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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 9 May 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: A birthday wish to Phil, our Head Doorkeeper, who is 54 today.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Natural Flood Management Programme

1. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What the locations are of successful applicants to the natural flood management programme. [902709]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): Forty projects have been selected to proceed to the development stage of the £25 million natural flood management programme. They include a broad range of locations, from Alnmouth to St Austell.

Justin Madders: I am working with residents in the Chase Way and Kendal Drive area of Great Sutton, alongside Environment Agency representatives and members of the local authority, to try to find a solution to the flooding problems that we have there. There are lots of different pots of money available at different times, and sometimes it is difficult to understand what the realistic chances are of our succeeding in getting the funding that we need to bridge the gap that we have at the moment to get the works done. Will it be possible for me to meet with either the Secretary of State or some of his team to talk about what realistic funding options we have for the area?

Steve Barclay: I thank the hon. Member for his engagement, and I will arrange a meeting with the relevant member of the team. The information is on gov.uk. Two projects near his constituency—the Cheshire Wildlife Trust and the Mersey Rivers Trust—are involved in the programme. I welcome his engagement. It is a good scheme, and I will ensure that he gets that meeting.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I have been working with the Environment Agency to address a small flood problem on the River Gade in my constituency. The Environment Agency has been very helpful, and has met with me. In another part of my constituency, the River Ver has been flooded with sewage yet again. That is unacceptable, and the Environment Agency

needs to take it seriously and take action against the water companies, rather than just saying, “We’ll work with you.” Action is what my constituents want.

Steve Barclay: I agree. That is why we are increasing fourfold the number of inspections, so that water companies are not marking their own homework. It is why we have the plan for water, introduced by the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and significant additional investment. It is why we are taking tougher enforcement action, with the biggest ever criminal prosecution of water firms by the Environment Agency. It is also why we are taking action on things such as bonuses for companies that commit serious wrongdoing.

Farmers

2. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to support farmers. [902710]

5. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to support rural farmers. [902714]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): Food security is more important than ever, which is why we need to back British farmers to keep putting food on our tables, while protecting the environment. We are supporting farming with £2.4 billion of annual spending, an average boost of 10% for the sustainable farming incentive payment scheme, and new rules to ensure that farmers get a fair price for their products.

Sir Edward Leigh: Obviously farmers in low-lying areas of Lincolnshire are suffering from flooding, so any update on the support that they can be given would be very helpful. I have a specific question for the Secretary of State: will the Government update us on when they will announce the long-term funding solution that they promised for internal drainage boards, to address the pressure on local authorities through special levies?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right to focus on the importance of drainage boards, particularly in Lincolnshire. He knows that I have a particular constituency interest in the adjacent area. We have announced £65 million of funding, and the Minister for water, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), will make further announcements on that shortly. We are looking more widely at the huge pressure on farming from the wet weather, particularly in areas such as Lincolnshire. There has been a 60% increase in rainfall—these have been our second wettest six months—and we are looking at a series of easements, particularly with regard to SFI, to ensure that farmers get their payments.

Jamie Stone: On behalf of my party, I too wish Phil, the Head Doorkeeper, a very happy birthday.

As the Government know, we grow the very finest seed potatoes in the far north of Scotland. They are particularly good because, relatively speaking, they are virus free. That is probably because of the northerly latitudes where they are grown. I happen to know that farmers in Europe are crying out to get hold of these

seed potatoes. I ask the Government to do everything in their power to ensure that the potatoes go where they are needed and wanted.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member makes a valid point in terms of both the quality and the desirability of the products to which he refers. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries is engaging actively with the EU on that specific point, and I am sure that he will update the hon. Member on it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): One has only to look over the hedges of eastern England to agree with those who are predicting the worst harvest in living memory. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact that will have on the wider rural economy—in particular, the availability and price of straw, which is vital for the livestock sector, and important commodities such as potatoes, which are likely to be under great pressure in terms of supply and price this autumn?

Steve Barclay: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely on the money in terms of the concern regarding straw prices and lower harvests this autumn. We are engaging extensively with the sector. We have the Farm to Fork summit next week, chaired by the Prime Minister. That is an indication of how seriously we are taking this, and how much we are engaging with farmers and farm leaders.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is north-east week in the parliamentary canteens, and I hope all Members are taking the opportunity to enjoy great north-eastern produce. However, it is always north-east week in Grainger Market in Newcastle, which tries to champion local farmers and produce. What is the Secretary of State doing to support north-east farmers in the challenges they face to produce sustainable and affordable food for my constituents facing a cost of living crisis?

Steve Barclay: As the MP for North East Cambridgeshire, I feel I should extend north-east a little wider, given that we are a big food-producing area. To the hon. Lady's specific point, the Minister for Farming is engaging with that issue and is travelling up to the north-east this evening as part of that engagement. Our colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), is conducting a review of public sector food procurement, so that within our public sector we can better procure domestic produce. We also have a review of labelling so that we can more clearly label that fantastic produce from the north-east, to ensure that purchasers can buy it more easily.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What are the Government doing to support farmers? Quite a few people are asking that. When one looks at the evidence of what is going on, the survey this week from the National Farmers Union into farmer confidence revealed that a staggering 65% of farmers are facing declining profits, or their business will not survive at all. Their prospects are worse than most Tory MPs, it suddenly seems. Why is it that farmers do so badly under the Conservatives?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman seems to have written that question before listening to the various examples that I have just given, but let me give him one. The most successful scheme the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has ever run is the current sustainable farming incentive scheme, with over 20,000 applications—more than any other scheme the Department has run. We have also been flexible in looking at how those schemes are delivered, given the challenges of the wet weather, and I will have more to say on that very shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I listened carefully to that answer. While Brexit has been deeply damaging to farmers all across the United Kingdom, the actions taken by the Scottish Government mean that farmers in Scotland have far greater protection than those elsewhere on these islands. The SNP Government have guaranteed Scottish farmers the level of funding that was available pre-Brexit, unlike the Tories here in England or indeed the Labour party in Wales. That is the SNP standing up for farmers in words and deeds, unlike the Westminster parties. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to apologise to farmers in England for his Government's betrayal of them?

Steve Barclay: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the £2.4 billion commitment in our manifesto, which has been met in full.

Tree Planting

3. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help increase tree planting. [902712]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): This Government have put in place the most comprehensive regime ever to increase tree planting. Crucially, it is underpinned by legislation in the Environment Act 2021 and legally binding targets to increase our tree cover to 16.5%, and supported and backed up by our £675 million nature for climate fund. To date, 15 million trees have been planted under this Government, more trees than in any other decade.

Theresa Villiers: Trees must play a crucial role if we are to meet our commitments on nature recovery and net zero, and they are a tremendous source of happiness, well-being and landscape beauty. To meet the ambitious tree-planting goals that the Government have set, can they streamline the permissions process? Some of the red tape seems disproportionate and in need of regulatory reform.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for the work she has done in her constituency to encourage tree planting, but she is right that the process needs to be fast and simple. We have taken that on board, and the Forestry Commission has recently introduced the woodland creation fast track, aiming to help to decide eligible woodland creation offers within just 12 weeks. To inform that scheme, it has developed a low-sensitivity map of the whole country to show people the best places to plant

trees, or where they could think about planting trees, that are not on our best available agricultural land, which is important for food.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Led by the Woodland Trust, Tree Equity Score UK is a map-based application created to address disparities in urban tree distribution by identifying the areas in greatest need of investment in trees. What is the Department doing to promote increased tree cover in the parts of the country that need it most?

Rebecca Pow: I highlight again the low-sensitivity map, which points out exactly the same things as the map the hon. Gentleman refers to. We have many funds focused in particular on urban areas—some come from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—to encourage urban tree planting, because it is so important for our health and wellbeing. We have a whole list of funds available, and I urge people to look at them and plant trees.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I have to say that the Minister's response suggests that the Government are completely in denial. The Office for Environmental Protection report exposed that the Government are way off target on their legally binding tree-planting target. There has been no trend of improvement on tree planting between 2018 and 2023. It would be bad enough if the problem were lack of money, but her Department is even failing to spend the money that it has been allocated. The environmental land management scheme is underspent by hundreds of millions, and the nature for climate fund that she spoke about has returned £77 million to the Treasury unspent. Is not it clear that, to get the tree cover that our country needs, we do not need a magic money tree; we need a Labour Government?

Rebecca Pow: I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at his own tree-planting record. This Government have planted more trees than Labour did. We now have the plan in place so, if one looks at the graph, it is ramping up to hit those targets, and the training, skills, the forest apprenticeship and the framework are in place to reach our targets.

Coastal Defences

4. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen coastal defences. [902713]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): We are investing approximately £1.3 billion of our £5.6 billion flood and coastal risk management investment programme in coastal projects. They will better protect over 100,000 properties, as well as critical infrastructure. The Environment Agency is also running the £36 million Government-funded coastal transition accelerator programme, which is funding coastal authorities so they can explore how to better support their communities.

Peter Aldous: The East Anglian coast has taken a real battering in recent months, and projects such as the Lowestoft flood defence scheme have been delayed. Our

region is the most vulnerable to climate change, and is a lead player in delivering net zero for the UK, so will my hon. Friend consider a climate change risk assessment on which a regional coast defence strategy can then be prepared to properly protect homes, businesses, ports, farmland and infrastructure, as well as nurture our unique coastal environment?

Robbie Moore: There is no better champion than my hon. Friend on the challenge of coastal erosion. The Environment Agency is developing a new national flood risk assessment and an updated coastal erosion risk map to improve how we access flood risk information and communicate it to our communities. Those new datasets and maps will include the potential impact of climate change on flood risk and coastal erosion, and will help to inform how we better protect homes, businesses, farmland and infrastructure along our coastal communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): We learned from the Public Accounts Committee report that 500 flood defence projects have been cancelled, just like the one in Lowestoft. Whether the Minister chooses to use the words “cancelled,” “deferred,” “delayed” or “on a long list” makes no difference, because he is still refusing to tell us where those projects are. Why does he insist on holding residents in contempt by not telling them the fate of their local flood defences?

Robbie Moore: I and my officials have been reviewing the applications that have been put forward, and announcements will be coming very soon. The Government are investing £1.3 billion in flood defences, which is more than ever before, and we will continue to ensure that we are better protecting coastal communities.

Catchment Partnerships: Funding

6. **Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): How much funding his Department plans to provide for catchment partnerships in the 2024-25 financial year. [902715]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): One hundred catchment-based approach partnerships are set out in the plan for water. The catchment-based approach is exactly the right one—I agree with the decision taken by my right hon. Friend on that—and is exactly the approach that we are taking. In the financial year, £15,000 is allocated to each catchment for that.

Dr Coffey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. The plan for water is starting to work in relation to community partnerships: next week, the East Suffolk Catchments Partnership will publish the plan for the River Deben. However, could I encourage my right hon. Friend to try to accelerate some of those partnerships, potentially by increasing the funding from £15,000 per partnership to £50,000, so that every single partnership can have a full-time employee to really drive this action forward?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend. What we are doing is twofold. First, we are increasing funding: she will have seen that, yesterday, we announced an uplift of £11.5 million for local

community-led projects to improve river catchments. Alongside that, we are looking at some major interventions in catchments, such as on the River Wye, where we allocated £35 million. We are taking a targeted approach to catchment-specific issues; in that catchment, the issue was chicken litter. The phosphate was going into the River Wye, so we are funding anaerobic digesters as a targeted way of taking a catchment approach.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Sewage has been discharged into our rivers for 3.6 million hours, including the River Thames in my constituency. Funding is only part of cleaning up this mess: the whole water sector is broken and needs to be put into special measures, so what is the Secretary of State's long-term plan for tackling these issues, or is he content to keep following Labour's lead and to take up our policies?

Steve Barclay: The first thing I would mention is the £4.5 billion of investment in the Thames tideway tunnel over the past eight years, which is going to significantly improve the water quality of the River Thames. Alongside that, we are stepping up inspections, with a fourfold increase in inspections; we are tackling bonuses in companies that are guilty of pollution; and we are taking much tougher enforcement action, with the biggest ever prosecution of water firms by the Environment Agency. A whole range of actions, coupled with the plan for water, is bringing additional investment into the sector and taking a catchment by catchment approach.

Air Quality

7. **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on improving air quality. [902716]

15. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce air pollution. [902726]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): We are driving down emissions and concentrations of the most harmful air pollutants, reducing their impact on public health and the environment. Through the Environment Act 2021, we introduced further legal targets for fine particulate matter. We have allocated £883 million to support local authorities, and air pollution has fallen significantly since 2010, with emissions of nitrogen oxide down by 48%, PM2.5 down by 24%, and sulphur dioxide down by 74%.

Jane Hunt: Given that incinerator capacity far outweighs waste, I welcome the Government's decision to introduce a short-term pause in the determination of applications for environmental permits for certain types of waste incineration facilities. Will the Minister please now extend that pause beyond its current official end date of 24 May and include existing incinerators that have applied to increase their capacity?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. Our assessment of incineration capacity and needs is ongoing—I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that work or any of the next steps—but the Government are clear that proposed waste incineration facilities must not result in overcapacity or compromise our ambitions to minimise waste and improve recycling.

Munira Wilson: Last month, my local authority of Richmond upon Thames, along with other councils, was informed by DEFRA that its local air quality grant of £1 million—which had been awarded just two months earlier—was being rescinded. Given the number of areas in Twickenham breaching air quality standards, including areas close to schools, and with World Health Organisation targets becoming ever more stringent, how does the Minister think he is meeting his commitment to “expand the resources available to councils to improve air quality”?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question, which gives us the opportunity to highlight the great progress we are making in this area. We want to continue to make progress and support local authorities, but we did have concerns that the local air quality scheme was not delivering the most positive outcomes, and some of the bids that were coming forward were not aimed at improving air quality: we had bids for a robotic chatbot and for a kinetic art project. We want to focus on improving air quality and make sure we are funding local authorities to do just that.

Serious Dog Injuries Register: Dog Groomers

8. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): If he will take steps to implement a dog groomers charter mark that includes a register of serious injuries for dogs. [902718]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, groomers must protect dogs under their control from harm and provide for their welfare needs. Where that Act is breached, offenders face imprisonment or an unlimited fine. As the legislation is already clear, we do not have any plans at the moment to implement a charter.

Duncan Baker: A constituent recently brought quite a distressing case to my office. A routine trip to the dog groomer's turned into a disaster for her beloved pet. The dog was seriously injured due to the groomer using incorrect equipment, resulting in painful lacerations, multiple veterinary visits and permanent scarring. Unfortunately, that is not an isolated case. I am aware that, as the Minister says, the Animal Welfare Act provides some framework in relation to intentional harm, but I am amazed at the lack of regulation in the industry. Will the Minister make an assessment of what further legislative steps can be taken to regulate the dog grooming industry and ensure the safety of all dogs?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this case, and obviously I sympathise with his constituent whose pet suffered that poor practice. The Government's belief in the importance of animal welfare underpins the strong protections included in the Animal Welfare Act, and we will take steps to address widespread welfare issues where they arise.

Waste Incineration Plant Capacity

9. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) operational and (b) consented waste incineration plant capacity. [902719]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): Officials are currently assessing planned residual waste treatment capacity, including incineration, against expected future residual waste arising in England, so that we can understand our future capacity needs following the implementation of key commitments in the resources and waste strategy. This capacity assessment will be published in due course.

James Wild: My North West Norfolk constituents welcome the moratorium on new waste incinerators and the review, but given that the incinerators already operating and those with consent provide enough capacity as we meet legally binding targets to halve residual waste, may I urge the Minister to make that temporary pause permanent so that we do not have to have an unnecessary and unwanted incinerator in Wisbech?

Sir Mark Spencer: DEFRA officials are currently scoping the need for a review of the role of waste incineration facilities, and I do not want to prejudge the conclusions of that exercise. The current pause period will end on 24 May, and the next steps will be announced no later than that date.

Animal Welfare

10. **Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to help improve animal welfare. [902720]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): This Government remain absolutely committed to implementing our action plan for animal welfare. Since the action plan was published in 2021, we have made significant progress on a whole raft of animal welfare measures, such as introducing tougher sentences on animal cruelty and new laws on animal sentience, bringing forward legislation to ban live exports and keeping primates as pets, launching the animal health and welfare pathway, ensuring the microchipping of cats, and backing critical legislation to crack down on puppy smuggling, pet abduction and livestock worrying.

Henry Smith: I am grateful for that answer and, indeed, for all the animal welfare measures that this Government have introduced. Recently, pupils in Larch class at Three Bridges Primary School wrote to me very eloquently about their concern for the welfare and protection of endangered species. Can the Minister say a little more about what her Department is doing in that respect?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and indeed for his own work on animal welfare in this place, which has been impressive. I also thank the pupils of Larch class at Three Bridges Primary School. He can go back and tell them that this Government are absolutely committed to tackling this and to helping endangered species. We are actually the first Government to legislate to halt species decline in this country—as far as I know, no other country has done that anywhere in the world—and we have funds to save species. They might also like to hear about otters returning to our rivers, about saving red kites by protecting them from persecution, about saving the chalk hill blue butterfly and more.

Fly-tipping

11. **Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support local authorities to tackle fly-tipping. [902721]

12. **Steve Tuckwell (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support local authorities to tackle fly-tipping. [902722]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): Nationally, fly-tipping on public land has fallen for the second year in a row, with enforcement actions up by 5%, but we all know the huge detrimental impact that fly-tipping can have on our communities. Fly-tipping fines have more than doubled, and we are now expecting local authorities to reinvest that income in enforcement and cleaning up our streets. We are going further with reforms on how waste carriers are regulated, with the introduction of digital waste tracking to help local authorities continue to crack down on waste crime.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. What landowners and the public want is for this to stop. I realise that we have doubled the fines—we have massively increased them again—but may I suggest that all cases should be prosecuted and that prosecutions should be publicised widely, both to reassure victims and to deter perpetrators?

Robbie Moore: I could not agree more; promoting the convictions absolutely reassures victims that the Government and local authorities are taking tough action. I know that my hon. Friend has particular concerns about what is happening across the countryside, and DEFRA is funding the national rural crime unit to explore the police's role in tackling fly-tipping and how that can be optimised, working with local authorities to deal with this crime.

Steve Tuckwell: Fly-tipping is a concern for many local residents across Uxbridge and South Ruislip. I would like to pay tribute to Mary in Yiewsley, Bernie in South Ruislip, Wendy in Cowley and Donna from Ruislip Gardens, who all act as community champions in reporting regular fly-tipping. I also need to mention the waste service team at Hillingdon Council, who work tirelessly in responding to regular cases of fly-tipping. However, all of this great work from residents and the council can only go so far, so what further funding and support is available specifically to target fly-tipping hotspots?

Robbie Moore: We have provided nearly £1.2 million to help local authorities combat fly-tipping, and our grants are focused on hotspots where they have funded around 200 CCTV cameras, plus other infrastructure including fencing, signage and mobile tips. A further £1 million is due to be released shortly, which will help further tackle these hotspots. I pay tribute to Mary, Wendy and all my hon. Friend's constituents who are getting involved in helping him.

Topical Questions

T1. [902742] **Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): Since last updating the House, we have remained focused on delivering our plan to improve food security, on improving our water quality, and on leading the way, both at home and abroad, in protecting the environment. That is why we are introducing legislation to ban the supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic. It is why we have launched, as part of our catchment plan, the £35 million scheme on the River Wye, further to our announcement yesterday of £11.5 million in water company fines and penalties to be reinvested in water restoration schemes. We are working on Dartmoor to implement the very good recommendations set out in David Fursdon's report, and we have seen over 20,000 farmers now sign up to the sustainable farming incentive, making it the most popular scheme ever. Alongside that, we are working at the G7, on bluetongue virus and in many other respects, but I can see, Mr Speaker, that you want me to speed up my reply.

Mr Speaker: I want to get your colleagues in. I call Thérèse Coffey.

Dr Coffey: The Environment Act 2021 was landmark legislation, and we of course need to think not only locally but globally. One element of that legislation was the introduction of forest risk commodity regulations. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend said what more we can do through our global supply chain measures.

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right to focus on forest risk commodities: our flagship announcement at COP28 was that we were taking leading action on that. Many who have watched nature documentaries, for example on the orangutans, can see how important that is to particular species. I hope to table legislation on that later this month, but my right hon. Friend is right to focus on its importance.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The environmental regulator has today condemned the disgusting state of our waterways caused by the Conservatives letting water companies pump them full of raw sewage. This has to stop, so will the Government now back Labour's plan and make water bosses personally criminally liable, so that if they keep illegally dumping sewage, they end up in the dock?

Steve Barclay: We already have the biggest ever prosecution by the Environment Agency, which is already live. We have also already banned bonuses for those companies guilty of serious pollution. We are quadrupling the number of inspections as part of that tougher enforcement scheme. We are also bringing record investment into the water industry. The hon. Gentleman never comments on the quality of water in Wales, but perhaps he will want to address that in his follow-up question.

Mr Speaker: We will try Lincolnshire: I call Sir Edward Leigh.

T2. [902743] **Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** In response to my earlier question, the Secretary of State said that food security was of urgent national concern. Has any Agriculture Minister ever met a farmer who has denied that 3b land is just as good for growing arable crops as 3a land?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries is extremely well placed to speak about the quality of land and how it pays, given that he himself farms. We recognise that this is part of a wider debate about the clustering of solar sites on farmland. We also recognise the importance of food security. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) can see the shift in focus to our environmental schemes that align with food security, because I believe that food security is instrumental to our national security, and that also affects our land use.

T3. [902744] **Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab):** An Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report published last year recommended that we support the request of the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food to undertake a country visit to the UK before the end of 2023. The Government initially indicated that they would facilitate that, but the Minister's latest correspondence to me states that it will not be feasible to invite the special rapporteur this year. Why is that not feasible before the general election? The UN is ready and waiting.

Steve Barclay: I am happy to look at the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman raises in relation to the UN, but we are clear about the importance of food production, food security and backing our farmers. It is left-wing councils around the country that are banning meat and acting contrary to the interests of many of our farmers.

T5. [902748] **Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con):** What can be done to improve compensation payments for cattle farmers following a TB outbreak?

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): We are constantly working with those farmers facing the misery of a TB outbreak. I am aware of an outbreak in my hon. Friend's constituency in Leicestershire, which is very painful for the individual farmers concerned. That is why we must throw everything we can at this terrible disease—every tool in the toolbox—to try to stop TB spreading across England.

T6. [902749] **George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB):** I am so old that I grew up in a land without plastic; a better Britain wrapped in brown paper and string. Last year, our households on this small island handled 90,000 million tonnes of plastic. It is indestructible—it cannot be burned and we cannot get rid of it. Will the Minister support the global plastics treaty campaigned for by Greenpeace and others?

Steve Barclay: This Government are taking action on plastics. Let me give the hon. Gentleman a specific example: there has been a 93% reduction in the use of plastic bags as a result of measures that this Government have introduced. If he looks at the communiqué from the G7 in Turin, he will see that the Government were supporting action on plastics, building on the work announced from Ottawa last week.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Many communities in my constituency face the double whammy of coastal tidal flooding and fluvial river flooding. We have seen significant investment in places such as Par and St Blazey through the StARR project—St Austell

Bay Resilient Regeneration—which the Minister has been to see. We have recently completed flood defences at Pentewan, but the village of Mawgan Porth remains vulnerable to both river and coastal flooding, and I cannot get any real progress in developing a scheme to reduce flood risk there. Will the Minister meet me to look at what we can do to protect Mawgan Porth?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): Having been to Cornwall to meet my hon. Friend and see the StARR project for myself, I am more than happy to meet to discuss what more we can do, because I know that he and his colleagues on the local council are championing this scheme as much as they can, and I am more than happy to help.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The sun may be shining today, but it has been a long, cold, wet spring for our farmers. Given the prediction that 17% of crops will be lost, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the number of farming businesses that will reluctantly stop producing food? How will he ensure that the farmers flood fund reaches all the farmers who desperately need it?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises an extremely valid point, and it is a shared concern across the House. Everyone can see the impact of the wet weather. That is why we are continually engaging with the sector. We had the farm to fork summit as part of that engagement, and we are looking at what easements can be granted in schemes such as the sustainable farming incentive, but also more widely. I will have more to say on that shortly.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Southport has seen millions of pounds of investment into drainage capacity for water, but unfortunately the villages of Tarleton, Hesketh Bank and Banks have not. These farming communities have been devastated by flooding. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries met me and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) last year, which was appreciated by farmers, but more needs to be done. A report has been submitted to the Department. We want to set up an internal drainage board. What more can be done to make sure that is done at pace to help these communities?

Steve Barclay: As I touched on earlier, I am a huge supporter of the work of our internal drainage boards. They do a superb job, which is why the Minister for Water and Rural Growth, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), decided to allocate an additional £75 million. We will look constructively at what more can be done in more areas through the focus of drainage boards. My hon. Friend will have seen that we have already flexed our regulations in response to Storm Henk, for example, and we are looking at what further things we can do.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Brexit has been a disaster for farmers across the United Kingdom, but at least in Scotland they have the certainty of funding going out beyond 2027, unlike in Labour-run Wales and Tory-run England. What steps will the Government take to provide the same level of surety for English farmers that the SNP has delivered for Scotland's farmers?

Steve Barclay: As a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I think the suggestion that the way the SNP allocates its Barnett consequential gives farmers funding certainty is a somewhat bold claim. The point with Brexit is that we can tailor our response to the needs of our farmers, whether through specific legislation such as that on gene editing to develop disease and drought-resistant crops, our procurement legislation so that we better leverage our public sector procurement and our labelling legislation so that we can support British producers, as well as through schemes such as the SFI, which is the most popular ever run by DEFRA, with more than 20,000 farmers now signed up.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): In the past, flooding from the Lady brook and Micker brook, which run through Bramhall, Cheadle Hulme and Cheadle to join the River Mersey, has caused devastation to homes and families. Does my hon. Friend agree that joint working across the region is part of the solution? Will he continue his support for the upper Mersey catchment partnership working?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend has raised that specific case with me before. I am more than happy to meet her to have those conversations at speed, because I know just how valuable projects such as flood alleviation schemes are to her constituents in better protecting more homes.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): North West Leicestershire has benefited enormously from being the heart of the national forest, with millions of trees planted over the past 40 years, much of which are on degraded former colliery land. As desirable as tree planting is, that must be balanced against food security. Does the Minister agree that good agricultural land must be protected to produce good food?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I must first commend the national forest for all that it has achieved. Many farmers are involved in that forest, too. That is why the Forestry Commission's map showing the best places for tree planting is so important, and that is not on what we call best available land, for which we have specified that the main priority is food production.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Violence Against Women and Girls: Prosecution Rates

1. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for violence against women and girls. [902697]

10. **Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates for cases relating to violence against women and girls. [902707]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Tackling violence against women and girls is a priority for the Government. I recently visited CPS Thames and Chiltern

to hear specifically about the work it is doing to combat stalking. I also heard how the domestic abuse joint justice plan will transform how we investigate this all-too-frequent crime.

Wera Hobhouse: Data from the Crown Prosecution Service shows that despite an increase in the number of referrals from the police for domestic abuse, both charging rates and prosecutions have decreased in the last quarter. In Bath, the Southside project, Voices, and Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support all support those affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, but we cannot rely on charities to do the heavy lifting. Does the Attorney General agree that if we want the public to have confidence in the system, increased reporting should lead to increased numbers of prosecutions?

The Attorney General: Yes. It is always difficult to talk with pleasure about increased numbers of prosecutions, because all the survivors of those acts have gone through a horrible event for a prosecution to take place, but I agree with the hon. Lady that it is generally a good sign that prosecution numbers are going up. I am pleased to say that they are going up in her area for adult rape cases. There is more to do on domestic abuse cases, which is why we are focusing specifically on the domestic abuse joint justice plan. The work of the charities in her region, which I should say are funded by but independent of Government—that is what survivors prefer—will really help us to ensure that those survivors get justice.

Chris Elmore: The Attorney General will know that the Online Safety Act 2023 was given Royal Assent at the end of last year and that, in that Act, there are various bits of legislation to protect women and girls in relation to cyber-flashing, deepfakes and revenge porn. Will she set out for the House how many prosecutions have taken place under that new, important piece of legislation that is trying to protect more women and girls from those other forms of violence?

The Attorney General: I am afraid that I do not have to hand specific figures for the hon. Gentleman's constituency under that Act, but I am happy to get them for him. We are confident that it will be possible to bring prosecutions under the Act. These are important and distressing but relatively new crimes, and it is important that we continue to work with the police and the CPS to prosecute novel areas of criminal activity. It is really difficult for survivors of these crimes to deal with them.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Attorney General rightly refers to the work done in relation to domestic violence. The most serious offences of violence against women and girls are rape and serious sexual offences. As she will know, there are concerns that once victims have come forward, there are delays in their cases being heard, largely because of the difficulty in getting suitably experienced barristers to prosecute them. Does she accept that one of the main drivers of that is the fact that legal aid fees were increased for defence barristers, but prosecution fees have lagged behind? There is a gap of around £500 in the brief fee between prosecuting and defending. Does she agree that we must plug that gap urgently, to get suitable counsel prosecuting as well as defending those cases?

The Attorney General: The Chair of the Select Committee is tempting me to step on the firm territory of the Lord Chancellor, as he well knows. He also knows, because he and I have discussed this many times, that the Lord Chancellor and I speak several times a week about our concerns about the shortage of counsel in the criminal sphere in particular. However, I would say gently to my hon. and learned Friend that I do not think money is the only reason why it is not always attractive to prosecute RASSO case after RASSO case. They are draining cases to be involved in, and they are listed very tightly at the moment because of the pandemic backlogs, as he mentioned. That leads to tensions with listings and with the judiciary, which can make it very difficult to do this area of work relentlessly. I have nothing but praise for the barristers who are engaged in it.

Crown Prosecution Service and Police Services: Joint Working

3. **Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** What recent steps she has taken to increase joint working between the Crown Prosecution Service and police services. [902700]

The Solicitor General (Robert Courts): Close and collaborative work across the criminal justice system is key to securing justice for victims, holding offenders to account and keeping the public safe. The police and the CPS have invested heavily in new ways of working, including through the national operating model for rape prosecutions, with the result that the police and the CPS work more closely together at an earlier stage in prosecutions.

Mary Robinson: During a recent visit to Greater Manchester police's divisional headquarters in Stockport I heard that there can be significant delays between sending a case to the CPS and receiving a charging decision back. To solve that, it was suggested that having CPS staff based inside the station would speed up the process and improve communication. What consideration has my hon. and learned Friend given to a CPS presence in police stations, and will he work with me and Stockport division to facilitate a trial?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this extremely pertinent point. She is right to emphasise the importance of early co-operation between the police and the CPS. At a visit last month to Charing Cross police station I considered precisely that point. There is a buddy system there, with CPS lawyers working with police officers, which is improving case file quality. We are actively exploring how to ensure closer early working with the CPS and the police, and I will look at Stockport with her.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The United Kingdom Government are going above and beyond to ensure that British arms are readily available in Israel's arsenal to bomb Gaza. The Attorney General is refusing to give out the legal advice, based on the long-standing Law Officers' convention, yet the circumstances for up to 1.6 million people are now between life and death. What steps is she taking to ensure that Britain is not complicit in the destruction of a nation and its people?

The Solicitor General: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Attorney General keeps all these matters under close review, and will ensure that any legal advice is properly obtained and acted upon.

Royal Albert Hall: Governance

4. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): If she will refer the governance of the Royal Albert Hall to the first-tier tribunal (charity). [902701]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): The Royal Albert Hall is one of our most important cultural institutions. There are long-standing differences between the trustees of the Hall and the charity commissioners over governance matters. I really hope that the parties will work together to resolve their differences without expensive litigation and I stand absolutely ready to facilitate those discussions.

Mrs Hodgson: The Attorney General, in her—I must say excellent—recent letter on the matter, expressed her “disappointment” that the Royal Albert Hall Bill “is not more ambitious” and

“that the constitution of the Corporation of the Hall of Arts and Sciences gives rise to a potential conflict between the private interests of seat-holding trustees and the Corporation’s charitable objects.”

I totally agree. She has said that she will look at this issue but, unlike her predecessors, will she please also consider, if she needs to, referring the matter to the charity tribunal, so it can be settled once and for all? Tickets to attend one of our country’s most famous and treasured venues should not be turning up on notorious ticketing websites like Viagogo, and those who are receiving ill-gotten gains should not be running the charity.

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady takes a very close interest in these matters and is, I believe, the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse. I really commend her for her work in this important area. Many of us who are great supporters of the Albert Hall are concerned by ticket costs. I am hopeful, as I said, that the two parties can continue to work together. I want to avoid expensive litigation if that can be done. A previous Attorney General was asked permission to refer the matter to the first-tier tribunal. I have not been asked by the Charity Commission to do so. I am very hopeful that this matter can be resolved amicably and I am very happy to remain involved if that is helpful.

Women and Children’s Safety Online

5. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to help keep women and children safe online. [902702]

The Solicitor General (Robert Courts): The CPS takes the issue of keeping women and children safe online extremely seriously. I am pleased to report that the CPS has delivered the first conviction for cyber-flashing within weeks of the new offence becoming law. This is an important milestone for protecting women and girls online, and demonstrates how the Government have worked to put perpetrators behind bars.

Andrew Jones: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. In addition to the good work he is doing to help prevent online bullying, trolling and abuse, keeping safe online includes helping to prevent fraud. Will he detail how the Government, through the online fraud charter, are ensuring that tech companies help women and children?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to the online fraud charter—a world first—which sits under the Online Safety Act 2023. Twelve of the biggest tech companies are working together to reduce fraud on their platforms. The signatories are agreeing to undertake certain measures within six months, such as blocking, reporting and take-downs, to ensure that the vulnerable—such as children being exploited as money mules—are protected online.

Crimes While Protesting: Prosecutions

6. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in prosecuting people that have committed crimes while protesting. [902703]

The Solicitor General (Robert Courts): Non-threatening peaceful protest is fundamental, but those rights are not absolute and they must be balanced with the rights and freedom of others. The CPS works closely with the police to ensure that those who commit offences during protests are brought to justice and our streets are kept safe. Indeed, just last month the CPS successfully prosecuted a protester under the Terrorism Act 2000 after he wore a Hamas headband to a pro-Palestine rally.

Dr Evans: The Minister rightly points out that there is a clear balance between democratic peaceful protest and the tactics used by the likes of Just Stop Oil to disrupt society. We have seen mass protests, mostly peaceful, on the London streets, but we did see damage, such as that to the Ministry of Defence, which is completely unacceptable. How do the new laws that we have passed in Parliament aid the prosecution of those who are not interested in peaceful protest?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this extremely pertinent and concerning point. The police already have a full suite of powers under section 4A of the Public Order Act 1986—as well as some relating to criminal damage, the offence to which he referred. To ensure that they act, the Government have, however, reinforced those powers under the Public Order Act 2023. The Crown Prosecution Service is working closely with the police in, for instance, providing round-the-clock charging advice nationally. My hon. Friend is right: it is unacceptable that those who are taking part in legitimate democratic processes commit criminal damage, and it is also utterly unacceptable that, for example, Jewish people feel threatened. The Government expect the full powers available to the police to be used so that offenders can be prosecuted.

International Humanitarian Law: Israel-Palestine Conflict

7. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on compliance with international humanitarian law in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. [902704]

8. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on compliance with international humanitarian law in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. [902705]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): As all Members know, the Law Officers' convention means that I cannot disclose outside Government whether or not I have provided advice, or the specifics of such advice, but it is no secret that we continue to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and for civilians to be protected.

Mary Glendon: It is more than three months since the International Court of Justice issued its interim ruling on the Gaza conflict and set out steps that Israel must take in order to protect civilian life. The Netanyahu Government have, as yet, failed to comply with that ruling, but our Government have still not come out publicly and urged them to do so. Will the Attorney General take the opportunity today to call on Israel to take the steps ordered by the Court?

The Attorney General: This Government firmly respect the role and the independence of the ICJ. Its ruling, or order, called for the immediate release of the hostages and referred to the need to get more aid into Gaza, and that is exactly what the Government are also calling for.

Debbie Abrahams: The ICJ ruling also declared that there was a "plausible right" to be protected from genocide, and following the urgent question to the Deputy Foreign Secretary on Tuesday I cited United Nations international law relating to that. When there are concerns about a potential genocide taking place, those are the circumstances in which the sale of arms should be withdrawn. Can the Attorney General tell me, and my constituents—as this is a massive issue for thousands of people across the country—exactly when the Government will come out and recognise both international law and the risks that we take in breaching it?

The Attorney General: This Government believe very firmly in international law. On 9 April, the Foreign Secretary announced that our position on export licences was unchanged. We publish data on our export licensing decisions transparently and on a quarterly basis.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Attorney General.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We have heard questions about the International Court of Justice, but I want ask some questions about the International Criminal Court. Its chief prosecutor said last week that

"all attempts to impede, intimidate, or improperly influence"

the Court over its investigations of war crimes in Gaza must "cease immediately".

He was forced to issue that demand after a letter signed by 12 United States senators warned the ICC:

"Target Israel and we will target you."

That letter threatened sanctions not just against the ICC's officials, but against its employees, associates and families.

Will the Attorney General join me in condemning those Republican senators for their outrageous actions? Will she also join the chief prosecutor in agreeing that

anyone who threatens the ICC simply for doing its job is undermining the very impartiality and independence on which its international mandate depends?

The Attorney General: I thought that the ICC's statement was worthy of note, and I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for bringing it to the House's attention. In his statement, the independent prosecutor was also keen to point out that he welcomed active engagement by Governments and other parties on the work in which he is clearly engaged around the world to ensure that international humanitarian law is respected and war crimes are not committed. He is a British prosecutor, and we in this Government are proud to work with him; we have been very proud to support him in his work in Ukraine, for example. There are ongoing investigations of what is going on in Israel and Gaza by more than one international court at present, and I think it is difficult to speculate on specific outcomes.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Attorney General will be aware of the Government's grounds of defence in the ongoing case of *Al-Haq v. the Secretary of State for Business and Trade*, in which the FCDO lawyers admitted that the

"inability to come to a clear assessment on Israel's record of compliance"

with international humanitarian law "poses significant policy risks". What is the Attorney General's assessment of that submission? Given the FCDO's concerns about Israel's compliance with IHL, what has she said to her Cabinet colleagues who are worried that the issuing of arms export licences could make the UK Government complicit in breaches of international humanitarian law and the arms trade treaty?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I cannot give my specific legal advice. I cannot share that with the House—it is for the Government alone—but I can say that the Foreign Secretary has reviewed the most recent advice from the IHL cell. That has informed his decision that there is not a clear risk that the items exported from the UK might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of IHL. It leaves our position on export licences unchanged, but that position is kept under review.

Fraud and Economic Crime

9. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps she is taking to prosecute perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [902706]

The Solicitor General (Robert Courts): Last year, the Government published a new fraud strategy to combat fraud and economic crime, and the Corporate Transparency Act 2023 received Royal Assent. Last month, the Serious Fraud Office published its strategy for the next five years, which is focused on tech, intelligence gathering and enforcement. In fact, I am pleased to report to the House that on Friday the SFO secured the conviction of former investment manager David Kennedy for his part in a £100 million investment fraud, in which hundreds of people lost their savings.

Christine Jardine: Fraud is prevalent. In fact, it accounts for a third of all crimes committed in this country, and increasingly we are seeing online scams. Vulnerable people often get caught up in phishing schemes. Will the Government consider setting up an online crimes agency to clamp down specifically on online crimes, which will become more prevalent with the use of artificial intelligence?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is absolutely right. This is a particularly pernicious crime. It often targets the vulnerable and, sadly, in an interconnected and digital world, it is likely to increase. We will look very closely at all such matters. A number of joint strategies are shared between agencies in any event, but I am certainly very happy to look at her suggestion.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): There were 36 failed personal protective equipment contracts during the pandemic, costing over £1 billion, but only

one company, PPE Medpro, has been named. If the Government are serious about tackling fraud, why are they refusing to disclose the details of the other companies? How exactly were those contracts awarded, and can the Solicitor General update the House on how many prosecutions are pending?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member quite rightly raises a matter of particular concern to him, and indeed to the whole House. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs remains committed to covid-19 scheme compliance, and will continue to prioritise the most serious cases of abuse. Specifically on prevention and recoveries, up to 30 September 2023, HMRC had prevented the payment, or recovered the overpayment, of over £1.6 billion-worth of grants, made up of £430 million that was prevented from being paid out and over £1.2 billion that was recovered from overpayments. By 30 September 2023, HMRC had opened 51 criminal investigations into suspected fraud within the schemes, and made a total of 80 arrests.

Business of the House

10.34 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

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

MONDAY 13 MAY—Motion to approve the draft Procurement Regulations 2024, followed by motion to approve the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2024, followed by debate on a motion on the risk-based exclusion of Members of Parliament.

TUESDAY 14 MAY—Motion to approve the draft Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (Amendment of Schedule A2) Order 2024, followed by motion to approve the draft code of practice on fair and transparent distribution of tips, followed by general debate on War Graves Week.

WEDNESDAY 15 MAY—Remaining stages of the Criminal Justice Bill (day one).

THURSDAY 16 MAY—Debate on a motion on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on women's state pension age. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 17 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 20 May includes:

MONDAY 20 MAY—General debate. Subject to be confirmed.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—If necessary, consideration of Lords message to the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Holocaust Memorial Bill, followed by motion relating to the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill.

Lucy Powell: I was pleased to join the Leader of the House this week to launch a guide for Members and candidates, co-ordinated by the Antisemitism Policy Trust, on tackling conspiracy theories. Although the existence of conspiracy theories is nothing new, their reach, risk and repercussions are ever increasing. I encourage colleagues to read this important guide.

I welcome my new hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb). He is the first person from Blackpool to represent Blackpool in over 60 years. Having campaigned with him for years, I am now proud to call him my hon. Friend. I know that his former boss, and our good friend, Tony Lloyd would be thrilled and proud, too.

I also welcome two more Members to Labour, my hon. Friends the Members for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Our reach into previously undiscovered support is much broader and deeper than I ever imagined.

Talking of which, we understand that Conservative Members were all trooped over to No. 10 yesterday for a presentation and briefing on how they did not really lose the local elections after all. Perhaps we could have a debate on what the local election results tell us. It might

help to inject a little bit of reality into their thinking, because they cannot cure something if they are in complete denial about it.

Which part of the message that voters expressed did their tin ears not hear this time? The third biggest swing since the second world war in a parliamentary by-election? Losing the York and North Yorkshire mayoral election in the Prime Minister's own backyard? Labour taking Rushmoor, the home of the British Army? Or losing one of their more successful elected representatives, Andy Street, in the west midlands? If they cannot hear the message now, they will have a stark awakening at the general election.

We might have all had a small laugh when the former Prime Minister forgot his voter ID, yet another of his own rules that he thought did not apply to him, but there is a more serious point. We also saw veterans turned away from the polls because they could not use their veteran ID card. The Government have promised to add the card to the list of acceptable IDs. When will they do so?

