region that meets the needs of the growing population of the west midlands. Central to his plans for his flagship policy is bringing buses back to public control. Those revolutionary plans will see the west midlands following in the footsteps of other trailblazing metro areas led by tireless Labour Mayors such as Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester. Manchester's Bee Network has already started to revolutionise travel in the region, with ridership and reliability climbing thanks to his decision to pursue franchising.

Our Mayors are truly doing trailblazing work. However, Labour knows that access to high-quality bus services should not be restricted to just those living in metro areas. As we announced in Birmingham last month, Labour in government will grant every local transport authority, not just metro Mayors, the power to take back control of their local bus services through franchising. Under our plans to accelerate and streamline the franchising process, we will reform the six-year bureaucratic slog encountered in Greater Manchester, shrinking the franchising process to as little as two years.

Labour's plan to extend franchising powers beyond metro Mayors is important here because plenty of communities in the west midlands are not within the remit of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. As proud as I am of Richard Parker, who has turned the west midlands red, I am sure that the hon. Member for Redditch is already sick of me banging the drum for him this afternoon when her constituency does not come under his remit. That is why, within Labour's plan to fix our broken buses, our longer-term plan is to provide everywhere in England with the option to take

[Simon Lightwood]

more control over bus funding. Labour will reform and combine bus funding streams to ensure that they are better utilised.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. Could you restrict your speech to the west midlands and not make it national, please?

Simon Lightwood: Okay. The west midlands transport network is more than just buses, vital as they are. The west midlands metro now severely lags behind tram networks in other cities. Greater Manchester's trams, which predate the west midlands tram network by only seven years, have 64 miles of track across eight lines, compared with the 14 miles and single track in the west midlands. Richard Parker has pledged to finally open the long-promised metro extension from Wednesbury in Sandwell to Brierley Hill in Dudley, and invest in the much-needed extension to Solihull. Crucially, he will roll out contactless ticketing across all modes of transport throughout the west midlands. That seamless integration, which has worked so successfully for Transport for London and has been pursued by the Bee Network in Manchester, will revolutionise mobility across the region.

The west midlands has a proud and cherished heritage of problem solving and invention. With Richard Parker now at the helm to deliver for residents within the metro area, and a Labour Government delivering for so many other communities in the west midlands, we can harness that heritage to kick-start the regional economic growth that the west midlands so desperately needs. Labour is clear that high-quality transport befitting the UK's second city region is at the very heart of making that possible.

6 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this important and timely debate. She, like me and everyone in the room, will agree that funding improved transport across all modes and all regions is necessary and important. Today, we have come together to talk about funding for the west midlands; I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and highlighted the real experiences of the communities that they represent.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Andy Street as the outgoing Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority. I have responsibility within the Department for Transport for work with local government and Mayors, and I particularly enjoyed working with Andy. He is a staunch champion of the region and always has been. He has always been committed to improving transport for local people, and I have really enjoyed working with him on it.

I also look forward to working with Andy's successor, Richard Parker, to continue this important work. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) requested this of me: I congratulate Richard Parker on his result. I will be writing to all the successful Mayors, and indeed to those who lost their position, to congratulate them or commiserate. More importantly, for those who

are in post, I will pledge to continue to work across the political divide to make matters better for the communities that they represent.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch on involving her constituents in this entire debate. That is democracy in action. She said on 1 May that she wanted to hear what more the Government are doing to support local transport, and that she wanted to share her constituents' views with me. She has certainly done that, and it is now my duty to respond to her. On points to which I do not respond, I will write to her so that she can forward my response to her constituents.

On 4 October, the Prime Minister announced the £36 billion plan to improve our country's transport. Network North was the plan that saw every single penny previously allocated for HS2 in the north and the midlands remain invested in those regions. The resurfacing fund is £8.3 billion of investment in highway maintenance. Many hon. Members have brought up the importance of potholes, and of highway maintenance and repairs. The fund means that all highway authorities in England will receive their biggest funding boost in over a decade, including an additional £5.1 million for the West Midlands Combined Authority and £4.76 million for Worcestershire County Council, to help to deliver an unprecedented transformation in the condition of the region's highways. Again, that is all made possible through the reallocation of HS2 funding.

Authorities will have been able to make an immediate start on the resurfacing of their roads. That work makes a real difference to communities, as we have heard this afternoon. Under Network North, Worcestershire County Council is receiving over £2.3 million this year, with plans under way to apply surfacing treatments to more than 13 miles of road, including an £842,000 investment in Redditch to treat more than two and a half miles of carriageway. Local authorities in the midlands and the north that are not part of a mayoral combined authority will also receive their share of the brand-new £4.7 billion local transport fund. I am pleased to say that under the scheme, Worcestershire will receive £209 million of additional funding over the next seven years. The LTF, as we call it for short, aims to help to improve connectivity between and within towns and cities, while improving everyday journeys for local people.

