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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 May 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: As the Session draws to a close, I would like to express my personal thanks to Sir Roger Gale for his stalwart service as an additional Deputy Speaker. On behalf of the whole House, and in particular the other Deputy Speakers, I want to express our profound gratitude to Sir Roger for his unflappable demeanour in the Chair, his wise procedural counsel behind the scenes and, most of all, his warm friendship. As we go into the election, today will be his last day.

I also wish to say a few words of appreciation for Liam Laurence Smyth, who is stepping aside from his role as Clerk of Legislation this week and moving to a part-time role in the Chamber Business Team. Colin Lee, most recently the managing director of the Select Committee Team, will become Clerk of Legislation from 1 June. Liam has been a House of Commons Clerk for over 40 years. His extensive procedural and Committee experience included a period as Clerk of the Journals. Most recently, he has overseen the work of the Public Bill Office, during challenging and complex times, and he has worked tirelessly to ensure that all Members have access to high-quality and timely advice on legislation. Liam is skilful at sharing his knowledge, both with colleagues here and overseas. I want to thank him personally for the advice that he has given me as Speaker over the years, and I am delighted to say that he will continue to sit regularly at the Clerk's Table. He is an institution.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Journalism

1. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support local journalism. [902975]

16. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the effectiveness of Government support for local media. [902991]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): Mr Speaker, 24 hours is a long time in politics. As this is the last session of oral questions before we hand over to the people we serve and await their decision, I want to thank the whole team at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and everyone who supports our ministerial team. Let me also wish luck to everyone whose lives will be changing. That includes Members, of course, but importantly it also includes the staff who support them and the residents they serve. Having looked at Sir David Amess's plaque during prayers, I also wish everyone a very safe campaign.

We are committed to supporting local media as a vital pillar of our local democracy. Our Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will, among many other measures, help to rebalance the relationship between local publishers and online platforms. In addition, the Media Bill, which I hope will be passed, includes measures to help radio to provide high-quality local journalism. We have also supported local press through tax reliefs and innovation funding.

Mr Dhesi: The *Slough Observer*, the *Slough Express*, BBC Radio Berkshire, Asian Star Radio and other such local media outlets are the glue that binds and builds our Slough community, holding to account local councillors, MPs and officials, and placing a local focus on national issues. However, the Tories have neglected local news. In 2019 the Cairncross review highlighted the serious challenges facing local journalism, but to date the Government have taken no significant action. Their lack of support, coupled with low wages and job insecurity, is forcing talented journalists out of local news. What steps have Ministers taken to ensure that jobs in local journalism are viable?

Julia Lopez: Since we are doing some name checks, let me pay tribute to *The Havering Daily*, Time FM and the *Romford Recorder*. I think the hon. Gentleman must have missed the Digital Markets Act 2022 and the key recommendation of the Cairncross review, which identified the lack of balance in the relationship between publishers and dominant platforms. We brought that recommendation to the House and it was passed. That was our main effort to protect local journalism, but of course it was not our only effort. We also provided business tax relief for local journalism offices, we support the BBC's local democracy reporting scheme, we have protected public notices income, we are looking at how we use Government advertising spend, and we are speaking to the teams about what else we can do.

Mr Carmichael: This seems to be an appropriate moment to acknowledge that in Orkney and Shetland we are blessed with some very good-quality local media: *The Orcadian*, *The Shetland Times*, *Shetland News*, SIBC, BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland—if I have forgotten anyone, I will doubtless suffer for it in the weeks to come. For communities such as ours, a strong local media presence is an important bulwark against the relentless centralisation of control, power and government in Edinburgh, which is why we need to protect our media. Does the Minister agree that what we really need is a coherent strategy for all aspects of local media, including advertising, to ensure that local media outlets remain strong?

Julia Lopez: I certainly agree, and we have been putting forward that strategy, but it is a very dynamic market. We are now seeing challenges to local reporting from artificial intelligence, and we are considering how we can protect some of these publications, because we agree that they are such an important part of our local democracy. If any other Members want to bob on this question and name-check their local media, I shall be happy to pay fulsome tribute to their journalists.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister must have guessed that a mention of the *Torbay Weekly*, which was launched four years ago under its editor Jim Parker, would be coming in this supplementary question.

On a more serious note, one of the worrying trends we have seen is the way that national corporations will buy a historic local title, turn it into a weekly and run into the ground. Even when such corporations close down a newspaper, they refuse to release the title so that it can perhaps be used by a local group that is trying to put together a multimedia platform to continue local accountability. What steps could the Government take to resolve that?