I notice that there is nothing in the upcoming business on the Sentencing Bill, which is quite a surprise given that we learned this week, from a leaked email to probation and prison staff, that some prisoners will be freed up to 70 days early. Why are the Government consistently failing to bring back the Sentencing Bill so that these issues can be properly debated? And why are they failing to publish the figures on the number and nature of prisoners who will be released early? It is another part of their plan that is not working, is it not?

Despite serious and fast-moving developments in Israel and Gaza, the Government, again, did not come to the House to make a statement this week. It was only through your granting an urgent question, Mr Speaker, that Members could raise issues. We want an urgent ceasefire and the assault on Rafah stopped. After much delay, the Government rejected the Procedure Committee report on holding Lords Secretaries of State accountable, yet there is clearly widespread support across the House for its recommendations. Rather than the Government simply rejecting them, should the Leader of the House not seek the view of this House and table a motion on the accountability of the Foreign Secretary to this House as soon as possible? Whether on the middle east, China or Ukraine, there are hugely important matters to be raised.

I am pleased that the Leader of the House has finally brought forward the House of Commons Commission's proposals on risk-based exclusions next week. Staff and those working in this place will be looking carefully at what we say on Monday in the interests of their safeguarding. As we heard last night, Members want proper time to debate these proposals and amendments. Has she considered those calls to extend the debate on the motion beyond two hours?

Despite the Prime Minister's latest set of disastrous election results, he continues to insist that his plan is working. He has his fingers in his ears and is ploughing on as if everything is fine. It is as if there is no cost of living crisis or waiting lists are not sky high, and that voters just need to see more of the "real Rishi" and listen to him better. The reality is very different: people are crying out for change. But the only thing that does not seem ever to change is that every time he faces the electorate, he loses. That is not going to change, is it?

Penny Mordaunt: First, let me mark the fact that yesterday was VE Day; I know there will be many events going on across our constituencies during the week, giving us a chance to remember the debt we owe our forebears and also to think of those facing conflict today.

May I, too, welcome the hon. Lady's new colleague, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb), to his place and pay tribute to all candidates who took part in the important elections last week? I also thank her for helping me to launch the publication to which she referred. We commissioned it and I thank all the organisations that worked on it. It is important that we combat the rise of conspiracy theories, as that is part of restoring trust in what we do here and keeping trust in democracy. This publication will be a useful product, not just for Members, but for those who wish to come here too. I shall certainly make sure that the Lord Chancellor has heard what she says about the Sentencing Bill, although he will find her concern odd, given Labour's voting record on our measures to introduce tougher sentences.

The hon. Lady mentioned her new colleagues, and I do hope the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) is being made to feel very welcome in her new party. I am buoyed at the news that our odds of retaining Dover have slightly improved since yesterday lunch time—*[Laughter.]* It is true. But I think this is a personal tragedy for the hon. Member for Dover, as was what happened last week for the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). It has exposed a pattern of behaviour from the Leader of the Opposition, and it is a shame that we are not due an update to Peter Brookes' "Nature Notes", for the decorator crab is a species that covers its surface area with materials to disguise its true form, usually selecting sedentary creatures and seaweed. The Leader of the Opposition is the decorator crab of these Benches, desperate to show that he is not really leading the Labour party at all. He has channelled Margaret Thatcher; his deputy has praised Boris; he has expelled the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) with great fanfare, a man he was campaigning for to be Prime Minister only moments before; and his exterior shell is stuck over with St George's flags, his Gunners season ticket and several programmes from the "Last Night of the Proms". What next? Will it be a photo op with a bulldog? Will it be a lecture on how misunderstood Enoch Powell was? Should I ask the Whip on duty on the Front Bench if he has checked in recently with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)?

This is Operation Radish: the concerted effort to convince the British public that while the Labour party might look red on the outside, at its heart it really is not at all.

Even the defection from the Government Benches of one of Labour's sternest critics cannot disguise the fact that Operation Radish is not going well. Not everyone has got the memo. The shadow Leader of the House talks about the important election results last week. Has she noticed that the first act of the new Mayor of the West Midlands was to turn his attention not to investment or infrastructure, but to Israel and Gaza? Ditto for the Mayors of West Yorkshire and London, with the latter also stating "equivalence" between the Head of State of Israel and a terrorist organisation.

The anti-nuke shadow Foreign Secretary is currently trying to walk back from calling a candidate for the presidency of the United States a neo-Nazi-sympathising

KKK sociopath. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) sought to smear a decent candidate for Mayor of London as a white supremacist. Object to ULEZ and you are a child killer. If you are a woman advocating for your rights and dignity, you are a bigot. Want to strengthen our borders? You are a racist. If you have made money through hard work, you can't possibly get Britain. That is today's Labour party—just as it has always been.

The politics of the PLP is more the politics of the PLO and the JCR: more comfortable in university tented encampments and on picket lines than on the international stage; more interested in thought policing than actual policing. Labour has not changed—not its behaviour or its record. It is still high crime rates, high waiting lists, higher taxes, higher levels of poverty, less pay, less opportunity, less money for the NHS and less freedom. The British people can see what is going on. They like their radishes in salads, not in No. 10.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend indicates in provisional business for the week after next the remaining stages of the Holocaust Memorial Bill. She is familiar with early-day motion 711. *[That this House notes the First Special Report of the Holocaust Memorial Bill Select Committee, HC121, on the problems with the current proposal and the restrictions faced by the Committee considering the hybrid Bill; respects the conclusions and recommendations on page 20; agrees with the list of matters related to the current proposals for a Holocaust Memorial and believes these need updated attention on deliverability from the Infrastructure Commission, from the National Audit Office on likely capital costs and recurrent annual costs, from the Chancellor on future funding control, and from the police and security services on maintaining unfettered public access for use of Victoria Tower Gardens while protecting the Memorial; asks His Majesty's Government and the Holocaust Memorial Foundation agency to commission the views of the property consultants on a comparison of the current proposal by Sir David Adjaye in Victoria Tower Gardens with viable alternatives, to commission the full appraisal and to hold a public consultation on the selection of site; and further asks His Majesty's Government to commit to having this or an amended proposal considered first by the local planning authority before considering whether to call in the application, noting that an open-minded observer could doubt another minister in the Levelling Up department should be asked to make an independent decision on an application by the Secretary of State.]*

Will she arrange, at least seven days before the House returns to the Holocaust Memorial Bill, for there to be answers to the questions on recurrent costs, the total capital costs, the amount of money going to education and how much the cost of the project has risen in the last year?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I always do, I shall ensure that the Ministers in charge of the Bill have heard his specific requests and that the business managers take his asks into account.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): First, may I say on behalf of my party and in the spirit of congenial politics, led by our new First Minister and

[Deidre Brock]

all our independence-minded Ministers, how delighted I am to see the Leader of the House still in her place after her party's catastrophic results in England? They were not catastrophic enough to mobilise her PM for PM rebels, apparently. With her weekly ill-informed comments about Scotland, she is an extraordinary recruiting sergeant for independence and I am sure she will not disappoint today.

May I warmly welcome the launch by the Leader of the House this week of the guide to recognising conspiracy theories, such as those around 5G masts and 15-minute cities? It will be useful reading for some of the Members on her own Benches, and perhaps those on Labour's increasingly busy right wing.

Given the Leader of the House's personal interest, and what is supposed to be a central role of this House in protecting democracy and protecting us, will she be pressing for a wider debate on disinformation and the malign influence of secretive social media groups that perpetuate these damaging myths? I am thinking, for example, of the 36 so-called grassroots Facebook groups that I raised with the Prime Minister last week. They are forums full of vile racism, conspiracy theories and Islamophobic abuse of Sadiq Khan, all with links to Conservative party HQ staff, activists and even politicians. There is reason to suspect similar groups are quietly spreading their poison across the UK, including in Scotland. Does the Leader of the House agree that this needs to be investigated and brought to light, not laughed off as the Prime Minister did?

Last week, I asked the Leader of the House about the chaos of the Tory trade tax—the border checks that Brexit now requires—or, as former Tory Ministers have called it, “that act of self-harm on the UK”.

She swerved that with a boast about Brexit boosting UK financial services. Brexit is doing its damage to Edinburgh's trade and talent in that sector, too, but services is a sector not affected by the serious issues that I raised of rotting food, crippling import charges, biosecurity risks, and delays and chaos at the ports. The Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House might be content to ignore the exporters and importers, the farmers and the fishers, whose businesses have suffered while she pretends that all is well on the Brexit front, but my party and I are not. So I ask again: when can we put the record straight—after last week's twaddle—and have a debate in Government time on the ruinous impact of Brexit all across the economy?

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I rejoice at the news that the Scottish Government no longer have a Minister for Independence? I was waiting this morning, Mr Speaker, to discover why that would be my fault, but the hon. Lady did not raise it. I wish to place on record my thanks to the former First Minister for his service. I know that there are many who would kick a man when he is down, but I am not one of them; he has done his best. Some say that he has been the worst SNP leader of all time. I say, no. Not only has he managed not to be arrested, but other SNP leaders make his record look pretty stellar—the new First Minister, for example. I also welcome him to his post.

In all seriousness, I welcome the hon. Lady's support for the education pamphlet on conspiracy theories. That is very important, as such theories are a real threat

not just to democracy, but to the wellbeing of our constituents. They are a form of radicalisation, they are spreading and we must do everything we can to combat them.

The hon. Lady returns to the issue of the border operating model. As she would expect, I have paid great attention to what is actually going on. There remains little sign of disruption to border flows as a result of the changes, and volumes of trade appear to be at the levels expected. The IT systems are working as they should, and although, as I said last week, there have been some minor issues to resolve, there is nothing fundamental. I would be very happy to facilitate a deeper briefing for her or any of her colleagues on that matter if it would be of interest.

Our exports are now at record levels. We have become, as I have said, the fourth largest exporter overall, and we are the largest net exporter of financial and insurance services in the world. I am sorry that the hon. Lady still does not seem to recognise the importance of that to her own constituency. I think that is something to celebrate, so I ask her to focus on the realities of what is going on and the opportunities that sit there for her constituents.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today, we have had the excellent news that Harrow has been allocated Government funding for a new special educational needs school—something that has been campaigned for by the Conservative-run council, the officials and the teachers and parents of Harrow for a considerable length of time. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in congratulating all those responsible on obtaining this. Can we have a debate in Government time on the brilliant work that our teachers and support staff do in special educational needs environments, in very challenging circumstances, with a lot of very challenging children?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work that he is doing to ensure that his constituents have the provision that they need. We have had a huge uplift in the general teaching staff; there are now 30,000 more teachers than when we came to office. Obviously, we have also been expanding special educational needs provision, but the need is growing and we are determined to keep pace with that. I think that a debate on the subject would be welcomed by many in the House, and I encourage him to apply for it in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debate for Thursday 16 May. If awarded time on 23 May, we would propose debates on UK arms exports to Israel and on potholes and highway maintenance. Those would be the two debates immediately before the Whitsun recess. Although all Chamber slots until the Whitsun recess are now pre-allocated, we would still welcome applications for Thursday debates in Westminster Hall, where the new time seems to be working quite well.

Can we have a debate in Government time on the vexed question of leasehold reform? In my constituency, developers are selling, or proposing to sell, packages of property freeholds to third-party companies and denying

leaseholders themselves the chance to buy the freeholds of the properties that they live in. This is a really complex legal question, but an awful lot of leaseholders do not have the wherewithal to fight the property development companies and third-party companies buying such investment portfolios. Taylor Wimpey is a company with an interest in development in my constituency that is currently doing this. Can we have a debate in Government time to try to sort out this vexed question?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful advert for the Backbench Business Committee. He raises the very important matter of a particular aspect of leasehold. He will know that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is very focused on these issues. If the hon. Gentleman wants to give me specific examples, I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the detail of his case.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Leader of the House may be aware that Hastings, St Leonards and some surrounding villages suffered the consequences of a burst water main over the bank holiday weekend, depriving tens of thousands of residents and businesses of running water, and impacting Hastings' famous and amazing Jack in the Green weekend and May day celebrations. While Southern Water acted promptly in finding and fixing the leak—and I thank the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) for their huge support—can we have a debate about investing in water infrastructure, including building new reservoirs and maintaining existing infrastructure, and the impact of ageing infrastructure on water supply reliability?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the situation that affected my hon. Friend's constituents so adversely. She will know that the infrastructure plan that is under way to modernise our waste water system and other water systems is the largest infrastructure project of its type in the world. She can follow the progress of that infrastructure plan on Water UK's website. In particular, the plan on combating storm overflows is there for the general public to see. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has heard the particular case that she raises. She will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Yesterday was the 79th anniversary of VE Day, but the RAF's photographic reconnaissance unit has never been recognised for its contribution to allied success. The Spitfire AA810 project is seeking a commemoration of the unit's covert operations, and I am working with *Southwark News* to try to trace the four Southwark crew: Frederick James, William Fisher, Frederick Legon and Lesley Baker. Can we please have time to debate the ongoing need for formal recognition of the PRU and its courageous crews, especially given that half of them paid the ultimate sacrifice for our victory in world war two?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I am sure I do so on behalf of the whole House, given the response to his question. It is a very important thing

that he is doing, and I will certainly use all the communication channels available to me to get the names of the people from the particular crew that he is trying to trace. It is right that we set the record straight on that. I was at the RAF Club earlier this week and got to meet some veterans from Bomber Command, particularly Colin Bell, the Mosquito pilot. We have to ensure that their legacy is understood for generations to come. I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House when I say that anything that we can do to assist the hon. Gentleman in this important campaign shall be done.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I am aware that the Leader of the House has been celebrating Portsmouth's elevation to the championship this season. Last year in Ipswich we celebrated our promotion to the championship, and right now we are celebrating our back-to-back promotion to the premier league. For the first time in over 20 years, the Tractor Boys will be in the premier league, in the big time—arguably the single biggest boost to the town for over 20 years. Will she join me in congratulating Kieran McKenna, our exceptional manager, Mark Ashton, the chief executive of the club, and the whole team at Ipswich Town, who are passionate about not just the club but the town? I wish them all the best for the premier league next season. Who knows? Maybe Portsmouth will be there the year after.

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of us all, I congratulate Ipswich Town on this huge achievement. It is great for the fans, but it will also be great for the whole of Ipswich, because these achievements bring economic and social progress, and many other things. I think that both our clubs being promoted is an excuse for a pint—I will stand him one. Seriously, congratulations to everyone there. I hope that what he says about Portsmouth comes to pass.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Requiring voter ID is an additional burden that prevents people from voting and an unnecessary barrier to our democratic process, especially for those in poorer communities, ethnic minorities and young people. In last year's local elections, 14,000 people were prevented from voting because they did not have the right ID at the time. Can we please have a ministerial statement on the impact of the requirement for voter ID in this year's local and regional elections?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important question. She knows that this issue is reviewed on a regular basis, and I will make sure the Cabinet Office has heard what she has had. Even people who were against bringing in this particular check to protect people's votes recognise that, because progress had been made in cracking down on areas where fraud had been particularly prevalent, such as postal voting, it was anticipated that there would be more fraud in other areas. That was one reason why the check was introduced, but I will make sure the Cabinet Office has heard what she has asked.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that I have raised with her before the discrimination against people who are visually impaired, who have to pay VAT on audiobooks when all books are zero rated. That discrimination cannot continue. We have had debates in Westminster

[Sir Mike Penning]

Hall, but can we have a debate on the Floor of the House in Government time on stopping this discrimination against visually impaired people?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend raises an important point and one that I have a great deal of sympathy for. I will make sure that the Chancellor has heard what he says, as the next questions to the Treasury team are not until much later on, and I think that he is doing a great deal of service by continuing his campaign.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have a debate on ministerial transparency? As the Leader of the House knows, ordinary MPs have to register with the House any hospitality that they receive from other parties within 28 days and in considerable detail. However, under the scheme that she still favours, Ministers have an exemption and they do not have to publish anything for several months or provide details at all. She said repeatedly in this House that she would, by last summer, ensure that there was a parallel system for Ministers so that they were not being treated differently from MPs. That still has not happened, so when will it happen?

Can the Leader of the House also explain the retrograde step we seem to have taken now? For instance, in the past we learned that the then Home Secretary registered through the Department that she had gone to a Bond premiere because Bond exercises “executive function”—I note the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) laughing, because he was the one who made that point—despite the fact that Bond is obviously a fictional character. Now, ministerial Departments are publishing the barest details. They do not even say what the tickets are for. Could the Leader of the House, for instance, explain to us what her lunch with Saints and Sinners was all about?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman, who is normally a stickler for detail, has not noticed that I have been reporting my returns monthly since the start of this year. They are not very exciting, but they are reported monthly, and I think other Departments are also able to do that. I did a speech at the Saints and Sinners Club for charity. Two charities benefited from it, and they are in my entry in the parliamentary Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I know he is keen on this issue and has campaigned on it for a long time. Of course, people do make mistakes—he himself was adrift two years in registering an overseas visit—but I am in favour of parity between ministerial reporting and Parliament—

Sir Chris Bryant: Why aren’t you doing it?

Penny Mordaunt: I am, and I have been doing that since the start of this year—[*Interruption.*] I have.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on potholes? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] In my Chipping Barnet constituency, they seem to be worse than ever. After representations from me and my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), London has been included in the Government’s major boost for potholes funding,

so we need a debate to ensure that Barnet Council uses the £736,000 that it is receiving over two years effectively to tackle potholes and get them filled in.

Penny Mordaunt: If there is consensus in this House on any issue, it is that we cannot talk enough about potholes. An additional £8.3 billion has been allocated to councils for road improvements, which are of importance to our constituents. Critically, local authorities must account for what they are spending that money on, and since 15 March, they have had to report against the last tranche of funding. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard my right hon. Friend’s keenness to have a debate on the matter, and she will know how to apply for one.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Godiva Calling, a battle of the bands competition, is taking place at venues across Coventry in May and June. The competition will give some of Coventry and Warwickshire’s rising musical talents the opportunity to perform at the city’s now flagship music event, the Godiva Festival. Successful artists win the opportunity to perform their own music on the main stage over the festival weekend in July. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging local musicians to get involved in the competition, and will she arrange a debate on support for grassroots artists and on the importance of music and its ability to connect people and bring them together?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes a number of points that are supported by many Members in the Chamber. I join her in wishing everyone taking part in the battle of the bands a very good time, and congratulate them on making a success of what now seems a landmark event in the Coventry calendar. She will know how to apply for a debate, and I encourage her to raise the matter with the Secretary of State on 23 May.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): While the Prime Minister is today rightly meeting university vice-chancellors to warn them of their duty of care towards Jewish students, the National Union of Students has passed a so-called non-binding motion seeking to expel the Union of Jewish Students. To ban Jews because they are Jewish is pure Nazi ideology, and it gives the lie, frankly, to those who claim that their anti-Zionism is not antisemitism. This issue is a national crisis and it goes to the future of the rule of law in this country, and it is one of the myriad examples of the grotesque antisemitism that we are seeing in national life. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling for cross-party consensus in supporting the Prime Minister in the work that he is rightly doing with universities and others to stop antisemitism on campus?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for raising this very important matter. I am pleased that the meeting between the Prime Minister, the Education Secretary and university vice-chancellors is going on today. We know from recent research that there are universities that do this really well—that treasure all their students and want an environment on campus in which people can learn and live their best life. Sadly, that is not happening on all campuses. The conduct by the NUS, and by particular students in it, is nothing short of grotesque, and I am sure that Members in all

parts of the House would agree on that point. It is absolutely vital that we push back against the growing trend of increased antisemitism. I think that I speak for most, if not all, hon. Members when I say that we are supportive of any measures that will do that.

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): I have always said that the Conservatives made a mistake in overlooking the right hon. Lady, and she has shown that again today. In that regard, can she help me with what I think is a narrow but important problem? Both Front-Bench teams support the continuation of arms sales to Israel, but the great majority of Back Benchers, even on the Conservative side, would like the opportunity to vote otherwise. That has been stopped—stymied—in the past. I hope that she can find a way for the House to freely express its attitude to this question. The Government, and the Labour Front Benchers, might get a rude awakening and a big surprise.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern, but I have not been overlooked—I am Leader of the House of Commons.

The hon. Gentleman has found the answer to his own question: he has just been able to freely express his view on this matter. As he knows, there are strict rules regarding our arms exports, which are also scrutinised by a Select Committee of this House. That is the Government's policy, and if those lines are breached and there is evidence of that, that policy will kick in.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Wessex Fields is a large chunk of council-owned land in north Bournemouth. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council is rushing through the sale of that nine acres of real estate for £4 million less than its independent evaluation, claiming it is storage rather than employment land. This is the same council that is cutting our famous annual air festival and selling off car parks, public paddling pools and plant nurseries, all because—it claims—there is no money, yet here it is throwing away £4 million of local taxpayers' money. I have written to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up and to the council's scrutiny committee calling for that decision to be investigated, but Bournemouth deserves better, so can we please have a debate on poor council decision making?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear about those decisions in my right hon. Friend's constituency, and I am sure many Members of the House who have visited the air show previously and are very fond of Bournemouth as a consequence will also be disappointed to hear about the choices his council is making. He has done the right thing in asking the Secretary of State and the council's scrutiny committee to look at this issue; I will also make sure that the Secretary of State understands its urgency, and I hope we can get some common sense.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In February, after much waiting, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up announced that regulations would be put in place to curb the growth of short-term holiday lets. The summer season is already here; the Secretary of State said that those regulations would be in place before the summer, so when are we going to see the necessary regulation to stop the growth in short-term

holiday lets, and to stop landlords coming in and purchasing properties that should be used for family housing in places such as York?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady has raised this issue before. As she will know, a careful balance is needed between enabling economic regeneration and ensuring that people can have a good, secure home and get on the property ladder. I will make sure again that the Secretary of State has heard the her request, and will ask him to update her.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Can we have a debate about flood resilience and sport? I am fortunate to have in my constituency one of the most beautiful and iconic cricket grounds in England: New Road, the home of Worcestershire county cricket club. Previously, when that ground has been flooded, I have been able to reassure colleagues that it will reopen through the fantastic work of the ground staff. This year, however, it has been flooded eight times, and with the increasing risk of flooding as a result of climate change, the board of Worcestershire county cricket club has said that it is going to have to explore other locations and opportunities. Can the Leader of the House therefore support me in urging Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to work together, in order to look at all options to support the future of Worcestershire county cricket club and protect New Road?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is fighting for a very good cause indeed. I will, of course, do as he asks and write to Secretaries of State at both DCMS and DEFRA, asking them to co-operate and assist my hon. Friend in this very important campaign.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This afternoon, I will be attending the Art Fund 2019 museum of the year, St Fagans in my constituency, to celebrate the opening of the newest building in its outdoor offer, the recreation of the Vulcan pub from Cardiff city centre. While I am uneasy about attending a pub in a museum when I used to drink in it many years ago—it makes me feel rather old—it is a fantastic addition to that wonderful museum's offer. It will be set up like a pub from 1913, although unfortunately not with 1913 prices over the bar. Can we have a debate on the wonderful contribution that our museums make to our life in this country, and also to celebrate free entry to such museums—which was, of course, brought in by the Labour Government?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very jealous of the hon. Gentleman's planned visit and congratulate the museum on winning museum of the year. I would encourage him to celebrate this with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 23 May.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I must say that I have some good news from Mid Devon District Council. My right hon. Friend will no doubt fall off her chair—so long as she does not defect. The main thing is that it has been forced to release the information on 3 Rivers Development—I have mentioned it in this place a couple of times—because it has been acting irresponsibly. If he had a shred of decency, the leader of the council would now resign. This is a scandal

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

worth millions. The chairman of the scrutiny committee has done a runner—literally done a runner—and refused to take part. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) said, local government is not getting it right. We need time in this place to debate incompetence, obfuscation and, in some cases, downright dishonesty by councillors using their position to bamboozle the people who put them there, who are the voters who vote for us and them.

Penny Mordaunt: First, I reassure my hon. Friend that I am not about to defect to the Opposition. They would not be interested in me—I am too left-wing. However, as I do every week, I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up has heard about the ongoing saga in my hon. Friend's constituency and his concern about the performance of the council.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House, as a former Minister for disabled people, is as concerned as I am that it is now two years since the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued a section 23 notice against the Government with regard to their discrimination against disabled people. That was followed by the report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities investigating a second set of breaches of the convention by this Government, which was published a couple of weeks ago. Can we have a debate in Government time about why there has been this discrimination by the Government against disabled people and what the Government are going to do about it?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly make sure that both the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work at the Department for Work and Pensions have heard that the hon. Lady is keen for an update on this matter. I have to say that, in my experience, the criticism of this country by many organisations, particularly international ones including people from nations that provide very little support for disabled people, is quite wrong. I could point to many aspects of the work that has been done in many Departments to support disabled people in every walk of life. This is a matter that should concern everyone because most disability is acquired, whether from the built environment or in relation to work. We have enabled 1 million people with a disability to get into work and have the dignity of a pay packet because of our change of approach on welfare and support. There are many other examples and I think we have a good record over many years. However, there is always more to do and I will make sure that both Ministers have heard the hon. Lady.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Twelve months ago, the then Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), told the House that the Secretary of State was considering the recommendations of the final report of the regulation of property agents working group, published in July 2019. Can we have a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to advise what progress has been made on creating an independent body to regulate managing agents, so that leaseholders and indeed managing agents might have

confidence in a single, fair and transparent system that will protect not only leaseholders, but managing agents alike?

Penny Mordaunt: I will make sure that my hon. Friend has an update from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. He will know that we are committed to raising professionalism among property agents. They must already belong to a redress scheme, and both the Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill and Renters (Reform) Bill will help to drive up overall standards, but I shall make sure that the Department has heard what he said.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Yesterday, only weeks after admitting to the serious side effects from its product, AstraZeneca withdrew its covid-19 vaccine worldwide. Like millions in the UK and over 700 million people worldwide, I took the AstraZeneca jab, based on the Government's assurance that it was "safe and effective", and I suffered side effects. I know there is very little appetite in this Chamber to discuss these matters, but I assure the House that there is huge and growing concern among the public about a medical intervention that this House encouraged, coerced and, in some cases, mandated people to inject into their bodies. So can we have a statement from the Health Minister on the withdrawal of the AstraZeneca vaccine and why the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency failed to act to protect the public interest, or is it that AstraZeneca withdrew its own product because it was far too safe and effective?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to see the hon. Gentleman speak like that in this Chamber, especially as three speakers on the Front Bench have raised the issue of conspiracy theories and our combined efforts to push back on them. The vaccine he refers to saved, according to many independent estimates, over 6.5 million lives in the first year of use alone and over 3 billion doses of it were supplied globally. He will know that, as with many other medical products, we do not keep particular vaccines in use permanently. Disease and therapies change and vaccines need to be updated, and he knows it is very clear that this has been withdrawn for commercial reasons. It is no longer needed and there are two particular vaccines that are used now in our NHS with regard to covid.

The hon. Gentleman has had several debates on this matter and on excess deaths. Of course people suffering ill effects from taking vaccines is a serious issue that needs to be addressed and their needs must be served, but that is quite another thing from promoting false information about the effectiveness and safety of vaccines. That vaccine and the people behind it saved millions of lives. There is a chapter in the publication we have spoken about that covers this precise point. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to get a copy and read it, to think seriously when he comes to the House, as he does every week, and promotes conspiracy theories and to really think about the consequences of what he is doing.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I am delighted that Darlington has secured funding for a new 48-place special educational needs school but there is more to do, with excessively long waits for child and adolescent mental health service assessments putting stresses on

families. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to see those waits reduced, and can we have a debate on the issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all he is doing to campaign on this very important issue. He knows that we have made increasing special educational needs provision a priority. We have opened 108 special free schools and 51 new alternative provision free schools, but this is a growing need and we want to ensure that every child and young person can have access to the support they need to thrive. He knows how to apply for a debate, and I shall make sure the Secretary of State for Education has heard about his continuing campaign and his interest in doing more for his constituents.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Today, we are hosting an event called the National Women in Agriculture Awards, celebrating women in farming. It is an absolutely fantastic opportunity for women across Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England to be celebrated. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the hard work and the backbone of British farming—the women?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of the whole House, I congratulate the hon. Lady on her involvement in that event, and of course send our thanks and good wishes to everyone attending, but also to everyone across the four nations of the UK who is providing this fundamental service—food production—to our population, and caring for the land and the environment. She is absolutely right: in this sector, as in most, it is women who deserve the greatest praise.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The UK shared prosperity fund is an important part of this Government's levelling-up agenda. It has been very important to us in Cornwall, where it has supported over 100 businesses and community projects, including around £1 million to improve flood resilience at Mevagissey harbour and £350,000 to promote all-year-round tourism in Newquay. The current round of funding expires next year and people in Cornwall are eager to know what the future holds. I know the precise details and the amount will be part of the spending review, but could we have a statement from the Government on how they see the future of the shared prosperity fund?

Penny Mordaunt: The UK shared prosperity fund, which is worth £2.6 billion, has played a major part in restoring pride in places and helping people to access opportunity, particularly in places of need such as ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and rural coastal communities. I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has been doing in his local area. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard that he is keen to have an update on this matter, and my hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Derriford Hospital in Plymouth has declared five critical incidents already this year. Despite the heroic work of dedicated NHS staff, it has some of the worst performance on accident and emergency and ambulance handover delays in the country. With social care, primary care and NHS dentistry in a dire state in Plymouth, too, can we have a debate on health in

Plymouth and what can be done to support those brilliant NHS staff in rescuing services at Derriford Hospital?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the particular performance of the hon. Gentleman's local trust. He will know that we are putting a huge amount of resource into ensuring that we can catch up, particularly since the pandemic. We have 2 million more operations, more than 160 diagnostic centres have been set up and we have the dental recovery plan. The funding is provided by the UK Government, but it will be up to local commissioners how they use those services. The next questions to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care are on 4 June, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise any specific concerns he has with her then.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome and support the Government ensuring that the UK is in the vanguard of global decarbonisation of aviation. I also welcome and support the sustainable aviation fuels mandate coming in early next year. However, the revenue support mechanism is not planned to be introduced until later in 2026. Can we have consideration of a statement on bringing that forward to ensure that there is certainty in the UK sustainable aviation market, so that domestic manufacture of the fuel ensures that we decarbonise our aviation and are at the forefront of green technology?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We can be proud that the UK is world-leading in this regard—not just our incredible science and business community, but the RAF. That is its second mention in this business questions session. It has been a pioneer on sustainable aviation fuel. The next questions to the Secretary of State for Transport are on 16 May. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this matter with him there.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This week marks World Asthma Day, and new analysis from Asthma + Lung UK shows that 12,000 people have died from the condition since the national review of asthma deaths was published in 2014. In fact, asthma deaths have increased by almost 25% in the past 10 years, despite there being major preventable factors in two thirds of those cases. Please can we have a statement from a Health Minister outlining how the Government plan to tackle this crisis and finally act on the recommendations of the national review of asthma deaths?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important issue, which will be of direct concern to many across the country. As I have said, the next questions to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care are on 4 June. The hon. Lady may wish to raise the issue directly with her then. In the meantime, I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): The Leader of the House will no doubt be aware of the ongoing speculation that Royal Mail and its parent company International Distributions Services are subject to a takeover by EP Group. I know she will agree that the Royal Mail plays an important economic, social and cultural role in this country. As well as delivering a

[*Andy Carter*]

universal service obligation to all parts of the UK, Royal Mail is an iconic British brand. It carries His Majesty's insignia and plays a vital role in all UK elections.

I know how much my constituents value regular and timely postal services. May we have a debate in Government time on what legal safeguards are available to ensure that the important functions of Royal Mail are delivered for all our constituents, and that they continue beyond the obligations in the National Security and Investment Act 2021 in the event that the company is taken over and headquartered outside the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. Those services are fundamental, not least because many healthcare services in particular rely on them—other hon. Members have raised concerns about that. Given that the next questions to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade are not until 13 June, I will ensure that she has heard his concerns.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): On behalf of my constituent Glen Coleman, and the many other victims who were discriminated against and dishonourably discharged from the armed services for being gay, can the Leader of the House give any reassurance that the LGBT veterans independent review carried out by Lord Etherton will be brought forward for debate in the near future, or at least before the general election?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. The review and the apology given by the Prime Minister on behalf of the nation is an incredibly important landmark. There are still outstanding issues with regard to those in services that are not public facing—intelligence agencies and so forth. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard what he has said. I encourage him to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Leigh Lionesses are a newly founded football club aimed at providing a nurturing environment for girls to thrive in football, but according to leading member Gary Jacobs, whose daughter is a brilliant Leigh Lioness, their journey has been marred by a real struggle to find consistent playing venues and suitable facilities because so often they are already booked up by boys' football clubs. May we have a debate in Government time on the number of pitches, all-weather pitches and facilities available for women's football up and down the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I can feel a bid to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport coming up. My hon. Friend, who is a formidable campaigner, will know that the next questions to the Secretary of State are on 23 May, when I encourage her to raise that directly. The Secretary of State has taken a particular interest in community sport and has given considerable grant funding to local authorities to increase the number of pitches, and in particular those that can be used all year round. My office stands ready to assist my hon. Friend in ensuring that everyone in her constituency—especially the girls' teams—has somewhere they can play this sport.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Yesterday, TSB announced 36 bank closures, including the closure of the branch on Bedlington high street in my constituency. That will be

the last bank closing its doors, making Bedlington basically a banking desert. I understand that lots of people now prefer telephone banking or internet banking, but many people—mainly vulnerable people—depend on high street banks. This closure will have a huge impact on Bedlington. Will the Leader of the House join me in demanding that TSB reviews its decision at Bedlington? Can we have a debate in the House to discuss the impact of these actions on towns such as Bedlington?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It is in everyone's interests, including banks' interests, that constituents can access those services. Even if a particular bricks and mortar building has to close down, there are ways of retaining those vital services, including cash banking for businesses. As he rightly said, access to banking services, particularly for vulnerable and older people, needs to be continued in our communities. I will ensure that the relevant Department gives him advice about what he can do to help facilitate that. Of course, the bank has an obligation to ensure that its customers can continue to use its services.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I have stopped the large number of so-called asylum seekers from attending my surgeries, and I have instructed my office not to deal with asylum cases, for two reasons: as MPs we have zero authority, mandate or influence over Home Office decisions; and I want to dedicate my very limited resources to putting Dudley people first. Can we have a debate on the pressure that asylum seekers are putting on our nation's resources and local services?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific point, which I could generalise on. Our approach to this issue has been to recognise that we have finite resources, and we want to direct them in the most efficient and effective way possible. That is why we must control our borders, which is what the British people want. They want the Government to control access for foreign nationals to the UK. As well as border control, we have been reforming processes at the Home Office. He will know that we have speeded up looking at cases by close to 300%, and we are cracking through that backlog. We will get on top of it. The public can see that progress is being made, including on getting people out of hotels. We are making good progress and we need to continue, to ensure that the systems we have in place are not piling pressure on local services, whether education, healthcare or the services that the hon. Gentleman offers in his office. That is very well understood, and I hope he understands that the Government are doing that.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Up and down the country, hundreds of thousands of young people are about to take their summer exams. Unfortunately, there will not be a level playing field, because thousands of pupils—including hundreds in my constituency—have been impacted significantly by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and asbestos, having lost several months of face-to-face teaching. The Department for Education and the exam boards do not seem interested in providing an uplift to those young people to ensure that they get fair examinations. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of RAAC and asbestos on the learning and opportunity of young people, and on the need for fair and equal examinations this summer?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will know that the Secretary of State for Education, in legendary fashion, has been doing something about this matter. If he will furnish me with the details of the schools that he is particularly concerned about, I will ensure that the Department gets that message and responds to his office, so that his constituents do not face disruption this summer when doing their exams.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): On behalf of Hinckley and Bosworth, I congratulate the returning Conservative police and crime commissioner for Leicestershire, Rupert Matthews. His re-election was in no small part thanks to his introduction of a rural crime team, which has recovered £1.3 million worth of stolen goods since its introduction and reduced rural crime by 24%, according to the latest newsletter. Will my right hon. Friend thank the returning PCC, the Leicestershire police force and, most importantly, the offices of the rural crime team for all they do to reduce crime in the likes of Market Bosworth and the surrounding villages?

Penny Mordaunt: I happily join my hon. Friend in congratulating Rupert Matthews on his return to office, and I thank him for the leadership he has shown in reducing crime in his local area, as well as the police force on the frontline. In certain parts of the country the police often get a hard time from us in this place, but they do tremendous work. On the same resource since 2010, crime has been halved in this country, leaving aside online fraud and particular hotspots in the west midlands and London. That is a tremendous achievement, and it is thanks to the accountability and direct democracy of police and crime commissioners but also, most of all, the hard work, efforts and effectiveness of our police officers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members that it is important to ask the Leader of the House about business connected with the House, as well as congratulating various people.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituent Janice lost her brother in 2020 in a tragic incident caused by a dangerous driver. She has since campaigned tirelessly for those convicted of causing death by dangerous driving to receive lifetime driving bans. As things stand, I understand that the Government are looking at the issue, but they have been doing so for some time. May we have a statement from the relevant Minister setting out the Government's intentions, and whether they will seek to ensure that those convicted of causing death by dangerous driving cannot again get behind the wheel?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing Janice's work on this important issue to the attention of the House, and I thank her for what she is doing in the wake of an appalling tragedy to ensure that no one else has to endure what she has been through. I will ensure that both the Lord Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Transport have heard the request for an update on this important matter.

SME Finance

TREASURY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. I emphasise that we want brief questions, not speeches, and that those questions should be directed to the Committee Chair, not the relevant Minister.

11.42 am

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this wonderful opportunity to present the report that the Treasury Committee published yesterday on access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses.

As every Member will know, small and medium-sized enterprises form the backbone of the UK economy. All of us in our constituencies will be aware of amazing small and medium-sized businesses. In fact, 99% of the businesses in this country are small and medium-sized, which gives us an idea of how important they are. Well over half of our constituents who are employed work for SMEs. Access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses, which the Committee has been looking at, is therefore a really important issue. I want to highlight some of the points raised in our report. This is an opportunity not only for Members to hear those points but, I hope, for the Minister to take them on board.

No one can deny that, with the pandemic and the energy price crisis, the past five years have been an absolutely torrid time for everyone. SMEs have often been at the forefront and have experienced the brunt of those crises, but without the huge resources that larger businesses have to be able to cope. Through those crises, the Government took extraordinary steps to provide support in terms of access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses, but we are now in a different environment. In fact, all the evidence and data published this week show that small and medium-sized businesses are beginning to feel much greater confidence—we are seeing some real improvement there. Nevertheless, issues remain from that difficult time and also more structurally following financial regulation measures set up since the banking crash in 2008.

I want to flag up a few of the points that we made in our report. The first concerns the Business Banking Resolution Service, which was set up after the banking crisis and was designed to provide access to resolution, mediation and outcomes for businesses that were too large to access the Financial Ombudsman Service but had nevertheless been treated pretty badly during the financial crisis. I think it fair to say that the Committee formed the view that the Business Banking Resolution Service had not been a success. It is owned and run by the banks, which raises questions about conflicts of interests in the first place, or certainly the perception of a conflict of interests. Moreover, it has spent about

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

£40 million during its lifetime and has awarded only £2 million worth of compensation, because it drew the access criteria so tightly that very few businesses were able to qualify. As a result, there were very unsatisfactory outcomes for businesses that used the resolution service because they could not access the Financial Ombudsman Service, and the Committee agrees that it should close as planned. We look to the Government to come up with a consultation on a new mechanism by the end of this calendar year.

Secondly, there is a Government initiative called the British Business Bank. The Committee thought highly of what it heard in evidence from BBB, and welcomed the announcement in the Budget that the covid recovery loan scheme had been rebranded as the growth guarantee scheme. We expect that to be an important source of credit to help small businesses to grow when they would otherwise have struggled. However, we noted that very few small businesses even knew about this organisation, and we have tried to publicise it through the report. We urge the Government to assess the effectiveness of BBB every year, because we think it has an important role to play and it is pretty successful where it is known about, but it is not widely known about.

Thirdly, we were greatly concerned by what we heard in the evidence about something that sounds very niche but is actually very important. It is known in the trade as Basel 3.1. After the financial crisis a committee set up in Basel, the Swiss city where the central bank of central banks is located, came up with some proposals which were then known as Basel III. The Prudential Regulation Authority—part of the alphabet soup of financial regulation that was set up after the crash—is currently consulting on a tightening of the criteria for lending to small and medium-sized businesses. At present there is a discount factor relating to the risk to banks' balance sheets from lending to such businesses, but the PRA wants to tighten that arrangement considerably.

The Committee is concerned because, according to the evidence that we heard, such a move could withdraw about £44 billion of lending to businesses from the UK economy. We therefore urge the PRA not to proceed, particularly because we also heard evidence that the proposal would not be implemented in the United States or in the European Union. In fact, for many years when we were members of the EU we did not implement what the Basel Committee was recommending. The committee then issued a statement expressing concern and saying that we were in violation of its recommendations. That shows that it is perfectly possible not to implement them: all you will get is a reprimand. We have therefore concluded that the support factor for small and medium-sized businesses should not be changed at this stage in the economic cycle.

A fourth issue that came up in the evidence we received, and which has really shocked the Committee, is the extent to which banks are simply closing the bank accounts of businesses across the country. I expect that every Member of this House will have had a piece of casework that involved one of the businesses in their constituency being told that its bank account was closing, with absolutely no reason or notice given by the bank. We asked the banks about this issue, and they confessed that they had closed over 140,000 business bank accounts during the course of 2023. Obviously, there can be

perfectly good reasons for doing that: there will be businesses that do not reply to any questions from their banks, and there will be businesses that are suspected of money laundering or that have actually been found to have done so. However, we also found that banks can use phrases such as “risk appetite” or “reputational risk” to close the bank accounts of organisations and businesses that we would think are a perfectly fair part of the fabric of this country. For example, amusement arcades and pawnbrokers can struggle to get access to a bank account.

Perhaps most alarmingly, we heard in one of our evidence sessions with banks that even someone in the defence sector can have their bank account closed or struggle to open one. This is often to do with the shareholders of banks wanting to observe the environmental, social and governance rules. We all think that such rules are good, but they can lead to some unintended and inadvertent consequences, whereby defence companies are effectively debanked and cannot get access to a bank account in this country. I am sure that all Members present will recognise that the defence of this country is a foundation for ESG compliance, and should not, therefore, lead to people struggling to get a bank account. We urgently request that the Treasury introduce the legislation on debanking that it has promised, and we look forward to that happening before the end of July. It is something that we are keen to see.

I see that my 10 minutes are up. I thank everyone for their attention, and I hope my statement has provided food for thought for Members across the House.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I am on the Treasury Committee, and I commend my hon. Friend for her great chairmanship. She has already mentioned the need for transparency, and I am delighted that the Treasury will bring that forward, but I was particularly struck by how difficult it is to open accounts. Even for farmers, it can take multiple months. Most importantly of all, the PRA's approach is going to choke the growth of many small businesses, and we need our small businesses to become much bigger for the prosperity of our country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the PRA really needs to understand the importance of this issue to ensure that the entire country prospers, which will only happen if small businesses prosper?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Inflation is the worst tax on our economy and important steps are being taken by the independent Bank of England to raise interest rates, to make sure that inflation gets back to its target zone. That all seems to be on track. Monetary policy has been tightened already, and we see that in the environment in which our small and medium-sized businesses are working. They have been squeezed by higher interest rates, and the evidence we received showed that the acceptance rate for credit has fallen from 80% to 50%, so it does not feel like the right time to be tightening access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses through a change in regulations. It particularly does not feel like the right time to be doing so unilaterally, when the EU and the US are not following the Basel 3.1 rules.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I am also a member of the Treasury Committee, and I thank the Chair for all her hard work on this report.