The Government recognise that local leaders have the best view of their communities' needs. That is why we are empowering them with unprecedented local transport budgets to spend on their local priorities, which could include upgrading road junctions, improving pavements, reducing congestion and helping buses to run more reliably. It could also be spent on additional highway maintenance activities, if that is a local priority. Anyone can see the LTF allocations for their local transport authority on the Government's website.

I should also mention the now well-established city region sustainable transport settlements, which provided more than £1 billion to the West Midlands Combined Authority in the first round of funding, and are set to provide a further £2.6 billion in round 2. I heard mention of a deficit; I say again that there will be an additional £2.6 billion for the West Midlands Combined Authority. The most important thing that my Department can do is, of course, to increase the overall funding amount available to all local authorities, and that is exactly what our Network North plan delivers.

Let me turn to buses, which I recognise, despite the fact that I am the Rail Minister, are the nation's favourite mode of public transport. More people travel on buses than all other forms of public transport put together. We know that safe and reliable buses are hugely important to our constituents, which is why the Government are providing unprecedented support for bus services, totalling more than £4.5 billion since 2020. For the west midlands specifically, Network North has supported the extension of the popular £2 bus fare cap and allocated £230 million to increase the frequency of bus services. That money can also be spent on new bus stops and park-and-ride upgrades. For Worcestershire specifically, that means more than £2.8 million to deliver its bus service improvement plan. There is also £3.4 million redirected from HS2.

Let us not forget the trains—because, of course, I am the Rail Minister. Network North committed £1.75 billion to deliver the midlands rail hub in full—something that Andy Street campaigned very hard to do. Investment in the midlands rail hub will increase the frequency and capacity of rail services across the midlands, benefiting services for users of more than 50 stations.

Wendy Morton: On the midlands rail hub and trains, I welcome the work that the Minister did to support the previous Mayor, Andy Street, in delivering a step forward for Aldridge train station. Will the Minister continue to work with us and the new Mayor to make sure that we not only deliver that train station but look at the open-access route from Wales to Euston with a stop at Aldridge?

Huw Merriman: I am happy to give a commitment not only to continue to champion the midlands rail hub but to include Aldridge station. My right hon. Friend has been an absolute champion on the issue and has made a number of interventions on me in the Chamber in support of it, and I very much hope that the new Mayor will continue that work. My right hon. Friend and Andy Street got it to this stage, and I am sure the new Mayor will take it forward. I will certainly look to talk to him about that and to pass on my right hon. Friend's interest.

In February, the Secretary of State for Transport announced £123 million to fund and design the first phase of the midlands rail hub, and the resulting improved services are likely to run from the early 2030s. We have the plan in place; we now need to ensure that the new Mayor is on board with it. That work will also include benefits for the cross-city line from Redditch to Birmingham. Network North investment will see the cross-city line return to six trains per hour in total, including three to Redditch. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch has pushed and asked for that, and I can give her that commitment.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome that, of course. I am delighted to hear that commitment to three trains from Redditch to Birmingham, which is something on which I worked closely with the outgoing Mayor and on which I hope to work with the new Mayor. When will that service be started for the benefit of my constituents?

Huw Merriman: I will write to my hon. Friend with the specifics of the timeline. I do not have the information with me, but I will make sure that we write to her with more guidance on that. My officials are working closely

with the West Midlands Rail Executive, the joint client for the west midlands train industry partners on the entire project, to find and deliver the earliest solution.

I applaud the work that Redditch and Worcestershire councils have done to develop plans for improving Redditch station, in the heart of the Redditch railway quarter. This will help the area to compete effectively with nearby towns for economic activity and growth, while improving connectivity and opportunities for sustainable travel. I am very keen on this project, and I will be looking into it further. I thank my hon. Friend for raising it.

I am also pleased that the A38 Bromsgrove route enhancement programme, funded by my Department, is now being rolled out. I am sure that, once complete, it will be well used by Redditch residents to access Bromsgrove and Worcester.

I would like to focus on my Department's desire to enhance rural mobility, which is important to me as an MP for a rural constituency and which was raised by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who rightly highlighted the importance of rural mobility. We have published our "Future of Transport" rural innovation guidance to help support local authorities, and we have made up to £3 million of funding available to support rural transport innovation and tackle transport challenges in rural areas. Further, we are supporting the seven sub-national transport bodies to establish a centre of excellence on rural mobility.

I will address some points that have been made by right hon. and hon. Members. As I said, I will come back to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch with specifics, but she asked about noise cameras. The Department has published research and analysis in the March 2024 plan for drivers on the efficiency of noise cameras. We are evaluating findings before we consider the next steps, but it is a matter we are keen to take forward. We know that it is a real blight for constituents, so we are keen to do more on that front.

The hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston and for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) talked about devolution and the desire for franchising. I have to say, that has been very much driven by this Government. Since 2010, we have looked to devolve more powers to the regions, because we take the view that the regions know best what their local solutions need to be and are represented in many instances by the Mayors that I work with.

The Government's legislation on buses extended franchising to mayoral regions. Manchester has taken this on and, as was said, some time was taken for that to actually find its place. The West Yorkshire Mayor recently announced that West Yorkshire would be taking franchising forward. The point I make is that if the West Midlands Mayor decides that he wishes to take forward franchising for buses, that is a power we have devolved down, and that will be a matter for them. We will support that bid, as we have others. I want to be absolutely clear that that would not have happened had we not devolved those powers and had the Mayors not taken them on.

To the hon. Member for North Shropshire, the Command Paper on Network North made it clear that the Oswestry to Gobowen line would be reopened, with a new stop at Park Hall. Local to the area, we are looking to build a new station in Meir on the existing

[Huw Merriman]

Crewe to Derby line and reopen the disused Barrow Hill and Stoke to Leek line. That commitment was there, and we will be bringing more detail on that forward, so I can give her that assurance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) asked about the Access for All programme. I can say that 230 stations have been given step-free access, which is really important to allow all members of the community, particularly those most vulnerable, to use their railway stations. That point was also raised by the hon. Member for North Shropshire. Looking at the next tranche, we have 300 really good bids and will be looking shortly to announce the latest that we will take forward. There was a £350 million commitment from Network North to further roll out Access for All and improve accessibility at stations. That is really important. We also want to get delivered those we have already promised. I am determined and committed on that particular front.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire never fails to push for more rail services. He is right on the Chase line electrification about the growth in passengers and more frequent services in rail. He has pressed me for more investment so that the weekday services Penkridge receives can be transferred to weekends and that Stone station gets its direct service to Manchester. I am taking forward the matter with those he has asked me to, and I will certainly convey his concerns on pothole funding to the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman). I will ensure that I write back to any other hon. Member who has raised points today with more detail.

To conclude, I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch has given us all the opportunity to discuss, debate and celebrate the significant investment that has been made available for transport in the west

midlands, particularly in her constituency of Redditch. She always pushes for more for her constituents, and we always listen to her and will continue to do so. The Government's Network North plan will continue investing in the journeys that matter to local people, bringing jobs, opportunities and growth to this region and beyond. I am pleased we have been able to debate the matter this afternoon.

6.14 pm

Rachel Maclean: This has been an excellent debate, very well supported by colleagues from all over the wider west midlands region. I want to extend my thanks to all my colleagues across the House, including those from Northern Ireland, who have taken part, highlighting the vital importance of transport connectivity, whether it is bus, rail—of course, that is the Minister's own portfolio—active travel such as walking and cycling or other means of transport, or the use of the car, which is the essential route to freedom for our constituents. We must continue to enable constituents to use their cars to travel around their areas. I am proud to represent my constituency and the concerns of people across Redditch and the villages. Transport affects everybody every day, whether they are going to work, going out with their friends, or going to study and improve their opportunities.

I look forward to the Minister's response on the numerous points I have put to him. I am sure he will come back with a comprehensive response, which I will be anticipating eagerly and sharing with my constituents. Thank you, Mr Henderson, and I thank the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government funding for transport in the West Midlands.

6.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 May 2024

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Scope of Fusion Energy National Policy Statements: Consultation

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the launch of the consultation on the scope of the fusion energy national policy statement on 8 May 2024.

Fusion energy has the potential to deliver low-carbon, safe, secure energy, and developers, investors, and the wider industry need to be able to plan with confidence to commercialise fusion technology. The UK's STEP (Spherical tokamak for energy production) programme seeks to develop and build in the UK by 2040 a prototype fusion power plant. Private fusion companies in the UK and overseas are also quickly developing demonstrator fusion facilities. To deliver these facilities, sites for fusion energy facilities will need to be identified and construction started this decade.

If the UK is to maintain its global leadership in fusion and capture the environmental, economic and social benefits of fusion, the Government need to create a stable regulatory and planning environment that supports and encourages its development.

In 2022, the Government published a response to the fusion regulation Green Paper confirming that fusion will be regulated under a different framework than nuclear fission due to its lower hazard. With this different policy approach, the Government also identified a fusion-specific national policy statement as essential to providing clarity to developers and streamlining the planning process for fusion, aligning fusion with other energy-generating technologies. This is necessary not only to provide certainty for developers but also to align fusion with other complex energy-generating technologies which local authorities will lack the expertise to assess in the near future.