Julia Lopez: There is surely no greater publication in my hon. Friend's constituency than the *Torbay Weekly*. I should also say that this House has made it clear just how strongly it feels about BBC local radio services in the course of this Parliament, and I hope to see them protected in the next Parliament. He is absolutely right about the challenge of publications being bought up. We want to support some of the microsites, and we are looking at how we can use Government advertising spend to try to help support them.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): In the spirit of one-upmanship, I would just like to announce that Mr Speaker does not read the *Financial Times* or listen to Radio 4. No, he reads the *Bolton News* and listens to Bolton FM. We were very disappointed at the weekend, because we lost to Oxford United. I spoke to Keith Harris from Bolton FM this morning, and he wants assurances that the Government will do all they can to ensure that local radio is an essential tool for democracy, that it gets the legal support it needs, and that Government, both locally and nationally, can do more to support local platforms.

Mr Speaker: On a point of clarification, I read the *Chorley Guardian* and the *Lancashire Evening Post*. I would definitely still be listening, as Peter Kay would say, to Chorley FM—coming all over!

Julia Lopez: The *Bolton News*, Bolton FM and the *Chorley Guardian*—we could not live without them. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of local radio. As Media Minister, I fought hard to make sure that we included provisions for local radio in the Media Bill, and I very much hope that it will be passed in the wash-up.

Horseracing

2. **Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind):** What steps her Department is taking to support the horseracing industry. [R] [902976]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Given that my constituency of Pudsey will no longer exist after the election, this may be my final chance to thank all my constituents for the support that they have given me over the years. I pay particular tribute to my parliamentary and constituency team, who have helped me enormously over the past 14 years. It has been the privilege and honour of my life, and I am extremely grateful for it.

In answer to the question, the Government very much support horseracing, which is the second largest spectator sport and a major economic contributor, and not just to the rural economy but to the economy more widely. We have been working extensively with industry to maintain its status as a world-renowned sport.

Matt Hancock: I, too, rise to make my last contribution in this House. May I thank you, Mr Speaker, and all the staff of the House, who have helped me enormously over many years? I have answered thousands of questions from the Dispatch Box, and asked hundreds from the Back Benches. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who has been an exemplary Minister and representative of Pudsey.

It is perhaps fitting that my final question is about horseracing, which is at the heart of the West Suffolk constituency and, of course, Newmarket. It requires significant support in these difficult times. I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State have been working incredibly hard to try to settle the latest levy negotiations. Can he assure me that he will do everything he possibly can to use the last few days in which this Parliament is sitting to get that deal over the line? We now want certainty to be able to take this great sport from strength to strength.

Mr Speaker: I think that was a valedictory speech.

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend has certainly been an advocate of and a hard campaigner for horseracing, and not just in his constituency but for the wider sport. Significant progress has been made on increasing levy contributions on a voluntary basis, and a great deal of thanks must go to the British Horseracing Authority, the Betting and Gaming Council, and DCMS officials for all their efforts and engagements throughout this process. With an offer on the table, we urge both sides to agree on the terms of the deal, which will see increased investment in the sport, allowing it to grow and secure its sustainability. We will do everything we can to ensure that is agreed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer. The last autumn, winter and spring have seen a deluge of rain like we have never seen—many of us were either going to buy a boat or build one. What assessment has been made of the impact of the past 12 months of increased rainfall and flooding on the horseracing industry?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I know that colleagues in Sport England and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been looking at this issue, particularly as it has affected not just horseracing but other pitches, such as

for rugby, football and so on. I have some further details on the conclusions of that, which I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about.

Youth Investment Fund

3. **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What assessment she has made of the impact of the youth investment fund on opportunities for young people. [902977]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): As this Parliament comes to an end, I too would like to begin by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for everything you have done and for the support you have given me as a Minister over the past six years. I would like to thank DCMS and my officials for all the work they have done, the special advisers, who have been superb, and my hard-working and effective ministerial team—we work as a team—and I am thankful for my engagement with the shadow Secretary of State.

It is really important that we support our young people. That is why we have a programme to build or refurbish up to 300 youth facilities, supporting 45,000 young people each year. To date, £250 million has been awarded to 227 organisations to build, renovate and expand youth provision.

Paul Howell: Like others, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me over my first Parliament—I hope to come back for another one with a different constituency name. On the substantive question, on Saturday 11 May I went to the Middleton St George scout hall to join the local lord lieutenant and deputy mayor as we opened their new scout hall, with more than £350,000 from the Conservative Government's youth investment fund. Could the Secretary of State just remind us how important these community groups are—the scouts, the brass bands, and all of the different things that we see around our communities—and maybe just remind us of the breadth and scope of support that this Conservative Government have given to such organisations?