On the overall question of the confidence of SMEs in their ability to access finance, the report raises some interesting figures. There was a £95 billion finance gap in large high street bank lending to SMEs between 2015 and 2022, alongside the softer pressures of SMEs fearing rejection in lending and the lack of trust in the lenders themselves. Will the Chair please provide an assessment of how she feels that appetite looks across the rest of this year and beyond? What tools are at our disposal to deal with the inherent caution in the SME lending market?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I thank my excellent colleague for his question. He is absolutely right that the inquiry received evidence on what I would describe as financial apathy. Small businesses sometimes choose not to borrow, choose not to grow. In fact, only 5% of small businesses that seek lending would even consider shopping around to find another provider if they were rejected by their main bank.

There is work to do to encourage and guide SMEs, and the British Business Bank has a very important role. It is not well enough known, which is probably holding back the growth of many excellent small businesses. I am so proud that our Committee has been able to champion this.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Chair of the Treasury Committee for making this statement today. She will be aware that one of the main reasons why a lot of small businesses have to rely on bank funding is because bigger businesses do not pay their bills on time, and all too often do not pay their bills at all. A lot of small businesses in my constituency, particularly in construction-related work, tell me that they sometimes have to wait six months or more to get paid. That increases the risk factor for a bank, because it is much more likely that the small business will fail. Has the Committee looked at the problem, or does it intend to do so, where small businesses, particularly in the construction sector, are not paid for their work?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point that everyone in this House will recognise as a challenge. Getting paid by bigger businesses is a bane of the lives of many small business owners. I know there has been a lot of work in the Department for Business and Trade, and the Government need to lead by example by promptly paying for services. The Committee heard evidence that small businesses continue to be frustrated by this.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Treasury Committee for her statement and for answering questions.

Backbench Business

Miners and Mining Communities

11.57 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered miners and mining communities.

I thank my good hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who chairs the Backbench Business Committee, and the members of that Committee for granting this debate. Thirty-one Members from across the House supported the application for this debate, including the late Sir Tony Lloyd. He was a good friend, sadly missed, and a steadfast supporter of miners and mining communities.

Yesterday I marched with Bert Moncur, a former Murton miner and a constituent of mine who worked underground alongside my late father and my mentor and predecessor in this place, John Cummings. Hundreds of pensioners from across our coalfield communities marched on Westminster with a clear message, “We want our money back.”

We know the Government’s position. They claim to protect pensions while balancing the needs of the scheme and the taxpayer but, in reality, there is no fairness or balance. The Government have taken nearly £5 billion from the pension fund without contributing a single penny since 1984. Despite challenges such as the covid-19 pandemic, the global banking crisis and the Government’s financial meltdown, the miners’ pension scheme has endured, without any Government financial support. The miners I marched with yesterday are taxpayers, who were once part of thriving mining communities that had full employment and decent wages. They contributed to their pensions assuming that they would have security in retirement, yet their jobs, wages and now pensions have been taken by this Conservative Government.

I was born into a mining family, in the coalfield community of Murton, in 1961. It is hard to explain to someone who was not born in a mining community how life was organised around the pit. I remember Murton pit pond, our swimming pool, which was heated by surplus hot water from the mine. I had my first shower at Shotton colliery pit baths. Every village had a network of colliery clubs, parks, sports teams and welfare facilities vital to community life, funded by contributions from working miners. Our culture and heritage remains, and it is celebrated in our miners’ banners and brass bands that are showcased every year at the Durham miners’ gala. On the platform, we have heard the greats of the Labour and trade union movement, the likes of Nye Bevan, Tony Benn and my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The illustrious list will surely grow this year when my good and hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) addresses the gala. There is no feeling quite like marching to the racecourse, following your village banner and brass band—it is a unique privilege.

When I grew up, in the 1960s and 1970s, life was never easy in mining towns and villages, but in the main we were happy, and life had purpose and meaning. The pit provided full employment for all ages and abilities. Our streets were not paved with gold, but our communities were rich with pride and honour, and we had a sense of

[Grahame Morris]

self-worth. The men in the mines during my childhood were from the wartime generation. They were those who had risked their lives to defend our country, democracy and way of life. They were men such as Bill McNally, a Murton miner who was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in world war one. His family still reside in the village. His grandson, Kevin McNally, is a diamond and one of my closest friends.

The coal industry was crucial in creating our nation's wealth. It fuelled the fires of the industrial revolution, sustained us through two world wars, and enabled the growth of new sectors in finance and the City. There is no doubt about it: this country, this nation, owes the mining communities a debt of honour and gratitude, one that is yet to be repaid.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am pleased to make a brief intervention in this debate. The hon. Gentleman may not know that I was vice-chair of the all-party group on coalfield communities for some time, and I, too, wish to pay tribute to the miners, for whom I fought during the miners' strike. I did so for the UDM—Union of Democratic Mineworkers—side of things. Those of us who were brought up in the 1950s know well the conditions of the miners at that time, and I have always had enormous, deep affection for them, which I carry through to this day.

Grahame Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Characteristically, he was generous in his remarks and we appreciate it.

The last pit in my constituency, Easington colliery, closed in 1993, at a time when coal provided 50% of the UK's electricity production. The decision at the time to close the British coal industry made our country dependent on imported coal, which until 2014 still accounted for 35% of energy generation. Coalfield communities have never fully recovered from de-industrialisation, as was proven in the new "State of the Coalfields 2024" report published by Sheffield Hallam University and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. In response to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), the all-party group continues to take up causes and issues, ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones).

The Government continue to undermine the local economy, as evidenced in the excellent report, despite the regular trumpeting of levelling-up policies. In reality, the Conservative party chooses to invest levelling-up funding in places like Richmond and Cheltenham, rather than in places like Horden, in my constituency, which is in the top 1% of the most deprived areas in the country. Levelling up offered hope, but the ready-to-go Horden masterplan for regeneration was sidelined by a Conservative-led coalition from Durham County Council that favoured a single bid from Bishop Auckland, a constituency represented by a Conservative MP and a former Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Government have ignored and neglected our most deprived mining communities. Far from levelling up, Conservative Ministers have widened economic inequalities.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem with the levelling-up agenda the Government are pursuing is that it is mainly about capital investment? Although that investment is

desperately needed in coalfield areas, Durham County Council has also lost £240 million from its grants, so the services that our constituents rely on have been devastated over the past 14 years.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I was going to talk about the levelling-up bidding rounds. He and other hon. Members are well aware of the costs that were incurred by the county council—£1.2 million—in preparing bids that were not approved by the Government. We should have a means-based system; it should not be a beauty contest. Those communities, including the mining communities that are among the most deprived and urgently need regeneration, should be prioritised. Unfortunately, that is not happening. The evidence is quite clear and is laid out in the "State of the Coalfields" report. I know other hon. Members will mention that, so I will not dwell on that point.

Coalfield communities undoubtedly face numerous challenges: a lack of job opportunities, limited public investment, and higher council taxes. We could have a separate debate about the flawed council tax that penalises areas with relatively low property values, like mine and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends. Demand on social services is increased in coalfield communities because of an ageing population, many of whom have health legacies associated with working in pits and heavy industry, and generally have lower disposable incomes. Under these conditions, local economies struggle to thrive, lacking sufficient income to support vital small businesses and employment opportunities.

Low wealth coincides with low wages, making my region, the north-east, the lowest paid in the country. The Government could alleviate this, in part, by addressing past injustices and ensuring retirement security for mineworkers and their widows by reforming the mineworkers' pension scheme, in line with the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee recommendations published April 2021.

A legacy of mining is industrial disease, cutting lives short, including those of my own father and grandfather, who were both coalminers who passed away in their 50s, before reaching retirement age. My father died in the belief that his pit pension would provide security for my ageing mother, who happens to be celebrating her 88th birthday on Sunday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray!"] We know that some pensioners receive as little as £10 a week from the mineworkers' pension scheme. Our miners created the wealth that made this country great, with the mineworkers' pension scheme being among the UK's largest pension funds. However, money that should be used to provide security in retirement is being siphoned off by the Treasury, taking half of all the pension fund's surpluses.

In a parliamentary response to me in December, Ministers confirmed that they had taken £4.8 billion—billion not million, as was reported on the TV last night—out of the pension scheme. I note also that this figure has not been adjusted for inflation, so can the Minister tell me what the figure would be if it were adjusted for inflation? This money should be used to enhance pensions, not only providing extra security in retirement, but supporting our local economies, coalfield communities, employment and small businesses. The vast majority of retired miners and their widows continue to live in our coalfield communities.

The moral case for reform was strengthened by an unfulfilled promise of a disgraced former Prime Minister. I must remind Members—particularly those on the Conservative Benches—of the promise made by Boris Johnson when addressing miners in Mansfield and Ashfield during the 2019 general election campaign. Once again, he deceived voters, failing to fulfil his promise on the surplus sharing arrangements, which remain grossly unjust. The Government and the Minister have the opportunity to put that right today.

I commend my colleagues in the shadow Cabinet, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who chaired the then Business, Enterprise and Industrial Strategy Committee, which provided a blueprint for reform. The Select Committee report on the mine-workers' pension scheme offers a road map for retaining the Crown guarantee, releasing the £1.2 billion in the investment reserve fund, returning the surplus, and protecting the taxpayer. With key Members such as my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Bristol North West, for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North likely to hold crucial positions in a future Labour Government, I am confident that we can achieve pension justice for retired miners and their widows in our coalfield communities. I urge those on my own Front Bench to provide a clear commitment on this issue at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, I want to mention my constituent, Ray Patterson, who sadly passed away last year, aged just 62. He was one of the 11,291 people arrested and one of 9,000 sacked during the miners' strike. His life was changed forever by his imprisonment on the ancient charge of unlawful assembly—a law that can trace its origins back to 1328. After the strike, the Government abolished unlawful assembly and introduced the Public Order Act 1986. Ray was innocent and at any other time he would not have been arrested, charged, or convicted.

I was 24 during the miners' strike and saw how the Conservative Government tried to starve workers and their families into submission. I saw a police state on the streets of east Durham, intent on crushing miners fighting to protect their jobs and communities. The Government, courts, police and national media were part of a criminal conspiracy against working people in coalfield communities.

Ray, who was imprisoned and lost his job and pension, spent the rest of his life rebuilding. He left us too early, but his legacy will live on through his family. Ray maintained his innocence and fought to exonerate himself—I am sorry, Ray, that we could not deliver justice in your lifetime. We need the truth. While Scotland has taken steps with the Miners' Strike (Pardons) (Scotland) Act 2022, England and Wales lag behind. The policing of the strike was notorious, marked by perjury and fabricated evidence, which were willingly accepted in the Government's war on the miners.

Four decades later, it is imperative that Ministers commit to uncovering the truth about the strike, particularly events in relation to Orgreave. Many convictions from the strike are unsafe, warranting the erasure of criminal records, with only a few exceptions. From Orgreave to Hillsborough, a pattern of criminal misconduct in public office emerges, with South Yorkshire police at its centre.

Coalfield communities face numerous challenges in achieving justice and economic growth. We require a Government committed to levelling up, fair taxation, and justice. Despite slogans such as “big society”, “northern powerhouse”, and “levelling up”, the Conservative party has failed to deliver tangible interventions, particularly in the areas of greatest need, such as Horden, Easington, Peterlee, Murton, Blackhall, South Hetton, Haswell, Shotton, and Seaham. Residents in these communities have little hope of opportunity and change under the Conservative Government, so those on the Labour Front Bench must address this challenge by bringing investment, growth, and opportunity to these former mining communities, which are in need of a real alternative.

12.15 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I thank all Members who have taken the time to attend this debate today. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris)—my hon. Friend—who co-sponsored this very important debate with me.

I represent my hometown of Leigh in Parliament, and 2024 is the 125th anniversary of Leigh being granted its town charter in 1899 by Queen Victoria. There were so many mines in Leigh and the surrounding communities that the area was known in the 19th century as Coalopolis. Gradually, from the 1960s onwards, the mines began to close, with the last one closing in the early 1990s. I lived very close to Bickershaw colliery, just over the boundary from my own village of Lowton in Leigh—over Plank Lane bridge. My great-grandfather worked down that mine with his brother, who was the fire safety officer. There were some very frightening stories of mining disasters back in the day, and I am sure all those from similar mining communities could tell similar tales.

There are many legacy issues in mining communities such as ours. They include contaminated land and the recovery of land that was covered by slag heaps, as well as the economic problems that we saw as de-industrialisation took place. Leigh was home not only to a large number of mines, but to cotton mills, which disappeared a generation earlier. I am proud to say that, today, unemployment in Leigh is pretty close to the national average. As Leigh is situated halfway between Liverpool and Manchester, we are gradually transitioning from a former mining community to a commuter community. I hope that one day Leigh can be as wealthy as Stockport or Trafford. Certainly, that is an ambition to which everyone in my home community can aspire.

I wish to talk about some of the things that we have been doing since I was elected as the Member of Parliament. First, Leigh has had £20 million for a new community diagnostic centre and operating theatre at Leigh Infirmary. Historically, people from Leigh have had to go to Wigan, which might not seem far away, but it can take 45 minutes to get there through heavy traffic, so it is important that our town has full facilities at the infirmary. We received £11.5 million from the levelling-up fund to refurbish Leigh market, the town square and shop fronts on Bradshawgate. Hopefully that work will begin soon. We have a further £1.5 million to regenerate Railway Road, where my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) used to have his hairdresser shop back in the day, although, as Members can tell, it is a while since I have needed his services. We have also received £20 million over 10 years from the future towns

[James Grundy]

fund for further regeneration projects in Leigh. That is £53 million that the Government are putting into the regeneration of Leigh, and I am very proud to have played my part in helping to secure that funding.

However, that is not the only funding that the constituency is getting; that is just some of the funding for the main town of Leigh itself, which is only about half the constituency. The surrounding former mining communities also make up about 50% of the constituency.

It may surprise Members—to some degree it surprised me—that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and I are waiting on final approval for Golborne station's reopening, for which the Government have already provided £14 million from the transforming cities fund. If we are successful, and I truly hope that we are, this will be the first time since the 1960s that the constituency has had a railway station. I hope that it will prove to be the template for a future station serving the town of Leigh itself. Andy Burnham and I have not always seen eye to eye, but I am proud that we have been able to put party politics aside and work together on that project. I really hope that the Department for Transport will approve it; I have my fingers crossed.

There was also a successful bid for £1 million for the Tyldesley heritage action zone—the first community-led regeneration project of its kind in the country. I thank Ian Tomlinson and the For Tyldesley community interest company for the great work that they are doing to regenerate Elliott Street, the high street in Tyldesley. Finally, I am working on a bid with Transport for Greater Manchester to secure £53 million of transport funding from the cancelled HS2 project to complete the Atherleigh Way bypass, to deal with the congestion that has been blighting Leigh, Atherton and my home village of Lowton for over 60 years.

That is £54 million secured for the former mining communities in my constituency, and £67 million more that we are fighting for, under this Conservative Government. I am proud that we have finally seen some money come to our town. As many people will say, including former Members for my seat, we have often felt like a forgotten part of the north-west of England and a forgotten corner of the borough of Wigan. I am proud to say that that is starting to change.

I am very proud to have served my constituency for nearly five years as the local MP, but I have a couple of requests of the Minister. First, Leigh could have secured another £8.5 million from the levelling-up fund, but Wigan Council refused to bid for the full £20 million available. The hon. Member for Easington said that he faced similar problems with the levelling-up fund bid. We have to find a better model for future rounds of levelling-up funding, because councils cannot be the arbiter of the funding we get. Every constituency has the right to the same amount of money, and it is important that everyone gets the £20 million they are eligible for. A better model needs to be found for allocating future funding and putting in bids. Some colleagues have said that they have £20 million in the pot waiting, but their local authority has simply refused to bid for it. That is not good, especially when the mining communities that we represent are so in need of that money, given the historical issues and problems that they face.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I feel a bit disturbed by the line that the hon. Member is going down. My local authority has tried to make bids in each of the different rounds. One time, we were told that we were not allowed to do so because we had received 5p in a previous round. Then we were told that we should apply in the next round, which did not even come into existence. We have been led a merry dance in my local authority. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, local authority staff have wasted hours, and thousands of pounds, completing a completely nugatory exercise. The Government should be ashamed of this process.

James Grundy: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman. We are looking down opposite ends of the kaleidoscope. His council has wanted to put forward bids and not got them. My council first came up with a bid to spend £20 million on a multi-storey car park, which was completely unacceptable. Then it bid for half the money. I think the one thing that we can both agree on is that the initial model for the levelling-up fund bore considerable room for improvement. That needs to be addressed, which is why I am raising it with the Minister. It is a cross-party concern, and I am happy to say that in this Chamber.

Finally, the hon. Member for Easington raised the miners' pension fund. I urge the Minister to take back to colleagues in Cabinet the issues that will doubtless be raised by voices across the Chamber. It is a matter of justice that miners get back the surplus from their pension fund. It is their money. They paid it into the system. We promised them that we would resolve this, and we should—it is only just. With that, I shall sit down, for I have said my piece. I welcome contributions from other Members.

12.24 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): I know that you cannot take part in today's debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you have a strong connection with miners and coalfield communities, and your presence in the Chair should be recognised.

I am pleased to speak in this debate, as a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, as a patron of the Workers Memorial charity in St Helens, and as the MP for a very proud Lancashire mining community. I was born in the summer of 1984. I know that there will be disbelief at that, given my youthful visage and disposition. I am positively Jurassic compared with our new kid on the block, my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather). As I approach my own landmark this year, like many others I have been watching and listening to the excellent documentaries, podcasts and reflections on the 40th anniversary of the miners' strike. As someone relatively au fait with the history of that period, which some of my esteemed colleagues lived through—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing today's debate and the work that he does—I was frankly surprised by how surprised I was by the revelations contained in much of the testimony provided by those involved.

I am not naive about the excesses of the state and its abuse of power—it had life and death consequences every day where I grew up—but I had not quite understood

how it had manifested with such brutal consequences in England, Scotland and Wales. There was a moral vacuum at the heart of the then Government's economic policy, which was designed to cast not just one but maybe two or three generations of men and their families out into the wilderness of worklessness. Those men and their families and communities were treated as subversives, when in fact all they were doing was asserting their right as workers and trade unionists to withdraw their labour as a last resort.

It was not just the policies that were immoral, but the strategy and the tactics to divide communities and to set worker against worker. Well, we do not forget. The solidarity today and the desire for justice and truth about what happened is still as strong. I do not say these things to settle scores or to make any of my friends on the Government Benches, some of whom come from these communities and know much more about them than I do, feel uncomfortable, but the people I represent would want and expect me to say them, and it is my duty and privilege to do so.

However, the positive legacy of mining and miners is still a shining light in St Helens. The work done by the North West Miners Heritage Association is testament to that. It preserves the stories and memories, it has recreated the beautiful banners, and it provides support to old friends and comrades. As many of the physical signs of our industrial past fade from view, the association, the brass bands and the rugby league clubs keep the flame alive, and ensure that this and subsequent generations know the history of their forebears. We need to look after some of their forebears now. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington and my neighbour the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) talked about miners' pensions. I pay tribute to Colin Rooney from Haydock in my constituency, who is one of the leading campaigners on that issue. I hope that those on both Front Benches—that of the outgoing Government and that of, hopefully, the incoming Government—have heard what has been said on that.

It is important to say that mining communities such as the one I represent are as much about the future as the past. In St Helens, one of our flagship regeneration projects is the development of Parkside. It was the last Lancashire colliery to close in 1993. It lay idle for over 20 years. When I was elected nine years ago, I said that it was one of my priorities to get the project moving. That is why I am so proud that, working with the Labour council, we have secured tens of millions of pounds in funding to redevelop and renew the site, attracting public and private investment, building new infrastructure and creating employment. Working with the Labour-run Liverpool city region, we secured designated free port status, which is attracting advanced manufacturing and the jobs of the future, putting St Helens at the heart of industry and innovation again.

We are also undertaking one of the most ambitious brownfield development projects in old mining communities in Parr and Bold, creating new housing and community facilities to help those places thrive. That takes a lot of work, not least to clean up contaminated land with limited funding. I hope that in government my party will look at restoring central Government funding to do that, as part of the very welcome plans to unblock planning and build more good, appropriate and affordable housing.

We know too that we need more jobs, more skills and more business and economic growth. The "State of the Coalfields" report, which has already been referenced, gives us an enviable evidential base to put our case about where we need investment and what type of investment we need. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust continues to be a fundamental part of driving policy and progress in our areas right across the country, and it deserves ongoing and indeed enhanced support from Government to keep our communities moving ahead and to identify the help they can be given on that journey. The partnership between politicians, business and local, regional and national government is critical to that. The work done by organisations such as the Industrial Communities Alliance to drive economic, environmental and social renewal is a vital part of planning and implementing levelling up, in whatever guise and under whatever Government.

I am proud of the contribution made to those discussions and efforts by St Helens and the work we are doing there. Martin Bond, one of our councillors, is the vice-chair of the ICA for the north-west region. His grandfather, Luke Maloney, from Sutton by way of County Galway, went underground in 1930 aged 14, after his own father had been killed in the same pit, and stayed there for 40 years. That is just one example of how the past, present and future coalesce in mining communities. I want to finish by giving a sense of that. My friend Eric Foster and his comrades from the Golborne Ex Miners Association have faithfully organised an annual commemoration for the 10 men who died in the disaster at Golborne colliery in 1979. On 18 March that year, one of Britain's last major mining accidents took place there, after a build-up of methane exploded and sent a fireball searing through the mine tunnels. We gathered from across Wigan and St Helens some weeks ago to mark the 45th anniversary. We remembered those who lost their lives, John Berry, Colin Dallimore, Desmond Edwards, Patrick Grainey, Peter Grainey, Raymond Hill, John McKenna, Walter McPherson, Brian Sherman and Bernard Trumble, and we stood with Brian Rawsthorne, then a 20-year-old apprentice electrician from Garswood in my constituency, who was seriously injured but survived. He and the families of the men who perished have borne their grief with great dignity, and they and their sacrifice are not forgotten. They can rest assured that whatever we do, in everything we do in mining communities in future, they will always be part of it, and part of us.

12.32 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) for securing the debate. I am also grateful for the rescheduling of this debate from the very compressed timescale that would have been offered previously, because it is so important that we take time on this debate.

Mining has been a topic of personal relevance to me since long before I became an MP. I am a proud boy from Ferryhill, a mining village in the north of my constituency, and I am familiar with the unique sense of common bond created by the challenging circumstances emanating from the towns and villages of the Durham coalfield, which is typical of the coal communities right across Britain. Fishburn was the last mine in Sedgefield to close, in 1973, with those at Wheatley Hill, Mainsforth and Trimdon Grange all having closed in 1968. It has

[Paul Howell]

been over 50 years since those communities had a mine—so long ago that the Prime Minister at the time was Harold Wilson—but the heritage remains strong, as we see from this debate. Despite it being over half a century since the mines were there, they still identify as mining villages.

The traditions most celebrated, as we have heard, include the annual miners gala in Durham, where the banners of the mines are paraded. I have had the privilege of attending some of the Friday celebrations, where the banner is prepared for the Saturday with the associated brass bands playing. Brass bands are a strong cultural asset of our mining communities—a culture that is at least as important to the UK as any other. As a child I remember vividly the carnivals that took place, with jazz bands and floats that brought people out to enjoy themselves. Mining is so foundational to these communities that they often have half a pit wheel prominently displayed at the entrance to the village.

We laud the heroism of the coalminers for good reason. Their work was frequently dangerous, with many thousands killed by disease and in accidents, including the 73 killed at the Trimdon Grange colliery in my constituency in 1882. The Black Bull pub in Ferryhill was renamed the Dean & Chapter to respect the 73 men who lost their lives in the colliery. The local community paper is similarly called “The Chapter” as a link to the colliery. The Dean and Chapter pit, which was located next to Ferryhill, closed in 1966, and is where my grandfather mined. While the coalminers and the communities are remembered with respect and fondness, the mines themselves were not good places to work. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy), who cannot speak in this debate as he is assisting the Minister, tells me his grandfather, Ralph Mitcheson, went down Crofton pit in Blyth, having left school at 12, and made my hon. Friend’s mam promise, “Never let any of my grandkids go down that pit.”

The hon. Member for Easington and others have referred to the mineworkers pension scheme. My own position on that is very clear and is on record already. He mentioned the then Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s report on the subject. That was one of the first Committees I served on in this place, and I am a signatory to that report; I was pleased to contribute to and be part of that inquiry and I stand behind the report here and now.

There is no more important reflection of the importance of mining in my area than Redhills, which was known—and still is—as the pitmen’s Parliament. In that space, each pit had a representative chair, and now miners’ families are able to have brass discs attached to the chair naming specific miners who went down that particular colliery. I am proud to say that my grandfather, Thomas Ellis, is referenced on the Dean and Chapter chair.

We must also ensure that Members of all parties remember our roots and that we work together to celebrate mining communities’ history and encourage their future. I attended the installation of a blue plaque in Durham to celebrate John Forman, who played a central role in forming the Durham Miners Association and was its president from 1872 to 1900. Strangely, the only other politician present was the Liberal Democrat cabinet member for economy and partnerships. We need

cross-party engagement, because people such as John, who worked so hard on mine safety—even writing a paper on how coal dust ignited and caused explosions—and was seen as the head of an organisation and a social movement that transformed the lives of the people of County Durham, are the roots of our communities, and their values need to be built upon, not forgotten.

No one would dispute that the past couple of generations of residents have had more than their share of difficulties, yet the resilience they have shown has been remarkable. It is their community identity that is the foundation for everything. That is particularly evident in the community support centres that have been established, such as Ferryhill Ladder, Cornforth Partnership, Deaf Hill community centre, Trimdon Grange community centre, Trimdon village hall and many others across my Sedgefield constituency.

For the past few years, I have been co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for “left behind” neighbourhoods, which looks at the problems of deprived areas and proposes practical solutions to them. That is not just the mining villages, but they are certainly part of that cohort that could be described as left behind. We have seen our request for a community wealth fund delivered, which should be valuable to many of those communities.

One problem the APPG has consistently raised, however, is low connectivity. How can residents aspire to social mobility if they do not even have the physical mobility that would enable them to reach better jobs? In Newton Aycliffe and NETPark we have many employment opportunities, yet the bus services connecting the mining villages to them are appalling. The single most crucial factor in enabling the mining communities to thrive again is better transport connections, because they invariably have very low levels of car ownership and are too isolated for walking or cycling. Therefore, the efforts being made to improve transport links are more critical for those communities than most. I hope that the changes in the Treasury Green Book to reflect social impact can be turbocharged to deliver for those communities.

I wait with interest to see whether our new North East Mayor takes an interest in these rural connections. I fervently hope she does and that she does not just spend all her time in the urban centres of the region. It is essential that rail connectivity is also improved; I am delighted that the reopening of Ferryhill station, which will link my communities to Tyneside and Teesside, has been confirmed. I look forward to the new Mayor also committing to the Leamside line; there are rumours that she is not going to, but I hope they are false, because it would be transformational for thousands of people who currently have limited transport options and would gladly use the new stations and line to go to work and college. I will continue to work cross-party to push for delivery of that line, in particular with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I was waiting for the hon. Gentleman to get to the key moment when he would mention the Leamside line, and I was not disappointed. As he knows, there is a connection between our constituencies, and they could be made even more connected if we got the Leamside line reopened. He mentions that the newly elected Mayor may get cold feet on it. If she does, I have a bucket of hot water ready and waiting for her feet.

I have every faith that it will still be high on her agenda, and I look forward to being able to get on a train from my constituency to the hon. Gentleman's very soon.

Paul Howell: I look forward to that opportunity. I have written to the North East Mayor asking for engagement on that, and I would be delighted if the hon. Lady joined me for such a meeting, should it arise.

Ferryhill station is not just about travel; it is also about economic regeneration. The station closed as part of the Beeching cuts in 1967, the same year that the Ferryhill mines closed—and the same year, as it happens, that I moved out of Ferryhill to Newton Aycliffe, about six miles away. It meant that residents lost not just a source of local jobs, but a means of travelling to new jobs. It is therefore an imperative that the project, which was recently confirmed again by the Prime Minister, now makes urgent progress. Like any investment, it will show the communities at or near the station—Ferryhill, Chilton, Mainsforth, Dean Bank, Cornforth and Bishop Middleham—that they are valued, while also presenting increased opportunities for those that are slightly further away, such as Spennymoor and Tudhoe.

One of the tenets of my election in 2019 was the desire to improve access to opportunities for all, and no one is more needing or deserving of opportunity than the residents of what were, and still are, described as mining villages. One cause of mine has been to encourage aspiration, particularly for the young people of Sedgefield, and that flows from sessions with the ambassadors of Ferryhill primary schools, led by Glenys Newby, as well as visits to schools in Hurworth, Wheatley Hill and everywhere in between.

To enable and encourage aspiration, it is critical that we create opportunity. Opportunity comes from jobs and careers, which is why I am so pleased about the growth of NETPark, a science community within two miles of Fishburn, a former mining village. Close to my mining communities is the new town of Newton Aycliffe, which offers 10,000 jobs, including at Hitachi. It is fundamental for the recovery of the mining communities that industries of the future can be sustained, including at Hitachi. I am working with everyone from unions to the Secretary of State, to find a way for those industries to continue admirably inspiring their workforce in the future. However, they will help the communities most in need only if my mining villages can reach them via the bus connection that I mentioned.

If we wish to secure future growth, we must develop new skills. I am enormously encouraged by the growth in apprenticeships in the area, where 13,490 have started since 2010, and by the increasing quality of our schools, which is helping to deliver better educational outcomes. Over the past 14 years, we have gone from 67% of our schools being rated good or outstanding to 91% today. Opportunity is supported by education, and I have been delighted to engage not only with schools but with the amazing universities that support my constituency—most notably Durham University. I commend the work being done to reach out to communities.

I am delighted that Fiona Hill, the recently appointed chancellor of Durham University, hails from Bishop Auckland, a place with challenges similar to those in my communities, so she gets it. Fiona Hill hails from a disadvantaged background but managed to rise to work on the international stage, and has now returned to

become chancellor of Durham University. I support the university's "Shy bairns get nowt" project, which is an attempt to instil more confidence in our young people so that they speak up and are not only heard but listened to.

I have such hope for the former mining communities in my area. We need to continue efforts to support education and aspiration, and to deliver better transport for those communities. Despite their challenges, I can see the potential they have to reinvent themselves. However, I cannot stress enough just how crucial bus and train services are to that process. I look forward to seeing the services improve and those amazing communities become the places that they deserve to be.

12.44 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for all his important work on this issue, and I thank him and the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) for leading this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). I will mention Channel 4, so I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The miners' strike of 1984 ripped the lives of miners and their families apart. It ripped towns such as Barnsley apart. The miners were shamefully branded "the enemy within" by the then Prime Minister. Men were imprisoned because they were fighting for their jobs. Women ran soup kitchens because they were fighting for their communities. Over 30,000 men worked down the pits in Barnsley to keep the lights on and the country moving. The work was dirty and dangerous, but it was respected.

However, the Ridley report of 1977 planned the destruction of Britain's coalmining industry, and its tactics were deployed under Margaret Thatcher in 1984. They were illustrated in the excellent Channel 4 documentary on the miners' strike earlier this year, which highlighted the experiences, impact and legacy of the strike 40 years on, and showed in particular new footage of the events at Orgreave on 18 June. Orgreave changed how we are policed as a society, but it also changed many lives that day, as the documentary so powerfully highlights. Trust in the police is still impacted in areas such as mine, even today. Constituents of mine in Barnsley are still waiting for justice for what happened to them at Orgreave, and they deserve to know the truth.

Many men who went down the pit have suffered from long-term health issues. The previous Labour Government gave £2 billion-worth of compensation to coalminers who had contracted lung diseases as a result of their work for British Coal, and around £500 million for those who were injured by their use of vibrating tools down the pit. However, although former miners can seek compensation through the industrial injuries disablement benefits claims process, many often report that the system is difficult to navigate.

Sadly, former miners and their families often tell the National Union of Mineworkers that they have not been assessed correctly and are therefore deemed ineligible for the compensation they deserve. It is often left to spouses to fight for miners' compensation after their death, waiting for a post mortem to prove that they did indeed have lungs full of coal dust and that it was the cause of their severe ill health and subsequent early death. We must do better in our approach to this issue,

[Stephanie Peacock]

so that the men struggling with poor health are given the support they need. The NUM does an important job to this day in supporting miners in their struggles with industrial disease, and it has worked with my office on a number of cases in recent years.

Another issue that affects thousands of my constituents is the mineworkers' pension scheme. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and I met miners who had travelled from Barnsley to Westminster to meet us and campaign for change to the scheme. The average miner has a pension of just £84 per week, and widows are on a lot less. Through the 50-50 surplus-sharing arrangement, the Government have taken £4.8 billion pounds out of the scheme, and that figure is set to rise to £6 billion. In response to a parliamentary written question, Ministers have admitted to me that the "take it or leave it" deal when the pits were privatised was done without any actuarial advice.

I was pleased to secure the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee inquiry into that injustice. I am grateful to the Committee's then Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones)—he is now shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury—for all his work on the issue. His report clearly concluded that the Government should not be in the business of profiting from miners' pensions. Having campaigned to secure that enquiry, I have raised this issue dozens of times in this place. I have met Ministers and shadow Ministers and, earlier this year, I visited the Treasury to make the case once again. I will continue to campaign for action and justice on the mineworkers' pension scheme.

Almost 90% of the mining workforce became unemployed in the first 10 years after the 1984 strike. For communities in the north, Scotland, south Wales and, of course, Yorkshire, where coalmining was a vital industry, the effects were devastating. In 1994, a year after the pit closed, Grimethorpe in Barnsley East was named the poorest village in Britain. That was portrayed so powerfully in the film "Brassed Off", which showed the impact on our community. Last year we marked the 30th anniversary since the pit ceased production. Hundreds attended the miners' memorial in Grimethorpe on the Thursday before Christmas, as they do every year, to remember the men who went to work and did not return home, as was sadly too often the case at collieries across the country. Indeed, I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the Member for Doncaster Central, regularly attend the Armthorpe memorial and have been a strong champion for miners.

Economically, areas such as Barnsley have never recovered. In its report, "Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields", the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has made a number of recommendations for former coalfield areas. These include stronger policies to grow local economies and tackle economic inactivity, improvements to the transport infrastructure, and increased provision of apprenticeships. Following my questions in this place, I was pleased that the Secretary of State agreed to visit Barnsley East to see at first hand the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, based in Wombwell in my constituency. However, despite being deserving by every measure, Barnsley East has missed out on levelling-up funding. Levelling up was meant to support left-behind areas, but it has failed to do so.

Barnsley was built on coal. Mining powered communities and our communities powered a nation. When I held an Adjournment debate on the mineworkers' pension scheme in 2019, there were 160,000 men in that scheme, but today that number has sadly fallen to just under 125,000. Time is running out. We can and should do better for our miners, whether that be on miners' health, on miners' pensions or for mining areas, as they face the economic legacy of pit closures to this day. The National Union of Mineworkers has a banner in Barnsley that states:

"The past we inherit, the future we build."

That is just what we need to do: build a better future for our coalfield communities.

12.50 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate. I am the furthest south, by a long way, among the Members who will participate, but the fact is that Cornwall has an incredibly proud heritage and history of mining. It is not just about our history; we still have a thriving mining sector in my constituency, and some amazing opportunities to come. When most people think about my constituency, they are aware of the beaches, the coasts and all that we have to offer tourists, but the middle part of my community—what we often call the clay villages, because of the history of china clay mining there—has far more in common with former mining villages in the north of England than it does with the rest of the south of England. Representing such a diverse constituency that contains so many different elements presents me with some interesting questions and challenges.

Our mining history in Cornwall goes back literally 4,000 years—it goes back to the bronze age, when tin was discovered and mined to create the bronze that was needed in that era. By Roman times, tin was already a much traded and sought-after commodity that was being extracted in Cornwall. At that time, Cornwall was actually described as one of the wealthiest strips of land anywhere on earth, because of the incredible wealth brought by tin mining. By medieval times, Cornwall's status as the tin mining capital of the world had become so important, and the wealth it generated for the Crown had become so significant, that a set of special bodies and laws was established through the stannary courts and parliaments to protect that mining wealth. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Cornish tin and copper mining reached its zenith: the metals mined from Cornwall helped to provide the raw materials for the industrial revolution and were a major contributor to the economic growth of our nation, and indeed of the empire.

Cornwall has also been at the forefront of pioneering in mining. The high-pressure steam engine was invented in Cornwall by Richard Trevithick, which led to the creation of the iconic engine houses. At one point there were over 200 engine houses in Cornwall, and when Cornish miners went around the world they took that technology with them—in many parts of the world where mining takes place, the same engine houses can be seen. We in Cornwall also invented the safety lamp: Humphry Davy's invention was another major bit of pioneering safety equipment for miners of the time.

More recently, the extraction of china clay in my constituency has been at the heart of the Cornish economy. Cornwall has the largest and highest-grade

deposit of kaolin—also known as china clay—anywhere in the world, and for 250 years now has been extracting, producing and exporting high-quality china clay. I am proud that several of my ancestors, and my grandfather and my uncle, worked in the china clay industry. By 1910, Cornwall was producing 50% of the world's china clay, which revolutionised mid-Cornwall, the part of Cornwall that I am proud to represent.

For example, the tiny village of West Polmear had only nine residents, but then Charles Rashleigh invested huge sums of money to create factories and homes for the china clay workers, and very quickly it became a village of several hundred people. He renamed the village Charlestown—not after the King, as many think, but after himself. Many people will be familiar with Charlestown today as a thriving visitor centre, and will probably also recognise it as one of the places that was regularly featured in the BBC's "Poldark" series.

That period also saw the Cornish mining diaspora, where about 250,000 Cornish miners and their families left Cornwall to spread literally around the world. At that time, it was said that if you found a hole in the ground anywhere in the world, you would find a Cornishman at the bottom of it. Today, statues commemorating Cornish miners can be found in the state of Victoria in Australia; and there is a Cornish waterwheel in British Columbia in Canada, a Cornish cultural society in Mexico and, most importantly, a Cousin Jack's pasty shop in California. All are clear signs of how Cornish miners spread around the world.

However, like many of the stories we have heard this afternoon, the clay villages in my constituency, as with any mining sector, have faced huge challenges as the number of people employed has fallen. The china clay industry used to employ around 10,000 people in my constituency, but today that figure is just over 1,000. That has presented a number of challenges for those communities, economically, socially, and in terms of health. They are some of the most disadvantaged communities in Cornwall, and indeed in the country. They face challenges in finding jobs: many of the jobs we now have in Cornwall that are linked to tourism or food production are lower paid and often seasonal. As other Members have mentioned, the lack of good transport links also presents a huge challenge.

However, great work has been going on in recent years. We are seeing the regeneration of old china clay pits through the creation of a garden village, with the construction of about 1,300 new houses, a new school and new workplace buildings, and real investment in that area. A new link road is being built through the china clay area, with £80 million of Government investment, which will improve connectivity. That is the single biggest investment in mid-Cornwall by any Government. The Government have also provided £50 million through the levelling-up fund to upgrade the branch line between Newquay and Par and connect it through to Truro and Falmouth—what we call the mid-Cornwall metro—which will also greatly improve transport connectivity for many of those china clay villages.

We are also seeing significant investment in St Austell Hospital, which serves many of those communities—a £15 million surgical hub is being built right now and will be opened in the coming months—and the redevelopment of Cornwall College in St Austell will serve many of those communities, with a brand-new campus about to be built in the coming months. The

Government have recognised the needs of those communities. More than any previous Government, they have provided those villages with investment to help to address some of the disadvantage they face.

However, this is not just about the mining of the past. Cornwall has a great opportunity that I believe will breathe new life into and revive our mining sector: lithium extraction. We have known for 200 years that there is lithium in Cornwall—I have seen old mining maps from the 1800s showing significant deposits of lithium in Cornwall—but it is only recently, because of the need for lithium for producing batteries, particularly for electric vehicles, that there has been a market for the mineral. Two companies, Cornish Lithium and Imerys British Lithium, are looking to develop the extraction of lithium, which will provide the UK with a secure domestic supply of what will be one of the most sought-after elements in the decades to come. It is estimated that they could produce 50% of the lithium that British car manufacturing will need for the batteries we will have to produce.

That is very good news not only for Cornwall, but for the UK. In one of his previous jobs, the Minister came to visit us, and he is aware of the opportunity presented. It is not only a great economic opportunity, but I believe it provides us with an opportunity to ensure that the extraction of elements going into the manufacturing of batteries in the UK has the highest environmental and ethical standards. One concern that local people sometimes raise with me is that lithium extraction does not have a particularly good reputation around the world either in the ethics applied to it or in its environmental impact. However, we can produce lithium in Cornwall to the highest possible environmental standards and to the highest ethical standards, which I think puts us in a very strong competitive position in the global market.

There is a great opportunity to revive the mining sector and give mid-Cornwall a great future for decades to come. Being good at taking things out of the ground has been part of Cornwall's history, but a lot of the value and the higher-paid jobs have ended up elsewhere. This time, we want to ensure that we capture as much as possible of the value of lithium extraction and that we keep it in Cornwall. We must create the well-paid jobs in Cornwall and keep the value there as much as we can, so that there is a lasting and positive impact on our economy.

We are incredibly proud of Cornwall's heritage and history of mining—it is in our DNA; it is what our people have done for thousands of years—but there is also a huge opportunity for it to be part of Cornwall's future, and for Cornwall to play a significant part in our national prosperity once again.

1.3 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1984 miners' strike. As we heard in his speech, he has fought for miners and their families since he was elected in 2010.

It is also a privilege to speak in this debate alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). Along with his entire community, he was out on strike for the whole year to save the British coal industry, and what he and other miners experienced was a disgrace.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

It was brutal, it was callous and it was completely unjust, and I support my hon. Friend in his repeated call for a public inquiry.

If Margaret Thatcher was at the Dispatch Box today, I would ask her: “How could you have done this? How could you have left what were once real communities, full of life and solidarity, in such a state of despair and disrepair? How could you do this without any plan, without any reparations and without any transition—nothing for the miners and their families?” Those questions apply to all those who enabled her: her MPs, her peers and her allies in the media, who spun lie after lie about the miners and the mining industry. To all those who did not speak out, I ask: “How could you sit on the fence when this cultural and economic vandalism was taking place?”