The consultation we have published begins the process taking us towards designating an NPS for fusion energy (EN-8). It will include our seeking views on the broad policy proposals for this NPS, and high-level planning criteria.

These broad policy proposals are:

Open-sited—a developer-led approach underpinned by site criteria rather than identifying sites. This approach would allow siting in more communities across the UK, subject to local support.

Technology inclusive—the UK's fusion strategy committed to supporting all fusion technologies, so the NPS will cover all fusion technologies.

Output agnostic—amend the Planning Act 2008, so that all fusion energy facilities in England will be nationally significant infrastructure projects, independent of capacity of thermal or electrical output. This approach was proposed in the new nuclear NPS consultation, so any amendments to legislation will be co-ordinated.

This consultation relates to the exercise of powers in England and Wales. The Planning Act 2008 and the system of nationally significant infrastructure consenting do not apply to Scotland or Northern Ireland. The Wales Act 2017 gives Welsh Ministers responsibility for consenting to the construction of power stations of a capacity up to and including 350 MW.

Alongside the publication of this consultation, we will publish a consultation on the scope of an appraisal of sustainability and a habitats regulation assessment. These will inform consideration of the sustainability impacts of fusion development.

I am depositing a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS445]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Trade and Co-operation Agreement Partnership Council: Third Meeting

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My noble friend the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton) has today made the following statement:

The next meeting of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement Partnership Council will take place in Brussels on 16 May 2024, with delegations attending in person and by video conference.

The meeting will be co-chaired by myself and executive vice-president of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič.

The agenda will include:

1. Opening remarks by the co-chairs and adoption of the agenda
2. Energy and climate
 - 2.1. Climate policies in the EU and the UK
 - 2.2. Co-operation frameworks for transmission system operators (electricity, gas) and energy regulators
 - 2.3. EU-UK co-operation in energy matters in the Specialised Committee on Energy, and through the MoU between participants of the North Sea Energy Co-operation (NSEC) and the UK
 - 2.4. Security of supply
3. Trade and level playing field
 - 3.1. State of play
 - 3.2. Agreement on co-operation and exchange of information in competition matters
 - 3.3. Consumer protection—product safety
4. Health security
5. Fisheries
6. Security
 - 6.1. State of play
 - 6.2. Information exchange on vehicle registration data
7. Other areas of co-operation
 - 7.1. Road transport and safety
 - 7.2. Association to Horizon Europe—mobility of researchers
8. AOB
9. Concluding remarks by the co-chairs

[HCWS449]

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee: Thirteenth Meeting

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My noble Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton) has today made the following statement:

The next meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee will take place in Brussels on 16 May 2024, with delegations attending in person and by video conference.

The meeting will be co-chaired by myself and Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič. The agenda will include:

Welcome, opening remarks from the co-chairs and adoption of the agenda

Formal adoption of the agenda

Stocktake of Specialised Committee activity 29 September 2023-16 May 2024

Update on the Withdrawal Agreement in accordance with Article 164 of the Withdrawal Agreement

Citizens' rights

The Windsor Framework

Acts to be adopted by the Joint Committee

AOB

Concluding remarks

[HCWS450]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Antimicrobial Resistance National Action Plan 2024 to 2029

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): This is a joint statement with the Minister for Biosecurity, Animal Health and Welfare.

Today we are publishing the 2024 to 2029 UK antimicrobial resistance national action plan. This reaffirms the Government's commitment to preserving the effectiveness of critical medicines for generations to come.

The ability of bacteria—and other pathogens—to develop resistance to the medicines, particularly antibiotics, used to treat them is a significant and growing threat. Antimicrobials underpin modern medicine, enabling critical healthcare, including hip replacements, cancer treatments, and caesarean sections, to be undertaken safely.

The UK is leading the way in the global fight against AMR, both at home and abroad. This is in line with our 20-year vision for AMR to be contained, controlled and mitigated by 2040. This national action plan has been developed through cross-UK working between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In recognition of the shared challenge of AMR—infectious diseases do not respect borders—the four nations of the UK will work together to deliver this plan.

This five-year national action plan for AMR is the second in a series to support achievement of the 20-year vision. It sets out our comprehensive “One Health” approach to confronting AMR, across humans, animals,

food and the environment. It sets out an ambitious course of action, strengthening the existing UK commitment to preventing infections, optimising the use of antimicrobials, and investing in research and innovation to address AMR. The plan includes commitments that will help to protect people and animals from drug-resistant infections.

I am proud of the progress the UK has made in tackling AMR over the past five years, with significant achievements in reducing the use of antibiotics in animals, revolutionising the way we pay for antibiotics on the NHS in England, and investing in world-leading research. Without the efforts of the past 10 years, there would have been much higher rates of infection and antimicrobial usage. This Government are committed to continuing to act to mitigate the threat posed by AMR, which requires action across the whole of society.