Lucy Frazer: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a huge campaigner for his area. We have given 300,000 opportunities to young people through our national youth guarantee. That is not just about the youth clubs that I have mentioned; we have also given 12,000 disadvantaged young people an opportunity to have adventures away from home; we have made 30,000 places for the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme; and we have created 250 new uniformed youth groups.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It was Labour Government funding that enabled me, a working-class girl from Pontypridd, to access specialist music lessons, to fall in love with opera and to take part in a specialist workshop with Welsh National Opera. We all know what is sadly happening with the WNO, so what steps is the Secretary of State taking to safeguard our world-class WNO and the jobs and opportunities it provides for young people and everyone across Wales and the south-west?

Lucy Frazer: I am really delighted to have an opportunity to answer this question about funding in Wales, because, notwithstanding the fact that arts is devolved to Wales, this Government have given £4 million through the Arts

Council to Welsh National Opera—the same amount that the Welsh Government have given. Furthermore, the Arts Council has given transition funding. In fact, Welsh National Opera has been in the top 10% of organisations that have been funded. My position is that the Labour Government in Wales have reduced their funding to the Arts Council of Wales by 10%, and have been called out by those in Wales, so I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving me the opportunity to point that out.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State, or anyone else on the Tory Benches, honestly tell the young people in Bristol and across the UK that they are better off, after 14 years of Conservative failures on youth services, failures on education and failures on skills development, than they would be under a Government led by Keir Starmer and a changed Labour party?

Lucy Frazer: Absolutely. This Government have supported young people through education in outstanding schools—80% of young people get an outstanding education. We are up in the PISA—programme for international student assessment—tables for education. As I said, 300,000 young people have been given opportunities in the creative industries, which the hon. Member fails to mention. Employment is up in the creative industries, and we have doubled the number of people employed and doubled the revenues. Labour voted against our creative industries tax relief every single time.

Women and Girls in Sport

4. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the participation of women and girls in sport. [902978]

7. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the participation of women and girls in sport. [902981]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): We have a number of individual initiatives to support the participation of women and girls in sport. The national physical activity taskforce is working across Government to ensure that women and girls get more active. We have established the Board of Women's Sport to identify challenges and opportunities across women's sport, and we are fully supporting Karen Carney's recommendations to lift standards and deliver sustainable growth for women's football.

Wendy Morton: As you know, Mr Speaker, football is a great sport in which both boys and girls can participate. Walsall Football Club Foundation does fantastic work to encourage and enthuse schools in my constituency to participate through initiatives such as Let Girls Play. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that this is exactly what we need to do to encourage more grassroots sport for girls? Will she also join me in congratulating the boys team at Cooper and Jordan School on recently winning the Utilita kids cup final at Wembley?

Lucy Frazer: I am delighted to congratulate the boys team, and to commend all the work done in local schools to encourage girls to get more involved in sport. That is why the Government are committed to equal access to physical education and sport in schools, so that girls are able to participate in whatever sport they like. If they want to play cricket, football or rugby, they should be entitled to do so. And it is why the Department for Education has published guidance on how to deliver a minimum of two hours a week of quality PE, alongside over £600 million of funding for primary PE and sport through the sport premium.

Greg Smith: There is no greater exemplar of encouraging women and girls into sport than the motorsport sector. From Susie Wolff's F1 academy and Discover Your Drive to Motorsport UK's Girls on Track scheme, the sector is discovering British talent like Abbi Pulling, who won both races in Miami in the F1 academy and then, the very next weekend, won the British F4 race here in the UK. And that is before I get on to the engineering and design roles. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that motorsport shows the way for other sports to follow?

Lucy Frazer: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on the huge value of motorsport. I congratulate motorsport on its Girls on Track scheme, which is getting more girls and women into sport. I highlight and re-emphasise his point that motorsport is not just about the sport itself; it is a huge powerhouse for research and development that builds and supports innovation.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I draw attention to my recent appointment to the board of Llanelli Scarlets.

I pay tribute to both Front Bench teams for the cross-party work in this House, because women's and girls' sport is really important. Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating the activity of girls and women in sport? Whoever is in government next, we will continue to work across parties to ensure that the rights of all women and girls are upheld in sport.