We must be clear about something else. Miners had no choice but to strike because they knew exactly what was at stake not just for themselves, but for their families, their villages and the entire country even. At the very least, the Government owe an apology to the miners and their families.

There is so much to cover in this debate, such as the aftermath of the strike, the numerous injustices, the wrongful convictions, the health inequalities and the economic wrongs that go on to this day. I know I will not be able to cover everything, but time permitting, I will try to cover the role of my constituency, the role of women in the north-east and the policies we need to see in coalfield areas today.

I am privileged—genuinely so—to represent the City of Durham, which hosts the Durham miners’ gala every year. It is the greatest demonstration of working-class solidarity in the world, and it would not be possible without the Durham Miners Association, which is headquartered at Redhills, also in my constituency. Can I put on record my thanks to the DMA, particularly Alan Mardghum and Stephen Guy, for its work in hosting the gala, its support to ex-miners, and its support to me and my office?

Since 1871, there have been only a few occasions when the gala has been cancelled—during the world wars, the general strike and, most recently, the pandemic. It was also cancelled in 1984, months after the strike began. Instead, a strike rally was held in its place. One right-wing paper said that Durham looked like “a city under siege” on that day, but the footage presents another picture. It shows banners and brass bands with communities and families marching together—no different to any other gala. It is a small insight into the way the media distorted the reality of the miners and their communities that even an event as joyous as a rally in Durham could be turned into something sinister by the press. That occurred throughout the strike, and no more so than at Orgreave. We cannot forget what happened on that day. To put it simply, we need a public inquiry.

On a clear day, people at the gala can see the top of Durham cathedral from the racecourse where they assemble with their banners. Hon. Members will know that the cathedral and its community play an important role in the gala. The miners festival service, during which banners are blessed by the Bishop of Durham, has been going on for as long as the gala itself. The banners are beautiful, and I am proud to have contributed to one

and to have assisted others in getting theirs made. They represent people and places, and they can be as theological as they are political.

In the south aisle of the cathedral is the miners’ memorial, which is dedicated to Durham miners who lost their lives in the county’s pits. Next to it is a book of remembrance listing all the men and boys who lost their lives, and above it hangs a miner’s lamp. The cathedral played an important role in the strike, and no more so than through David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham. Let us recall some of his words from his enthronement service in September 1984. He said that “the miners must not be defeated. They are desperate for their communities and this desperation forces them to action.”

Jenkins went on to speak about what happens when a mine closes and the impact of that on the community. He put it bluntly when he said:

“It is death, depression and desolation.”

When I spoke to my friend Dave Anderson, the former Member of Parliament for Blaydon and a former miner himself, he told me that the effect of the pit closures could be seen within months. In fact, in his speech following the death of Margaret Thatcher, he said:

“The village where I lived had seen coal mining for almost two centuries. In a matter of months after closure, we were gripped by a wave of petty crime—burglary and car crime—mostly related to drugs. We have never recovered from it.”—[*Official Report*, 10 April 2013; Vol. 560, c. 1672.]

What Jenkins said was prophetic.

Although the mines are now closed—the last mine in the City of Durham closed in 1984—we can still secure justice for those affected. For instance, the Minister could say at the Dispatch Box that he will introduce legislation to pardon the miners who were wrongly convicted during the strike, because some of the stories I have heard are as absurd as they are unjust. They include that of a Durham miner who was accused of a breach of the peace for pouring a cup of tea at the picket line. I repeat what I said at the start: we need a public inquiry.

We also need economic justice for our communities. The DMA told me that a miner’s job created many other jobs in the community and beyond, including at least five in the supply chain. If we reflect on this point, the destruction and recklessness of Thatcher’s Government becomes unambiguous. I asked at the beginning how her Government could do this to their own people. The mine was at the heart of the community. It was the primary source of employment and everyone knew what the consequences were for children. It is an injustice that no transitional plans were made, as there were and still are in other countries. Germany, for instance, took a long-term view about manufacturing; why didn’t we? We had the potential to lead the world in alternative sources of energy. We could have reskilled and restructured our industry, but instead the Government chose destruction. And I say to the Labour Front Bench that we can still do this, and we should do this when we form the next Government.

Thankfully, not all women were like Margaret Thatcher during the strike. The contribution of working-class women during that strike cannot be underestimated. Heather Wood, an activist during the strike and a great friend to me, told me that the strike might not have lasted so long had women not been involved. In the

north-east, women's groups like the one Heather is involved in were feeding up to 1,000 people a day five days a week. They organised holidays for the children of the miners, provided childcare and food during the school holidays and presents and toys for the children on the Christmas of 1984, and helped parents find school uniforms when the autumn term began, assisted people with their household bills, and provided emotional support when things got tough, as they so often did. It was truly heroic work, all done on a shoestring, all done in the spirit of working-class solidarity. And when the miners returned to work in March 1985 the women's support groups in the north-east continued, and, importantly, their involvement in the strike politicised them and many went into public service, becoming councillors and community activists, and they are still doing that today with the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign.

Mrs Hodgson: I am one of those women who were politicised by Margaret Thatcher. I always say Margaret Thatcher is the reason I joined the Labour party and the reason I am standing here today. The younger generation might be curious as to why we are all talking about Margaret Thatcher so much; those who did not grow up in the north-east in one of those mining communities might not quite understand how it felt, but she smote our communities. That is how it felt to grow up under her reign. Does my hon. Friend agree that if all our mining communities were clustered together into one region, even today that region would statistically be the poorest region in the country, and that is what we are talking about today?

Mary Kelly Foy: I could not agree more; Margaret Thatcher politicised me too—to do exactly the opposite of what she did. Since the destruction and closure of the pits we have seen continuous health and economic inequality, and my hon. Friend is right that we are one of the poorest regions, and we desperately need to do something because, as has been pointed out, the miners created the wealth of this country in the first place.

The miners' strike might not have been won, but the working class definitely were not defeated; they are bruised but not defeated. People are still coming to the gala—more than ever in fact—and former mining communities are still having their banners blessed at Durham Cathedral, and that means something. Those of us who represent the mining communities will keep fighting for justice for our communities, and I repeat that there must be no less than a pardon for miners wrongly convicted in the strike, a full public inquiry into the events of the strike, including those at Orgreave, and economic justice for miners and their families.

The miners were not the enemy within. They came from families who fought in two world wars. They represented the best of this country, and I am proud to represent them in Parliament. What we need now is a Labour Government to revitalise these coalfield areas, deliver the justice that miners and their communities deserve, and fulfil the words of our community—the past we inherit, the future we build.

1.15 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I want to declare an interest on a whole number of fronts for today's contribution, but first I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington

(Grahame Morris) for bringing this topic to the House's attention. We have heard some fantastic speeches here from everyone across the House.

I want to declare an interest because I am probably the only miner out of 650 MPs currently sitting in the House. I am probably the only Member who left school at the age of 16 and went to the pits together with my father. My father was not one of those miners who said, "I'm sorry, you canna gan doon the pit because it's a dangerous job." My father, like lots of others, wanted and got their kids employment in the pit. That is the way it was, and I am absolutely proud: I am proud to be a miner; I am proud to have spent my younger days on the coalface six miles under the North sea, only 80 feet below the seabed; and I have got some tremendous memories. I am really proud of what we have achieved: what we achieved collectively, as communities, as the National Union of Mineworkers; how we supported each other and would not turn our backs on friends and colleagues and those in most need. We were a real fighting force in the communities, not just in the north-east, not just in Durham and Northumberland, but right across the country.

It has been mentioned that Margaret Thatcher stated clearly that the miners were the enemy within. Despite people being offended by that, I see it as a badge of honour. I see that as a badge of honour because I opposed everything that the Tories were doing right up to the miners' strike and I oppose everything, or nearly everything, they have done since then. I am one of the enemy within.

I remember being on the picket line with my father—who is no longer with us—my brothers, my cousins and my friends. The only crime we were committing was to fight for jobs and the future. It was never about wages, terms and conditions; it was about the right to work and the right to ensure that our communities would be secure in the future. And we got absolutely blitzed for doing so.

Our pride turns to great anger when we think about how the Government at the time—the Thatcher Government—turned the whole state against hard-working individuals, their families and their communities and against their only means of surviving and the way in which their communities were economically stimulated, and when I think about the way in which the police, and some say the armed forces, were used against miners during the miner's strike. I did not just witness it; I was part of it. I saw the brutality, and I could give a number of personal tales that I would prefer not to at this moment in time. But I was proud, and I am still proud, to represent the mining communities of south-east Northumberland. I live in and represent Ashington, known as "coal town" because it was perhaps the biggest coal-producing town in Europe if not the world, and there were lots of pits in places including Bedlington, Newbiggin, Morpeth, Stakeford and Guide Post.

We can look at how the miners were treated during the strike and at the fact that 40 years on, we still have 11,000 who were arrested by the police. There were a thousand sacked miners, and many of them never got employment again anywhere. Many were acquitted because of dishonest police practices and police evidence. Again, I personally witnessed the horrors of the Government policy against my own community, my own family and me personally.

The calls for a pardon for the mining industry were accepted in Scotland, which was a fantastic move forward, and we need to look to do that here. I personally do not

[*Ian Lavery*]

want a pardon, because I did what I wanted to do because I wanted to support my community, and for many years. I do not want anybody telling me they are sorry I was arrested, because I would not believe them. The lives of many miners and lots of other people were absolutely shattered as a result of the miners' strikes. I know people who were arrested, who had never been in trouble with the police before, and who ended up in police cells. The plea bargaining meant either they went to prison or they accepted a charge for something they had not been involved with at all. It was so corrupt. It was absolutely disgraceful. That is why we need a public inquiry.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that one of the things that the documentaries and today's debate will achieve, I hope, is for the younger generation to learn more about this period in time, and that it was as close as we will ever get to becoming a police state? If men were travelling across the country in a car, they could be pulled over and questioned about where they were going and even arrested. We need people to understand that that is what happened, when all our communities were doing was fighting for their jobs.

Ian Lavery: I have to say that I cannot watch those documentaries; it is too emotional. I agree with every sentiment that my hon. Friend expresses.

We should never forget what happened. A number of my hon. Friends have mentioned the Durham miners, the Durham miners' gala and specifically Alan, Stephen and the whole team there, and I have huge admiration for them. What a wonderful day the Durham miners' gala is, with hundreds of thousands of individuals flying their banners, brass bands, music, celebration and speeches remembering the mining industry. I have got a lot of time for the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, which has fought valiantly to seek justice for individuals involved in Orgreave. I have lots of admiration and support for the Women Against Pit Closures. In particular, somebody who goes unnoticed a lot is a lady from my patch in south-east Northumberland, Ann Lilburn. She was known as the housewife from Hadston, and she was absolutely fantastic leading the women of south-east Northumberland and later the Women Against Pit Closures. I have to say, if it had not been for the women during the miners' strike, I am not sure how long it would have lasted. Their support was absolutely fabulous. I pay tribute to a man who has sadly passed on, Rick Sumner, who for years supported the National Justice for Mineworkers campaign, which was to remember sacked miners.

A whole number of issues need to and will be raised, but I want to discuss the mineworkers' pension scheme. The Labour party manifestos of 2017 and 2019 agreed to redress the huge anomaly that everybody will mention. Again, I declare an interest, as I am the only current member of the mineworkers' pension scheme in this place. I am still a member, so I declare that interest. The mineworkers' pension scheme is deferred wages, like any pension, and that should be recognised. The 50:50 split came in 1994, and that was a crime. We have had £4.4 billion siphoned off and trousered by the Tory Government. Let us be honest, the BEIS Committee recommendations are not too hard to accept. The money

is already in the funds, and the BEIS Committee said that that money should be redistributed to members, many of whom are on less than £85 a week. Some 50% are on less than £65 a week, 25% are on less than £35 a week, and 10% are on less than £10 a week. Let us get them paid and make sure we do the right business.

One thing that needs to be focused on is compensation, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). Mining was a tough, hard and severe job, and people have had severe personal problems and consequences as result. The Government imposed wholesale vindictive industrial austerity on the mining communities. I give a big thank you to the NUM and the advice centres up and down the country for the fantastic work they continue to do. We have to look at the miners' pneumoconiosis scheme, which is awful. It is so difficult for members to attract compensation, even though it is one of the most dreadful diseases that we can ever imagine. Can we not get the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the coal industry liabilities team, Nabarro and the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council together in a room to see how we can get these payments made? People are now suffering greatly as a result of working underground, and we must make sure that they can gain compensation without the default position being to deny any claims. We have issues with CISWO, levelling up, the destruction of the mining community and much more.

To conclude, I understand that the Minister's two grandfathers were miners. I think that is right; I have read that somewhere, although I am not sure how true it is, but he will understand the situation. We need to look at levelling up. We need to look at a pardon for miners. We need justice for the MPS. We need a public inquiry into policing of the strike. We need a wholesale review of compensation schemes in the main and, in particular, of the pneumoconiosis scheme.

1.27 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy), who is no longer in his place, for securing today's debate. It is always a real pleasure to follow our miner, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery).

Coalmining was a mainstay of the economy for almost a century. In South Shields, we had St Hilda's, Whitburn, Harton and Westoe collieries. It is therefore no surprise that people in my constituency would be hard-pressed not to know or be related to a miner. Generations of families worked down our pits. Our former pitmen will testify that it was not a glamorous job; it was dirty, hard and dangerous graft, but those negatives were well worth it for the steady income, the camaraderie, the friendship and the community that they built around our pits. That way of life and the social bonds are the thing that all former pitmen and their families say they miss the most.

Thatcherism has many ugly legacies, but the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985 was one of the most visceral, personal and defining moments of the 20th century. It was the moment of the strongest resistance against her industrial vandalism and the hollowing out of our mining communities. Not content with closing our docks and shipyards, the pits suddenly became uneconomical,

she said. Those who tried to resist this blatant destruction of our communities were arrested and convicted. This weaponisation of the state against ordinary men and women fighting for their livelihoods during the strikes draws worrying parallels with today's anti-strike legislation. It is why we need a public inquiry into Orgreave, and it is why this Government should introduce similar legislation to that introduced in the Scottish Parliament pardoning those convicted of matters relating to the strike. All they were trying to do was save their jobs.

I know all too well what unemployment—or the constant threat of it—can do both mentally and physically: it is utterly soul-destroying. There is one heartbreaking story that all of us in South Shields are sadly familiar with: that of a lovely family man and colliery engineer made redundant who, after dropping his children off at school, put a chain across the front door, wrote a goodbye letter to his family, climbed up the stairs, went into his bathroom, poured petrol over his clothes and, with a match, set himself alight. In 1993, his pit—Westoe pit—closed, signalling the end of not just coalmining in South Tyneside but a tradition and a way of life.

Our memories of the solidarity of the trade union movement and the rejection of the trickle-down economics that have proven such a driver of inequalities in our region have endured, because the challenges facing former coalfield communities are not consigned to the history books; they have deepened alongside regional inequalities. The economic gap between coalfield areas and the rest of the UK has been widening considerably over the last decade. Average earnings for workers in former coalfield areas are 7% below the national average. That is the legacy of de-industrialisation.

South Shields, as a post-industrial and coastal constituency, has faced and continues to face several challenges. Those are challenges that we have proven time and again that we will always overcome. In South Shields, we do not wait for Government help that never comes—we get on with stuff. Our port of Tyne is now the base of the biggest offshore wind farm in the world. We are home to hundreds of small businesses, and we have been instrumental in the fight against poverty, paving the way for holiday clubs and setting up a mobile community supermarket.

The Government's levelling-up rhetoric rings hollow in my constituency, which has been rejected for towns fund and freeport bids and two rounds of levelling-up funding. The level of child poverty in South Shields remains stubbornly high at 40% and unemployment across South Tyneside is 6.7%, which is higher than the north-east average, yet in the Chancellor's recent Budget he allocated London's Canary Wharf double the amount of funding that our entire region will get.

The privatisation of once-nationalised industries that followed our pit closures has done nothing but deepen inequality, delivering profits for shareholders and decimating services that we all rely on. That is happening at the same time that the Government are pocketing the miners' pension surplus. More than £4 billion has been given to the Government, with £420 million of that in the last three years alone. The Government keep saying that we need to strike a fair balance, but there is nothing fair about it when miners and their widows are left destitute on as little as £18 a week. We should not be surprised, because as the WASPI women know all too well, this Government have form when it comes to pension grabbing.

Our miners were prosecuted and made redundant, and saw the heart ripped out of their communities, and now they are being robbed of their pensions, their retirement and the dignity that they all deserve.

We know all too well in South Shields that if you close a pit, you kill a community. Our proud mining heritage will always remain because of people like Gary Wilkinson, a local film maker, Bob Olley, our local artist, and Alan Mardghum and Stephen Guy from the Durham Miners' Association, and places like South Shields Museum. Thanks to them, the generations who follow will know that underneath the South Shields streets, housing estates and fields they walk on, there were once thousands of pitmen gathering coal to power our country. We are proud of the past that we have inherited in South Shields, and it is one that we will continue to use to build our future—one that we will build with the next Labour Government.

1.33 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate? I am proud to have been born and brought up in Dailly, which is a coalmining village in South Ayrshire, alongside the former mining towns and villages of Cumnock, New Cumnock, Dalmellington and Patna that are also in my constituency.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, my late father Peter Dorans DCM was employed as a coalminer at one of the three mines surrounding the village. He worked at the coalface. As a coalminer, my father suffered, as many did, from common industrial diseases including vibration white finger and carpal tunnel syndrome from the frequent use of heavy drilling equipment, and partial deafness. Up to the day of his death, every time he coughed, he brought up coal dust from his lungs.

Many thousands of coalminers suffered other medical conditions including emphysema and breathing-related illnesses. Many lost limbs and suffered from other life-limiting conditions and injuries and early death as a result of the working conditions in the mines at those times. Many miners also lost their lives in mining disasters. I will highlight just two from my constituency.

In September 1950, the Knockshinnoch mining disaster occurred near New Cumnock when a glaciated lake filled with liquid peat and moss flooded the pit, trapping more than 100 miners underground for a number of days. Thirteen men died. In November 1962, at the Barony colliery near Cumnock, a mine shaft collapsed trapping two contract workers, Thomas Fyvie and George Wade, together with two colliery employees, Henry Green and John McNeil. Despite valiant and sustained efforts to rescue them, they remain entombed deep underground to this day. I pay tribute to those men and all who have lost their lives and suffered appalling life-shortening health conditions and injuries as a result of working in the coalmines.

The debt owed by this country to the men who risked their lives to power the country and economy for generations is immense. Not only did coalminers and their families make that possible; they paid a terrible price over the centuries in loss of life and limb, and in shortened lives caused by the brutal working conditions and inadequate housing and health services, just to enable others to become wealthy—some obscenely so.

[Allan Dorans]

Without doubt, in the last two centuries, robust, hard-working, proud men worked in incredibly difficult circumstances for what was a paltry wage—they often relied on meeting unattainable, backbreaking daily or weekly targets to earn a barely liveable wage. Despite those difficulties, the miners and their families created and sustained strong, supportive communities in the face of adversity and came together to look after each other in difficult times. [Interruption.] Excuse me.

Large-scale coal production ended in my constituency when the two largest coalmines in the area—the Killoch and the Barony—ceased production in 1987 and 1989 respectively, with the loss of thousands of mining jobs and the knock-on effect of the loss of countless jobs in the supply chain and the local economy.

Grahame Morris: The hon. Gentleman is making really important points about the loss of life in mining disasters, a number of which occurred in my constituency too. However, there is the ongoing legacy of industrial disease. Yesterday, I spoke to some miners from the midlands, who were lobbying Parliament and pointed out the injustice of the current schemes. One of them was suffering from chest disease—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. To qualify for compensation, the requirement was 20 years of underground work, but he had worked only 19 years, so he was excluded. There are a number of other examples like that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) finds that he is having difficulty speaking and wants to take some time, I could move to the next speaker and come back to him.

Allan Dorans: I think that I will be okay, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have had a drink, so I will continue.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I totally agree that the system is terribly unjust and that those miners should be properly compensated.

With great difficulty, I resist the temptation to mention the part played in the demise of the coal industry by the actions of the late former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. [Interruption.] The closure of the coalmines and the subsequent—[Interruption.] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will take a minute.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Alex Davies-Jones.

1.39 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans). As the proud chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, it is a privilege to speak in this debate. I put on record my thanks to the vice-chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy), who sadly is no longer in his place, for securing today's important debate. I also thank the other vice-chair, the right hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), who is in his place, and the former vice-chair, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), who had to resign following his elevation to the Government Whips Office.

Before I begin, it is important to emphasise that former coalfield areas make up a significant part of the country, spanning Wales, Scotland and England, with a combined population larger than Scotland, at around 5.7 million people. These areas are far too big to be ignored. As the daughter and granddaughter of former miners, this topic is of great significance to me, and to many of my constituents in Pontypridd and Taff Ely. This year is the 40th anniversary of the start of the miners' strike. My father, who was at Orgreave, was one of those who went out on strike. The values he stood for—community, dignity and fairness—are the same values I seek to uphold. Even a generation on, the pain for those affected is still raw, yet the legacy of coalmining is about so much more than the miners' strike. Coal is no longer dug in our areas, but that rich seam that powered Britain's industrial revolution still runs deep in the veins of our communities. The closure of the mines may be in the past, but the people living with the consequences are not. They are living, breathing communities.

For the generation, which includes me, that has grown up since the strike, the challenges are different. Coalfield communities no longer suffer the mass unemployment of the '80s and '90s, but are we to believe that this change is progress? Truth be told, many former coalfield areas still lag behind much of the rest of the country. In some places, the number of jobs lost may have been replaced, but in far too many cases the respected skilled mining and engineering jobs have been replaced with low quality, poorly paid employment. That was starkly highlighted by the all-party group's recent report, "Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields". I am immensely grateful to my colleagues on both sides of the House who helped shape that report, and I pay tribute to the Industrial Communities Alliance, without which the inquiry and subsequent report would not have been possible. The report represents a pivotal moment in the coalfield regeneration agenda, and sets out key steps for improving former mining communities. For the sake of time, I will focus on just a few.

Strong policies are needed to grow local economies in our former coalfields. That means an end to the city-centric model of growth. Let us be clear: the idea that growth in the cities will inevitably trickle down to our towns and mining villages is utter nonsense. Coalfield communities have a strong identity. In many cases, if people have to move away for work or commute to nearby cities, it is because they have no choice. The Government's levelling-up initiatives are, sadly, just a slogan. We need to be honest about what small, short-term pots of money are expected to achieve. There needs to be a new model of local and regional development that places the emphasis on growing local economies, and that provides long-term financial certainty to local authorities and other partners and stakeholders.

One way in which we can develop coalfield economies is by investing in suitable premises for small and medium-sized businesses. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust has a successful model of investing in units for small firms, and recycling the profits to support the local community. The winding up of the coalfields enterprise fund and the coalfields growth fund has resulted in an unexpected windfall for the Treasury of some £15 million. That may be small change to the Treasury, but for our communities it could be transformational. It is therefore disappointing that the Government have so far refused to return that money to the coalfields to support a tried and tested investment programme.

While I am on the topic of money coming back to our communities, I briefly want to mention CISWO—the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation—which was set up to support assets following the closure of our mines. The assets—our miners’ welfare hall, playing fields, facilities and village halls—were paid for by the miners and bestowed in trust to that organisation. Sadly, so many Members in this place have shared frustration about the woeful and appalling operation, management and engagement of the charity. I urge the Minister to look into this as a matter of urgency and to talk to the charities Minister about what can be done. Enough is enough. We need direct action about exactly what is happening in our communities as a result of this charity’s actions.

Let me express further disappointment, as others have, in the Government once again rejecting the recommendations of the Business and Trade Committee about renegotiating the mineworkers’ pension scheme. The Treasury has already surpassed £5 billion of surpluses. Surely, at a time when many families not just in my constituency but across the country face hardship in the cost of living crisis, it is only fair that the miners who contributed to the scheme be entitled to a fairer share of the surpluses.

In addition to the Committee’s recommendations, the APPG recently celebrated the publication of the “State of the Coalfields” report, commissioned by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. The CRT does fantastic work to breathe life back into our former coalfields, and I was proud to join the organisation to celebrate the launch. However, its findings only reiterate the necessity of the ICA’s recommendations. For example, the city-centric factor that I mentioned is backed up by the report’s findings that more older people live in our former coalfields than younger people, with younger people graduating and moving away to cities to seek job opportunities and, sadly, not returning. These factors are pushing our former coalfields even further behind, as the employment gap causes an increase in benefit claimants and people having no choice but to commute to cities for work.

The report found that, among the four focus areas analysed, south Wales performed the worst for employment shortfall and for the number of out-of-work benefits claimants, which is of deep concern to me as a south Wales MP. Upon individual inspection we can see progress for our former coalfields, but they lag behind the rest of the UK. The report found that the average hourly earnings for former coalfield areas are 6% to 7% lower than the national average, which is shocking. We truly have a lot of work to do, but thanks to this fantastic report we have a way to do it, and a way to navigate it has been paved.

I understand more than most the importance of devolution and the power of giving local communities the autonomy to make change. However, in the case of coal tip safety, it is anomalous that the Welsh Government should be financially responsible for addressing a pre-devolution issue when other legacies of the coal industry, such as water pollution, gas leaks and pit shaft safety, are the responsibility of the UK Government-funded Coal Authority. Because of the landscape of the Welsh valleys, our communities are more at risk than those in any other part of the UK. The prospect of any repeat of the terrible tragedy of Aberfan is truly unthinkable. As a result, the burden of making coal tips safe has fallen disproportionately on the Welsh Government and local authorities in Wales. That cannot be fair.

When I spoke of values such as community, dignity and fairness, it was not in the vague, philosophical sense; these recommendations are the practical application of those values. Just as my father stood up for his community 40 years ago, it is incumbent upon us to stand up for our coalfield communities. We must take the next steps needed to ensure that they are fairer and more prosperous for the next 40 years.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Would the hon. Gentleman like to finish his speech?

1.47 pm

Allan Dorans: I would, Madam Deputy Speaker; thank you. I will take it slowly and try not to speak with too much passion.

The consequences of coalmine closures and deprivation in former coalmining communities are well documented. According to the 2020 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, coalfield areas are still over-represented among Scotland’s most disadvantaged communities. Of the 610 coalfield areas where data was gathered, 31% are among Scotland’s most deprived. However, in east Ayrshire, in my constituency, that figure was a shocking 40% in 2016, and it remains the same in 2020. Within the overall measures of deprivation, coalfield communities have lower incomes, worse health and lower education and employment outcomes than those in 80% of Scottish communities. Coalfield communities across the UK need and deserve far greater funding from the central Treasury to significantly increase access to health promotion and care, to provide the best schools and colleges and access to university, and to stimulate economic activity, with an emphasis on high skills and high pay.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust was launched in 1999 as an independent charity designed to fund projects that would increase access to employment opportunities, education and skills training, improve health and wellbeing and develop enterprise. It has commissioned two reports to examine how former coalfield areas compare with the rest of the country on a range of social and economic indicators. The most recent of these reports was published in 2019, and its findings shockingly include the fact that average life expectancy in the former coalfields is around a year less than the national average, and there is a greater incidence of long-term health problems.

Former coalfields continue to have large numbers of people of working age out of work and claiming incapacity benefits. Growth in the number of businesses was generally slower than in the rest of the UK and the employment rate in the coalfields was below the national average. All the coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales have an occupational structure that is skewed towards manual occupations and lower levels of high-skilled jobs. The findings are a damning indictment of how former coalfield communities have been neglected by successive Governments for the past 50 years. For those reasons alone, a concerted effort is required by the UK Parliament, the devolved Administrations and local councils. They must have a joint focus on development and improvement across the board in these communities.

Much has been made of the current Government’s levelling-up agenda, which is designed to address the long-standing problem of the UK’s regional economic disparities. Several funds have been set up under the levelling-up agenda, including the levelling-up fund, the

[Allan Dorans]

community renewal fund, the shared prosperity fund and investment zones. However, none are targeted specifically at former coalmining areas.

In June 2023 the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities published the report, “Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields” with the aim of examining the needs of former coalfield communities and steering policies to improve the lives of residents. The report made 12 recommendations, covering economic development, public investment, infrastructure, environmental issues, housing and skills, all of which would make a significant difference to my constituency and the rest of the United Kingdom. I am sure that the Minister is well aware of those 12 recommendations so I will not list them all, but I say to him that I strongly agree with all of them. I ask him to indicate what progress has been or will be made in implementing them.

In conclusion, the time to recognise the contribution of mining communities over the centuries to the economy of the United Kingdom, and the hardship endured by so many in those communities, is now. I am grateful for the work of East Ayrshire Council, South Ayrshire Council, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and other publicly funded voluntary organisations and charities for their continuing work in restoring pride, a sense of community and hope to those communities. I also acknowledge the work carried out in my constituency by the Coalfield Communities Landscape Partnership, working with East Ayrshire Council and the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere, delivering a significant number of regeneration projects, including biodiversity and landscape outputs, people-engagement activities, local interest groups, training workshops and volunteer activities. However, that is not in itself enough to restore the former mining communities to the vibrant communities they once were.

The former coalmining communities, which once powered the industrial revolution and contributed immensely to the wealth of the United Kingdom, must now be prioritised, receive significant investment, and be supported and developed to ensure that they once again become thriving and sustainable communities able to face the future with hope, aspiration and confidence. I therefore call on the Government to significantly increase levelling-up funding, or preferably introduce new specific funding, and set aside the significant resources that are urgently needed to regenerate former coalmining communities and improve the lives and opportunities of the people in my community and across the country.

1.53 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans). I thank the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate. My hon. Friend spoke poignantly about the rich tapestry of community organisations that tie together coalfield communities. Although I was not around when the coalmine in Clara Vale, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), was open, I spent a lot of my youth going up there to visit family members. Whether it is the pit banner on the wall, the Methodist church or the community groups, the heritage

of coalmining communities is alive and well in the north-east, and being championed by people like my hon. Friend the Member for Easington.

As the newest coalfield Member of Parliament, I have the distinct privilege of representing the entirety of the Selby super-pit, which in its time was regarded as the most technologically advanced coalmine in Europe. The last coalmine in my constituency was still producing coal within the last decade. Kellingley colliery—or the Big K, as it was known—was the last deep-pit coalmine to close in Britain, with the loss of over 600 jobs. So in Selby we know a thing or two about coal, and we are living through the consequences of what the industry’s end can bring, both for our communities, and for ex-mineworkers and their families. I would like to send special thanks to the Selby branch of the NUM advice service for all the work it does to advance its members’ interests.

We inherit a proud past in Selby, but we in this House need to consider the future that we hope to build as proud representatives of coalfield communities. Our work is twofold: to provide dignity, recognition and support to ex-mineworkers and their families; and to unlock the economic and social potential for future generations in areas, such as mine, where coal was once king.

Nowhere are those questions of justice more pressing than in relation to the mineworkers’ pension scheme, which many Members have spoken about so eloquently today. Since 1994, successive Governments have received over £4 billion from the scheme, and are due to receive at least another £1.9 billion in due course. Yet the mineworkers who built the profitability of Britain’s coal industry and the wealth of our entire nation have not gotten a fair share of its proceeds.

During the 2019 general election—since when, I should note, the Conservative party has received no democratic mandate from the electorate—Boris Johnson said categorically that the Tories would make sure that no

“miner signed up to the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme is out of pocket...we will make sure all their cash is fully protected and returned, I have looked into it and we will ensure that’s done.”

That was a solemn, black-and-white, categorical assurance made by a Conservative Prime Minister to coalfield communities. It was the reason some mineworkers decided to vote for Mr Johnson’s party in 2019. It is the reason some Members on the Conservative Benches are sitting here at all.

Having collected his votes and gone back down to London, what did that Prime Minister proceed to do about the promises he had made to coalfield communities such as mine? Absolutely nothing. It is yet another damning example of the age-old Conservative habit of breaking promises made to northern communities in England and to the British people overall; a final kick in the teeth for mineworkers to endure. They have lived for 40 years with the legacy of Thatcherism and are faced with the indignity in retirement of being peddled Tory false hope. Meaningful MPS reform requires a Government with empathy and a desire to see that justice is done. That is why I am pleased to see the Labour party’s ambition to reform the scheme to provide ex-mineworkers with the dignity in retirement that they deserve.

But we cannot have dignity without our health. If I could encourage Ministers to take away one thing from this debate, it would be to try to bring greater compassion and greater speed to the assessment of ex-mineworkers

for industrial illnesses by the Department for Work and Pensions. My team and my local NUM branch have been fighting hard for Mr Anthony Rock, who is receiving a percentage of his industrial injuries disablement benefit for pneumoconiosis, but not for his progressive massive fibrosis which is known to develop directly from his condition. There have been egregious and unacceptable delays from the DWP in the several claims that Mr Rock has made regarding his illness. He is becoming seriously unwell, so I would appreciate it if the Minister could meet me to discuss how we can advance his case as quickly as possible. I wish that Mr Rock's case was an isolated one, but sadly his experience is all too common for mineworkers across the country. It is time for the DWP to shape up and take responsibility for treating mineworkers with the respect they deserve.

Finally, and on a note of optimism, I recently had the pleasure of visiting the Coalfield Regeneration Trust's business park at the site of the former Kellingley colliery. It has managed to turn a site where 600 people lost their jobs into a thriving business centre for Yorkshire's small and medium-sized enterprises, employing local young people in well-paid and skilled employment. That work must not just continue but expand and flourish, because it has been proven that it works and it benefits communities such as mine. The proposal by the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities and the CRT to return CGF and CEF funds to allow it to expand its work should receive extremely thoughtful consideration from Members across this House.

For places such as Selby, our value lies no longer in the coal beneath our feet, but in the spirit of our people and communities; a legacy bequeathed to us by our coalfield heritage. The industrial pride, skills, ingenuity, solidarity and communal spirit that are hardwired into such communities are some of the most potent tools we have to build a better future for our country, both back home in Yorkshire and across the length of Great Britain. It is our responsibility in this House to do all we can to empower coalfield communities to realise that enormous potential. I thank all Members from across the House who are doing incredible work to achieve that aim.

1.59 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather), and I commend my good friend the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate.

I am proud of my constituency, which has a rich and vibrant tapestry of mining heritage woven through it, not only in the towns and villages that make it up but in those of us who inhabit them today. From the very depths of the earth, our townspeople toiled to fuel the industrial revolution, shaping the landscape of our communities and leaving an everlasting mark on our collective consciousness. However, alongside the moments of triumph, we must also accept and confront the tragedies that have befallen our mining communities and families.

The Auchengeich pit disaster of 1959 will always stand as a poignant reminder of the dangers faced by men in the pursuit of bread for the table. Every year I am humbled and honoured to stand alongside the former councillor Willie Doolan and all the members of the local committee as we commemorate that mining disaster, remembering the men who were lost and their surviving

families, many of whom still live in the local area today. Their tireless efforts to ensure that the tragedy of the Auchengeich disaster is never forgotten is a testament to the resilience and strength of our community, and I thank each and every one of them for all that they do. Similarly, the Cardowan Colliery disaster of 1932 gives us all a stark reminder of the human cost of industrial progress. The ongoing work of my constituents Alice Morton and Campbell Provans in organising a memorial service to commemorate the lives lost in that devastating event is, I am sure, always greatly appreciated by Members on both sides of the House.

As the grandson of a miner, I was raised on stories of the pit and its men, of the graft and the toil, and of the togetherness and camaraderie that we have heard so much about today. My grandad was out of the pits by the time I came along, but the scars of pit life remained. If I listen quietly enough, I can still hear his cough today; but not even the damage of lungs ravaged by silicosis could dampen his love and affection for his mining friends and comrades.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sorry that I have not been able to take part fully in the debate, but I have a copy of a census return that contains the first mention of the Grants from Ulster having settled in Scotland. My great-grandfather, at the age of 19, came over to work in a pit not far from my hon. Friend's constituency. My hon. Friend has mentioned some of the appalling disasters that have affected the mines in his constituency, as well as my constituency and others. Does he agree that there should be a greater recognition of the almost unbelievable bravery shown by miners who went back into burning pits to look for their friends? Is it not time that we gave them the recognition that their heroism deserves?

Steven Bonnar: My hon. Friend has made an important point. Every time I attend the commemorations and hear the real, lived stories, I wonder why there are not commemorations all over the UK to honour those brave, brave men and, indeed, their families.

I hope that friends on both sides of the House will accept that the Scottish National party will always stand up in unwavering solidarity with those who chose to strike during the tumultuous times of the past. We recognise the hardships endured by miners and their families, who often faced financial hardship and societal stigma as a result of their principled stance. The fact that they stood tall in the face of adversity, fighting not only for their own livelihoods but for the future of generations to come, will never be forgotten or underestimated by any of us on these Benches, or, indeed, in the mining communities the length and breadth of Scotland, so it is with a heavy heart that we must acknowledge the neglect and disregard shown by the UK Government towards this shared history.

The Scottish Government, with the powers available to them, have taken significant steps to alleviate the burdens being carried by our mining communities. Through the Miners' Strike (Pardons) (Scotland) Act 2022, Scotland became the first of the four nations of the UK to offer a collective and automatic pardon to those convicted during the strike. That landmark legislation serves as a beacon of reconciliation, offering some solace to those who bore the scars of past injustice. It is imperative that the UK Government now follow suit, taking responsibility

[Steven Bonnar]

for the actions of the National Coal Board and providing compensation for those affected. It would be too late for my grandad, with his silicosis-scarred lungs, but there are people who could benefit, and it is time that the Government put their house in order and sorted this out. I hope that the Minister will comment on that later. While the Scottish Government have done what they can within their powers, the responsibility for devising a compensation scheme rests squarely with the Government in this place.

We also continue to press for a UK-wide public inquiry into the strike, ensuring that the voices of miners and their families are heard and their grievances addressed. Only through collective action and unity can we achieve meaningful change and deliver justice to those who have been denied it for so long. As we look to the future, we must ensure that no community is left behind in the transition to a more sustainable economy.

The recent revelation that the fantastic levelling-up bid made by the Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life, a heritage museum in Coatbridge, was rejected by this place is a stark reminder of the indifference with which our mining heritage is still treated by this Government and, indeed, this House. The project would have secured the preservation of our historical mining past, well into our future, and its rejection speaks volumes about the lack of recognition afforded to the sacrifices made by generations of miners and their families.

In the face of neglect and indifference, we must stand firm in defence of our mining heritage. We on these Benches demand that the Government recognise the importance of preserving our shared history, and provide the necessary support to ensure that future generations can learn from the sacrifices of the past. Let us together ensure that the legacy of our mining communities is never forgotten, and that the voices of those who came before us continue to resonate through the halls of history.

2.6 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on the work that he did to secure the debate, and for his admirable opening speech.

According to the excellent report “The State of the Coalfields 2024”, commissioned by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, the former coalfields account for 8% of the population in England, 10% in Scotland and 25% in Wales. That gives us an idea of the scale in Wales—one in four people there live in a former coalfield area—and of the importance of today’s debate.

Mining has been a dominant part of Welsh life for generations. My grandfather was a miner, my uncle was a miner, and my father was a Bevin boy who was sent down the local pit during the second world war. There were mines across my constituency from the sea on one side to the sea on the other—Hendy, Llangennech, Bynea, Llwynhendy, Tumble, Cross Hands, Pontyberem, Ponthenri and Pontyates, and in Llanelli itself and Burry Port, with coal being exported from those two busy ports—and, of course, mining has shaped our politics.

My predecessor as MP for Llanelli, the great Jim Griffiths, spoke passionately from his own experience of the hardship that he saw in the mining communities in which he was brought up—the effects of unemployment,

poverty, malnutrition, sickness and industrial injury—and took up the fight to bring about the reforms that were needed to help those who fell on hard times. He spoke and wrote about “The Price Wales Pays for Poverty”: maternal mortality, malnutrition, overcrowding, condemned housing, unemployment, silicosis, and the terrible affliction of tuberculosis. He also highlighted the wealth taken from Wales by coal owners, royalty owners and landlords, and demanded a proper response and resources to deal with the country’s problems.

When serving in the 1945 Labour Government, Jim Griffiths introduced the Family Allowances Act 1945, under which money was paid directly to mothers. He subsequently introduced the National Insurance Act 1946 and an Act close to his heart, the National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Act, which was very much born out of the suffering and difficulties of injured miners that he had witnessed and which introduced extra benefits for people injured at work. That Act was universal, in that it covered the entire workforce. It provided injury benefit for six months, disability benefit for the permanently injured, and a death benefit for dependants. It also set up tribunals to assess cases, rather than claimants’ having to take on all the responsibility for pushing their own cases.

Now, some 80 years later and some 40 years on from the miners’ strike, as is documented in the report I mentioned earlier, we have shockingly not eliminated all the problems. There are still high levels of poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and sickness in former mining areas, and there is still much to be done to enable those areas to enjoy the same levels of wealth as others. We know of many of the problems that our former mining communities face, scattered as they are in south Wales up and down steep valleys. Many are in what are now pleasant rural locations, and some contain quite spacious council or former council-owned properties, but their location was clearly intended to be close to the mines where people worked. Now, investors, developers and young people all want to be near the main arteries or in the main towns, and it is so much more difficult to attract inward investment into the more remote mining communities. Furthermore, they are often spread out in different locations along the valley, making it very difficult to provide services, and often there is a considerable distance up or down the valley to get to the most basic of facilities, such as doctors’ surgeries or shops. Nowadays, there are more opportunities for people to work remotely and to set up businesses that use the internet, but some of our mining communities also suffer from inadequate broadband speeds and a poor mobile phone signal.

I want to highlight some specific problems, starting with my serious concerns about the drop in quality of former miners’ concessionary coal. I have met miners in my area who used to receive good-quality smokeless coal, but now receive very poor-quality coal, which is causing considerable problems and expense. The coal is blocking up chimneys, meaning that people have to get their chimneys swept more often and at additional expense, and the fumes and fine ash that it gives off pose serious health risks. In fact, the smell and the fumes that emerge from chimneys are so bad that they are causing neighbours down the street to complain about the smoke.

When I looked into this issue, I found that there was not an isolated batch of coal and that the problem is widespread. On contacting Wayne Thomas of the South

Wales NUM, I learned that as stockpiles of anthracite had been run down, coal of an inferior quality was supplied by Russia. Because of the war in Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia, which I fully support, the supply was halted and an alternative source had to be found. I understand that the coal now comes from Peru and is supplied in a chimney- compressed duff, using molasses as a binding agent. The NUM says that such coal gives off a very fine ash, which causes respiratory problem—obviously not good for ex-miners, many of whom already have breathing problems.

Across the UK, the complaints are similar to those of former miners in my area, who complain that the smoke from chimneys smells funny and that the coal causes blockages. The NUM has twice met the head of the coal liabilities unit at the Department for Business and Trade to discuss this matter, but there has been no news of any improved source, and better sources must be found. I say to the Minister that miners have worked hard in a difficult and dangerous job, and that they are entitled to receive decent concessionary coal. It is shocking that former miners, many of whom are elderly, are now being given poisonous, poor-quality coal, which gives off fumes and ash that are bad for their health, and which clogs up their chimneys. As a matter of urgency, I beg him to do everything he can to source decent coal for our former miners. It is a Government responsibility.