The next five years mark a critical period in which to confront the threat of AMR. In September 2024, the United Nations General Assembly high-level meeting on AMR will be the most significant global moment on AMR since the 2016 high-level meeting, which secured a landmark political declaration on AMR. The UK will continue international advocacy for AMR, which is essential to solve this global threat. Looking forward to 2028, the centenary of the discovery of penicillin, the Government have committed £5 million in seed funding to help launch the Fleming Centre, a collaboration led by Imperial College London and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. The centre will support the next generation of world-changing health discoveries.

The publication of this national action plan is a significant milestone in confronting the threat of AMR, one of the most pressing challenges humanity faces this century. The national action plan has been published on gov.uk.

[HCWS448]

HOME DEPARTMENT

UEFA 2024: Licensing Hours Extension

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government have consulted on, and will be proceeding with, the proposal to make a contingent licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003. This order will relax licensing hours in England and Wales for the 2024 UEFA European championship, subject to any of the competing home nation teams (England and Scotland) reaching the semi-final or final of the tournament.

The order will apply to premises already licensed until 11 pm for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises in England and Wales. The order will extend the licensing hours for such premises from 11 pm to 1 am the following day on the days of the semi-final (9 and/or 10 July) and final (14 July) of the tournament should the criteria of the contingent order be met.

The Government consider the semi-final and final of the tournament to be an occasion of exceptional national significance and an extension to licensing hours will enable communities to come together at their local licensed premises to support any of the home nation teams if they reach the later stages of the tournament and celebrate any subsequent success. This will also provide support to the hospitality sector by enabling businesses to extend their trading hours if they so wish.

The results of the consultation will be published on gov.uk. The Government are grateful to everyone who responded to the consultation. The order will be laid in Parliament in due course and an economic note will be published alongside it on legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS443]

JUSTICE

Chief Coroner's 10th Annual Report to the Lord Chancellor

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner's tenth annual report to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services, under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

The report provides a comprehensive overview of all the work taken forward across the coroner service in England and Wales in the calendar year 2023, under the leadership of the Chief Coroner. It provides valuable insights into the service's operations and future direction.

In particular, the Chief Coroner's report sets out:

An overview of the work that he, as well as coroners, their officers and their staff have undertaken in 2023;

Statistics for 2023, with particular focus on cases over 12 months old, service deaths and PFD—prevention of future deaths—reports;

The training courses and updated guidance that coroners and their officers have received, and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders; and

Recommendations on changes to improve coroner services further.

The report also includes the Chief Coroner's 10 years post-reform review of the coroner service, which was published in January 2024.

I am very grateful to His Honour Judge Thomas Teague KC for his work during the course of 2023 in guiding and supporting coroners. As he prepares to retire in May, I also extend my heartfelt appreciation for his dedication and leadership since his appointment in December 2020, particularly in navigating the complexities of the pandemic and in ensuring the post-pandemic recovery of the coroner system. His contribution has been invaluable, and I thank him for his unwavering commitment to the service.

I am grateful, too, to all coroners and their officers and other staff, for supporting the Chief Coroner and HM Government in improving services for the bereaved, and for their unwavering commitment and dedication to the crucial work which they undertake.

The report will be laid in Parliament and will be available online at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-coroners-annual-report-2023>

[HCWS441]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Cambridge Delivery Group Update

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today, I set out a further step in this Government's commitment to realise the full potential of Cambridge.

"The Case for Cambridge", which we published at spring Budget 2024, explains why Cambridge's success can neither be taken for granted nor easily replicated elsewhere. The city is one of the UK's most prized assets. There is now an opportunity to grow the city and protect its position as a leading centre of science and innovation.

The Cambridge delivery group, chaired by Peter Freeman, was established as a Government team to advise on and drive forward the Government's vision for Cambridge. On 26 March 2024, I confirmed that we are establishing a dedicated growth company as the next step towards a development corporation. Part of the Cambridge delivery group's strategy is to focus on enabling and accelerating key developments that align with the overall strategy for growing the urban area of Cambridge, while ensuring that we protect overall green space and that the wider region benefits from improved transport, better access to services and enhanced amenities and employment prospects.

The Cambridge biomedical campus is one such strategic site, as Europe's leading centre for medical research and health science. At spring Budget, we announced a £7.2 million investment for locally led transport schemes to provide the Cambridge biomedical campus with connectivity and £3 million to support Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to develop longer-term capacity and delivery plans for the site.

In addition, the Government are satisfied that the national importance of the greater Cambridge life sciences sector is sufficient to prompt, in principle, the early expansion and coherent delivery of this foremost UK life sciences cluster. In particular, the Government are satisfied that the imperative to support this key sector provides sufficient justification for immediate collaboration between key stakeholders on development proposals coming forward ahead of the emerging local plan, to address the coherent enhancement, intensification and expansion of the Cambridge biomedical campus adjacent to Addenbrooke's Hospital.