Turning to the miners' pensions, I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for their work. I hope the Minister is aware of the former BEIS Committee's report on the mineworkers pension scheme and its recommendations—namely, that the 50/50 surplus sharing arrangements should be comprehensively reviewed to ensure that miners get their fair share, and that the £1.2 billion reserve fund should be given back to the pensioners immediately. It is now three years since that report, and former miners are not getting any younger, but there has still not been any action from the Government. I ask the Minister to look again at the scheme, and to ensure that miners get their fair share.

I turn now to the coal tip legacy. I was a very impressionable small child at the time of the Aberfan coal disaster on 21 October 1966. I was the same age as some of the children buried under the slag heap as it engulfed the school, and I will never forget the images on our black-and-white telly of fathers desperately trying to dig out their children. Following that, we saw the gradual remediation of the tips. Things began to look better and greener, but with the increased frequency of more violent weather events, it is now clear that the job is not done. As we saw all too vividly in the Rhondda a couple of years ago, there is still a lot more work to be done to ensure that the tips are safe.

This is a legacy from pre-devolution times. The slag heaps were produced as a result of mining coal to fuel the factories that filled the coffers of the UK Treasury, and the UK Government have a responsibility to ensure that every tip in Wales is made safe. We in Carmarthenshire are relatively lucky, with fewer and less risky tips than in the valleys further east, where urgent investment is needed. It was very disappointing that there was no mention of any funding in the spring Budget, and I ask the Minister to take this message back to the Chancellor.

I turn to Orgreave. On 18 June, we will mark 40 years since we saw the truly shocking scenes of police attacking miners at Orgreave, and we need a proper inquiry into

what happened that day. It is very disappointing that the Government have not instigated such an inquiry, even after the revelations about South Yorkshire police in Bishop James Jones's Hillsborough report. However, we need not only an inquiry into Orgreave, but a proper Hillsborough law. It is not enough for the Government's belated response to the Hillsborough report in December last year to espouse the introduction of a voluntary charter, an independent public advocate and a code of ethical policing. Instead, we need a full Hillsborough law to force those in public office to co-operate fully with investigations, and to guarantee fairer funding to enable those affected by a major tragedy to challenge public institutions. I urge the Minister to set up an inquiry into Orgreave, and to adopt a full Hillsborough law.

I want to say a few words about a just transition to the industries of the future, which is the exact opposite of what we saw in the 1980s, when it was clear that the Thatcher Government wanted to destroy the coal industry. However, it was not just the coal industry that was decimated. We saw the closure of the big steel plant in my constituency and numerous other closures across the country, resulting in areas of mass unemployment, with communities feeling that they had been thrown on the scrapheap. The legacy remains till this day, as documented in the Coalfields Regeneration Trust report.

It does not have to be like this. Of course we want to make progress and to harness technology to our advantage—whether it is the spinning mills of the 18th century, motorised transport, robots on the production line, artificial intelligence, the transition from fossil fuels to renewables, or the change from blast furnace steel production to green primary steelmaking—but it should be a just transition, with training and jobs for workers, and investment in the new green industry of the future. That is why it is so disappointing to see the Government's half-hearted approach to the future of the steel industry. We welcome investment in the electric arc furnace, but there is a refusal to think bigger and to invest in the green primary steelmaking of the future, leaving thousands of workers to lose their jobs. It is a devastating blow for Port Talbot and, yet again, the surrounding former coalfield communities.

We in the Labour party are determined to see a just transition to the industry of the future, with proper investment through our proposed national wealth fund, the upskilling of workers and the creation of quality jobs. Never again do we want to see workers thrown on the scrapheap and communities devastated.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. After Kevan Jones, we will have the Front-Bench contributions and then the wind-up from Grahame Morris.

2.17 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my Durham colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), on securing this afternoon's important debate. For the last 23 years, I have had the privilege of representing North Durham, which was part of the once mighty Durham coalfield. Over those 23 years, I have seen many changes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) spoke about the close-knit tradition of mining communities—not just in County Durham, but in his own area in Northumberland. Having grown up as the

[*Mr Kevan Jones*]

son of a miner, I am familiar with that close-knit tradition and the reliability of work that there was in such communities. However, I do not look at the past through rose-tinted spectacles, because, to use a Hobbesian phrase, life was nasty, brutish and short for many people. There was nothing romantic about the death rates, which we just accepted as the price of coal, but many of the communities in my constituency—the town of Stanley, for example—were built on coal. The surrounding villages, such as Craghead, Sacriston and others, were all built because of coalmining. Their economic existence was coalmining. When that was finally taken away in 1985, when the last pits closed, the economic heart was ripped out of those communities overnight, as has been mentioned by many hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate.

Today, people would not recognise where the mining industry was based in North Durham unless they know the history of the area. They would certainly not know where the pit was in the South Yorkshire village where I grew up if they did not know the history of that village. That unseen legacy has cast a long shadow over many mining communities. I congratulate the Coalfields Regeneration Trust on its excellent report on the state of coalfield communities in 2020. It is a superb piece of work.

When I was first elected, the legacy of heavy industry, and certainly coalmining, was evident in my constituency. People who had worked underground their whole life suffered from not only debilitating lung disease, but other physical conditions related to heavy industry. Sadly, that generation is increasingly no longer with us.

After that social fabric was taken out of County Durham, we had unemployment, deprivation and poverty and, as happens in many communities, crime and drugs filled the gap. When I was first elected, I described North Durham as a rural constituency with urban problems and, as in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Easington and for Wansbeck, the legacy of drug abuse, for example, is still there today. This health inequality is now affecting a lost generation of younger people born in the 1980s, some now in their 40s, who never got into proper paid employment.

The report from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust speaks for itself. Life expectancy in coalfield communities is 82 for women, as opposed to 85 in the south-east of England, and 78 for men, as opposed to 81 in the south-east of England. The other thing that appals me—I have spoken about this before, and I feel very passionately about it—is that, in a wealthy country, life expectancy in County Durham has gone down over the last 10 years, which is an absolute disgrace. The report also outlines that, in 2021, the proportion of the population reporting bad or very bad health was 7.1% in former coalfield areas, compared with 4.2% in the south-east of England and 4.3% in London.

We have a legacy of ill health. Health professionals in County Durham tell me that the age at which people access intensive healthcare is now in their mid-to-late 50s. That puts extra pressure on our health services, which is not reflected in the funding. In addition, my constituency is now in the commuter belt for Tyneside and other areas, which is very difficult for people in many outlying communities unless they have access to a car. Young people do not have aspiration, which is

difficult to raise, to get into good, well-paid employment. Warehousing and other low-skilled or semi-skilled work are no replacement for the high-quality jobs that we used to have in the coalfields.

We have heard a lot of talk from the Government about levelling up. I have said it before and will say it again: levelling up is a complete con. It is not a serious measure to level up Britain. If it were, the communities highlighted by the report would be at the top of the list. It is all about capital projects and pork barrel politics, basically setting areas against one another. Councils have spent millions of pounds, certainly in County Durham's case, submitting bids that were never going to succeed. The only successful bid from County Durham was in Bishop Auckland, which happened to have a Conservative Member of Parliament, getting half a bypass in the process.

Levelling up has not replaced the £240 million that the Government have taken out of Durham County Council's core funding by shifting the tax base on to local council tax payers. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington spoke about the low council tax base in County Durham, where 60% of properties are in band A, which means that we cannot raise money.

Additionally, we need extra services for our growing elderly population and our growing number of looked-after children. Is there a relationship between the closure of Sure Start centres, which offered early intervention for families, and the number of looked-after children who are coming back into care? It does not take a genius to work out that the two are related, and the Government have slowly woken up to that fact and are now reintroducing children's centres.

We also had access to European regional development funding. Again, it was promised that no region would lose out, but we have. That money automatically came to areas like the north-east, and it did some fantastic work. It did not fixate on capital projects, at which the local Member of Parliament or whoever wanted to be elected could open a plaque; it was about employment and training. I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Easington on DurhamWorks, which has been very good at getting young people who are not in education, employment or training back into work.

Levelling up has been a complete con, and we need that investment if we are to make a real change to health, employment and training. The Prime Minister let the cat out of the bag when he stood for the leadership of the Tory party and boasted that he would take money away from areas like mine and redistribute it to leafier parts of the south-east of England. That is exactly what has happened, and the idea that the Government can take the needs-based element out of this is absolutely disgraceful. The idea that they can give coalfield areas the odd £20 million here and there to replace the hundreds of millions of pounds that they have lost in local government funding, ERDF funding and other funding is just a con.

I look back to the last Labour Government with clear eyes. County Durham had five new schools, three new health centres, a new hospital and two new further education colleges. That is real investment in a community. I am also proud that, in government, we paid compensation to people with COPD, which should have been done many years earlier. It took a Labour Government to do that.

We need a radical change of approach, which no one can foresee at the far end of this Parliament. It will only happen with the election of a Labour Government who will reprioritise the needs of individuals. Without that, the legacy of limited employment opportunities and ill health in our coalmining communities will continue, not just for those who worked in the industry but for generations to come. In a wealthy country like Britain, it is a national scandal that we should leave such communities to suffer in this way.

2.28 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I commend the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Leigh (James Grundy) on securing this excellent debate, in which we have heard some common themes. I also thank the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for driving forward its excellent work.

I am struck by the sense of pride expressed by everyone who has taken part in this debate, whether it is the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who has first-hand experience at the coalface, or the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) who, being chronologically challenged through no fault of his own, has no such experience, although that does not diminish how we all feel about the communities we represent. I grew up in a mining community, and that sense of community is part of us, which is very evident from everyone who has taken part today.

I therefore welcome the opportunity to sum up this debate for the Scottish National party. As Members will probably be aware, I have made many contributions in this Chamber about my constituency and its rich mining history, which dates back to the 12th century, when the monks at Newbattle abbey first began extracting coal. By the 20th century, mining was an integral part of my community's way of life. Midlothian was home to a range of pits, with probably the best known being Bilston Glen and Monktonhall. We also had the first Victorian super-pit, the Lady Victoria, which is still the home of the National Mining Museum Scotland. Again, I extend an invitation to Members to visit it, as it is an excellent facility. It was opened by my predecessor, David Hamilton, also a former miner. It was the UK's first single facility for understanding and commemorating the mining industry and so is an excellent attraction that people can come to see any time they visit Midlothian.

We heard a lot today about the fact that we are marking the 40th anniversary of the miners' strike of the 1980s, which left a scar in many communities across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Its unique set of circumstances saw entire communities defending their way of life and their jobs against a UK Tory Government who seemed determined to bring them to their knees and deployed the forces of the state to meet that end. As was narrated in the John Scott KC review in 2020, which was commissioned by the Scottish Government, some miners were dismissed notwithstanding the fact that they had been admonished in court. Dismissal brought with it financial hardship, with loss of income and pension rights, and difficulties for many in obtaining future employment. Above all, miners and their families lost their good name and their respectability as honest hard-working men doing dangerous jobs. That loss was perhaps the deepest one, cutting them hardest and being the hardest to bear.

The corrosive and bitter scars left by the impact of that Thatcher Government on once-proud mining communities, which felt abandoned by the state, are there for all to see. That is why I, along with many others, have called many times for a full inquiry into exactly what happened at that time. We have heard the calls for justice for Orgreave again today. We need to understand, and our communities need to understand, what political influence was exerted at that time and what political interference took place in respect of the actions and decisions of Thatcher's Government.

Peter Grant: I recall realising at the time that Ian MacGregor, the chair of the National Coal Board, had worked out that if a way could be found to sack somebody for gross misconduct, that would be a lot cheaper than paying them the redundancy payments to which they were entitled. Does my hon. Friend believe that one day we will find that that was a matter of policy on behalf of the NCB?

Owen Thompson: I truly hope that we do, because only when we get the answers to these questions—the honest answers from Government—can our communities and those directly involved truly move forward. I accept that we are not talking about decisions made by this Government, but it would be for them to take the opportunity to start that inquiry so that we can get those answers.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): We are about to have a debate about BBC bias. I was a young correspondent at that time and I recall just how biased a lot of the coverage was. We constantly saw things from the police's point of view, but never saw things from the miners' point of view. What lessons does my hon. Friend think there are to learn from any inquiry on press and media coverage during that strike?

Owen Thompson: As we heard from others earlier in the debate, it is important that all sides are reflected and that the reality of the situation is reflected. I am perhaps proud to say that I am too young to remember watching much of the coverage live at the time, although I have watched the more recent documentaries, so I cannot speak directly about my experiences of what was broadcast at the time.

That moves me on to how proud I am that the Scottish Parliament has—unanimously, I believe—introduced a pardon for miners who were convicted of certain offences during the miners' strike. However, I am frustrated that we have not seen more action taken to do the same here. Miners and those who were involved in the strike in my constituency, in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), and in those of other colleagues in Scotland, cannot get the compensation that I feel they deserve until we have a UK-wide pardon in place.

That is why I took the unusual step of introducing my Miners' Strike (Pardons) Bill in this place. I hope that Members across the Chamber will support it. It has been drafted, so all the Government need to do is support it and we could put that pardon in place to mirror the one established by the Scottish Government. I hope we will see that happen. I genuinely hope that if this Government do not do that, the next one will.

[Owen Thompson]

However, I wrote to the right hon. Member for Islington North about my Bill in December and I have not yet received a response. [Interruption.] Sorry, not Islington North—I meant the leader of the Labour party. I can't keep up with these London constituencies! I have had no reply from him in support of my Bill and that is deeply disappointing. I hope that enough colleagues on the Labour Benches will have a word in his ear to make sure that that pardon is introduced.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd highlighted the work of the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities and the “State of the Coalfields 2024” report. That excellent report has gone into a lot of depth on the issues that our coalfield communities still face. The inquiry received more than 70 submissions from across Scotland, England and Wales. I am glad that the Scottish Government, local authorities, and the voluntary and community sectors all contributed to that. It is important that where we have an evidence base such as this, we look at it in a lot of detail and understand better what it means for each of our communities.

Like so many others, I am deeply disappointed by the lack of levelling up and the fact that for many of our communities, it feels as though that has simply been a Government slogan. We need funding to shore up our coalfield communities and stop them falling further behind. I have always said that there needs to be a more even and balanced distribution of the UK's prosperity; we cannot just have it all driven into one place, and our coalfields need it far more than most. The pit closures left a lasting legacy of social and economic damage. That resulted from decisions made in this place and it is up to this place to do much, much more to deal with it. Midlothian and other mining communities must benefit from any new funds and initiatives that could help to boost recovery.

Finally, I come to another issue that has been touched on by many Members: the miners' pension. I commend the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for her work in driving forward the review on that. It is long overdue that these recommendations are implemented; the BEIS Committee report from 2021 needs to be implemented now. Our miners deserve fairness. The 50% surplus arrangement has been in place since 1994. We have heard about figures such as £4.8 billion and rising, without even adjusting it for inflation. That money should be going to our miners—at the very least, it should be going into our coalfield communities. It is outrageous that it is taking so long to implement this. We need it to happen as soon as possible.

A number of miners, including my constituent Ally, have encountered a situation where they were mis-sold pension products from their miners' pensions. Despite trying endlessly to get an outcome on that, they have found that the companies involved have often gone bust and tracking them down is a massive issue for anyone. I ask the Minister to relay to the Treasury the need for greater understanding of the impact this is having on former miners and the need for a further look at what is possible when that situation arises. I will certainly continue to try to bring that about.

Today's debate has been excellent. It has shown the spirit that is still there in our mining communities; it is not going away any time soon and we will all continue to campaign for justice for our miners.

2.38 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Let me start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) for securing this debate.

I also thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Easington, for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), and from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). All of them spoke about the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's “State of the Coalfields 2024” report and the miners' pension scheme. It is a pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition, not least because these issues are deeply personal for my constituents, as they are for Members from across coalfield communities.

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of the coal industry on my constituency, and on the north-east as a whole. Its history is woven into the fabric of our community. Many towns and villages owe their existence to the pit. Today, statues and colliery wheels commemorate our past, and community facilities set up to serve mining families remain in use. In my constituency, there were many collieries, from Chopwell to Kibblesworth and from Greenside to Bewicke Main. Each pit was surrounded by a community in which coal was not just a job, but a way of life. Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I could not go without mentioning the annual big meeting, the Durham miners' gala. Each year, brilliant flying banners and marching brass bands bring together thousands in our region to celebrate working-class life and solidarity.

So far, I have talked about my local area, but the mining history of the UK stretches far and wide, from the coalfields in Lanarkshire to mines in the midlands, on to the Welsh valleys and all the way down to Kent.

Steve Double: I think the hon. Lady has missed Cornwall from her list.

Liz Twist: Indeed. I noticed the similarities in what the hon. Member said between his community and our coalmining communities.

Let us be clear that the reality of working down the pit was far from romantic. Miners toiled in brutal working conditions, doing backbreaking work in the near darkness. As we have heard, many people lost their lives in disasters or developed industrial diseases, such as pneumoconiosis, as a result of their work. It is important that we remember and pay tribute to them.

Mining communities knew better than anyone that this work was tough and dangerous, but whole ways of life were built around the pits. Their rapid closures caused mass upheaval, the consequences of which are still felt to this day. As the reports from the Industrial Communities Alliance have highlighted, former coalfield areas still suffer from a lack of skilled, well-paid jobs, as well as from high levels of economic inactivity. While employment rates have improved since the days of mass unemployment, many people still feel there are few meaningful and secure alternatives to the work that was once available.

Labour is determined that we will not abandon our communities to the whims of industrial change. Through our green prosperity plan, we will seize the opportunities of energy transition to deliver economic justice and rebuild the strength of our industrial heartlands. We will create secure, clean jobs, backed by strong trade unions, with individual and collective rights guaranteed for all workers. Our former mining communities powered us through the industrial revolution, and it is not right that many people within them are forced to rely on insecure, zero-hours contracts, or left vulnerable to fire and rehire. That is why Labour's new deal for working people will put an end to those practices and build our economy from the bottom up, and the middle out, to deliver a high-growth, high-wage economy for all.

This Government came to power talking about levelling up, but inequalities remain as stark as ever. A report from the APPG on coalfield communities, in partnership with the Industrial Communities Alliance, speaks of the failure of the current approach to deliver for former coalfield areas. Pots allocated by competitive bidding are too haphazard and too short term to allow for the developments that are needed to transform former industrial sites. Coalfield communities must be allowed to come together, and to learn from each other, not made to compete like contestants on "Dragons' Den".

Not only must we deliver a better future for our communities, but we must right the wrongs of the past. As we have heard, the party in Government have broken promises about the mineworkers' pension scheme. Does the Minister think it is fair that the Government make vast amounts of money from the current arrangement, while former miners struggle to make ends meet? Let me be clear: this is a historic injustice that should never have taken place, and the Government should not be in the business of profiting off mineworkers' pensions.

After so many years of silence from Parliament on this issue, the BEIS Committee inquiry was very welcome. The Labour party will work with mineworkers and their families to right this wrong, and we will set out our full plans on this by the time of the election. People should be in no doubt that we will deliver justice for mineworkers and their families with the urgency required.

We must never shrug off injustice. We all remember the violent images of the strike in 1984 and 1985, perhaps no more so than the sight of Lesley Boulton cowering in the face of a police truncheon at the Orgreave coking plant. Earlier this year, new footage from Orgreave was shown in a Channel 4 documentary, which clearly set out the police brutality and allegations of a cover-up. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), considered the case for an inquiry, but it seems that the Government no longer think that they have any lessons to learn. Their memories are clearly short. The Labour party has long supported a full investigation or inquiry into the events at Orgreave, and we are committed to putting a new Hillsborough law on to the statute book to prevent future injustices. I hope the Minister shares my conviction that the truth must be heard.

Our coalmining days may be behind us, but we must not forget the communities that formed around them. They were the engine that powered Britain's industrial success, and we owe it to them that they should share in the rewards.

2.46 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): It is genuinely a great pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government in this important area of policy. I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I welcome the focus on this issue. I congratulate the all-party parliamentary group, its current chair, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and all those who are involved, or who have previously been involved, for raising these issues. We might not agree on all elements, but across the House we all agree that this is an important subject that we need to debate.

I particularly welcome the debate because I also have the privilege of representing a coalfield seat, North East Derbyshire, the home of Ireland, Williamthorpe, Renishaw Park, Hartington and Park House, where, just a century ago, tens of thousands of men worked. Many colleagues have outlined their experiences today; it is a privilege to know that our ancestors went down those pits every single day. I agree with the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) that this work was tough and dangerous. Not a single member of my family, or any of the people I have had the privilege of representing for seven years, has failed to remind me how difficult mining was. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members have had similar conversations.

Eckington drift mine, the last drift mine in my constituency, closed only five years ago. Contrary to what we heard in some contributions, in my constituency we regularly celebrate our mining legacy, from the recent openings of memorials for High Moor and Westhorpe collieries, from Pat Bone's work at the Killamarsh Heritage Society to attending a remembrance service for the terrible loss of 17 souls in 1973 Markham colliery disaster. In a few weeks, I hope, with my family, to add my ancestors' names to the Eckington mining memorial, which Paul Burdett and his team have so kindly put in one of the towns in North East Derbyshire.

As the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) indicated, my family was also deeply steeped in this legacy, going back around 10 generations. As far back as the censuses go, we were miners or hewers. My mum's maiden name is literally Collier. Both my grandfathers worked down the mines, including my mum's dad who worked for a time at Westthorpe and High Moor in the area that I now have the privilege to represent. Like so many of the people there, both of their lives were cut short. I managed to know my maternal grandfather for only seven years before he died of the injuries that he had suffered down the pit in the 1940s, including losing a limb. I never knew my other granddad—he died seven years before I was born. So I share the acute sense of link with this and agree that this is an area in which we need to do more.

When I speak from this Dispatch Box, I do so with great pride on behalf of mining communities and my own family, but it is pride tinged with a little bit of sadness. I am afraid that I was not intending to talk about this, but I think that it is important that I do so. I do not particularly want to bring party politics into this, but I think that party politics has already been brought into this quite significantly over the course of this debate.

Many strong points have been made today by colleagues across the House. I agree with the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) that, at times, CISWO

[Lee Rowley]

does not discharge what we all hope it would do, and I shall certainly pass that back to my colleagues in the relevant Department. I agree with most Members who said that there is more to do. I am interested in the concern of the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) about the quality of coal, which I shall take up with colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade and ask them to look at that in further detail—as much as they are able to do so.

However, I do think that some of the language has been genuinely loose today. The hon. Member for Wansbeck talked about opposing absolutely everything that the Conservative party does. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about things being “callous”, or about how the Government chooses “destruction”. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) talked about “indifference”. There is a place for rhetoric and a place for hyperbole—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Lee Rowley: I am absolutely not going to take any interventions. I have listened to the grievances of Opposition Members for three hours, and it is now time for them to hear the alternative.

Labour does not own the story of mining in our country. Labour does not get to reset the narrative in the way that it has sought to do today. The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) talked about a Government of empathy. Labour does not get to disregard the settled pension arrangements—arrangements defended by the Labour party for 13 years when they sat on the Government Benches. In 2008, when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—he was in his place a moment ago—was in charge of his Department, junior Ministers were sent out to answer written questions to that effect. Labour does not get to reset the agenda on that. It certainly does not get to repeatedly let down mining communities for decades, to the extent where those communities—

Stephanie Peacock: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will not give way. I have listened for three hours to the Labour party’s grievances.

Labour does not get to set the narrative, having let down mining communities for 13 years, to the extent that those mining communities send to this place people such as myself and many of those who are sitting behind me right now. People come up to us and say that we have done more in four years than the Labour party managed in 40. Labour does not get to reset that agenda.

Today, so many Labour Members have rightly drawn on their community’s history as part of their speeches, just as I am doing, and I shall draw a little bit more on mine. I want to refer in particular to one of my predecessors who sat in this place for North East Derbyshire—but not my Benches. He joined this place not as a member of the Labour party, but he was a former executive member of the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain. He built his career in mining. I will pass his statue when I go home today. He did not join here as a Labour Member, but he felt forced to join the party because he was a miner. In the end, though, he left the Labour party. That is a story of our times in these communities

Our mining heritage is shared; it is not party political. I yield to no one in this place when it comes to the proud legacy that mining has provided for my community and my family; it is not just owned by one group of us here. That is why we turn now to some of the points that have been raised.

Many Members have talked about levelling up. I accept that there is more to do in that area. We have always indicated that levelling up is a long-term initiative that will take time to work, but at least this Government have made progress.

Stephanie Peacock: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady had many minutes in which to set out her view, and now I will respond to it.

The hon. Member for Easington talked about the Government continuing to undermine the local community, choosing to invest elsewhere. The hon. Member for Pontypridd said that, sadly, levelling up was just a slogan. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about it being a con. Well, let us list a few levelling-up projects. Let us pick some areas totally at random. Shall we pick Easington, covered by the north-east investment zone? Across the county, the share from the UK shared prosperity fund has been £31 million, with £750,000 for the town accelerator fund. Let us pick St Helens. From the English city regional capital regeneration funding there has been £7.2 million for St Helens manufacturing, £25 million for a town deal, and a long-term plan for towns, covering Newton-le-Willows.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East wishes to speak again. Barnsley has received a share of £39 million from the UK shared prosperity fund—[*Interruption.*]—£10 million for Barnsley Futures, £500,000 for a town accelerator and a future high streets fund of £15.6 million. What about the hon. Member for City of Durham? Durham has had £281,000 for Redhills Revealed through the community ownership fund, and a share of £31 million from the UK SPF. What about the hon. Member for Wansbeck? Wansbeck has received £16 million for town centre regeneration in Ashington, a share of £31 million from the UK SPF, and from the north-east investment zone a share of £47 million.

The hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) said that Government support never comes—except it did come, with a levelling-up partnership, £6 million for the future high streets fund, and £20 million for the South Shields riverside transformation. What about the hon. Member for Pontypridd? Pontypridd received £5 million from the levelling-up fund, and £14 million for the A4119 dualling scheme. What about the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty? Selby received a share of £17 million from the UK SPF. What about the hon. Member for Llanelli? There has been £15 million for regenerating Llanelli. The list goes on and on. [*Interruption.*]

The reason Opposition Members do not want to hear this is because their narrative does not work. Mining communities have had a significant amount of attention from this Government—[*Interruption.*]—and I am extremely proud to represent a mining community. Where were we left after that heat rather than light? This is a very important subject, which we share in. Even though I have had to set the record straight on a number of areas, there were some genuinely useful contributions. There is a need to remember, but not to dwell, because

the mining community that I have the privilege to represent wants to look forward, not back. It wants to celebrate its history, but to be known for its potential, opportunity and renewal. The past is what we inherit, but the future is what we build. It is the future that this Government will continue to build, to ensure that mining communities such as mine, and everybody's in this place, continue to prosper and thrive.

2.57 pm

Grahame Morris: Mr Deputy Speaker, may I thank you and Madam Deputy Speaker for your admirable chairing of this very good debate? I thank my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy), for his work behind the scenes to secure enough colleagues' signatures to get the debate. More than 30 MPs supported it, and 16 made a speech or intervened. I think we had some excellent contributions, particularly from Opposition Members—obviously I am biased—although there were some very good ones from across the whole House. I thank the lobbyists who came down yesterday from the national miners' pension scheme—my constituents John Trehitt, Bert Moncur and Ted Slavin, who made the journey and lobbied Downing Street and Parliament about the anomaly with the miners' pension surplus.

I did not agree with the Minister's analysis. I urge him to act with alacrity—I have looked that up; it means physical quickness, coupled with eagerness or enthusiasm—in addressing the issues that have been raised. I thank the respective Front Benchers, and I thank those on the Labour Front Bench for their commitment to miners' pensions. There is a big job of work to do. I thank everyone for their participation today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As a good Welshman, I am honoured to put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered miners and mining communities.

BBC Mid-term Charter Review

2.59 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the BBC mid-term charter review.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for this debate on the BBC charter and its performance. I must add that my application was supported by no fewer than 33 colleagues from across the House. Good weather, a one-line Whip and local election fatigue, I suspect, have intervened, but have not diminished the importance of the debate to all those voters who watch and hear the BBC and pay for it, and for whom I speak today.

The reason for my proposing this debate is that the Government's mid-term review of 22 January 2024 was only announced by written ministerial statement and not on the Floor of the House itself, and therefore was not properly discussed. The question I will deal with is whether this mid-term review satisfies the genuine concerns about the manner in which the charter should operate.

I was somewhat involved in the 2015 charter review that led to the new charter, in that I proposed a defined new purpose for the charter specifically on the question of impartiality, which was inserted. I also proposed a conditional licence on the impartiality issue as long ago as the debate on the Broadcasting Act 1990 for broadcasting licence holders, which was incorporated in the Act—so at least I have been consistent.

The new charter provided that the BBC would be governed by a new unitary board and regulation would pass to Ofcom as an external and independent regulator. The question is whether that has worked effectively in delivering for licence fee payers in the national interest, by strengthening the oversight of the BBC's complaints procedure with proper independence and enabling Ofcom to regulate the BBC's online public service. The Government tell us in their review that

“impartiality is core to the BBC's responsibilities under the Charter”.

The BBC ran a £220 million deficit in 2022-23, with an annual income, believe it or not, of £5.7 billion and operating costs of £5.9 billion. In comparison, the democratically elected House of Commons, our bastion of freedom and accountability, together with the House of Lords, merely costs around £847 million a year. Given that the BBC has a massive influence on public opinion and is unelected, that makes the rule of impartiality fundamental to its justification. The Government review also points out that impartiality is one area where the BBC is seen by surveys to be “less favourably compared” in the provision of news, and exhorts the BBC to improve that and to maintain the trust of the public and the audience.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I think the hon. Gentleman has somewhat lost the House. None of us understands what the connection is between expenditure by Parliament and expenditure by the national broadcaster. Can he further develop why that is relevant?

Sir William Cash: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have not lost anything at all. It is very simple. The fact is that in Parliament, we have proper debates by

[*Sir William Cash*]

elected people and decisions made on matters of public importance, whatever the outcome and whatever the views expressed. They are democratically decided. The decisions put across by the BBC quite often are the result of a kind of centrist viewpoint, which I will come on to later, which is inevitably not consistent with the views of the public who pay for the benefit, if that is what it is to be called, of watching and listening to the programmes in question.

The Government review recommends that the BBC publishes more information on how it carries out its work on impartiality and how it responds to Ofcom's challenge to improve its performance. A new complaints system has been established under the principle of "BBC First", but the question remains whether that has worked. The number of complaints made to Ofcom about the BBC's impartiality has increased, and the evidence is that the BBC is not meeting this challenge.

It is understood that there has been substantial disagreement between the Government and the BBC during the creation of this new complaints system, but it is still found wanting and Ofcom needs to improve its own performance. It is also understood that many former BBC employees with BBC sympathies remain in Ofcom and are involved in this process. That also represents a problem, the ultimate result of which is unsatisfactory. Clearly, the Government are not sufficiently satisfied with the BBC at the moment, or with Ofcom's performance on this vital question. That is bad news. As the Government point out, the BBC has failed to have a sufficiently robust internal system for identifying the statistical data to determine its analysis of complaints. The Government state that the independence of complaints handling indicates that the BBC can do more to ensure that audiences feel that their complaints will be fairly considered.

A number of points need to be made. I know something of this, because the European Scrutiny Committee, which I chair, took evidence from the BBC nine years ago on the issue of bias. We criticised the BBC on the question of the European issue before the referendum took place. The distinguished Lord Wilson of Dinton made same kind of criticism of bias in his own report. All these years later, the Government remain concerned even now that the manner in which complaints are dealt with, and the data involved, continue to be profoundly unsatisfactory.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am afraid that I am one of those who has been distracted, and I will not be able to remain to speak in the debate. I took a very great interest in the report by Lord Wilson of Dinton, not least because it did not denigrate the integrity of people in the BBC. It did uncover, however, an unconscious preconception about what certain views on the European community meant. The report was about the impartiality of the BBC when reporting matters concerning the European Union. It made a lot of people in the BBC extremely angry. People from the BBC told me that it should never have been commissioned, even though it was a totally objective report. When confronted with it, the BBC still gets very angry about it, which suggests that there is a different atmosphere in the BBC about certain issues. Nobody ever thinks that they themselves are biased, and the

BBC does not think it is biased, but it can unconsciously produce a very one-sided approach to a particular issue such as the European Union—and, in that case, about the single currency.

Sir William Cash: Indeed. The proof was in the pudding and was demonstrated by the outcome of the referendum on 23 June 2016. My hon. Friend is right. Actually, this is about unconscious bias in some cases and very positive groupthink in others. That is where the problem lies—somewhere in between.

On a limited budget, the voluntary organisation News-Watch does the job extremely well. It states: "The BBC's continued stonewalling of complaints, inadequacies of Ofcom in its watchdog role and the lack of effective reforms proposed by the mid-term review to ensure impartiality remains a fundamental problem." Thus, the national interest is undermined, and the right of the licence-fee payer to have a proper system in place is denied him. News-watch is calling—rightly, in my opinion—for much more radical reforms to ensure impartiality, with a fully independent complaints system, more transparency and accountability, and efforts to improve diversity of opinion among BBC staff through new staff-training initiatives to ensure impartial research and analysis. All those are urgent.

The mid-term review does not, in my opinion, provide a proper system for determining breaches of impartiality, and allows the BBC and Ofcom undue latitude in interpreting what the words "due impartiality" mean, leaving the BBC as its own judge and jury. Indeed, in the past year, the new BBC editorial complaints unit—otherwise known as the ECU—has upheld only one impartiality complaint. People simply will not believe that, but it is a fact. Neither the BBC nor Ofcom routinely publish detailed data on the vast majority of the nearly 2 million complaints received since Ofcom became the regulator in April 2017. The system is, therefore, not fit for purpose.

Ofcom's own figures indicate that complaints relating to bias make up as much as 39% of the complaints, and complaints about misleading and dishonest content make up a further 26%, amounting to approximately 800,000 complaints about bias since Ofcom took over. Of the 155 complaints upheld or partly upheld by the new ECU system, only 33 were accepted as relating to bias, which is an absurd and minuscule proportion. We do not yet have the latest figures, those relating to 2023-24, but the provisional information indicates that the ECU considered 374 complaints, of which only 2.7% were fully or partially upheld and 89% were not upheld. The situation is shocking and demonstrates an intrinsic failure of the system. It must be made fully independent, and must not be judge and jury.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I wonder what the hon. Gentleman thinks about the mid-term review's own conclusion that

"there is clear evidence that adherence to impartiality and editorial standards is now at the heart of the BBC's priorities".

Sir William Cash: It is at the heart of the BBC's priorities in theory, but not in practice. Ofcom is insufficiently independent, and it is understood that there are deep concerns about the entrenched ties between its content board and the BBC—which still persist—and, therefore, a lack of accountability. A mere 56% of the

public now believe that the corporation is impartial. The BBC refuses to engage with complaints that do not refer to single programme items, and there is a lack of comprehensive research into audience perceptions of bias.

I noticed an important letter in *The Daily Telegraph* on 23 January this year from Baroness Deech, a distinguished Cross-Bench peer and King's counsel who was a governor of the BBC from 2002. Regarding the publication of the mid-term review in January, she wrote that

“Complaints are seen by the BBC as very sensitive matters, threatening the independence of the editors: witness the lengths to which it has gone to keep secret the Balen Report on its bias against Israel.”

She argues that

“The best way to handle complaints would be to appoint an independent ombudsman from outside the media industry, supported by experts on the topic at issue.”

I believe she is right. She confirms that

“Ofcom is heavily staffed by former BBC and media professionals who may be as touchy as their current counterparts at the notion of bias at the BBC.”

It is not just a notion: it is clearly apparent, and that is what the public think.

It is also interesting to note the views of distinguished BBC insiders, who know how the system works on a daily basis and have been openly critical of the BBC's performance while they were employed as top-line and experienced presenters and commentators within the BBC for decades. I recommend that anyone who is interested in this subject reads Roger Mosey's book “Getting Out Alive”, which gives a very good insight into issues of bias by the BBC on the question of Europe. He recalls a “Today” programme meeting when Rod Liddle was confronted by a producer who said disparagingly,

“The Eurosceptics believe Germany is going to dominate Europe! This generated laughter from bien pensant colleagues” about the ridiculousness of that idea.

“But what if it's true?” was the response from the editor, and he set the team thinking about items that would examine whether Euroscepticism had some well-founded beliefs”

As Members will recall, at that time nobody thought for a minute about the simple question that those of us who were campaigning on the European issue—in my case, having come into the House in May 1984, I have campaigned continuously for 40 years—were trying to get across: “What does the European Union and its related matters mean for the British people?” That is an example of how the system can work—when reason prevails, as demonstrated by the editor of the “Today” programme.

Mosey also refers to the issue of asylum seekers in the summer of 2003, when Tony Blair was Prime Minister.

Mosey said that the people he describes as the “editorial policy people” asserted in this context that the issue was being led by an

“angry tabloid agenda and extreme Right-wing groups”.

Mosey replied strongly to the editorial policy team, saying among other things that the

“asylum debate is one in which we've done rather badly in reflecting the concerns of our audiences or the genuine crisis faced by the government in dealing with the issue”.

That was in Tony Blair's time, let alone now. Later, he mentions:

“Two years ago when it started being raised, we did not realise the level of unease about the issue”.

Now, two decades later, the position remains the same.

I also recommend John Humphrys's book “A Day Like Today”, particularly, after 33 years of political interviewing, his conclusion:

“Today presenters and their stablemates do have questions to ask themselves. Does an interview always have to be so combative? Does there have to be a winner or loser”—[*Interruption.*]

John Humphrys, and he knows what he is talking about, unlike the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), says that

“if it does, the loser might very well be the public. If we interviewers succeed, albeit unintentionally, in convincing the listener that all politicians are liars, the real loser is our system of representative democracy that has served the nation so well for so long”,

to which I say, “Hear, hear.”

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. I would just draw the House's attention to when I was new young Back Bencher in the early 1990s, and two or three of us, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), finally got a meeting with the “Today” programme's editorial team, which I think included Rod Liddle. We started to explain to them why joining a single currency in the European Union might be a rather bad idea and they were very interested, but they were greeted with derision when they went back to the BBC and suggested that our arguments should be taken seriously.

Sir William Cash: The short answer is that we got the verdict on 23 June 2016, as we all know.

The problem is that the BBC is incapable of enforcing its own rules on impartiality, largely because the overwhelming majority of the corporation's journalists as pivotal staff—as one hears, even from Members of this House who have worked for the BBC—are signed up to a left-liberal political worldview in which group-think and woke prevail, and any who diverge from the worldview they hold makes those who differ from them targets for criticism and worse, including ridicule.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): I neither deify nor damn the BBC, and like most of my constituents, my household's interactions are with BBC Merseyside, CBBC, “Match of the Day”, the Proms and the latest new drama. However, I will say that I have never worked, engaged with or had dealings with any member of BBC staff—political staff, journalists—who has been anything other than professional. I have never assumed, and I have never asked about, what their political leanings are. Having listened to what the hon. Gentleman says, and I respect him very much, I do think that we have had a lot of subjective opinion and perhaps some score settling, but not a lot of objective evidence.

Sir William Cash: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I will only say that, as he will have noticed, I have been quoting some highly experienced, knowledgeable and famous presenters and commentators, who have made their own remarks.

What the corporation desperately needs is more political diversity. One of the problems is the BBC's hiring policy, which should be seeking out journalists, researchers

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and programme makers with divergent views if they are genuinely to present commentary on a fair and unbiased basis. Despite Director-General Tim Davie's avowed intent to reform the BBC and maintain a proper reputation for impartiality, that has not happened. This can be seen, for example, by the total failure—I have myself mentioned it frequently in the press—to restrain the likes of Gary Lineker from making political statements on the issue of small boats, and getting away with it scot-free. The same applies to outrageous examples of aggressive interviewing, far beyond objective questioning, that have recently centred on the Hamas-Israel conflict. This was the subject of an important debate led by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) in Westminster Hall only a few weeks ago.

The so-called thematic review published only this week is a good example of how things are still going wrong. The report claims to have considered more than 1,500 output items but deliberately opted not to undertake any statistical content analysis, as the BBC knows only too well, and, as before, ignoring the report on the BBC's coverage led by Lord Wilson 20 years ago. The BBC knows that real statistical analysis is required and can do so but simply refuses to provide it.

The licence fee is inevitably under attack as a result of this failure and the loss of trust with taxpayers that goes with it. It is also embedded, I am afraid, in the failures I have identified in the well-intentioned BBC mid-term review itself. This raises the question of why those who pay the licence fee and who feel that the BBC disregards their views, and can demonstrate to have experienced that, should be forced to pay for the running of the BBC, a subject upon which the wise and reasonable Lord Charles Moore has frequently written in the past.

3.20 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). He made a wide-ranging speech more at times perhaps suited to the History channel than to BBC Parliament, but I am sure the viewing public will have listened to what he said with great interest. He made some important points, and the attendance at this debate does not reflect the high regard in which people hold the BBC and its importance for our nation, which is why this review is of importance.

I was not familiar with the term “BBC sympathiser,” but I suspect that many members of the public would recognise themselves as BBC sympathisers because it does hold a special place in many people's hearts and is respected around the world. That should not make the BBC immune to criticism, however, and because of the unique way it is funded it is often held to a higher standard than many of its competitors.

It is right that the BBC should respond to public concerns and reflect the way society is changing, otherwise it will find itself consigned to the history books alongside silent movies and video cassettes. The sad reality is that the BBC's traditional rivals on free-to-air terrestrial TV are already on life support because they cannot compete with online subscription services in terms of quality and they cannot match the ways online services can

target adverts and reach people, which were inconceivable not long ago. So the BBC could become the last man standing in terms of wholly British broadcasters.

But the warning signs are there for the BBC too. A recent survey found that 43% of people did not know what the TV licence was for and 66% agreed that the TV licence should be scrapped in 2027. I do not agree with that, but that survey should be ringing alarm bells. It may only be one survey, and I do not know the age breakdown, but I suspect we would find from it that younger people are less likely to see the value of the licence fee. After all, they will have grown up in a world where on-demand subscription services are the norm, so paying for something regardless of whether they watch it may well seem outdated and probably unfair.

But when we look at the hard facts, not just at surveys, that also paints a worrying picture. The number of people not paying the licence fee has doubled in 10 years, and that is despite the threat of large fines for non-payment. If that non-payment rate increases at the same rate over the next few decades, we can all see where that will take us. So we need to ask serious questions about why non-payment rates are growing. Clearly that is in part because people are voting with their feet and their wallets, and that is a challenge for the BBC in its overriding mission, which I will address shortly, but it is also a question of enforcement.