One of the first priorities of the new growth company will be to support immediate collaboration between key stakeholders at the Cambridge biomedical campus. The growth company will also help to address any barriers to the early expansion and coherent enhancement of the campus, including through the accelerated delivery of any associated housing development and the provision of appropriate levels of affordable housing to meet the housing needs of those working at the campus.

[HCWS447]

Local Government Stewardship Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): All hon. Members will recognise the critical role local councils play in providing essential statutory services to their residents and being accountable to the communities they serve. Where councils do not meet the high standards that we set for local government, it is right that the Government intervene in order to protect the interests of residents. Today, I am informing the House of statutory guidance on best value standards and intervention; action the Government have taken in relation to part-time work for full-time pay, including the reissuing of a best value notice to South Cambridgeshire District Council;

inspections of Warrington Borough Council and Spelthorne Borough Council; and a proposal to continue the intervention at Liverpool City Council and appoint a statutory board.

Best Value Guidance

Following consultation last summer, which ran for six weeks between 4 July and 15 August 2023 and received 76 responses, the Secretary of State today, under section 26 of the Local Government Act 1999, is issuing statutory guidance on best value standards and interventions. Accompanying the guidance is a summary of the consultation responses received and the Government's response to the consultation that details the changes made following the consultation. The draft guidance was well received by the local government sector.

The guidance provides greater clarity to local government in England on what constitutes best value and the standards expected, and a clear escalation pathway involving the various models of statutory and non-statutory intervention in the event of failure to uphold these standards. Local authorities, including combined authorities and combined county authorities, are required to have regard to this guidance when carrying out their functions.

The guidance includes reference to council staff undertaking part-time work for full-time pay without compelling justification as an indicator of potential best value failure. This is in accordance with non-statutory guidance on four-day working week arrangements, which was published in October 2023 and makes clear the Government's view that these practices are unlikely to adhere to the best value duty. The best value guidance demonstrates that we will take action where an authority is not using its resources effectively and does not have a credible workforce strategy. As part of this, I have today reissued a best value notice to South Cambridgeshire District Council, given the trial it is continuing to undertake of a four-day working week.

Best Value Inspections

Warrington Borough Council is one of a small number of councils carrying the biggest risk in terms of debt leverage. The council is the most indebted unitary authority in England, with a capital finance requirement of £1.85 billion—5.5 times its total service expenditure (as of March 2023).

My Department commissioned the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy to undertake a detailed review of Warrington's capital finances. The review, which we are publishing today, found that its portfolio of debt-funded investments is very large and uniquely complex—to a degree that is concerning and puts the council at risk. The report also raises some concerns with decision making, governance and oversight. Having regard to that report, together with the council's response, and other information, including meetings with the council, external auditor reports and the decision in the July 2023 cabinet meeting to conclude two new loan agreements for up to £145 million and subsequent reversal of this decision, our assessment is that there are clear financial risks and that, if they materialise, they are very likely to have significant impact on local residents and some impact on the national public purse.

The Secretary of State has exercised his powers in section 10 of the 1999 Act to appoint Paul Najsarek as lead inspector to assess the council's compliance with its best value duty, and specifically in relation to council

functions of governance and section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and the strength of associated audit with particular attention to the decision making and scrutiny and risk arrangements; the capacity and capability across the organisation but particularly the finance function, and whether this is sufficient to meet the best value duty; the adequacy of the council's plans and capacity to address the recommendations made by the CIPFA capital review and to control its debt levels and reduce them over time; what an appropriate level of capital risk would be for the authority, with regard to the statutory guidance on best value standards and intervention; the impact the investment portfolio and its management has had on service delivery; and the prudence of financial decision making. The lead inspector has been asked to report findings by 30 August 2024, or such later date as may be agreed, and will be able to request the appointment of assistant inspectors.

Spelthorne Borough Council is another one of the small number of councils carrying the biggest risk in terms of debt leverage. Their debt stands at nearly £1.1 billion (as of March 2023), which is 52.4 times its total service expenditure and is the second highest level of debt for a district authority in England, after Woking.

Again, my Department commissioned CIPFA to undertake a detailed review of Spelthorne's capital finances. The review, which we are publishing today, highlighted concerns around governance and decision making, alongside a significant and expanding risk profile. Having regard to that report, together with the council's response, and other information, including meetings with the council, the public interest report issued in 2022 and the Local Government Association's corporate peer challenge from 2022 and follow-up visit in 2023, our assessment is that if the risks materialise and Government need to step in, there may be a considerable burden on the Exchequer.

The Secretary of State has therefore again exercised his powers in section 10 of the 1999 Act to appoint Lesley Seary as lead inspector to assess the council's compliance with its best value duty, and specifically in relation to council functions of governance, section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and the strength of associated audit, scrutiny and risk arrangements, with particular attention to the governance arrangements and decision making conducted across the council; the capacity and capability across the organisation, but particularly the finance function, and whether this is sufficient to meet the best value duty; the adequacy of the council's plans and capacity to address the recommendations made by the CIPFA capital review and to control its debt levels and reduce them over time; what an appropriate level of capital risk would be for the council, with regard to the statutory guidance on best value standards and intervention; the council's capacity to implement the new housing strategy; the impact the investment portfolio and its management has had on service delivery; and the prudence of financial decision making. Given that our concerns relate to broad decision making and whether the standards expected for effective and convenient local government are being upheld, the inspection will consider decision making in relation to those functions, encompassing leadership, governance, organisational culture, use of resources and impact on service delivery. The lead inspector has been asked to report findings by 30 August 2024, or such later date as may be agreed, and will be able to request the appointment of assistant inspectors.

Once the inspections are complete, we will carefully consider the inspection reports. If they show either council is in breach of its best value duty, we will then consider whether or not to exercise powers under section 15 of the 1999 Act.

Liverpool City Council

Liverpool City Council has been under statutory intervention since June 2021, following the best value inspection, with four commissioners appointed to exercise functions relating to regeneration, highways and property. In November 2022, the Secretary of State issued further directions to expand the intervention to cover finance, governance and recruitment and appointed an additional commissioner. On 7 March 2024, I confirmed to the House that the Secretary of State had updated the directions as the intervention approached its scheduled end date of 9 June 2024, and reduced the scope of the intervention by returning certain functions to the council. I also informed the House that the commissioners considered at that time that some form of statutory intervention would be needed beyond the scheduled end date, that the next report from commissioners was expected later that month, and that I would update the House in due course.

The commissioners wrote to the Secretary of State on 15 March with their fifth report. The report, published today, documents the strength of the council's leadership and their commitment to drive the improvement needed. There has been significant improvement in many of the council's activities, particularly in the last year. However, the council started from a very low base and there was slow progress in the first half of the intervention. Under the new leadership, we have seen the pacing of improvements accelerate significantly, but there are a number of areas which need further improvement and there has not been sufficient time to demonstrate to commissioners that improvements are embedded throughout the council. The commissioners have recommended that the intervention continues until the end of March 2025.

Having reviewed the report and all other relevant information, today I am announcing that the Secretary of State is satisfied that despite the significant improvement, especially over the last year, Liverpool City Council is not yet meeting the best value duty.

The Secretary of State is minded to exercise his powers under section 15 of the 1999 Act to continue the statutory intervention until 31 March 2025 to enable focus on the improvements across the authority and provide assurances on continuous improvement needed to meet the best value duty.

Consistent with the recommendation made by commissioners in their latest report, the Secretary of State is minded to appoint a statutory assurance and improvement board instead of the current commissioner model, reflecting the progress made by the council, and because there is strong and committed leadership. The board would provide oversight, advice and challenge to the council, and would not be able to exercise any functions of the council.

To support this, the Secretary of State has proposed new directions he is minded to issue to the council. He is minded to direct the council to undertake a range of actions to the satisfaction of the assurance and improvement board, including:

To allow the board to provide advice and challenge to the council on all areas of work related to any relevant improvement indicators; and

Directions that require the council to undertake specific actions in relation to property, to continue finance improvements, to build capacity and capability for regeneration and to further embed culture and performance management throughout the council.

These proposals are subject to the council meeting specific conditions to the satisfaction of commissioners, in regards to property, in May.

The Secretary of State is considering the composition of the proposed board. He agrees with the commissioners about the importance of continuity and providing expertise that best supports the council with the improvement needed. The Secretary of State considers that, if he were to decide to appoint a statutory board, he is minded to appoint Mike Cunningham CBE QPM as chair of the board. He is considering the appointments to other board positions.

All interested parties are now invited to make representations to the Secretary of State about the report and the changes to the intervention that he is minded to make with respect to Liverpool City Council, by close on Monday 13 May 2024. The Secretary of State and I will consider carefully all the representations before making a final decision on whether to make these proposed changes to the Liverpool intervention and issue new directions to the council, and on any appointments.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge the work of the dedicated staff who deliver the important services of local authorities, on which local residents depend, and also the work of local councillors, and in particular those who have just been elected. I also want to thank the commissioners in Liverpool and other councils in statutory intervention for all they do. I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the statutory guidance, reports and associated materials.