When I ask questions of Ministers about enforcement action, it is clear that none has been taken against anyone over 75 for non-payment. I certainly know of a constituent in that age bracket who has decided for their own reasons not to pay the licence fee and so far has received 23 letters with various degrees of threat within them, but no actual enforcement action has been taken. It seems to me that the BBC has taken the decision not to prosecute over-75s for non-payment. I certainly have no issue with that—we should not be criminalising pensioners—but that does jar with the other stories we hear about seriously ill and vulnerable people being prosecuted for non-payment. It seems that we are ducking the hard decisions that need to be made about how we deal with the licence fee.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Is there not another issue here, which is that the BBC is a successful programme maker and broadcaster, yet it is completely unable to compete with the likes of Amazon Prime and Netflix, because it is not allowed to run subscription services in the same way? Is there not a case for replacing a large proportion of the licence fee income with subscription income for those programmes, albeit that it would still be necessary for the BBC to have some public subvention for its public service broadcasting, which plays such a key role in our national life?

Justin Madders: That is where the debate takes us, and that is a debate we need to have. We need to decide as a House and a country whether we think that the current model is sustainable. There is evidence mounting that it is not. Equally, I want to protect the BBC, what is good about it and what I value about it. That means that we have to face these issues. Not many businesses that decide not to charge 10% of their customers will survive for long, and people in a free society should not be criminalised for refusing to pay for a service that they do not use, so something will have to change. Either the

BBC will have to change tack, or the Government or this place will have to fill that gap. If a council saw such levels of non-payment for council tax, the Government would be sending inspectors in to ask the council to deal with it. We are in a strange situation where we are ignoring a serious issue.

I note with interest that the annual report on the licence fee produced by the BBC claims that it visited more than 72,000 premises without a licence, but the report mysteriously fails to say what action was taken as a result. While it is difficult to find out precisely how many homes should be paying the licence fee, we can state with confidence that 72,000 visits is in itself a small proportion of the properties not currently paying the licence fee. It is time for an honest debate about our expectations over people paying the licence fee.

The flipside of failures in licence fee collection is whether the BBC is run efficiently as an organisation. It is a cliché—I am sure we will hear plenty this afternoon—that it is a bureaucratic monster stuffed with BBC lifers, but we have to ask whether it is run effectively. I have been told that six different stakeholders from four separate BBC departments attend pitches for new TV series. When an organisation has so many internal stakeholders, we have to question who exactly they are serving. Those tasked with governing the BBC have to ask serious questions of it and of themselves as to whether they are delivering true value for money in that respect.

I will reflect on the subject of governance for a moment. I take the point that the hon. Member for Stone made earlier, but I come to a different conclusion. The debate today will clearly have a large element about the BBC's impartiality, and I do not think it is constructive for us to trade off instances where the BBC has failed in recent times to get that right. We can all say that it can and must do better. I agree that how internal complaints are resolved needs to be looked at with some independent oversight. However, I will focus on how the BBC reflects the diversity of viewpoints in its broadcasting and decision making.

Broadcast is not just about which political party has its voice heard, but who from those political parties speaks. It seems to me and my constituents that political coverage is massively dominated by voices from London. That same London-centric view is presented through all politics coverage, and frankly it plays into the impression of large swathes of the country that politicians are out of touch and obsessed with the comings and goings in Westminster, far removed from the realities of people's lives. Fair play to the BBC, it does deign to visit the regions with "Question Time" and "Any Questions?", although I recall a recent occasion when "Any Questions?" came to Cheshire, but the BBC still had to bus in the Labour spokesperson from London. It proves that you can take the BBC out of London, but you cannot take London out of the BBC. The same applies to programmes broadcast out of Salford, when everyone jumps on the first train back to London after the show finishes.

This is not a BBC for the whole country; it is a BBC that is still shaped by the same privately educated Oxbridge, London and home counties viewpoint that has dominated it since its inception. Every member of the board that I have been able to find schooling details for was privately educated. That means there is a real lack of diversity of thought, and that is reflected in the make-up of the senior echelons of management and editorial staff, raising

serious questions about the BBC's commitment to social mobility. It is no wonder that sometimes my constituents look at the BBC and ask, "Who are they speaking to?"

That does matter, because as figures on non-payment of the licence fee continue to rise, the more that people feel the BBC is talking down to them and does not have a voice in their community, the more likely they are to join the millions who have decided not to pay. If we are not careful, we will soon reach a tipping point where the licence fee model becomes unsustainable. As someone who actually wants the BBC to survive—maybe that makes me a BBC sympathiser—I want this place to look seriously at how we square that circle.

I declare an interest as a licence fee payer, not once but twice—I am sure that many other hon. Members who split their time between here and their constituencies are as well. Even if I were only paying it once, I am sure that I would think it represents far worse value for money than any other TV service that I pay for in terms of pounds per hour watched. On one level, that should not come as a surprise—I pay for the subscription services I do because they have things that I want to watch—but could I honestly say that, were I given a free choice, I would pay the licence fee? I probably would, but more and more constituents are asking that question, and will continue to ask it. It needs a serious, sustainable answer.

I do not think that the BBC can compete with on-demand subscription services in terms of quality or frequency of output. It does some great TV, but it cannot compete with the investment that some of the on-demand services provide.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's indulgence. He is talking about the BBC's TV services, but the BBC provides far more than just TV. He has not mentioned radio. I think that the BBC provides some of the best radio in the world, and that simply could not be provided by commercial operators. Does he agree that our nation is better served by having a diversity of voices from commercial providers and the BBC on the radio scene?

Justin Madders: I agree that BBC radio is absolutely fantastic. If I choose to listen to radio, I usually end up listening to the BBC, and not just for the sports coverage but for all other coverage. The BBC's radio offering is probably the one part that it has got right in getting a good spread of voices and opinions from across the country.

BBC local radio is really important. Radio Merseyside is important to a great many of my constituents, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) will attest. Some of the cuts to BBC local radio have been extremely regrettable, because it is a strength that we should be building on.

More generally, it is the BBC's news element—be it on radio, online or on TV—that is critical to the BBC's future. While some clearly think it has a bit of work to do to have everyone's confidence that it is impartial, it is really important to our democracy in this era of disinformation and division to have a new source that is still trusted by the majority of people.

Sir William Cash: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will bear in mind the extraordinary examples of the Bashir interview, the Jimmy Savile scandal and the Cliff Richard scandal—those things that seem to envelop the BBC periodically in a way that completely destroys its

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credibility. Alistair McAlpine is another example. Does he agree that it is astonishing that an organisation that has such a reputation in certain quarters can fall down so badly in others?

Justin Madders: Those are some interesting historical references. Any organisation that has been around as long as the BBC, and with that amount of output, will fall down at times. However, it is clear from surveys about what people think about the BBC's impartiality and their trust in what it broadcasts that it is well ahead of anyone else. That is something we need to preserve and treasure. I commend the work of Marianna Spring on the online disinformation being pushed by states and people who are hostile to this country and who want to sow distrust and undermine our democracy. Her work to expose that is vital.

If the BBC were to have no other role—though I think it should—it should be a trusted source of truth and transparency for everyone in this country and around the world. It will have a challenge persuading people that it is relevant in other areas. In the next few decades, the majority of the population will have grown up in a world where the idea of paying for a service on a TV set that they do not own for a bunch of channels they hardly ever watch feels anachronistic at best and indefensible at worst. The sooner we recognise that to keep the BBC at all we need to address that challenge, the sooner we can decide as a Parliament and a country that it is worth saving. I believe that it is, but we need to address the challenges before it is too late.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Here is a funny thing: while I have been sitting here, I have received a text message from the BBC asking me to do “Any Questions?” tomorrow evening in Sedbergh. I have had to break the news that, as Deputy Speaker, I am unable to do so. How peculiar.

3.35 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): That is terrible news, Mr Deputy Speaker. The nation has been deprived of your views for too long, and we should hear more of them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on securing this debate and on a fascinating speech in which he adduced some interesting evidence, particularly from books written by former senior BBC people. He may not be shocked to discover that I would deduce different conclusions from much of that evidence. I may have misunderstood what he said about the Roger Mosey story of Rod Liddle at the “Today” programme editorial meeting, where most people around the table laughed at the idea that Eurosceptics might have a point, but Rod Liddle ordered them to do some stories about it to investigate whether it was true. That seems exactly what I would want the editor of the “Today” programme to do—question his own staff and perhaps his own prejudices, and say, “Okay, let’s report a wide range of views.” If that is what is happening, that is a good thing.

I also slightly take issue with my hon. Friend’s praying in aid the thematic review of immigration that the BBC produced this week, which was very self-critical of some

of its immigration coverage. That report was commissioned by the BBC so that it could flagellate itself if necessary and, hopefully, improve its coverage. That seems to be the sort of thing that I would want an organisation as powerful and important as the BBC to do—to retain the capacity to criticise itself. I suspect that he and I would share the view that, at times, the BBC can be exasperating, arrogant and wrong. Nevertheless, as chair of the BBC all-party parliamentary group, I believe it is one of our great national institutions. We should wish it success. We should constantly prod it and try to improve it but, in the end, we should take a positive view.

Sir William Cash: I hope that my right hon. Friend will appreciate that my intention is to point to how statistical data is analysed, which may sound extremely boring but lies at the heart of whether we can properly evaluate the analysis in the public domain. I agree that there are moments when the BBC does very good things, but on some occasions it does very bad things, and there are reasons for that which need proper investigation.

Damian Green: I do not disagree at all. There is an interesting point about statistical analysis as opposed to other qualitative, perhaps more fuzzy analysis of the BBC’s output and performance. There is clearly a case for both.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on the timeliness of the debate, because although our Benches are slightly denuded today, the country’s attention will be on the BBC over the next few days, particularly on Saturday night when there are two new episodes of “Doctor Who” followed by Eurovision on BBC1. I can tell hon. Members where the nation will be on Saturday night: watching the BBC. It is the only institution that can do that. Even in the completely different media world in which we now operate and that we all enjoy, there are times when the nation comes together, and that will be one of them. This is the second debate in a row where I quote a former tourism Minister who said that his experience of what attracted people around the world to this country were three institutions that they held in the highest regard: the royal family, the premier league and the BBC. We put them in peril at our own peril.

As Members, we all inevitably have a skewed perspective, because we concentrate on news and current affairs. Like everyone else here, I share many of the irritations and frustrations. I sometimes shout at the TV and the radio when I am at home, and I sometimes want to shout at the interviewer when I am on TV or radio. The BBC must get its news coverage right as part of its core mission. On that, the mid-term charter review is clear: it finds that there is clear evidence that adherence to impartiality and editorial standards is now at the heart of the BBC’s priorities, and so it should be.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave the impression that the BBC was a dying institution, with fewer and fewer people watching it or listening to it. However, eight out of 10 adults in this country on average consume BBC news every week. That is double the figure for the next nearest provider. At the same time—this is directly relevant to the mid-term charter review—the BBC is overwhelmingly the UK’s most trusted source of news. Some 45% of UK adults say they would turn first to the BBC. In second place, on 6%, are ITV or Sky. Regardless of the political views

of the individual, BBC news is more trusted by people in the UK than any other institution. Interestingly, it is also the most trusted news brand in the US. At a time when the challenge to democracy and the capacity to have balanced debate is under threat as never before, that is really important. This House should acknowledge, for all our frustrations and irritations, that we are lucky in this country to have an institution that has that reach and that level of trust, and that we should therefore seek to preserve and enhance it.

I contrast the situation with news and debate here with that in the United States, where people increasingly get their news from a channel that reflects the views they already have. There are right-wing news channels and left-wing news channels in the United States. Therefore, its political debate is polarised and increasingly toxic. Anything we can do in this country to avoid going down that track seems to me to be very worth while. It is an essential part of public service broadcasting, and public service broadcasting by and large works.

We have talked about the changing landscape and the arrival of the streamers. The question is often asked: who needs the BBC when we have Netflix, Prime, Disney, Apple and Paramount? It is a good question, and the answer is: anyone who cares about having a distinctive British voice in media, drama, comedy and all the things that people want to watch. The thing that unites all the streaming services I mention is that they come from the United States. Sometimes they make programmes in Britain—we welcome them here to keep our media industry thriving—but nevertheless, in the end, they are not going to reflect the voice of people in this country, and in particular people in the parts of this country that are furthest away from London. Therefore, having a broadcaster whose basic role is to do that seems to me to be very important.

The BBC contributes £4.9 billion to the UK economy each year, with 50% of the gross value added generated outside London, and supports about 50,000 jobs around the country, again operating largely outside London. We know that the creative economy is one of our strongest economic sectors, and we know that the BBC is the largest single investor in original UK content. Knowing those facts seems to me, again, to reinforce the argument that, for all of the reviews and investigations that need to be conducted, on the whole the BBC is a force for good.

Another criticism, which must be taken head-on, concerns over-expansion. Has the BBC tried to provide services that could be provided by private operators or by the market, and in doing so has it tried to make itself too all-embracing in the British media landscape? I think that is a permanent discussion that is well worth having. It is important to ensure that the BBC is only doing things that would not be done otherwise, or doing things better and in a way that others would not do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone was very critical of Ofcom. I am sometimes critical of it myself, although less so than he is. Nevertheless, it is absolutely right to identify Ofcom, in the era of regulation that we have entered, as a crucial element of ensuring that the BBC sticks to doing what it needs to be doing. If there are signs that Ofcom is not doing that job effectively, this House—perhaps through the Culture, Media and Sport Committee—will play an important role in ensuring that the BBC stays on the right track.

The overall context of this is, of course, the funding settlement for the licence fee, which has lasted for more than a century now and is increasingly under threat. We know about the short-term pressures; for reasons good or bad, the Government have not kept the licence fee in line with inflation levels over the past few years, and the BBC has therefore suffered painful rounds of cuts that have affected services that many of us value hugely, such as local radio. That is an important enough debate, which we have had in the Chamber previously, but an even more important debate is this: how long can a licence fee settlement continue?

I can reveal that the licence fee has survived for at least 30 years longer than some expected. I did some work on the 1990s licence fee and charter review, and in those days the much maligned—and unfairly so—John Birt was saying that he thought that it might be the last licence fee settlement, because he could see what was going to happen with the internet and new modes of delivery such as video and, at that time, just text. He thought that those would ultimately render the licence fee untenable.

Having sat through those debates in the 1990s, I find it fascinating that we are sitting here, 30 years later, still debating the same issues, and that by and large the people of this country are happy to pay the licence fee, although I agree that an increasing number are not doing so. Given what we get for it, it is still relatively cheap in comparison with the amount that many of us will spend on streaming services. It has survived longer than we expected, but in an age of declining linear viewing, whether it can continue is genuinely a key question. To those who wish to trot through the options, I can only commend the report that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee published a few years ago.

John Nicolson: Hear, hear.

Damian Green: I am grateful for that vocal support from the Opposition Benches.

Having run through the options, the Committee concluded that, as things stand, technically it would be quite difficult to find a better way of doing this. We all know what the imperfections are, but there may not be anything better at the moment. The key principle, it seems to me, is that because everyone in the country has some stake in this, perhaps a financial stake—everyone is, in some way, buying BBC services—everyone is entitled to some education, information or entertainment in return. It is that striving to provide a universal service that keeps the BBC honest, and keeps it doing the things that only it does. If we take away that obligation, we may have a successful programme maker, but we would not keep the BBC doing the things it has done successfully for more than a century.

I often feel that the licence fee settlement works in practice but does not work at all in theory. Nevertheless, anything that might be theoretically better might actually be worse in practice, so I do not envy the Ministers who have to grapple with this matter. It is a genuinely difficult and hugely important issue to which there is no obvious answer.

I hope that the House agrees that the UK has a hugely valuable asset in the BBC and that, regardless of whatever changes need to happen, we need to preserve and enhance its ability to make a significant and positive

[Damian Green]

contribution to our national life. That should be the test that Parliament sets itself when it considers the future of the BBC.

3.50 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I served on the former Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee during the last charter negotiations in 2015-16, and I thought then that the charter period of 11 years was very long—it is a substantial extension. Although that allows the BBC to make longer-term decisions, a lot changes in the media landscape in that period of time. When the last charter was negotiated 11 years ago, the social media companies that dominate our media landscape today barely existed. They arrived on the scene in 2015-16 as major market players but were not yet what they are now: the principal way in which many people access their entertainment and news.

Looking at Ofcom's "Media Nations" study, it is clear that younger viewers—people under the age of 40—increasingly look first to social media or subscriber platforms for their content, rather than doing what people would have done in the past, which was to turn on the television and see what was on. That is a dramatic change in the way people consume news and information, and it is not just about a change in the type of content that they can access; it is also about broadcasting moving away from a true broadcast service, whereby a very large number of people choose to see the same things, and towards a personalised service, whereby the content that people consume is designed around them and their viewing habits. That applies to news just as much as it does to any other form of content.

That is the very big change that we have seen, and the prospect of artificial intelligence reducing the cost of production, particularly for news content, will only accelerate the process. The shift in people's habits towards consuming media through online platforms and social media apps will accelerate the personalisation of the content they see. In fact, such tools have been designed precisely to achieve that end.

Sir William Cash: As ever, my hon. Friend, who has enormous experience of all this, will add a lot to this debate. He mentioned what was done some years ago compared with now. Has he been watching BBC Four's repeat of the entire "Civilisation" series by Kenneth Clark? Does he not think that it is one of the most remarkable examples of what the BBC can do fantastically well, and that people should be watching it now? That is not a bad plug for the series.

Damian Collins: I agree with my hon. Friend. If I may briefly digress on his theme, I once hosted an event in Parliament for the Royal Television Society at which that programme was discussed. It was said that commissioning budgets and commissioning editors behaved very differently in the past, and that David Attenborough commissioned the entire series without having to ask for the director-general's opinion; he just did a 14-part epic of factual content. Alan Clark's father, Kenneth Clark, opens the "Civilisation" series by asking, "What is civilisation?" He says, "I don't think I can define it, but I think I recognise it when I see it." I sometimes think that the debate about whether the BBC is distinctive enough

and what distinctiveness looks like at the BBC is rather the same: it is hard to define, but we think we recognise it when we see it.

The reason I wanted to open my remarks by talking about the changing nature of viewing habits and of the media, and the fact that it would have seemed impossible 10 years ago that the centrality of a broadcaster such as the BBC could be challenged by a service such as YouTube, is that it is changing viewing habits too. The one big difference between the charter negotiation in 2015-16 and the build-up to the new charter, which will come into effect in 2028, is that those changing habits are leading licence fee payers to make different choices. Increasingly, they are choosing not to pay. This is the great challenge we now face.

In the past, the BBC had to ward off Governments that sought to load substantial extra costs on to it without compensating with a large increase in the licence fee. We previously saw that with the cost of the World Service and then free licences for the over-75s. This time around, the BBC faces the challenge of potentially declining licence fee revenues, alongside the reluctance of consumers to pay much more than they are being asked to pay now. It is doubtful that licence fee payers would support a substantial increase to the licence fee, and I do not think either the Government or the Opposition would be inclined to do it.

The BBC will therefore have to continue challenging itself to consider how it can prioritise resources while maintaining its core principles, which I believe are fundamental to the BBC: that it is a publicly funded and universal service, in which there is something for everyone who pays into it. The challenge of how to deliver that in the modern era requires the BBC to look for alternative forms of revenue.

In many ways, the big change in the last charter renewal empowered the BBC to develop the commercial potential of BBC Studios. In the director-general's recent speech, I was pleased to hear that he has set a target to increase those revenues to over £3 billion within the charter period. BBC Studios would then bring in a very substantial part of the BBC's revenue.

Making more programmes for more people and selling them around the world is an excellent way for the BBC to make money, but we also have to consider how it can monetise its current programmes. In the pre-internet world, people would watch a programme they liked, and they could watch it again when it was repeated—some say that it would be repeated too often, but it would be repeated. If they wished to own it, so that they could watch it on demand, as we now say, they could buy a cassette or a DVD in a shop.

I think programmes should be free to air on services such as iPlayer for a period of time, but do they really need to be free for a year? Should there not be a point at which the BBC starts to charge people to watch on demand, just as any other subscription platform would?

The same goes for audio content. The BBC has tried to take a big position in the podcast market, although it has been very effectively challenged by new entrants that are producing programmes of the same quality as Radio 4, on a wider range of topics, and attracting very big audiences. Again, I think those programmes should be free to air and available to all, but should access to the full archive remain free forever, or should there be a charge? It is perfectly legitimate for the BBC to consider

such commercial revenues in the same way as it sold books, DVDs and CDs in the past. These are ways in which the BBC can seek to bring in more revenue to reinvest in the programming that it needs to make.

The BBC also needs to consider the distinctiveness of its local newsgathering. This is a very important part of the BBC service. I think most Members are concerned about the apparent dilution of investment in local radio, which is an area where the BBC can deliver something in a way that no one else is delivering it. I think there should be increased investment. These are often among the BBC services that local audiences value most, and I am not sure those local audiences would have made some of the investment decisions that the BBC has made.

The breadth of services that the BBC offers has changed dramatically throughout its history. It may well be that the BBC needs to consider whether to prioritise certain services over others, while still remaining a universal broadcaster, because it may not be able to deliver the breadth that it delivers now while maintaining the quality standards it wishes to maintain. These are going to be very important considerations.

In terms of distinctiveness, I would like to see the BBC taking creative risks. It can afford to take creative risks because it is not reliant on advertising revenue to fund its programming. Holding an audience at a certain level throughout the day might be a demonstration of universal appeal, but it is not a commercial necessity for the BBC because it is not dependent on advertising revenue. It is a fair criticism to say, “Are the services on the BBC schedule, particularly the daytime one, distinct from what we would see on other channels?”. We largely see the same menu and diet of quiz, antique and property shows, which, although popular, are widely available. Could the BBC afford to take more risks and be more distinctive there?

The principle of the BBC being publicly funded is important. An aspect of this debate that is not mentioned enough is that under the alternative where we say to the BBC that we want it to be a voluntary subscription service, the volume of those subscriptions is almost certain to add up to less than we are talking about for the licence fee today. We would therefore have a much smaller BBC, largely making programmes for a smaller group of subscribers who wish to pay. That would be a gross act of vandalism against an important national institution.

If we have a fully commercial BBC, with full advertising, the biggest losers would be the other commercial broadcasters—ITV and Channel 4. They would discover that the revenue pot from advertisers for live TV audiences in the UK is not infinite and the BBC would simply be soaking it up. We would weaken our creative sector and our television market in the UK by doing that. We cannot disturb one part of the ecosystem of a great success, British television and film production, without disturbing the other component parts of it. That is why the BBC’s remaining publicly funded is important, although the mechanism has to be open to challenge.

As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, younger viewers, in particular, see the licence fee as a type of subscription, no matter how the BBC wants to see it. In effect, people see this as a monthly charge they pay, just as they might pay for Amazon Prime or for Netflix; they do not understand it as a device levy if they are watching TV through a

computer or on their laptop. It might be that the BBC will have to be funded in a different way, be it a property-based tax, as has been discussed before by the Select Committee and is the case in Germany, or some other mechanism. If the BBC was funded publicly in that way, it is perfectly legitimate to say, “What amount, what proportion, of that funding should be contestable? To what extent should another free-to-air broadcaster, or even a subscriber broadcaster such as Sky, be able to come along and say, ‘We will make this instead, we will make it better and we will make it free to air.’”? What proportion of that revenue should be contestable in that way? There will be a legitimate debate on that, but opening this up too widely would make the BBC’s sustainability difficult to protect.

As we look forward to the end of this charter and the start of the new one, we face a lot of challenges on getting this funding mechanism right. It needs to give the BBC the revenue and flexibility it needs to do what we want it to do. It needs to be funded through a charging mechanism that makes sense to the public. We also have to consider the viability of other services such as the BBC World Service, which is of huge strategic value to the UK but is largely funded by licence fee payers now. We must consider the extent to which there should be government support for that, particularly in respect of services that are further afield.

In closing, I just wish to say that I regard the BBC as a vital national institution. In a world that is becoming more fractured and where audiences are more scattered, the role of a trusted national broadcaster that can be impartial—although that will always be open to challenge from people who hold different views—that is resolutely focused on trying to get to the truth, and that can be a trusted source of news and information in a world riven by disinformation, conspiracy theories and lies, is of the utmost importance. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said, a national broadcaster can put on those moments that bring the nation together, be it a royal wedding, royal funeral or the coronation, Eurovision or major sporting events. At such times, the nation can come together and the BBC becomes the national town square. That is a fundamental part of its role in our public life.

4.3 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on securing this important debate. I class myself as a critical friend of the BBC—I am not sure whether that makes me a sympathiser or not. I want to see the BBC prosper in the new media age, but that inevitably means we will see change at the BBC, in response to the global creative boom we are witnessing. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said, we should not underestimate the soft power involved here: the selling of UK plc around the world by the BBC and its work. However, we simply cannot expect the British public to accept an ever-increasing licence fee if they perceive the values and approach of the BBC to be out of kilter with their world.

My constituents tell me that they value the BBC. They value a British public service broadcaster, particularly for news and current affairs, but it seems that the BBC does not value the type of news and current affairs that my constituents want, particularly around local news.

[Andy Carter]

It is disappointing that the one area where the BBC can genuinely make a difference—local provision—has been the area that has been cut and withdrawn in recent months. My constituents are concerned about opinions that are presented as facts. They want creativity and innovation, but they want to see the world through eyes that are from their local area. They want to see their town or their street reflected on the screens or heard through the speakers of their BBC radio station.

Its best and most distinctive content is unrivalled in range and quality, while being highly valued by listeners and viewers. Some of its services and programmes would simply not be possible to provide on a commercial basis. As I said earlier in response to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), services like Radio 4 simply would not exist in the commercial marketplace.

The majority of my remarks will pick up on the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford about what the BBC should be doing as we move forward post the mid-term review, and thinking about the next licence fee settlement. The mid-term review provided a valuable insight into the BBC's governance and regulation arrangements, and whether they have successfully enabled and effectively delivered the BBC's mission and public purpose. I particularly welcome the mid-term review agreement with Ofcom and the recommendations to change the framework agreement, so that new BBC services are not automatically considered material changes.

There is lots of value in Ofcom publicising an annual view on the BBC's position in the local news sector, and setting out its approach to considering the competition impacts of changes to BBC local news services, particularly in relation to the local press, which is struggling significantly. The BBC's decision to move more of its resource online has a consequence and impacts local journalism that is supported by advertising. For me, Ofcom should take serious interest in that. Ofcom has said it will set out a view for the first time in November 2024, and subsequently use its annual report on the BBC to update its view. I particularly welcome that.

I will take a few moments to specifically look at the competition and market impact in relation to the audio and radio sectors. For context, let us start by looking at the audience of BBC Radio. The combined weekly audience for all BBC and commercial radio in the UK remains extremely healthy. Some 49.5 million people, representing 88% of the population, put their radio on every week to listen to a linear service. In the last quarter of 2023, the most recent figures published by Radio Joint Audience Research, BBC Radio's share of total listening is 43.2%. One operator has 43% of the radio-listening market; that remains a significant, dominant position. The remaining 56% is split between myriad much smaller commercial operators. The BBC holds an extremely privileged position because of the scale of funding it receives, its unrivalled broadcast network and its ability to cross-promote its services, the like of which is not available to any rival operator, be that in television, radio or online.

I advocated changes to the BBC Trust back in the early 2000s, but it is fair to say that there has been a relatively light-touch approach to defining and policing

the activities of the BBC that most closely resemble the commercial sector in the radio and audio world. Traditionally, this has included the main pop music services—Radio 1 and Radio 2—but the BBC is also increasingly leveraging its position in radio and audio into its online activities provided on the BBC Sounds platform.

This debate provides me with an opportunity to highlight the current process of consultation over the launch of new services on all platforms, including BBC Sounds, as well as the effectiveness of regulation and governance from Ofcom in ensuring its distinctiveness. Specifically, the review looked at how the BBC and Ofcom assess the market impact and public value of the BBC in an evolving marketplace and how this relates to the wider UK media ecology, including with regard to commercial radio and local news sectors, and other content makers and distributors. It is important that regulatory conditions for BBC radio services are not diluted and that the drive for the BBC to deliver distinctive output remains.

The BBC has been repeatedly and rightly criticised by Ofcom for not meeting the required standards of openness with stakeholders, especially when new services are being developed. Earlier, I detailed that a more structured consultation is required, which is what Ofcom is urging the BBC to do. The current framework places too much emphasis on the BBC's own judgment and assessments of impacts, especially when considering the significance of change to its own services. This undermines the credibility and independence of the process. Ofcom can and should do more to make sufficiently robust assessments of competitive impacts, and needs to set out a clearer and more consistent requirement for the BBC.

The extent of the BBC's significant dominance in sectors such as radio and the implications of this for both distinctiveness and market impact must be reflected more clearly. BBC services must be measured and held to account to the highest possible standards of distinctiveness. Just last week, when I met people from the BBC, I asked for some data relating to digital audiences. The reply I received is that they would be publishing them annually. That is simply not good enough.

In February, the BBC announced plans to launch new spin-off radio stations on DAB and BBC Sounds, which would directly imitate radio services provided currently by the independent radio sector. My view is that these new services are duplicates and they fail to deliver distinctive output to listeners already concerned about changes to their beloved BBC local radio services. The changes require regulatory approval from Ofcom, and I have raised my concerns directly with the Minister and the regulator. I am concerned that the BBC is attempting to fast-track proposals on BBC Sounds, which is subject to less regulatory oversight than the DAB services.

As listening habits continue to shift online, there is a real risk of harm to popular and innovative commercial stations developing across the UK. Stations such as Boom Radio have moved in to deliver popular services for the over-50s when Radio 2 moved its services to a younger age group. If this service is launched exclusively on BBC Sounds, and it inevitably receives significant cross promotion on BBC 1 and on Radio 2, it will drive audiences and can impact commercial operators significantly.

In March, the BBC confirmed new plans, for the first time in the UK, to run advertising around its podcasts and on-demand content on third party platforms, such as the Apple podcast app. If these proposals are introduced, listeners who do not use BBC Sounds would, in effect, be paying twice for BBC content. They have already paid their licence fee, which has contributed to making the content, but then they will be paying again through advertising revenues. The BBC is unfairly forcing licence fee payers to pick between ad-free listening on BBC Sounds or their preferred podcast platform. Listeners should be entitled to access BBC audio content, such as “Desert Island Discs”, via whatever means they choose. Although the podcasting advertising market is in its relative infancy, the BBC is dominant in UK audio, which is different from the TV market and, as a result, its impact could and probably will be significant. There is only a limited pool of audio advertising revenue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) referenced, with commercial audio broadcasters relying solely on that revenue to fund their services and invest in professional content.

Ironically, there is a risk that the new proposals will have an unintended consequence for the BBC. As we look at the future of the licence fee, observers may reasonably question, if some BBC audio services could be funded by advertising, why not do that to all their radio provision, or to the BBC as a whole? Analysis conducted by an audio think-tank has already identified that, were that to be the case, probably only Radio 1 and Radio 2 would continue to be funded, because they are the only services that would be commercially viable. I am very supportive of public funding for the BBC under the current licence fee model, simply because I do not think that a suitable alternative could be proposed at this stage. Given what I believe to be the unworkable nature of alternatives such as a subscription model for DAB or FM audio, we simply cannot allow anybody to railroad us into scrapping the licence fee at this stage.

I support the Government’s aim of ensuring that a strong, distinctive, independent BBC can continue to thrive for years to come. I also want us to take opportunities to improve the BBC where we can. My hope is that the mid-term review is a staging post in the charter that will help the BBC to live up to that ambition, support the corporation to fly the flag for Britain in all corners of the world, and address the risk that the BBC, which is not regulated and focused on distinctive content, risks the very future of public service broadcasting and innovation within the independent creative sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the Front-Bench contributions. The last two minutes will be for Sir Bill to wind up.

4.16 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): When the mid-term review of the BBC was published, one commentator described it publicly as a

“great big hard hammer, badly disguised inside a not very velvet glove”

used to batter this key public institution. There was much criticism of the report over the BBC’s perceived failure to achieve balanced coverage. The sight of some right-wing Conservatives attacking the BBC over its record on impartiality was something to behold. Many

hound BBC journalists over objectivity, yet the Conservatives are happy for their Benches to operate as a sort of green room for GB News, with half a dozen or so Tory Members popping up there regularly, masquerading as journalists. Ofcom, the regulator, has explicitly condemned GB News and its Tory MP presenters over their continuing breaking of our broadcasting rules. The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) moonlights as a newsreader daily on GBeebies—a clear breach of Ofcom rules, which the regulator is sadly too weak to enforce.

I worked for the BBC for many years as a freelancer. Most BBC journalists, I sincerely believe, try to be fair and impartial. They sometimes fall short. I think they did so during the independence referendum—not individual journalists but the BBC as an institution, because the BBC is deeply establishment as an institution. I do not believe for one moment that journalists go to work daily with the objective of spreading disinformation. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) cites as an example of woke Europhile bias the views of Brexiter Rod Liddle. Who was this lowly figure when at the BBC? In fact, he held the powerful role of the “Today” programme editor. The hon. Member for Stone mentioned Roger Mosey. Another junior figure? No, he was also the “Today” programme editor, who became head of news.

Setting aside the surreal comparison that the hon. Member for Stone made between the cost of the BBC and Westminster—that is Westminster One, Two, Three and Four, Radio Westminster and Natural Westminster History, presumably—he moved on to some more BBC woke bashing, conveniently forgetting that the current BBC director general was a Conservative party candidate, the last BBC chair was a major Tory donor, and the last chair but two is now a Tory peer, like Lord Grade, Lord Patten, et cetera, et cetera.

In my position on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I regularly aim to hold BBC bosses to account over their party political loyalties, their judgment and their treatment of staff. That is all part of a healthy democratic critique. This Government, or any Government that hold office in this place, should back public broadcasting as a basic fundamental concept, and celebrate the BBC for its many present and past achievements, while of course remaining a critical friend. The constant baiting of the BBC during these last 14 years by so many senior Conservatives has given us, sadly, a weaker public broadcaster, on a shooglier financial footing, with a less positive impact on our democracy than when the Conservatives came to power.

Sir William Cash: I think the hon. Gentleman has slightly misinterpreted what I said, and is on the verge of being misleading. I happen to think Ron Liddle was an exceptionally good presenter, as was Roger Mosey and John Humphrys, but their experience demonstrated a degree of awareness that all was not necessarily well in the organisation or the manner in which their programmes were put together. That is all I am saying. I was not criticising them; I was commending them.

John Nicolson: Hold the front pages! The hon. Gentleman thinks that right-wing Brexiters are fundamentally good things when they appear on the BBC. That is a shock to us all, is it not?

[John Nicolson]

I agree with the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), who he said that the recitation by the hon. Member for Stone of the events of one particular editorial meeting showed a journalists' office operating well: somebody says something controversial, other folk argue, and we all have—what was it Mrs Merton said?—a “right good debate”. I remember when I sat with the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and various others on “On The Record”; we were all reporters and we all held very different views, but we did our very best to make sure we were impartial when on air. That is just as it should be.

The Conservatives spent a good deal of time arguing that the licence fee should rise only with inflation. Then, when they trashed the economy and inflation rocketed, they demanded that the BBC not increase the licence fee with inflation, leading to further financial pressures. The Government also imposed a social responsibility, TV licences for the over-75s, on the BBC, leading to a widely predicted set of draconian cuts. Much faux surprise and outrage ensued from some on the Tory Benches. Those measures have had a huge negative impact on our public broadcaster, which we as a state have been building now for more than a century. An underfunded BBC suits none of us, because the BBC's role in providing scrutiny for politicians, especially in an election year, is vital.

Reform of the BBC is certainly needed: pay equality for women; more black, Asian and minority ethnic staff in senior management posts; and more LGBT people in management and elsewhere. The BBC needs to end its fruitless battles with female staff, having lost or settled every single pay case it has fought against those women, at huge cost.

Having seen two Tory BBC chairs improperly appointed and forced to resign in the last decade, we surely need a new system for public service appointments. We will have a Labour Government soon. Will we see the same old British principle of Buggins' turn, with Labour donors replacing Tory donors in senior posts? The Leader of the Opposition should rule out the appointment of any big-money donor as BBC chair. I notice he has conspicuously failed to do so. Now would be a good time to promise meaningful reform.

4.23 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on giving us this opportunity to discuss the BBC. He brought up the concept of “BBC sympathies”. Virtually everybody in the Chamber—in fact, I think literally everybody, including him—has expressed at least some BBC sympathies in this debate. That is testimony to the fact that Members with all sorts of views on the BBC's future, past and present have managed to find something they love about the BBC.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) recognised, for instance, the value of radio, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). My hon. Friend also rightly raised concerns about the BBC's future and spoke about the possible implications of different funding options. He demonstrated that he values it as a trusted news source, and mentioned that that must continue, but without a proper funding arrangement, it could be weakened. I value his contribution.

The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) gave a thorough review of the importance of the BBC to our national life, our economy, our role in the world. He made powerful arguments about the ways in which funding options have hitherto affected the BBC's output. He mentioned in particular the radio output, as have others. The concern has been raised by many Members, including some who are not here today, that the cuts and changes to local radio, for whatever reason, have had an effect. Future proposals may, as the hon. Member for Warrington South said, have an effect on competition. Concerns about that have been raised with him, as well as with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who has been taking radio stations' views on the proposals. I think it right that we consider the effects on competition—the unintended consequences, as the hon. Member for Warrington South said.

The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) has been a distinguished member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee over the past 10 years. We have many former members of that Committee here, even in our low numbers, and they bring such expertise. He gave a detailed description of the implications of different forms of widening revenue. I urge all Members looking at the different funding options to read the *Hansard* report of this debate, because Members have made great contributions with thought and care. The hon. Member for Warrington South described himself as a critical friend of the BBC. I think that was an apt way to describe himself, because he raised concerns about competition and new proposals while also sharing what he believes to be unique and distinctive about the BBC.

It is worth spending a small amount of time on what is unique and distinctive about the BBC. Members have mentioned radio and podcasts. I would add BBC Bitesize, which so many young people relied on during the lockdown years. We have the BBC website. How many Members are getting BBC News alerts popping up on their screens right now? That is so often our method for learning about something that has just happened. We use it to check the weather in the morning, or to listen back to something that we have missed during the day but which we find really valuable. The content that the BBC is able to put out because of the role we entrust it with—a unique role in our public life—is what makes it such a great public service broadcaster.

As the Secretary of State wrote in her foreword to the BBC mid-term charter review, the BBC is an unmatched media institution that

“matters deeply to this country”

and to

“people right across the world.”

I agree. The Government have an important role in both scrutinising and championing the BBC, but the Secretary of State and some of her colleagues have had an odd way of showing it. I gently suggest to the Minister that the Government need to focus on supporting the BBC to fulfil its public service broadcasting mission, rather than using it as a punch-bag, as so many Conservative Members—many of whom are not here today—have done consistently in recent years.

I will underline the importance of the BBC to our national life before addressing the mid-term review itself. The BBC is one of our greatest institutions. It brings wealth, jobs and joy, alongside other public service

broadcasters. It brings people together for shared experiences, as many right hon. and hon. Members have said. From sporting occasions to royal occasions, we were all there. Most people turned to the BBC in the last few hours of the late Queen's life, but we also turned to it for great moments of rejoicing when our new King was crowned so recently. The BBC brings together people from the world over in news output, which is particularly recognised and trusted, as the right hon. Member for Ashford said.

The BBC is an important part of our soft power, but it is also vital in the ecosystem of our creative industries. It contributes £4.9 billion to the UK economy every year, 50% of which is outside London. Many Members would argue that that percentage should be higher, and we will hold the BBC to its plans to take more investment outside London carefully. I have seen the benefit of that for myself in my constituency of Bristol West, which is home to the BBC's world-renowned natural history unit. It is not just about the natural history unit itself, but the clustering of creative industries that has developed around it, with independent production companies flourishing. The BBC is the single largest investor in original UK content, creating jobs but also helping us to tell our national story in a distinctive British way. That is the first "B"—it is the British Broadcasting Corporation; it is not anything else but British—and it keeps British life front and centre.

I salute the BBC for its desire to improve and innovate, and to widen its range of content. The hon. Member for Stone talked about a diversity of views, and I believe that that is already with us. We have a diversity of output—of regional output, of regional voices and of stories told—but every Member should always challenge the BBC to go further on that, because championing a diversity of views is one of the things we are here to do in our role as MPs. However, the BBC is now competing for our attention with global media conglomerates that are motivated by profit, rather than by public service—those are different functions. Those include streaming services, but also content across social media, so it is important that we support and work with the BBC to change with the times, as well as challenging it to do so. We need to make sure it gets the support it needs.

Of course, the BBC needs a modern governance framework that is robust, proportionate and fit for purpose. The introduction of the unitary board to govern the BBC and the regulation of the BBC by Ofcom were both new elements in the 2015-16 charter review. That review included a focus on governance and regulatory issues, and therefore the BBC's mission, public purpose and funding model were written out of the scope of this mid-term review. The Government chose to focus on six themes. The first was editorial standards and impartiality, which many Members have addressed today, and the second was the handling of complaints. I have to mention to the hon. Member for Stone that just because a complaint with which he sympathises is not upheld, it does not mean that the regulator was wrong. He poses an interesting argument: that a large volume of complaints not being upheld means that the complaints system is not good enough. The Minister may wish to address that point in her remarks.

The other themes were competition and market impact, commercial governance and regulation, diversity, and transparency. Overall, the findings of the review indicate that the BBC's governance and regulation are working

well. It says that that is particularly true of the BBC's commercial activities—something that is worth noting. I welcome the review's recommendations to push the BBC to continue making improvements in relation to diversity—diversity of view, of voice and of identity—and transparency. If I am the next Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, I will continue to push the BBC to do so. The BBC has made clear commitments in both those areas and is making progress towards meeting those commitments, but there can never be room for complacency in any creative organisation. I will always hold the BBC to account: it takes public money to do the work that it does, and representing the widest diversity of voices is so important.

As other Members have said, it is right that Ofcom should assess the impact of the BBC's decisions on the wider market, but it should also be noted that of all 35 materiality assessments reviewed by Ofcom since the start of this charter period, it has disputed only one. It is also right that the BBC has a clear, easy to understand and robust complaints process—that is why the principle of "BBC First" was introduced in 2017, so that licence fee payers can hold the BBC directly accountable. It is important to be guided by evidence. Of course, it is right that the BBC is impartial, and that there is a process for assessing that impartiality; that is the only way in which the BBC will remain the UK's most trusted source of news and, some would claim, the world's most trusted source. It should therefore be noted that Ofcom has upheld only one complaint against the BBC regarding impartiality in the eight years since the beginning of this charter.

It is important that Members of all views recognise the role of the mid-term charter review, but also the work that Governments of all colours will need to do. In a context of rising disinformation and misinformation spread by highly sophisticated state and non-state actors, and in a year in which the citizens of so many countries are taking to the polls, our public service broadcaster could not be more precious. Our democracy is the richer for it.

The information that the mid-term review gathered on the public perception of the BBC is also evidence—it is evidence of what the public think about the BBC. That is fundamentally important, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston raised that in reflecting the views of his own constituents. The BBC spent 100 years building trust, and it cannot stop now and it cannot take its reputation for granted. I believe it is doing neither. I believe it is working hard to move forward, but it will always be held to account.