[HCWS446]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Intellectual Property Office: Ministerial Priorities 2024-25

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (Andrew Griffith): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for AI and Intellectual Property, Viscount Camrose:

Creativity and innovation fuel investment and growth in the UK economy. The Government aim to strengthen the UK's place as a global leader in science and technology and are backing the UK's most exciting technologies and sectors of the future. We are boosting investment in innovation, working together with industry, and providing the right conditions to grow our economy, create high-quality jobs, and benefit society.

The role of intellectual property (IP) remains crucial to achieving our ambition and increasing investment in science and technology. It encourages and incentivises the UK to innovate and gives individuals, businesses, and organisations the confidence to create new ideas, products, and technologies, knowing their IP can be protected. Our society, economy, and environment will benefit from their work and endeavours, and we are backing them to succeed and grow.

We are experiencing a period of rapid technological and scientific change. The pace is accelerating and driving a remarkable new era for the world. That is why we must continue to build on the UK's strengths in AI, quantum, fintech, life sciences, and clean energy technology because advances in these areas will make a real difference to our economy and public services.

For the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), this backdrop represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Its response and the IP system need to keep pace with the operating environment and the expectations of those protecting their IP and using its services.

We are moving to a world where the operations of firms, and their supply chains are heavily internationalised, and our approach must reflect this. Through effective collaboration, the UK is shaping the IP system internationally and ensuring the UK's rights granting services remain competitive.

I am pleased to support the IPO's strategy for the next three years, which sets out its clear mission to help grow the economy by providing an IP system that encourages investment in creativity and innovation. The IPO corporate plan 2024-25 document outlines a clear plan for this financial year. As an executive agency of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the IPO has set priorities which are agreed by Ministers.

I am pleased that today I can inform the House that my priorities for the IPO in 2024-25 are to:

launch the One IPO customer account and new online IP search tool for all patent customers;

achieve an average overall customer satisfaction of 85% or more; and

achieve efficiencies worth at least 3.5% of its core operating costs.

The IPO has strong plans in place, which I am confident will contribute towards economic growth and enable the UK to maximise the opportunities in science, technology, and innovation.

[HCWS444]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Improving the Collection and Transfer of Child Maintenance Payments: Public Consultation

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Today, the Government will publish a child maintenance consultation: improving the collection and transfer of maintenance payments.

Families play a fundamental role in the success of our society, so it is crucial that all types of families have their financial needs met. For some families that are separated, paying and receiving child maintenance payments can be the difference between a child living in poverty and having the opportunity of a hopeful future.

It is estimated receiving parents in separated families received £2.8 billion annually in child maintenance payments through both private and Child Maintenance Service arrangements between 2021 and 2023. These payments keep around 160,000 children out of poverty each year.

The Government want to go even further to ensure the Child Maintenance Service continues to support all parents for years to come. While it works well for many

parents, there is evidence that suggests the direct pay service may not be working as intended, and from experience of delivering the service over the last decade we have identified three fundamental issues with direct pay that, should they be addressed, would improve the service and ensure more money is paid to parents.

First, direct pay was introduced to encourage collaboration and to act as a stepping stone towards a family-based arrangement. The Child Maintenance Service recognises this is not possible for all parents, but when it is appropriate and safe, a family-based arrangement has the potential to be better for children, families and the taxpayer. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the direct pay service is achieving this objective.

There is also an issue of hidden non-compliant cases on direct pay, despite the efforts of the Child Maintenance Service to encourage parents to report a breakdown in their arrangement as soon as possible. Delaying reporting missed payments can cause further delays in cases being moved to collect and pay which also results in arrears building up.

Lastly, direct pay is falling short in its support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. This was particularly made apparent by discussion around the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act, which received Royal Assent in June 2023. The Act, which began work towards Dr Samantha Callan's independent review recommendation to prevent the use of direct pay as a form of coercion and control by perpetrators, brought forward legislation to allow cases to move from direct pay to collect and pay when there is evidence of domestic abuse.

In response to these issues, and as part of achieving the objectives of the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act, we want to explore wide-ranging reforms to child maintenance service types, including removing the direct pay service and managing all Child Maintenance Service cases in one streamlined service. This will allow the Child Maintenance Service to tackle non-compliance faster and, when necessary, take enforcement action much more quickly.

In addition, it will allow the Child Maintenance Service to identify cases that may be suitable for a family-based arrangement and provide improved support to help ease the process of setting up private family-based arrangements.

Furthermore, the Child Maintenance Service will provide more appropriate support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. This will build on the work towards full implementation of Dr Callan's main independent review recommendation and will go further than the measures set out in the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act by providing the same level of protection for all parents without requiring them to provide evidence of abuse.

This consultation is a positive step towards creating a better Child Maintenance Service that supports, further protects, and improves the lives of separated families and children across the United Kingdom.

I will place a copy of the consultation document in the House Library.

[HCWS442]

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