The next charter review will, I hope, take place under a Labour Government, and we will work constructively with the BBC to make sure it is fit for the 21st century. It will be informed by the BBC's biggest ever public engagement exercise, which will begin next year. It will be informed by an understanding of the great contribution the BBC makes to storytelling—British storytelling—as well as to the growth of the creative industries in the UK, and its unique role in bringing communities together. Most importantly, it will be informed by a true appreciation of the value of a source of both entertainment and news that we can trust.

4.35 pm

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to what has been a genuinely interesting

[Julia Lopez]

and rich discussion. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on securing this important debate on our mid-term review of the BBC. As I approach my—ahem—40th birthday in just under four weeks' time, I would rather be celebrating his 40th anniversary as a parliamentarian, which passed only days ago. He will be retiring from this place when the general election comes calling, leaving behind four decades of service to our nation and a legacy of relentless campaigning, the crowning achievement of which will be his efforts to restore sovereignty to this place. He has been a parliamentarian of substance and impact, and a parliamentarian who has understood his fundamental role, which is first and foremost to serve the people and interests of this our great nation.

One of my hon. Friend's techniques as a relentless campaigner—I hope he will not mind my saying this—is lying in wait for Ministers and pouncing on them, with surprising agility for an octogenarian, in darkened corridors or voting Lobbies to advance the causes closest to his heart. So it has been that on many occasions we have discussed BBC impartiality. Of course, his interest in this subject extends well beyond my three years as Media Minister—he referenced 1984, 1990 and 2003—because it is a cause he has championed for decades. Why? Because, as he implied, it goes to the heart of the special contract between the British people and the BBC: that the BBC will be funded in a unique way, via the licence fee, because it has unique duties in how it covers national events, produces content, reports on and shapes public debate, and imbues the British values of fairness, free speech and rigour into the BBC World Service as an international projection of our nation.

As my hon. Friend reflected in a debate last month, he played an important role in putting the issue of BBC impartiality at the centre of the current charter. I regret that he will not be here in the next Parliament with his institutional knowledge, when a new generation of MPs will need to make some very big decisions about the future of the BBC as its next royal charter is drawn up, the foundations for which we are laying now. The mid-term review has been one of the staging posts to that moment, and it will be a huge moment for UK broadcasters, audiences and creators because the world is changing around us, and changing very rapidly.

The question that has preoccupied public debate on the BBC's future the most is the sustainability of the licence fee, which has been mentioned several times. Be in no doubt but that that will be a big part of the discussion on the charter renewal. The numbers paying the licence fee are falling whether or not people are advocates of it. The way audiences, particularly younger audiences, consume content is breaking their traditional relationship with the linear broadcasters, weakening the loyalty to and the love of the institution. Audiences feel that the BBC is not adequately reflecting them, as has also been touched on. As a consequence, they have lost trust in it and are starting to not want to pay the licence fee.

The fact that most television will be received over the internet will introduce new gatekeepers and promoters of content, and none of us quite knows how AI will shape the information industry. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke

about these challenges with great clarity, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who brings his considerable expertise to this debate. Before I turn in more detail to the mid-term review, my ask of this House, if I may make one, as we debate the BBC in the coming months and years is that we do not lose focus on the very big picture as we fret over the urgent or everyday matters surrounding the BBC, its coverage and its presenters.

Since the second world war, we have understood our country and its values in part through the strength of its great institutions, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). The BBC is surely one of them, but it is not enough simply to will it to have a future and expect that to be the case. As the world changes around us, those institutions whose strength we have perhaps complacently relied upon must go through a process of renewal—a renewal that provides clarity of purpose and a sense of mission for the next decades of the 21st century—and, dare I say it, that includes the Conservative party and a renewal of centre-right thinking.

In the BBC's case, that mission must surely include the vigorous pursuit of truth in a world in which information and facts are blurred with increasing sophistication and intent. It must not just provide audiences with a narrow diet of content that suits an individual's taste or caters to their own worldview, but challenge, inform, educate and provoke curiosity in a way that pulls people out of their silos and in a way that serves all audiences, but especially our children, as a counter to malign elements of the online world and the pull of addictive entertainment over nourishing educational content that helps them navigate the real world around them. As this House has made patently clear, that includes local audiences, and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) has campaigned particularly strongly on that.

One of the most interesting parts of the director-general's recent speech about the future of the BBC was about algorithms, which are designed by many organisations to monetise controversy. He set out how the BBC in the 21st century is developing unique ethical algorithms that do not simply double down on an individual's narrow preferences but guide them into a broader, richer catalogue and bring people together.

At charter renewal, there might also be interesting questions about how we can best create and deliver public service content if younger audiences are moving elsewhere, and about whether a wider range of outlets and creators are well placed to deliver that. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe touched on that.

We will need to look at the BBC World Service as a force for projecting our values globally as malign states seek rapidly to up the stakes in the battle for hearts and minds. Finally, there will be important questions about the BBC's vital role in feeding the wider broadcasting and creative ecology in a way that will allow us in the UK to continue as a world leader in creativity and to retain our cultural voice. That is an aspect of the BBC debate that is often overlooked or misunderstood when we discuss its value. It has led the director-general to describe the BBC as

“a growth and innovation fund for the UK...to back British storytelling.”

The mid-term review touches on some of these issues, but it should be seen as the staging post that it is—a new innovation introduced at the last charter to understand whether the BBC is operating in the way envisaged at the last charter review, but also to signal where we think things may need to change by 2027. I understand that for some Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone included, the mid-term review did not go far enough on issues close to their hearts and I want gently to challenge that view. The mid-term review delivered a number of significant and necessary reforms, focusing on editorial standards and impartiality, whether the BBC has the right complaints model, and the distinctiveness of the BBC's content in relation to competition and market impact.

I want to be clear that the discussions within the mid-term review with the BBC and Ofcom, led by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State, resulted in recommendations she got over the line, with the licence fee payer always at front of mind. Our review was unambiguous that there is scope for material improvement across a variety of areas and it made 39 recommendations for meaningful change.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone has previously mentioned, impartiality was at the heart of the mid-term review and we concluded that it continues to be a major challenge for the BBC. Following direct and constructive dialogue with us in Government, the BBC is implementing major reforms building on the Serota review, and that includes thematic reviews of output—most recently, we saw one this week on migration coverage.

A key feature of the mid-term review is the recommendation for Ofcom's regulatory responsibilities, including its oversight of due impartiality, to be extended to key areas of the BBC's online public service material, which is where many now go for their content. The BBC also has an important tool at its disposal in its efforts to continue building trust in its relationships with its audiences and that is the complaints process. As Members will know, the BBC is unique among broadcasters in having the chance—indeed, the responsibility—to try and resolve audience complaints about its content first before they are considered by the independent regulator Ofcom. The ongoing feedback of licence fee payers to the BBC and how that feedback flows directly to staff and programme makers is invaluable in helping the BBC understand what its audiences care about and how to make its services better.

We have heard concerns through the MTR about complaints, and that is why they formed a key focus of our review, and it is the area where we made the most recommendations. I recognise the strength of feeling among some Members. For those colleagues, fundamental questions remain about the appropriateness of the “BBC First” principle, and that is why at charter review we have committed to examining whether “BBC First” remains the right complaints model to enable the BBC to deliver against its responsibilities to serve all audiences.

My hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) talked about the BBC's role in the market and the impact on commercial competitors, and that was also raised in the mid-term review. The charter does not preclude the BBC having an adverse impact on the market, if the BBC and Ofcom believe that is necessary for the effective fulfilment of the BBC's mission and public purposes. We talked extensively with industry

during the review, and we found that a lack of effective engagement has the potential to risk the BBC's and Ofcom's decision-making process. We are clear that the BBC needs to drive higher standards for that stakeholder engagement and transparency so that businesses operating in the same markets can be supported. We have therefore made recommendations to ensure that the BBC strengthens that engagement with competitors in the media. In particular, that should include commercial radio stations and local newspapers, especially when it makes decisions that impact them.

While the mid-term review will deliver material improvements in the BBC's governance and regulation, I reiterate that it is only one part of the Government's ongoing programme of work to scrutinise the BBC, with more to come as we move towards charter review. This will be a significantly broader process than the mid-term review, considering what the BBC is for and how it is funded. That is why, before charter review, the next major step in our roadmap is the funding model review.

Over its 100-year history, the BBC has proven to be one of the most adaptable, innovative and forward-thinking media organisations on our planet. Across time, the BBC has shown its ability to open itself up to external scrutiny, reflect on challenges and find learning opportunities. We trust it will do so again, absorbing the findings of the mid-term review and improving its structures and processes—not as an end in itself, but to maintain the support of audiences and underline its purposes for truth telling and trust. We all rely on the BBC being the best it can be, and we need to set the foundations for its renewal in the 21st century as a vital British institution, not to protect the institution for its own sake, but because its purpose of truth seeking and having the highest quality content has been renewed and accepted as vital by the people and the nation we are elected here to serve.

4.47 pm

Sir William Cash: May I commend the Minister not only on her speech just now, but on having continually engaged with me on the subject over the past few years? She has been dedicated to her task, and I do not come at this debate with rose-tinted spectacles; I have been critical of the BBC, and I will continue to be so on the terms I expressed. I am glad to note that she has said that the Government believe, as the mid-term review says, that there is room for improvement. That improvement is in part to do with attitudes and with statistical analysis and data, and I set all that out in my speech. It is also to do with the group-think that still gravitates in certain cohorts at the BBC and Ofcom, but I have made my point on that and it is on the record.

I accept entirely that this organisation, which has been going for so long, has an incredibly important role to play in our national life. It is precisely because it impinges day by day, hour by hour on our opinions, thoughts and attitudes that it is so important that impartiality is sustained in the correct manner and by reference to criteria; it should not be judge and jury. As Baroness Deech said in her letter in *The Daily Telegraph* on 23 January this year, the BBC requires a greater degree of independence, and she even referred to an independent ombudsman. I am not satisfied—the figures I have given perhaps illustrate it better, and there is a lack of sufficient proof—that the ECU system is working as well as some people hoped. I have deep misgivings

[Sir William Cash]

about it, as I have expressed. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and these improvements, I hope as a result of this debate, will be examined in that light.

I simply say this to my hon. Friends on the Government side, and to those on the Opposition side, some of whom were somewhat more critical about what I have had to say than others. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). I recognise that they really know what they are talking about and have enormous experience of these matters. This has been an important debate. I am sorry that the 30-odd colleagues who signed my application to the Backbench Business Committee have not been here today—their presence would have been lovely, but to some degree it reflects the difficult few weeks we have had—but, notwithstanding that, I am glad that we have had the debate.

I am extremely grateful to the Minister for her response and to the other Members who participated. The debate has been more than worthwhile and is another landmark in considering the improvements that we can achieve in relation to the BBC in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I suspect that, like me, many of you have watched the Eurovision song contest for many decades with bated breath, expectation and hope. We wish Graham Norton well as he fronts the show this weekend, and we wish Olly Alexander incredibly well—we all hope that he will win. If any of you are free that night, Mr Fletcher, the Government Whip, tells me that he is having a Eurovision song contest party at his house, as will many people throughout the country. Good luck, everybody, on that contest.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the BBC mid-term charter review.

PETITION

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

4.51 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): More than nine years ago, I shared with the House the story of Mrs Lesley Hughes, who finally discovered in 2014 that she had been infected with hepatitis C back in 1970 by an NHS blood transfusion after a serious road traffic accident. For her and other severely affected constituents, I present this, the latest in a long series of similar petitions from all over the United Kingdom.

The petition of Mrs Diana Brooks and others states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of New Forest East,

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.

[P002976]

Local Government Officials: Bullying

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

4.53 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I rise to consider the potential merit of Government measures to tackle the bullying of local government officials. This short debate seeks to explore the Government's plans properly to provide for enforcement of the codes of conduct applicable to parish and town councillors, given the amount of bullying and intimidation experienced by local council clerks.

Far too many town and parish council clerks face regular intimidation by a minority of councillors, and there are at present insufficient enforcement mechanisms and penalties to resolve the issue. Good people are resigning as a result. The turnover rate for clerks is far greater than the average for most comparable forms of employment. An article in the *Telegraph* online on 1 October 2022 stated that a preliminary academic survey of town and parish councils

“found that over half...had experienced behavioural issues from councillors, including bullying and disrespect towards other representatives or clerks”.

The findings also showed

“an imminent loss of expertise amid a shortage of younger clerks”.

There are at least three important organisations with strong views about this worrying situation: the Association of Local Council Clerks, the National Association of Local Councils and the Society of Local Council Clerks. They are not unanimous in their recommendations, but they all recognise the reality of the crisis. All three have had constructive conversations with my staff and me in recent months, for which I am very grateful. The SLCC has stated:

“15% of parish councils experience serious behaviour issues... 5% are effectively dysfunctional as a result of them.”

That figure obviously varies to a degree over time, but the ALCC has recently indicated that it considers the problem to be worsening rather than improving.

I have been provided with deeply disturbing first-hand testimony of inappropriate behaviour by a small percentage of council members. It may only be one or two individuals on any given council, but the effect of their behaviour on the clerks, other councillors and other staff can be unbearable. It can easily cause a breakdown in health and subsequent departure from a much-valued career. Clerks often feel that their job is at risk unless they carry out the wishes of individual councillors, even though the councillor in question may be trying to act outside the legislative requirements, thus forcing the clerk to act illegally. I am advised that many clerks fear for their jobs on a daily basis.

In my view, much of the problem arises from the lack of an independent body to oversee councillor behaviour and to impose sufficient penalties to discourage such behaviour when it occurs. Sufficient codes of conduct are in place for councillors. They are usually clear, unambiguous and based on the Nolan principles, but their enforcement and the imposition of appropriate penalties when their provisions are broken are sadly missing. The standards board was abolished in 2012, and the current system of local authority staff enforcement

—via monitoring officers—does not work as effectively as would an independent system. In May 2023, it was confirmed that, nationally, there is an excessive turnover of monitoring officers. That is hardly surprising, given that they have to take action in a quasi-judicial role, sometimes against their own councillors, who are their employers at principal authority level, while those councillors also possibly sit on town or parish councils, too.

As I mentioned, it is not only staff but other councillors who find themselves being bullied. I shall not identify any specific councils or individuals in this speech, yet I know of one case where several councillors resigned during a three-year period because of bullying by the chairman of that council. In a separate case, two councillors were called upon to step down after their attempts to bully the council clerk out of her job were proven. A third council was plunged into disarray after eight members resigned amid claims of bullying, harassment and abuse, and the town clerk also resigned at the same time and for the same reason.

There are very many specific examples which could be cited, because such misconduct has become so common as almost to be routine on the part of a really small but poisonous minority of councillors. Of course, the vast majority of councillors neither accept nor condone such terrible behaviour, but they do not have the necessary means to deal effectively with the disruptors and the bullies.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Sir Julian Lewis: Here is one scenario posted on the internet by a despairing councillor:

“We have a Parish Councillor who continually harasses the Clerk out of hours, at home and by email, about pretty well everything the Clerk does. The Clerk is respectful, knowledgeable and more than capable; but this individual said to the Chairman ‘I can question the Clerk because I am a Parish Councillor’. We have lost three Clerks in less than three years because of this dreadful man and I fear we are going to lose this one.”

Given findings such as the academic survey I mentioned earlier, this is clearly a situation that must not be allowed to continue. Apart from the impropriety aspect, the turnover of staff caused by bullying is economically damaging, leading to severe loss of efficiency in the affected parish and town councils. Then there are the additional recruitment and training costs for those councils which lose their clerks through resignation. Several councils have also been taken to court for constructive dismissal claims relating to harassment. Once again, this would be much less likely to arise if there were proper regulation and proper enforcement.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am really grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. I have a long-term interest in looking at workplace bullying across the piece and am bringing forward a private Member’s Bill on 7 June to ensure we have a legal definition for bullying, which we currently do not have in our suite of legislation. I hope he will be able to support the Bill. But beyond that, we must ensure there is a route to an employment tribunal so that people are protected at work. Would he be

mindful to work with me and support that, and to find the mechanisms to put positive behaviours into all workplaces?

Sir Julian Lewis: This is the first I have heard about the hon. Lady’s initiative. It sounds absolutely admirable and I would be very interested in supporting her efforts. I particularly commend the idea of a clear and legal definition of bullying, because we all know that there are sometimes subjective approaches to the subject, where even a word of legitimate criticism is interpreted as that, unjustifiably, so she is definitely on the right track.

The SLCC states:

“Throughout the sector, there are growing concerns about the impact bullying, harassment and intimidation is having on Councils, Councillors and staff and the resulting effectiveness of those local councils”.

The three national associations are fully aware of the issues, but without Government intervention it is unlikely that they alone can solve this dreadful problem. The preferred approach of the NALC is to focus on certain recommendations, previously made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which have yet to be adopted. Indeed, the NALC assisted me in the drafting of early-day motion 611, tabled in November 2022 and supported by 27 hon. and right hon. Members, which specifically asked the Government to:

“re-visit its response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life report on local government ethical standards and introduce the report’s recommendations in full including tougher sanctions such as suspension for poorly behaving councillors.”

In addition to that, however, the SLCC and the ALCC have indicated their endorsement of an alternative option formulated by Mr Derek Biggs, the hugely experienced and highly respected former town clerk of Totton in my constituency, to whom I am indebted for his insights. This way forward, which I fully support, would be for the Minister to agree to set up a working party of experts in the area of town and parish councils to examine the issue in depth and recommend practical solutions to deal with it. The working party’s brief would be to ensure the design and establishment of an appropriate, independent enforcement body, and to propose legislation providing for penalties sufficient to act as a deterrent to transgressors. That would be one way of finally dealing with those who ignore the proper standards of behaviour that are rightly expected and approved by the Government. We really need to work together and end their sense of impunity in respect of unacceptable conduct in town and parish councils.

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) for raising this important subject, and also to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her helpful intervention. I look forward to her Bill.

I have been urged to be brief. As a fellow Welshman, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know that that can sometimes be quite tricky, but I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), the Whip on duty, that he is keen to rush home to start making his cheese and pineapple hedgehogs in preparation for his Eurovision Song Contest party; we all look forward, of

[Simon Hoare]

course, to his extended invitation. So I want to be serious but also to be as brief as I can, in respect for the House.

The debate is timely, because it comes just a week after elections to many of our town and parish councils up and down the land. I want to take the opportunity—as I have on previous occasions when I have met parish councillors—to put on record our sincere thanks for their service to their communities. They are always unpaid and usually unsung heroes, working to deliver change and improvements to the towns and villages in which they live and serve. I suppose I should declare a slight interest, having started my political career as a parish councillor before migrating to the district council, supposedly moving upwards to the county council, and then fetching up here. With the exception of membership of the other place, I have the full set of badges.

My right hon. Friend's point is particularly important because the councillors elected last week are being welcomed to their new authorities and being inducted—for the first time, in some instances—into the rules and conventions of public life. We all know that vibrant local democracy flourishes where the reputation of the local authority is held in high regard. It is an honour and a privilege to serve as a community representative, and all those seeking and achieving public office should be holding themselves to the highest standards of conduct in recognition of the trust placed in them. The electorate have a right to expect councillors to behave well and respectfully in all their interactions—with each other, with members of staff, and with the public. Councillors' decision making should be honest, demonstrably transparent, fair, objective, and in the best interests of all whom they serve. There is no place in our systems and structures of local government for bullying, intimidation or harassment.

My right hon. Friend's remarks focused on bullying, intimidation and other inappropriate behaviour on the part of councillors. As he will know, there have been incidents where council clerks have effectively been charged with such offences, so it can go both ways. It is important to nip it in the bud and cut it out as quickly as possible—not just for the standards in public life set out by Nolan and reiterated this afternoon, but because it fundamentally sours the working environment of public service when people abuse their position, bully, cajole, intimidate and so forth in council meetings. As my right hon. Friend has noted, there are rules that apply.

I am concerned that we still occasionally think of our town councils, and especially our parish councils, as some sort of quaint, Edwardian and Vicar of Dibley-like institutions where people quibble about whose turn it is to do the biscuits or whatever. Instead, they are doing incredibly important work. As my right hon. Friend will know, there is no cap that we in central Government can place on the precepts of town and parish councils; we merely rely on their good common sense.

We know that many town and parish councils across the land have been asked to take up roles and responsibilities—the management of public loos, for

example—on behalf of their upper-tier authorities, and they willingly do so. Those upper-tier authorities—be they borough, district or county councils—can be capped, and when there has been pressure on local government finances and close collaboration between the constituent parts of the local government family, some burdens have been passed on to lower-tier authorities.

My right hon. Friend is right to point out that there are some standards lacunae—I put it no more firmly than that. As he set out in some detail, there is a clear and growingly compelling case for having a look at this issue again. I would be more than happy to continue the conversations that I have had with NALC since I was appointed last November. I would include the ALCC and the SLCC, and I am more than happy to include my right hon. Friend in those discussions to try to find a common-sense route to go through.

Sir Julian Lewis: I shall seize on that potential opportunity to ask whether we could all come and see the Minister together. There are a lot of operators in this field, and to have him and representatives of the three organisations in the same room at the same time would be an extremely positive step.

Simon Hoare: I began my working day with an official visit to Croydon Council, followed by a visit to Slough Borough Council. Both were hugely enjoyable and rewarding, and the offer of being seized by my right hon. Friend during this Adjournment debate is an invitation I cannot resist. He makes a very important point, and I should have made that clear in my remarks. There is considerable and compelling merit to meeting the three bodies together. There is some overlap and some divergence of views, and different organisations will have different ways of seeing and identifying solutions to a problem. Let us have a roundtable, if one wants to call it that, or a meeting in the Department to try to identify the issues, and to try to deliver the simplest, easiest and most straight-forward solutions.

We would do so not to be unduly heavy-handed, or to impose the dead hand of Marsham Street on our vibrant town and parish councils, but because we hold dear, and view to be important and precious, those values of civility, transparency, decency, common sense and collegiality in all the fora in which elected or appointed people discharge public duties. That is an expectation that the public rightly place on all of us, and it is sometimes a challenge, but it is one to which we are all capable of rising. I look forward to furthering the discussion with my right hon. Friend.

I close by again thanking the hon. Member for York Central for her contribution, but I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East who, with his usual calm, methodical logic, put forward a compelling case that only a perverse Minister of the Crown could seek to resist.

Question put and agreed to.

5.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 May 2024

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

Global Health Agencies and Vaccine-Preventable Deaths

12.30 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered global health agencies and vaccine-preventable deaths.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me time today to speak about the importance of vaccines and immunisation in tackling humanity's greatest and deadliest diseases.

The discovery and development of vaccinations is one of the most significant and impactful achievements in human history. It was here in the UK that Edward Jenner first isolated cowpox to create the world's first vaccine: the smallpox vaccine. Since that incredible scientific breakthrough, researchers across the world have worked on developing inoculating vaccines to combat all manner of infectious diseases, including polio, influenza, diphtheria, and of course tuberculosis. As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis, that cause is particularly close to my heart.

Vaccines are a vital part of our public health infrastructure. First and arguably most important, vaccines help to prevent the spread of diseases by supporting the body's immune system to fight off infections. It is irrefutable that vaccines have a positive effect in reducing the incidence, spread and mortality of infectious diseases and that when a significant proportion of the population is vaccinated, herd immunity develops, which provides indirect protection for marginal and at-risk groups, including children, the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions. Vaccines not only help to eradicate disease, but significantly improve the quality of life of the population by protecting against further illnesses that can lead to long-term or chronic health problems.

History has shown us how effective vaccines are. Polio was one of the leading causes of death across the world in the 20th century. Since the global polio eradication initiative began in 1988, polio cases worldwide have decreased by a staggering 99%, and many countries, such as India, have been declared polio-free as a result of our efforts. That has been achieved only because of the ambitious vaccination programme. Measles used to kill approximately 2.5 million people each year, yet since the introduction of a vaccine, more than 23 million lives have been saved. More recently, the human papillomavirus vaccine, which is used to combat cervical cancer, has been shown to reduce incidence of cancer by 40%. The history of vaccination shows us all that vaccines work, they are safe, and they are the most effective way of preventing infectious diseases.

Last week, we celebrated World Immunisation Week. This annual event, led by the World Health Organisation, aims to mobilise the international community to overcome

the barriers to vaccine coverage. I was pleased to join colleagues from across the House and across the global health landscape at last week's brilliant event on World Immunisation Week, hosted by the APPG on vaccinations for all. At the reception we heard from representatives from Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Gavi is a multilateral health organisation founded in 2000 that vaccinates over 50% of the children on the planet against infectious and deadly diseases. Through numerous health emergencies, Gavi's innovation has underpinned a track record of success. It is now supporting promising vaccine candidates for malaria, TB and HIV.

The UK Government have a strong record of supporting Gavi, both with research and development, and with the roll-out of new vaccines. Gavi's work aligns closely with the Government's priority to end the preventable deaths of mothers and children. As I am sure the Minister is aware, Gavi is currently beginning to plan for its next replenishment, where countries around the world will commit financial resources to support Gavi's mission. I ask the Minister: how has the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office been engaging with Gavi in the lead-up to the replenishment, and can he give an assurance that the UK will remain one of the leading global supporters of Gavi's mission?

Gavi is not the only development organisation that plays a leading role in vaccinating people in high-risk or conflict-affected areas. The Global Fund, established under a Labour Government in 2002, has a long and accomplished history of tackling the TB, malaria and HIV epidemics, helping to save nearly 60 million lives since its inception. The Global Fund is the world's largest multilateral provider of grants for strengthening health systems, investing \$1.5 billion a year from 2021 to 2023.

In many countries, the Global Fund works in partnership with Gavi to support the successful roll-out of immunisation across health systems. That is because we know that having strong, responsive and accountable local health systems is imperative to tackling novel and legacy infectious disease. Without a strong health system, cases of infection go unrecorded, symptoms go untreated, diseases spread and untimely deaths increase. I ask the Minister: what support the Government are giving to the Global Fund to support its mission of strengthening health systems around the world?

The success of the mRNA vaccine during the covid-19 pandemic has led to the development of a number of promising vaccine candidates that should start to be rolled out in the near future. One such vaccine is for malaria, which is one of the world's deadliest diseases, killing a child almost every minute. In the last few years, the World Health Organisation has granted conditional approval to two malaria vaccines, with Cameroon being the first country in the world to receive them. I know that colleagues across the House will be fascinated to see the impact that the new malaria vaccine has. We all hope that the two new vaccines are a stepping stone to more innovative and effective tools and medicines that can be used to eradicate the disease for good.

We cannot, however, be complacent. Research shows that vaccines in isolation are not enough. Vaccine programmes must be accompanied by other effective public health measures, such as population screening, case finding, education programmes and robust health systems. Strong health systems are fundamental to a

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

successful vaccine roll-out. Particular attention should be paid to healthcare worker training, supply chain management and facilities capable of delivering vaccines safely.

In addition, local manufacturing capabilities need to be strengthened so that vaccines can be produced anywhere in the world at a much quicker pace. We saw the limitations of a lack of local manufacturing during the covid-19 pandemic, when many countries in the global south were the last to receive covid vaccines, after many people in the global north had already received multiple jabs. The inequality in our vaccine manufacturing capabilities has cost lives before, and we must ensure it never happens again. Will the Minister say what the FCDO is doing to support countries around the world to develop their own vaccine manufacturing capabilities, so that they can respond more quickly to future global health emergencies?

I am thankful for the timely opportunity to raise this vital issue with the House. The UK has always played a leading role in the research, development and financing of vaccinations; it is a legacy of which we can be proud, but we must not rest on our laurels, as the last few years have shown us that global health emergencies can arise at any time, anywhere, with untold consequences. I hope the Government will continue to strongly support organisations such as Gavi and the Global Fund in their efforts to vaccinate and eradicate disease worldwide. I fully expect that when the Global Fund and Gavi host their respective replenishment conferences next year, the UK Government will generously pledge significant financial support to both. Perhaps the Minister can confirm today that this will be the case.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before I turn to the SNP spokesman, can I check whether the Father of the House wishes to speak in the debate?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not having been here on time. I think to make a speech would be wrong; I hope it will be acceptable to intervene on one of the Front-Bench speakers.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you very much indeed. Let us turn then to our SNP spokesman.

12.43 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Gary.

I thank the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for securing this debate; the hon. Gentleman and I spend time together on the International Development Committee, and we are equally passionate about this topic. This is a timely and important debate. The hon. Gentleman put some really good, detailed questions to the Minister, and I am looking forward to hearing his responses later.

Throughout the world, people are living longer and healthier lives because of vaccines. Over the past 200 years, vaccination has saved more lives and prevented more serious diseases than any advance in recent medical history. Indeed, every year, 2 million to 3 million lives are saved globally because of immunisation. Only clean

water rivals vaccines in reducing infectious diseases and deaths. Immunisation is therefore recognised by the World Health Organisation as

“the foundation of the primary health care system and an indisputable human right.”

An indisputable human right. It is important to remember that. Vaccines are critical to the prevention and control of infectious disease outbreaks. They underpin global health security and are a vital tool in the battle against antimicrobial resistance. Quite frankly, they are one of the best health investments money can buy.

A recent major landmark study published in *The Lancet* has revealed the global impact of vaccines on saving lives. Over the last 50 years alone, global immunisation efforts have saved an estimated 154 million lives, which is quite astonishing; nearly two thirds of those whose lives were saved were children. Of the vaccines included in the study, the measles vaccination has had the most significant impact on reducing impact mortality, accounting for 60% of the lives saved due to immunisation. As a result of vaccination against polio, more than 20 million people are able to walk today who would otherwise have been paralysed. The world is on the verge of eradicating polio once and for all. The study found that for each life saved through immunisation, an average of 66 years of full health was gained. A hundred years ago, that would be unimaginable. Vaccines speak huge volumes in themselves.

Vaccinations against 14 diseases, including diphtheria, hepatitis B, measles, meningitis A, rubella, tetanus, tuberculosis and yellow fever have directly contributed to reducing infant deaths by 40% globally, and by more than 50% in the African region. Those gains in childhood survival highlight the importance of protecting immunisation progress in every country of the world.

In the covid pandemic, the vaccination programme was crucial in reducing deaths and in allowing us to return to a life free from lockdowns and to reduce societal restrictions. Covid demonstrated to all of us just how reliant our public health systems have become on effective vaccinations. It also taught us important lessons about how vaccines are distributed fairly—or not—during a pandemic. We must take steps at international level to avoid a repeat of richer countries stockpiling more vaccines than we could use, while poorer countries waited months on end for the first shipment to arrive.

If we cast our minds back to 2021, many of us were double or even triple-dosed with vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna, which have now become household names, but they supplied less than 2% of their vaccines to low-income countries. Three quarters of health workers in Africa had not received a single vaccine dose, and just 2% of people in low-income countries had received a single jab. The result, as we would imagine, was catastrophic, with avoidable loss of life. A report in *The Lancet* found that 600,000 people died as a result of the global failure to ensure that 40% of people in low-income countries were vaccinated in 2021. Even 40% is a low bar—we expected 100% of our citizens to have the vaccination.

The World Health Organisation is urging countries to work on concluding a new pandemic agreement, to ensure that the mistakes of the covid pandemic are not repeated. A new international, legally binding WHO instrument would strengthen pandemic prevention,

preparedness and response and regulate the sharing of drugs and vaccines fairly, to avoid a repeat of covid-era failures.

Attempts by the WHO to pool intellectual property and scientific knowledge through the covid-19 technology access pool initiative were dismissed, and dismissed repeatedly in this House. Market-led redistribution through COVAX—the covid-19 vaccines global access scheme—and bilateral donations of vaccines, while highly noble, were deeply insufficient.

Dr Ghebreyesus, the director-general of WHO, said disparities in vaccine access were a “catastrophic moral failure”. He has since said that the pandemic treaty would help countries better guard against outbreaks and would be only the second time in the WHO’s 75-year history that it had agreed such a legally binding treaty—the previous one was a tobacco-control treaty in 2003. We must ensure that this treaty is a success, and I hope we hear endorsement from the Minister.

In September 2022, I travelled to Cape Town in South Africa to visit the mRNA vaccine technology transfer hub. In response to being left at the back of the vaccine queue and being locked out of innovative new medicines by giant businesses that put profit ahead of equitable distribution, scientists there have reverse-engineered Moderna’s mRNA vaccine. The mRNA technology is based on decades of public research, and the Moderna vaccine was almost entirely publicly funded, yet Moderna was the greatest and most private beneficiary from covid vaccinations. The model of drug development in which Governments pick up the tab for research and development, but pharma companies assume monopolies of drugs to guarantee profit, cannot continue. It is abhorrent and leads to continued global health inequity and preventable death.

Prior to arrival at the research and production facilities, I had expected a vast chemical and industrial plant. Instead, I found a tiny boutique company, working 24 hours, around the clock, but that in no way inhibits the impact its work can have. The shocking bit was that I was told that as little as 5 litres of vaccine—we know how big that is in a container—can supply up to 100 million doses. Having expected this huge industrial chemical plant, I found myself instead in a little room with what looked like a little pot still—I would say that, of course, coming from Scotland, with its whisky, but it was similar in scale to a pot still.

Equipped with the knowledge of how this technology works and is made, staff at the hub have the vision and ability to reproduce this vaccine to ensure equitable access for low and middle-income countries. The plan is for this to be scaled outwards, with small manufacturing plants spread throughout the world to provide for local and regional production of mRNA vaccines, turning on its head the narrative that pharmaceutical production must be high-cost and high-scale.

Crucially, this work has been shared with other scientists throughout the world. Indeed, there are 14 spokes—I love the imagery of the hub and spokes—in the rest of the world, which have become partners in creating an ecosystem in which knowledge is freely shared, production and access are more equal across the world, and a more resilient healthcare system, based on need, not greed, is built. That is a public health necessity, and it has the power to transform the way we provide medicines throughout the world.

As Charles Gore, the executive director of the Medicines Patent Pool, told me,

“this is the single most exciting health programme—no longer about dependency or donation, but about empowerment.”

The mRNA hub has huge potential, not only to act against covid vaccine inequity, but to manufacture treatments for a range of diseases, including diabetes, cancer, HIV, malaria and tuberculosis. It is therefore vital that we reaffirm our commitment to vaccination programmes for preventable diseases and to the global health agencies that provide them in the aftermath of the covid pandemic, which had a significant impact on the distribution of vaccinations.

In 2022, the WHO and UNICEF reported that there had been the largest sustained decline in childhood vaccinations in approximately 30 years, which all of us should be seriously worried about. In 2021, there were 12.4 million zero-dose children—an increase of 3 million from 2019. UNICEF’s immunisation road map to 2030 is being designed to address the setbacks in childhood immunisation programmes due to the covid-19 pandemic. The WHO’s “Immunisation Agenda 2030” is a global health plan focused on improving access to vaccines for all; it is looking to achieve 90% coverage for essential vaccines given in childhood and adolescence and to halve the number of children completely missing out on vaccines. Gavi’s 5.0 strategy includes the vision of

“Leaving no one behind with immunisation”

by 2030 and has a core focus on reaching zero-dose children and missed communities.

A large proportion of UK Government contributions to vaccination programmes are provided through global health initiatives such as the Global Fund, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the WHO. However, the decision—I keep having to repeat this—to cut UK official development assistance spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income has had a massive impact. The Minister will speak about the Government’s £1 million pledge to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. That is welcome, but the fact remains that it is a cut of almost 30% from their 2019 pledge. STOPAIDS has said:

“This is a disastrous decision that risks 1.54 million potential lives lost and over 34.5 million new transmissions across the three diseases, setting back years of progress.”

In recent years, a new malaria vaccine has reached nearly 2 million children, yet evidence to the International Development Committee from the malaria campaign organisations Malaria No More UK and Medicines for Malaria Venture stated that the aid reductions put the UK’s strategy at risk. They also said that cuts to broader health programmes would have significant knock-on impacts for malaria. While I have the opportunity, I would like to put on record my thanks to the drug discovery unit at the University of Dundee, in my constituency, which is world-leading in work on a single-dose treatment for malaria, in terms of both preventing it spreading and protecting people from getting it.

Support for global health agencies and for vaccines is vital in stopping preventable deaths, but that must be part of a well-funded, coherent global health strategy. The UK Government must therefore reverse their death sentence cuts to ensure that children throughout the world have access to vaccines that increase their prospects, as well as to public health systems that will be there for them during the rest of their lives.

12.54 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for his commitment over the years to public health and international development. He is known for his work on tuberculosis and for chairing the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis, but he has also shone on AIDS and malaria, and I thank him for that. I should refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to a visit to Malawi last July with the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, which I chair. As part of chairing the group, I also have an unpaid role as a trustee at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.

This debate is timely: as I was coming to Westminster Hall, I noticed on the news that five babies in the UK have died of whooping cough. That just shows that if we let our vaccination rates drop domestically, it can have an impact. A lesson that we learn through our own mortality is that we must always keep up with public health measures. This debate is also of global importance, and we all agree that ending preventable deaths is an international development priority and a core pillar of our overseas development assistance strategy.

Immunisation is one of the most successful and cost-effective global health interventions in history, and I am particularly proud of the role that the UK, and the last Labour Government specifically, had in inventing the Department for International Development and leaving a legacy where the Global Fund, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and Unitaid were able to group together to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Sadly, in the last couple of years the numbers have plateaued, particularly in relation to malaria. They have not continued to fall as we would wish, and we must redouble our efforts to address that. As hon. Members have said, this debate follows World Immunisation Week. I should also note that the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases was in Dundee and saw the drug discovery unit, and I am pleased that the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) mentioned its important work on developing the vaccine.

As we know, one of the key principles of the sustainable development goals is that we leave no one behind, and the hon. Member for Dundee West outlined the lessons that we learned through the covid-19 pandemic and how we must redouble our efforts to address those. Last July, on a visit to Mitundu Community Hospital in Malawi, I was able to see at first hand the critical work of the expanded programme on immunisation. The hospital is an hour south of the capital Lilongwe, and it is where, in 2019, a little girl named Lusitana became the first child in the world to receive a dose of the groundbreaking and British-backed RTS,S malaria vaccine. During the visit, I also met five-year-old Evison Saimon, the second child to receive the vaccine in all its doses. Saimon and his mother talked about how delighted they were not to have malaria in their household. We can read all the things we like, but it really comes home to us when we actually go and meet families abroad and see this important work being done.

We also heard from representatives of Malawi's expanded programme on immunisation and the national malaria control programme about how the pilot programme is

being rolled out, with safety concerns managed and household surveys showing the positive impact on individual families and communities. Since the introduction of the vaccine, Malawi has seen a consistent reduction in cases and deaths in the age group eligible to receive the vaccine. Across the three pilot countries—Ghana, Kenya and Malawi—more than 4.5 million doses have been administered through the implementing countries' routine immunisation programmes, reaching nearly 1.7 million children. The World Health Organisation estimates that RTS,S could save the lives of an additional 40,000 to 80,000 African children each year once implemented at scale. It is especially important to note that the pilot was financed through an unprecedented collaboration between three global health funding bodies—Gavi, the Global Fund and Unitaid, with GSK donating up to 10 million doses. We have so many good examples of GSK's UK involvement, which we can all be proud of.

At this critical juncture in the fight against malaria, we really must not allow global progress to continue to stall. We must support the groundbreaking malaria vaccines and see how other countries, such as the 28 countries across Africa that are due to roll out a vaccine in the next few years, go with the roll-out of the programme. Vaccines have a limited impact if they do not reach the communities that need them most and are not joined up with other strategies, such as insecticide bed nets—I know that colleagues here have seen those—and occasional spraying, which we also saw when we were in Malawi. We also know that health data management systems are crucial to understanding the impact of those important measures.

Not only does immunisation save lives, but it has a profound knock-on effect for families, communities and countries. The economy is helped enormously in many parts of the world by such important, life-saving initiatives. As part of Gavi's mission to save lives and protect people's health by increasing the equitable and sustainable use of vaccines, it has helped to vaccinate more than 1 billion children in 78 lower-income countries.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the opportunity for more manufacturing in country. I was pleased that FCDO representatives and other partners recently joined us for a roundtable in the House to talk about the opportunity to work with the Serum Institute, which was so crucial during covid-19. That would be a triangular partnership between India, the UK and many African countries. The hon. Member for Dundee West has seen that in action in South Africa, and I am sure that it can be rolled out across other African countries too.

I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the Government's intention to continue to support these vital global agencies in working to end vaccine-preventable deaths with strong pledges at the upcoming replenishments of Gavi and the Global Fund. Will he also update the House on the steps that the Government are taking to help to build and support research and development, as well as manufacturing, in particular to build capacity in vaccine manufacturing?

On the British science side, which is so important, what is the Minister doing to support the higher education sector, particularly where we have important collaborations? There have been setbacks due to Brexit and bumps along the road. What is he doing to promote and support our excellence in research, particularly the deep pockets of research in our universities? They sometimes

report feeling a bit unsupported, and I know that the Minister will wish to put on record his support for international students being welcomed in the UK and for the rebuilding of collaborations across Europe, as well as for work with US partners and in country in Africa. I look forward to hearing his thoughts.

1.2 pm

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell):

It is a great pleasure once again to perform under your benign sway, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on his excellent speech, as well as on his work with the APPG and on the Select Committee, alongside the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law). So constructive are the performances that the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall always turns in that the first draft of the speech given to me by officials referred to him as “my hon. Friend”. I would not wish to embarrass him by any suggestion on that score, but he does a great deal of good work, for which we are very grateful. We are also very grateful that the Father of the House is here, which emphasises the importance of the subject and the all-party nature of our concerns.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I reflect that it is 45 years since I served on the Select Committee on Overseas Development, before 1979. The point that I would like my right hon. Friend to consider, if not to answer today, is how to go on ensuring that vaccination and immunisation programmes work in times of conflict. I spent this morning with Action Against Hunger looking at United Nations Security Council resolution 2417 of 2018, which concerns conflict and hunger, but the problem of conflict and the hindering of vaccination programmes also needs deep consideration.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which I will answer straightaway. It is worth emphasising that we are getting better at operating in very contested spaces. For example, he will know of the work that Education Cannot Wait is doing in very difficult circumstances, particularly where people have been forced to move or where there has been migration as a result of violence or climate change. On all these things, we are getting better at serving communities in extreme difficulty, but my hon. Friend raises a very interesting point, and if I have anything further to add on that, I will write to him shortly.

I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the importance of immunisation for global health. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Dundee West, who raised a number of interesting points, all of which I think I am going to cover, and to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who speaks on these matters for the Opposition, in particular for the comments that she made about GSK. It is worth pointing out that this is an area where a vital part is played not only by the private sector and the pharmaceutical industry, but by philanthropic organisations, many of which are very concerned with the area. There is no doubt that, as Bill Gates always says, vaccinating children is one of the best value for money interventions that can be made, with the widest and deepest effects. The hon. Lady’s points about GSK are very welcome indeed.

The hon. Lady asked me about R&D issues and about higher education, and I will make two points. First, she is absolutely right to emphasise the importance

of the R&D budget. She will have noticed that, during a very difficult period in which cuts—sometimes very serious cuts—were made in development spending, the R&D budget has been defended throughout. Indeed, as we have projected forward the draft figures, we have again protected the R&D budget in development, and it will, I think, be rising over the next few years. Like her, I have seen the remarkable work that that budget is doing. In the UK, I recently visited the Jenner Institute and saw the brilliant work that so many are doing there. I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of R&D.

Secondly, in relation to spreading British higher education skill into Africa, I point out to the hon. Lady the recently announced programme for the Tropical Health and Education Trust, which I launched in London. THET does a huge amount of good work in this respect. We had an excellent programme some 10 years ago, and I am very pleased indeed that we have been able to renew that.

All my colleagues who spoke in the debate shone a spotlight on our lifesaving work with partners, including Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and Unitaid. We see strong support in every part of the House for those lifesaving efforts, and I am very grateful for the contributions of Members here today in that respect.

I will endeavour to respond to all the points raised, but first I want to make a point specifically about Gavi, which I was asked about by the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall. He will, I think, recall that in 2011, when I had the privilege of being the International Development Secretary, we did the Gavi replenishment in London, and there has been a subsequent replenishment since that time. The point that I want to make to him is that that pivotal replenishment in 2011 was very heavily supported. Incidentally, we know that 83% of the British public thought that spending taxpayers’ money on vaccinating children under five in the developing world should be supported; they showed approval for that. I thought that was a very encouraging statistic then, and I have hopes for the upcoming replenishment, on which I wish to assure the hon. Gentleman. I cannot put a figure on the table now, but both I and the Foreign Secretary are very focused on the replenishment, because we know the good that this work does, which the hon. Gentleman so eloquently set out. We will undoubtedly be key supporters of the replenishment when we make our contribution.

I was also asked about the Global Fund. If I may say so, I thought that the hon. Member for Dundee West was a little unfair in criticising the figure. It was the first significant pledge when I returned to the Government in October 2022; we managed to get the system to agree. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was very keen on spending the money on the Global Fund, as was the Prime Minister, who emphasised the importance of the work, and £1 billion—a thousand million pounds—of taxpayers’ money is not to be sniffed at. If the hon. Member for Dundee West looks at what Peter Sands, the chief executive of the Global Fund, said at the time and subsequently about Britain’s support, both financial and in many other ways, I am sure that his spirits will be lifted.

In respect of the pandemic accord negotiations, which the hon. Member also mentioned, although I have nothing to say today, I think that they are proceeding well. The British Government have spent a great deal of time on that this week, and I hope that when the

[Mr Mitchell]

announcements are made in due course by Tedros from the WHO, the hon. Gentleman will be pleased and relieved at what we are able to achieve.

Vaccines have saved more than 150 million lives over the last 50 years, including more than 100 million children. That is six lives saved every minute for five decades. I am sure that we can all agree that this is one of humanity's greatest achievements. The UK's support for childhood vaccinations around the world has played its part, together with institutions including the World Health Organisation, Gavi, the Global Fund and Unitaid. However, the covid pandemic threatened to undo our hard-won progress, sparking the largest reversal in child vaccination rates in three decades and leading to increased outbreaks and deaths. Although vaccination rates have recovered since, global health is, as with everything, bound up with geopolitics. We stand at a crucial juncture in that respect. In these increasingly challenging times, we can only maintain our progress on global vaccines by uniting forces and standing together to ensure the health of future generations.

Let me be clear: reaching the world's children with vaccination remains a top priority for Britain, as set out so clearly in our widely endorsed international development White Paper. We are determined to enhance our partnerships with individual countries and strengthen our collaborations with organisations such as Gavi, which will help continue to save countless lives.

The UK has supported Gavi since its inception 24 years ago. By bringing together Governments, private sector foundations, civil society organisations and vaccine manufacturers, it has vaccinated—that is to say, Britain has vaccinated—more than 1 billion children, saving more than 17 million lives. I am glad to say that Britain was one of the six original donors, and it hosted Gavi's most successful summits, in 2011 and then in 2020, when we committed £1.65 billion over five years. Later that year, at the UN General Assembly, we pledged an additional £548 million to the Gavi COVAX advance market commitment to support lower income countries with covid vaccines.

We are now looking ahead, working closely with Gavi to develop a strong strategy for the next five years. That includes reaching all children with routine immunisations, and better integrating that with primary healthcare services. We want to improve co-ordination with other global health institutions to ensure that programmes are sustainable and, most importantly, led by countries themselves.

We are also looking ahead to the gathering hosted by the French Government, the African Union and Gavi this summer in Paris. President Macron will launch an accelerator mechanism to help African vaccine manufacturers produce vaccines in Africa and become commercially sustainable on a long-term basis. The UK looks forward to announcing the details of our support for that work, demonstrating the importance we place on a united global effort to improve access to vaccines and better prepare for future health emergencies. Those are all things that I have discussed in detail with Akinwumi Adesina, the president of the African Development Bank.

The roll-out of the malaria vaccines, which were referred to, not least by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green, highlights the role the UK has already

played in end-to-end support of innovation vaccines. First, working in collaboration with partners in India, our world-leading scientists helped to develop these game-changing new vaccines, which must be used in combination with bed nets and chemoprotection. Then, supported by UK funding, Gavi, the Global Fund, Unitaid and the World Health Organisation set up pilots to provide the evidence necessary for a wider roll-out, and Britain's MedAccess, so brilliantly led by Michael Anderson, worked with Gavi to secure the vaccine supply.

The vaccine roll-out will protect more than 6 million children from malaria by the end of next year. This is the first time that Gavi and the Global Fund will be working together on a single disease, and it presents a wonderful opportunity to strengthen their efforts even further. The wider work to prevent and treat diseases such as malaria, HIV and TB is also helping to save countless lives.

Britain was a founding donor to Unitaid 20 years ago, and has contributed more than half a billion pounds over the years. Today, more than 170 million people benefit from health products supported by Unitaid every year, from the latest HIV treatments to next-generation mosquito nets. Two weeks ago, on 24 April, I was delighted to join a parliamentary reception hosted by Unitaid, at which I reiterated Britain's firm support for it.

Another great example of our investment in cutting-edge research and development is the recent deployment in Nigeria of the innovative MenFive vaccine. That revolutionary new shot is a powerful shield against the five major strains of the bacteria that cause meningitis. The research into MenFive was funded by Britain and developed through a partnership between PATH—a global non-profit organisation—and the Serum Institute of India. The roll-out of 1 million vaccines in northern Nigeria came from Gavi-funded stocks approved by the World Health Organisation last year. MenFive will be rolled out in other countries—Niger is expected to start vaccinating imminently—giving a big boost to our work to end meningitis globally by the end of the decade. That is exactly the kind of scientific innovation that Britain will continue to support, driving further breakthroughs that will help to wipe out other preventable diseases.

While we are speaking of the future, let me turn to the matter of replenishments for our partners for the next 12 months, including Gavi, the Global Fund and the World Health Organisation. As I confirmed in my opening remarks, we are considering how and where our funding can have the greatest impact, and we look forward to announcing our contributions at the replenishment events.

I hope I have done justice to the work that Britain has done with our partners, which has saved countless lives. Those collaborations and scientific breakthroughs have enabled us to eradicate smallpox, and—thank goodness—we are on the verge of eradicating polio, which the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall raised. Children around the world are now protected against 19 deadly diseases through routine immunisation via Gavi.

There is, of course, more to do, and we will keep up the momentum. Nobody should die of a preventable illness, and everyone, everywhere should have access to these wonderful innovations. That is how we build a healthier and fairer world for all.

1.18 pm

Mr Sharma: I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate, which has addressed many issues. I thank the Front Benchers for their support and their contributions. In particular, I thank the Father of the House for his presence and his intervention on the Minister.

I also thank the Minister for his response. This is a matter very close to both our hearts, and is very important to all those present and to people outside the Chamber. Thank you, Sir Gary, for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship. I thank everybody present.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered global health agencies and vaccine-preventable deaths.

1.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

Global Intergenerational Week 2024

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

2 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Global Intergenerational Week 2024.

For accuracy, I should point out that Global Intergenerational Week was in April, but it does such great work and it is a real pleasure to speak on this important topic. I am deeply passionate about this idea, and I thank Generations Working Together, who lead Global Intergenerational Week events in Scotland, for its briefing. I also thank all 407 contributors to the online public engagement activity for the debate. All 407 responses have been helpful and illuminating, and I will mention a few of them later.

The campaign theme for this year's Global Intergenerational Week was focused on how intergenerational work is too often perceived as nice, rather than essential. Generations Working Together argues that intergenerational practice ought to be an essential consideration in upstream health policy, and an essential practice in social care, education, and urban planning and development. This is essential in order to build age-friendly communities—which I feel very qualified to talk about—defined by the World Health Organisation as a community that optimises opportunities for health, participation and security as people age. In an age-friendly community, policy, services and infrastructure are designed to respond flexibly to age-related needs and preferences.

As I said, Global Intergenerational Week ran from 24 to 30 April and was marked by events and webinars across 15 different countries, with landmarks lit up across the globe, including Melbourne Town Hall, something in Valencia—my Spanish is not up to pronouncing that; I would not want to murder the language—Adelaide's Parliament House and, closer to home, Rhyl tower in Wales and Belfast City Hall, as well as the Hydro in Glasgow, and the University of Glasgow. The movement is moving forward.

We live in a time of huge demographic shift towards an ageing population, a phenomenon that is happening in almost every country across the world. That is frequently presented as a significant social challenge. People often look at it through a negative lens, but it also presents an opportunity.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Lady is developing an interesting area of public discourse. Does she agree that one of the most positive developments in recent years has been the creation and growth of the Youth Parliament? I had the opportunity last week to meet Shetland's two new Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Joe Smith and Bertie Summers. I was struck by the fact that although we were talking about the same issues that Shetlanders would identify with across the piece, they brought a completely different and fresh perspective to them.

Marion Fellows: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his useful intervention. I absolutely agree. I have met my MSYPs frequently. They bring a breath of fresh air to arguments and discussions, and we should treasure

[*Marion Fellows*]

that. I am looking around the room, and I am not making any huge comment on age, but I know the person who helps us get speakers into Westminster Hall searched quite hard to find a very young Member of the SNP. [*Laughter.*]

Rather than reducing our ageing population to a strain on economic resources, we must use intergenerational opportunities as a powerful and cost-effective challenge to that narrative. Young and old people are often separated from each other due to age-segregated activities and living arrangements, changes in family patterns and the breakdown of traditional community structures.

Being a granny is my best job ever. I am fortunate enough to see my grandchildren regularly, but intergenerational interaction need not be confined only to within families. Older and younger people have skills and resources of considerable value to one another, and despite the prevalence of negative age-categorised stereotypes that are often perpetuated on social media, different generations have a lot in common and share many areas of common concern.

Older folk are not all the same, no more than younger people can all be categorised in the same way. Gemma, one of the contributors to the public engagement exercise for this debate, outlined how integration across generations leads to broadened perspectives. In her experience, she said that

“with older people, our values and political views may sometimes be different but there are always more similarities than differences.”

Another contributor, Catherine, responded:

“One can discuss different perspectives on issues. This tends to lead to healthy debate, and I find it a good way to temper modern idealism while allowing older generations to become more positive about certain issues.”

Intergenerational activity is one way of addressing the issues that are key to all generations. That is why it is so important to encourage intergenerational working and why that is the *raison d'être* of the annual Global Intergenerational Week. By promoting positive attitudes and breaking down stereotypes across age groups, we can build a more inclusive society that values the contributions of every generation. Will the Minister discuss that approach in his answer? Will he talk to people in his Department and across other Departments, because what we need is joined-up thinking right across the piece?

Embracing intergenerational integration will not only enhance social cohesion, but create an environment where sustainable intergenerational relationships can flourish, benefiting everybody. A response to the public engagement activity that I particularly enjoyed came from another Marion—not me, I promise—who described her interactions with young people as

“very uplifting, their energy, creativity and different way of seeing the world are inspiring and energising in themselves.”

I can only echo that from my experience as a further education lecturer, when I was in daily contact with young people—apart from the very generous holidays, of course. I worked with many young people across the piece, and I found that my perspective on things changed quite considerably through listening to them. This goes back to the stereotyping of ages and people, and actually believing that they are all the same, but that is not true.

A strengthening of social capital or civic virtue is at the core of this idea, building a sense of community through reciprocal social relations. There are also benefits in education. The national mentoring partnership in 2017 reported that at-risk youths involved in intergenerational monitoring programmes are 55% more likely to be enrolled in further or higher education.

The benefits go beyond strengthening communities and education outcomes. Intergenerational practice crucially provides a setting that can help to relieve isolation and involve people in community activities, leading to improved general health and wellbeing. During Global Intergenerational Week in 2024, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) opened the intergenerational learning roadshow, attesting to the importance of good intergenerational practice in reducing health inequalities.

As an aside, an older person teaching younger folk how to do something as basic as making soup is a wonderful thing, because it provides the younger person with a sense of worth and a way of saving money. I see that often in my constituency when I visit some of these different organisations, as I do regularly, and see the value of people learning. The knitting group is another perfect example of that, giving young people a skill that they did not have before.

A report from Generations Working Together and NHS Scotland outlined:

“Poor health, negative stereotypes and barriers to participation all currently marginalise older people, undermine their contribution to society and increase the costs of population ageing.”

Likewise, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme documented that social isolation in later life is not just a risk factor for depression, but dangerous for physical health and mobility. That shows the important societal value of the practice, but it is also important to note that intergenerational practices help to combat social isolation across all age groups. Loneliness and social isolation are increasingly prevalent in our younger generation.

Research from Generations United shows that older adults who participate in intergenerational programmes experience a 20% decrease in loneliness. Again, I have seen that in some of the neighbourhood programmes locally, which do such good work. It is interesting to notice the difference in both the younger person and the older person—both benefit. The health impact of loneliness is comparable with smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, according to a study published in the *Public Library of Science Medicine* journal. Having had some personal experience of loneliness, that is very true. It can weigh down heavily sometimes on older people and, as I have pointed out, on younger people, too, some of whom spend more and more time alone.

Intergenerational practice is therefore a solution to loneliness right across the age spectrum. The value of bringing people together cannot be overestimated when it comes to challenging ageism and negative stereotypes. According to the World Health Organisation's global campaign to combat ageism, intergenerational activity is a proven way to reduce it, and doing so can help us live up to seven and a half years longer—I am keen on that, I have to add. It is therefore essential that we improve and increase access to intergenerational activities. Not only does the evidence point towards the need for intergenerational practice to tackle a range of social

problems, but there is a demand for it. The Centre for Ageing Better found that four in five people want to mix with people of different ages and generations.

We as parliamentarians must do our best to highlight barriers to intergenerational interaction, especially when we consider our ageing population. Some of the barriers listed by respondents centred around communication, where there are difficulties understanding terminology or descriptors, and some older people feel that they have to be more sensitive or careful. Other barriers mentioned were practical issues, such as rural deprivation, poor transport and a lack of face-to-face opportunities.

Many younger respondents feel that financial issues are the biggest barrier. Jenny outlined that

“many older people who have no mortgage/rent or dependants find it very hard to grasp the real impact of the cost-of-living crisis.”

Anna said:

“Older people frequently don’t understand the real practical barriers for people my age, from home ownership and being able to afford children.”

Tom felt that intergenerational interaction and communities were being eroded more generally due to low rates of house building and how it forces young people to move away from the communities in which they were born and raised, severing community ties.

It is essential that we attempt to remove barriers to intergenerational integration. It benefits society as a whole and each one of us can benefit from it. At a time when the world is becoming more polarised, never has community and understanding across generations been so important. I commend Generations Working Together for the crucially important work that it does and highlight the importance of Global Intergenerational Week 2024 for raising awareness of the topic. Does the Minister agree that we would all benefit from more intergenerational working, that health, social care, housing, education and, even more essentially, urban planning and development should be further moved, and that levelling up would be good for all generations?

2.15 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing this meeting, Mr Efford. It is great to speak in this debate alongside my hon. Friend and SNP colleague the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I am afraid I cannot profess to speak for young people, as I am now 38. I am told that if you are under 45 you are considered a young parliamentarian, but I can probably no longer consider myself young. Nine years in this job has given me quite a lot of grey hairs that I never had before.

I really appreciate the diversity within Parliament. It is not good enough yet—we are not as diverse a Parliament as we should be—but the plethora of voices and different outlooks means that we make better decisions, because we all have different life experiences and come from different backgrounds. I thank Generations Working Together for the work that it has done for Global Intergenerational Week, and particularly for highlighting it in Scotland and ensuring that as many people as possible are talking about it.

My hon. Friend said that intergenerational work should be seen not as something nice, but as something essential. I completely agree, but it is also something nice: it is something fabulous that should be celebrated,

talked about and written into practice at all levels where the Government have a level of control. All kinds of public sector organisation should be expected to consider, work with and implement intergenerational practice wherever they can, so that we can get the best possible decisions made and the best outcomes for everyone.

Nobody is simply a strain on economic resources. Whether somebody is young or older, whether they are black or white, whether they are disabled or are running marathons every weekend, whether they are gay or asexual, whether they are a migrant or have lived here all their life, whether they vote or not, every single person has value. Every single person has a unique experience and a unique perspective that they can bring to the table. We have a responsibility as representatives to listen to all those voices—every single one—in order to make the best possible decisions. If we are listening and understanding all those different perspectives as best we can, we are more likely to consider them when we are taking decisions, and to make better decisions for everybody in our constituencies across these islands.

In Scotland and in the SNP, civic values run through everything we do. In Scotland the people are sovereign, not Parliament. We should, and do, celebrate diversity and value everyone for their perspective. I am unsurprised that this work has had a great base and has taken off in Scotland.

I want to talk about a few of my personal experiences and things I have heard. There was a great Girlguiding reception in Parliament this week, with the first Westminster Palace Brownies. It was truly brilliant to see the Brownies in Parliament—it was really cool coming up the stairs and hearing applause, because it is so rare to hear it in Westminster. Hearing that applause and hearing the Brownies singing was absolutely fabulous.

I was a Rainbow leader a number of years ago. One of the best things we did in my time was taking the Rainbows, who were very small—from age five to seven or eight—to sing Christmas carols for the older people in the nursing home next door. It was just such a fabulous event, because everybody enjoyed it: the Rainbows had a brilliant time singing and the older people in the care home really enjoyed it too. Maybe they did not see an awful lot of young people in their lives; maybe they were isolated and lonely, but they enjoyed those interactions. I genuinely loved doing it.

At a sheltered housing surgery in my constituency a few years ago, I met a chap from Aberdeen who had been a tram driver. The trams in Aberdeen stopped running in 1958, so he was a wee bit older than me. I am not a geek, honest—no, I definitely am—but I have a bit of an obsession with public transport. Hearing about what driving a tram was like and about his experiences and the routes he used to take made the history of my city come alive. I love the social history stuff, but actually being able to hear it from someone was one of the coolest things I have done in my time.

This week, I shared with a group of colleagues a photo of my family that was taken 13 years ago. We had five generations in one room, in one photo: me, my son, my dad, my granny and my great-granny. Most people are not lucky enough to have five generations together, but we have generations of about 25 years each. The experience for everybody was so affirming. It was so

[Kirsty Blackman]

brilliant to be part of the thread that links those generations. We all come with different perspectives and all come with different experiences.

My great-granny's dad was killed during the first world war. As a result, she grew up in absolute poverty. I compare that with the situation we are in now: my children have absolutely not grown up in poverty. The different perspectives and experiences, and the improvements we have managed to make in our own lives over the generations, were really lovely for my great-granny to see, hear and understand. She knew that my children would not have the same childhood she did or the same struggles she faced. It was really brilliant on that account.

Understanding between the generations breaks down barriers and makes for better decision making. I have mentioned this a few times, but there are studies that show that a company with a more diverse board makes more money as a result. That is empirical, solid, statistical evidence showing that diversity ensures that lots of people with different perspectives can come together and make the best possible decisions. It is incredibly important.

I have met Age UK a couple of times recently and have spoken in this House about digital exclusion—I am thinking particularly about older people, as well as people in areas of deprivation, for example. I agree entirely that lots of older people can teach lots of things to younger people, but younger people also have valuable experience and understanding that they can teach older people. There are organisations in my constituency like Silver City Surfers, which brings together older people and younger people so the younger people can teach the older ones how to access online banking or online shopping, or how to check online when their bin collection is. That intergenerational learning, which can be passed in both directions, is really brilliant. Everybody, no matter their age, has some wisdom that they can offer and some learning that they can share.

I have worked as a local authority councillor and have spent a lot of time dealing with various services in the public sector. There can be silos in organisations' decision making, particularly in the public sector; I do not know whether it is the same in the private sector. We need to break down those barriers. Ensuring that people of different ages and different generations, and people from different public sector organisations, can spend time and make decisions together leads to better decisions for everybody.

In Scotland, we have the "Getting it right for every child" curriculum. Part of the approach in schools and local authority care settings is about ensuring that we get things right for every single child. If I had a magic wand and were in charge of everything, I would definitely go far further and ensure that we are trying to get it right for every single person, looking at their unique circumstances and providing the support that they need to meet the challenges they face at that stage of their life.

One thing I talk about quite a lot in Westminster Hall—I am always surprised that Labour Members do not talk about it more, because they should—is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. It is one of the most truly brilliant pieces of legislation

I have ever heard about. It is on a par with some of the stuff on global domestic wellbeing that we are doing in Scotland, and the founding of the wellbeing economy partnerships. It is entirely about ensuring that decision making is protecting and improving the quality of life for the generations who are coming through. The Future Generations Commissioner in Wales ensures that the decisions taken by public sector bodies protect younger generations, not just older generations, and maintain or improve everyone's quality of life. It is incredibly important to think about how our decision making improves wellbeing for individuals as well as for societies and communities. That Act is incredibly useful and underlines that point.

Lastly, I want to talk about trust and loneliness, which my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw has spoken about. An awful lot of young people who have been through covid and have spent a period of their school life at home have an issue with trust. They do not necessarily have trust in their teachers, in authority figures or in older people, because a period of their formative years, when they should have been learning about interactions, had to be spent away from others, isolated and lonely as a result of covid. Breaking down the barriers and putting younger and older people together, so they can work together and do things as a team, rebuilds that trust. It makes it more likely that younger people will say, "Actually, I recognise the value, experience and wisdom that people of other generations bring to the table. I recognise that they might have a different perspective from mine, but it's just as valuable and just as important as mine."

Getting young people to engage with the systems that they need to engage with, instead of just feeling that they have to step out, is particularly important during a cost of living crisis. A Girlguiding survey last year said that 63% of girls living in the most deprived areas worry about the cost of living and its impact on them and their family. Young people are worried about that and are struggling to engage with authority figures because of what they have been through. Improving relationships and getting young people work with older people, so they realise that they are not terrifying—that in most cases they are lovely—really helps to break down the barriers and ensure that young people can contribute to the full extent of their talents.

Thank you again for chairing this meeting, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw once more: I am absolutely delighted and honoured to stand beside her in this room.

2.28 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to participate in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing a debate on this subject.

I always say, and I really do believe, that being a Member of Parliament is the best job in the world, but I was delighted to hear the hon. Lady speak about her joy in being a granny, which is a very important job indeed. It is such a privilege to be here for the first time Parliament has debated this really important subject. Although Global Intergenerational Week was a few weeks ago, it is excellent to see colleagues gathered here to discuss it.

It is really important that we embrace intergenerational practice and relationships, whether that is as individuals, groups, organisations, Governments or political parties. We have heard many great examples during this brief discussion today, such as living arrangements bringing people together, as well as different projects and organisations, and oral history, which I agree is incredibly important.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) talked about children being brought into residential homes. My children also had that experience when they were attending a co-operative nursery. It was incredibly important for them, particularly as they do not have close relatives living nearby; I felt that was very important indeed.

As well as bringing people together, we also need to make sure that all people of different generations and age groups are protected from the kind of stereotyping that we are hearing about, and from discrimination. We need to ensure that everyone, regardless of age, is treated with dignity and respect, and treated equally in our society. As well as protections that apply to people of any age, the Equality Act 2010 enshrines in law protections against discrimination on the basis of age. No one should be discriminated against because they are or are not a certain age or in a certain age group. For 14 years, that landmark legislation, which many other countries have tried to copy, has protected people of all ages from direct and indirect discrimination, as well as from harassment and victimisation. It has helped to build understanding of the challenges that different age groups face. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw stressed that many of those challenges are common to different generations.

It was great to hear the hon. Member for Aberdeen North talking about some of the privileges we have as parliamentarians and the job that we do when we are seeking to represent everyone in our constituencies. I too had the privilege of seeing the Brownies at their first ever meeting in the House of Commons, which was very exciting.

Another privilege we have as parliamentarians—I am sure others will recognise this—is that people send us reading material. I was sent a fascinating book, “Generations”, by Bobby Duffy, who has done a lot of work looking into the stereotypes about different generations. The book comprehensively demolishes the idea that, for example, young people today are fixated on ephemeral issues, are only interested in having fun and that issues around the cost of living are not important to them. It shows that younger generations are concerned about the health, wellbeing and success of future generations. I am glad that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act was highlighted. It is a great achievement of the Welsh Government, which ensures that the concerns of future generations are structurally represented in Government.

Some big challenges have been talked about this afternoon including mental health issues. In some cases, sadly, they carry across the generations. The issue of loneliness was rightly mentioned. For young people, social media use often exacerbates loneliness rather than brings people together to combat it. Loneliness is also a big challenge for many older people. Age UK has done wonderful work on this, but says that 1.4 million older people report themselves as often being lonely,

which is a terrible statistic for us to reflect on, and surely—hopefully—to act on. It was great to hear about some of the projects combating loneliness in Motherwell. The Clockhouse Project in Blackbird Leys in my constituency also does great work bringing older people together. Clearly, though, we need to do more.

We need to do more across the generations when it comes to mental health, as well. In particular, we need to tackle the crisis in children’s mental health and the currently very long waiting lists for support. We need much higher staffing levels within the NHS, but we also need to ensure that this is integrated with schooling, so that there are specialist mental health professionals at every school. There must be much more open access to mental health care, whether that is for young, middle-aged or older people.

We have to break down barriers to opportunity at every stage. Today, unfortunately, inequality is entrenched across the country. We are seeing inequality that is regional, inequality that is racial, inequality between men and women, and class inequality. Traditionally in the UK, there has been a promise that we can tell our children and grandchildren, “If you work hard, you will be able to get on, no matter what your background is.” That increasingly has not been the case for many people in our society, unfortunately.

Many older people who have worked hard all their lives are in an increasingly difficult situation. The housing crisis was rightly referred to, and clearly that is a huge challenge for many young people, but as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly said, it is increasingly a challenge for older people, too. Lots of older people are now living in precarious, poor-quality, private rented sector housing. This is the first time that that has been the case for a number of decades, and we really need to be facing up to that.

We must consider all generations when it comes to big challenges such as combating violence in our communities. I pay tribute to the work of Age UK, but I was very concerned to hear that it was Age UK’s hard work that led to Government systematically collecting information about the rates of domestic violence against older people, and that the information had not previously been routinely collected. That is really concerning. It should have been routinely collected, because we need to learn from it to ensure that every older person is safe. Of course, we also need to understand new forms of violence and control. That means having a focus on the kind of online issues that were touched on in this debate.

We need to look at how, ultimately, the different generations are progressing or otherwise. There is a measure of that: income persistence. The UK currently has American-style levels of income persistence which are significantly higher than the OECD average. That means that your parents’ income determines a huge amount of what your income as a young person and subsequent generations’ will be. Other countries are far better at disrupting that persistence. We believe that we have to take action on this and that the Social Mobility Commission should be involved in recording and analysing data on it. We need to do that and to learn from analysis of other sources, such as the longitudinal education outcomes data, so we can ensure much greater intergenerational income mobility.

I feel that I cannot not mention the need to recognise the contribution of every single generation to our society and economy. One generation that I have talked about a

[Anneliese Dodds]

lot is people in their 40s, 50s and 60s, particularly women. That group of women does not get talked about very much, and are not represented very much in the media. They do a lot, and though they tend not to complain very much, they are often squeezed at both ends. They provide huge amounts of care as sandwich carers. Many are trying to hold down a job. They are supporting children and often their partners or parents too, both financially and emotionally. Often they are experiencing health problems as well, and some are finding it challenging to manage menopausal symptoms alongside work that is not sufficiently flexible or suitable.

Politics simply has not kept up with the requirements of that generation. It should keep up, because the number of women falling into that generation and moving out of the labour market is very significant. We have calculated that our economy is losing about £7 billion in untapped potential because of those women being forced out of the labour market. Surely we need to do better there. We need to be acting on these issues.

Kirsty Blackman: I commend the hon. Member for highlighting that group of women. She is absolutely right: they do not get talked about enough. It is a responsibility of parliamentarians to ensure that we are talking about them, thanking them for their contribution and trying to make life better for them, or at least slightly more bearable than it currently is, so I thank her very much for doing so.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for what she says. It is important that Parliament is in step with society as well.

We have seen a huge amount of change, with much of the focus on these kinds of issues. We have seen significant positive change across the generations. It is interesting that the amount of childcare undertaken by both parents has changed substantially in recent years, albeit still not the progress we would like. We see it in shared leave, at nursery and school pick-ups, and in time off when the kids are ill or during school holidays. All those things are now viewed as part of the parcel of not just being a mother, but being a parent. None the less, much more progress is still needed.

There has been change over the generations, and, as I say, Parliament and politics really need to catch up on all of that. In doing so, we can work together across generations and learn from each other about what has changed things in a positive direction. That really gets to the root of what Global Intergenerational Week is all about. It was mentioned earlier that more diverse teams tend to have far better outcomes—particularly in business, but it applies everywhere. If we do not include every generation in our decision making, we will not take the right and effective decisions. The work undertaken by those who have been promoting Global Intergenerational Week really underlines that. It also enables us to celebrate the wonderful contribution of all generations—surely we should be doing that too.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Efford.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing this debate to mark Global Intergenerational Week, and all those who have contributed to the debate. I put on record my thanks to all the organisations in this country and around the world that have made it a really important week. It has been fantastic to hear about its success this year and the range of inspiring community-led initiatives that have encouraged people of all ages to come together in meaningful ways to build friendships and develop new skills that people probably did not realise they had.

I was struck by the hon. Lady's comments on housing. My mum has been living in a housing association flat in a complex full of lots of—dare I say—older people, but we have just this month managed to get her into a bungalow on a street full of families; it is a housing association older people's bungalow, but it is on a street full of families. The difference I saw in my mum in one day, going from that flat to that bungalow, was incredible, so I do think the hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of planning and housing. When I was Housing Minister, it was actually an area of work that I was trying to focus on; unfortunately, politics took over and I left that role, but there you go. I can assure the hon. Lady that we do talk cross-Government about many of these issues, and I will try to highlight some of the work that we are doing.

A number of Members have mentioned conversations and relationships with people from generations other than our own. I am sure that even as we get older, we all remember the advice given by our grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles, or even the older people who lived down the road. I do not know if it is well known, but I love baking, and I learned some of my skills from people who knew how to bake really well. I have held that knowledge with me, and I look forward to being able to pass it on to the next generation.

As others have rightly mentioned, we know that a substantial number of older people suffer from chronic loneliness, which can lead to both physical and mental health strains—the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw highlighted analysis showing that it is comparable to the smoking of 16 cigarettes a day. A lot of that work has come from the US Surgeon General, who recently spoke at an event in the House of Lords. It was fascinating to listen to the medical evidence on the impact that loneliness can have on people.

Loneliness is not just a problem for older people, as hon. Members have said. We know that young people, particularly those aged between 16 and 24, are often the most likely to report feeling lonely. Evidence shows that transitions in people's lives often bring about those loneliness moments. That is not surprising. Leaving home for the first time, going to university or starting a new job are instances where a young person can become lonely. That has been a focus of the work that we have been doing in the Department this year—trying to help young people who are going to university for the first time by engaging and interacting with them. We hope we can do some more of that work, and I will refer to that in a moment.

Bringing together the different age groups can be a great way of fostering better social connections. It is essential to building empathy, understanding the issues across the generational divide and dismantling any misplaced stereotypes. As the loneliness Minister, the idea

that most resonates with me is the power of intergenerational relationships in combating social isolation and loneliness for all ages, because loneliness does not discriminate. People of all backgrounds can experience loneliness at any time of their life—I know that I have. That is why we are committed to tackling loneliness and ensuring that everyone can benefit from the power of meaningful connections, particularly the most vulnerable people in our society.

Our work to tackle loneliness is driven by the three main objectives set out in the world's first strategy for tackling loneliness, which was published in 2018. The first is to reduce the stigma of loneliness by building a national conversation. Many people do not want to admit that they have experienced being lonely, or do not know what to do about it. To try to tackle that stigma, the national communications campaign that we run has now reached tens of millions of people since it was started in 2019. It tries to raise awareness about the issue and provides advice on what people can do to help themselves, or indeed help other people who they suspect suffer from loneliness.

The second objective is to try to drive a lasting shift so that relationships and loneliness are considered by organisations right across society. It is a complex issue that can be addressed only in partnership; the Government cannot do it alone. What makes this work so good in this country is the strong partnership with the Government. Many community and local organisations and national charities are helping us to advance that agenda. The Government and our partners have invested £80 million since 2018 on tackling this really important issue.

Last year, we launched the £30-million Know Your Neighbourhood fund to try to create volunteering opportunities to help to reduce loneliness. It supports new and existing schemes in the 27 most disadvantaged areas in the country. Last year, I had the great privilege of visiting one of the projects in Hull, where Age UK, a charity that has been mentioned by Members this afternoon, was creating volunteering opportunities for younger people to befriend older people at risk of becoming lonely. It was brilliant to see intergenerational relationships forming.

Older people who sometimes do not see people from week to week can suddenly have someone who regularly goes round to see how they are, checks on them, gets to know them and makes them feel that they are part of the community in which they live. I also loved the differences in conversations, with one person talking about tech and the other about post-war living. It was fantastic to see.

The final objective of the strategy is to improve the evidence base, which is important so that we can make a compelling case for ongoing action in this area. Our research really helped us to understand the prevalence of the stigma associated with loneliness. As I say, I am very proud to be the Minister for loneliness and to lead the work addressing such an important issue across Government. Like many hon. Members present, I want this country to be a place where we can all have strong social relationships and feel connected to the people we live around.

Global Intergenerational Week is also a good reminder that volunteering can be a great way of supporting intergenerational cohesion, much like the befriending service that I have mentioned. Stakeholders have told us

that intergenerational volunteering can be a flexible form of micro-volunteering and can have a number of positive impacts. It can improve cross-generational mental health and wellbeing, and reduce age segregation, which itself can lead to a variety of issues—not just loneliness but anxiety and poor health. It also helps to foster attachment to local areas and provide positive community outcomes, such as community connectedness. We know that there is growing interest in the opportunities that intergenerational work presents, so we want to work with all the organisations that are already doing fantastic work in this area, and to learn more about the positive impacts that it can have and what more we can do to help to foster more of it.

It is also important to mention social cohesion, which we are trying to build by supporting sustainable communities. That is why we have given communities significant support to provide them with the power and resources to shape better and more connected neighbourhoods, and why we are currently delivering the new community wealth fund, which will be important. The idea behind it is to support communities to improve the social infrastructure in neighbourhoods that perhaps do not have that and therefore miss out on all the opportunities for grants and other things that may exist. It also aims to empower local people to make decisions about what they think is best for their community. I am therefore pleased to say that £87.5 million will be allocated to that fund, coming from the expansion of the dormant assets scheme.

When I think about other parts of my portfolio, there is another key way to get intergenerational connectedness happening, and that is through social prescribing. There are real opportunities there for bringing different age groups together. It helps to connect people to the community-based support, including activities and services, that meet the practical, social and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing. It can work well for those who are socially isolated or are experiencing low levels of mental health.

One of the themes for this year's Global Intergenerational Week is building intergenerational workplaces, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned. We want to champion the benefits of such a multigenerational workforce and promote the importance of retaining the skills and experience that older workers have. My colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are regularly engaging with employers and employer organisations to encourage positive attitudes towards older workers, and to help some of the people who hon. Members mentioned earlier to return to work.

I know that colleagues in DWP have been working with employers that team up workers across generations. One example is a pottery manufacturer in Stoke-on-Trent with a long history of producing high quality products, where traditional methods and modern technology often work together. Of course, both older and younger workers can use the differing technologies, but clearly those with more experience of the traditional methods can pass on their expertise and experience to their colleagues who have joined more recently. I hope that we see more of that work happening in future. We are committed to delivering a comprehensive package of support to help older people to remain in and return to work, and that will include the dedicated 50-plus champions at jobcentres and mid-life MOTs.

[*Stuart Andrew*]

Other Members mentioned young people. In my role as Minister with responsibility for youth in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, I have been on some amazing visits around the country, and I think youth centres can help to form important relationships between generations. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned, if young people are disengaged from school—I say this with no disrespect to teachers—that relationship is often different from their relationship with their youth worker, so that mentoring is important. Our hope is to roll out programmes that do more of that, so we are embedding in young people the benefit of having relationships with people from different generations. Hopefully, they will pass that on to the younger generation as they get older.

Other Members mentioned Youth Voice. I always want to have young people around the table when we are talking about issues that affect them, not least because they do it so brilliantly and articulate it in a way that I could not, but also because, as I say to them every time, there is no point in this grey-haired, middle-aged man trying to decide what young people want today. The Youth Parliament and others are great at providing such opportunities.

I am the Sport Minister, and we have a sport strategy to get more people active. I am pleased to see that Sport England is now spending a quarter of a billion on place-based investment. I went to see one such scheme in a leisure centre in Canvey Island, where it was great to see very young people playing with footballs next to older people doing chair exercises. Getting them together was important.

Kirsty Blackman: The Minister has made me think about Cruyff courts. I do not know if he knows anything about them—another one is opening in Aberdeen on Monday, and I am massively excited—but in creating them, the Cruyff Foundation pays money towards a football pitch, which has to be beside a community centre or some sort of community building. That means that there is that community intervention and space, and a football pitch that can be used by anyone in the community. It is a truly brilliant initiative, so I encourage him to look at Cruyff court systems.

Stuart Andrew: That sounds really exciting. The hon. Lady is absolutely right: I am very proud of the fact that we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds in new sports facilities, but it is about making sure that it is not just the same people using them all the time. How do we get other generations using them? How do we get more women using them? The rise in women's football has been amazing for us all to see, but the number of facilities that are available, or even appropriate, for women has not been good enough, and that is why we introduced the Lionesses fund. I will certainly look into the project that the hon. Lady mentioned.

This debate has been an important conversation, and I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and all Members for their contributions on an important and enlightening subject. I agree with the hon. Member

for Aberdeen North: it is nice to see these different groups coming together. We are determined to do what we can to see more connected societies, and intergenerational approaches will be an important part of that work. I hope that we can come to realise and value the fact that intergenerational relationships build happier, healthier and more resilient communities.

2.58 pm

Marion Fellows: There has been quality, if not quantity, in this wide-ranging debate. We have covered many different areas and I am grateful to everyone who has spoken.

I have learned more, and that is always a good thing. If anyone is watching this debate, they will learn an awful lot about how good intergenerational working is—either working in the job sense or just working together with a common aim to teach and to learn. Importantly, the Minister started by talking about his mother and how much better she was not being in an enclosed environment just for older people. That is at the heart of what we have been discussing: generations being together and being interested in what the other is doing.

It is very unusual, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is very fortunate, to have had five generations together at one point, and I really envy her that. As the daughter of an older mother and having had children later myself, I will never see that, and I do not suppose that any of my family will, but it does not have to be family that does this work. Sometimes, it is better if it is not family. When I look at large families of different cultures, or different groups of families—on holiday, for example—the ones that are very cohesive are the ones that include all generations, which is great.

I do not have much time, so I will not dwell on this, but I will refer to the reading material that I am going to run and get: “Generations” by Bobby Duffy, which I think will be entertaining and enlightening. It benefits everyone if we talk about these things and read the evidence that the Government have gathered, which the Minister referred to, as well as the evidence in books and in general chat.

I want to thank organisations locally, as other Members already have, such as Befriend Motherwell, which is a fantastic organisation run by one of the churches. There are also other such organisations in my constituency that manage to bring together different generations who all learn from one another.

The fact that an older woman with dementia called Elspeth now asks her great-niece, who is headteacher at my Elspeth's primary school—she is about to start in a few months' time—is a really wonderful example of how bringing older and younger people together benefits them both.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Global Intergenerational Week 2024.

3.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 9 May 2024

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman: Annual Report 2023

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces annual report for 2023 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

This report is published by Mariette Hughes and covers the operation of the service complaints system and the work of her office in her third year as the ombudsman.

The findings of the report will now be considered fully by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the ombudsman will follow once that work is complete.

[HCWS452]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by North Lincolnshire Green Energy Park Ltd for development consent for the construction and operation of a combined heat and power enabled energy generating development, with an electrical output of up to 95 megawatts, incorporating carbon capture, associated district heat and private wire networks, hydrogen production, ash treatment, and other associated developments on land at Flixborough industrial estate, Scunthorpe.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on North Lincolnshire Green Energy Park application is 10 May 2024.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 18 July 2024 for deciding this application. This is to ensure there is sufficient time for the Department to consider the outcome of the piece of work being carried out by officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to consider the role of waste incineration capacity in the management of residual wastes in England. This follows the direction issued by the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries to the Environment Agency on 4 April to temporarily pause the determination of environmental permits for new waste incineration facilities up until 24 May 2024.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS453]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Affordable Homes Guarantee Scheme 2020: Expansion

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): Today, I have laid before Parliament a departmental minute setting out the details of a contingent liability that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities intends to incur under the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012. By expanding the capacity of the existing affordable homes guarantee scheme 2020 from £3 billion to £6 billion, the Department increases its capacity to create contingent liabilities.

The expanded affordable homes guarantee scheme—announced at the autumn statement 2023—will continue to be delivered by ARA Venn on behalf of the Department under the oversight of Homes England. The delivery partner has been managing the scheme since 2020 and was appointed through a fair, open and competitive procurement process. Contracts for the management of the expanded scheme have now been signed with the delivery partner and the expanded scheme opened for business on 12 February 2024. In delivering the scheme, the delivery partner will raise capital from bond market investors and on-lend the proceeds to registered providers of affordable housing in England. The Department will guarantee both the principal and interest cash flows to investors.

Through the scheme the Government will continue to boost investment in providers of affordable housing and support the delivery of a significant number of new affordable homes for those whose housing needs are not currently met by the market. The expansion will support a further 4,000 new homes, bringing the total estimated number of new homes supported by the scheme to 27,000. The expansion also allows eligible spend to include upgrading existing housing stock, increasing the scope of the scheme to include retrofit, decency, and building safety. This will support registered providers to meet the decent homes standard, as well as their net zero obligations, alongside developing new homes.

This expansion sits alongside the Government's wider set of policies to support affordable housing, including our flagship £11.5 billion affordable homes programme as well as the investment of billions of pounds in infrastructure to support the delivery of new homes since the start of this Parliament through schemes including the £4.2 billion housing infrastructure fund and the £1 billion brownfield, infrastructure and land fund. Collectively, these schemes will deliver tens of thousands of new homes and unlock tens of billions of pounds in private investment.

[HCWS451]

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