Lucy Frazer: I could not agree more. We do quite a lot of important cross-party work in this House. One of the things I have been most proud to be involved with in this role is supporting the women's football team and women in sport. It was phenomenal to go to Australia to see the women's team almost win the World cup, and it has been phenomenal to see the work that the Lionesses and former Lionesses have done to spotlight that. We are at a very exciting point for women's football, and the Government are continuing to support it in so many different ways.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks a good talk, but on her watch the gender activity gap is wider than ever: 22% fewer girls than boys take part in team sport. Does she agree that it is only under Labour, the party of equality, that women and girls in Bristol and beyond will finally have equal access to sport?

Lucy Frazer: I absolutely disagree with that statement, of course, because for a number of years now the Conservative Government have been supporting women and girls to get into sport, with a significant campaign

to get more women and girls into sport, and the cross-departmental work with the Department for Education to ensure that young girls have equal access to sport in school. In fact, year on year, we have seen those numbers on participation in sport improve, and we also set up the national physical activity taskforce with the specific aim of getting 1 million more women involved in activity.

Heritage Buildings

5. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to protect and repurpose heritage buildings. [902979]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I thank the hon. Member for her question. One of my colleagues has just said to me that she is stepping down, so I would like to pay tribute to her for the representation she has given to the good people of Halifax.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for listing buildings of special architectural or historic interest, giving them enhanced protection. The Department and its arm's length bodies also provide significant financial support for heritage buildings, including through Historic England's £95 million high streets heritage action zones programme.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer and thank her for her kind words. I pay tribute to Halifax Civic Trust, which does so much great work in my constituency and has some amazing heritage buildings, not least the magnificent Piece Hall. However, we have others that developers have bought and sat on, refusing to invest in them, engage or release them to other interested parties. What else might we be able to do to force them to engage and release those buildings if they are not going to invest?

Julia Lopez: I spoke to my noble Friend the heritage Minister in preparation for this question and in doing so got to know a bit more about Piece Hall, a fantastic heritage site in the hon. Member's constituency. I commend the work of all local activists to protect that building and bring it into public use. It is a wonderful example of an 18th century northern cloth hall, which now has a modern purpose. We are very grateful for the work that has gone into it. She may be aware that we also have the cultural development fund, which has allowed communities across the country to retain important public buildings with heritage value, repurpose them and breathe life into the communities that most need them.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): On the subject of heritage buildings, may I add my own thanks to yours, Mr Speaker, to the Clerk of Legislation, Liam Laurence Smyth, who really is an institution in this place? He was for many years a close colleague of my late father-in-law, Stephen Panton, who served this House as a Clerk for 33 years. Mr Laurence Smyth has done a great deal for many of us in this House and has been personally enormously helpful to me. While I am still in order, Mr Speaker, and on the subject of heritage buildings, does the Minister agree that for many people in South Norfolk the *Diss Express* feels like a heritage building and should be protected and celebrated accordingly?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the *Diss Express*, which I presume is a heritage railway—

Mr Bacon: It is a local newspaper.

Julia Lopez: It is a local newspaper—I do apologise.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) Resign!

Julia Lopez: Perhaps it is not too risky to say that I would consider doing so, but I appreciate my hon. Friend highlighting that wonderful organisation in his constituency.

Swimming Pools and Leisure Facilities

6. **Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the impact of the swimming pool support fund on local pools and leisure facilities. [902980]

13. **Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the impact of the swimming pool support fund on local pools and leisure facilities. [902988]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Responding to concerns that we heard from the sector, in 2023-24, the Government have awarded more than £60 million to address cost pressures facing public swimming pools and improve energy efficiency in the long term.

Rachel Maclean: I put on record my thanks to the Minister's Department for the considerable sum of funding—£382,000—that has been made available to Redditch to level up swimming pool and leisure facilities in my constituency. That comes on the back of £16.5 million of town deal funding, as well as £5 million of culture funding. Does she agree that significant representations have resulted in a meaningful commitment to level up Redditch within this Parliament? Does she agree that mental health and wellbeing are a key part of that?

Stuart Andrew: My sex has obviously changed, but I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to her for the enormous campaigning she has done on behalf of her constituents in Redditch in securing that significant investment. I agree that getting people active is vital to improving their physical and mental health. That is exactly why we are investing this historic amount of money in grassroots facilities and have published the new “Get Active” strategy, which sets out our ambition to get 3.5 million more people active by 2030.

Rob Butler: Aqua Vale swimming and fitness centre in Aylesbury has a prime location in the heart of town, but I am sorry to say it is starting to show its age. The announcement of £240,000 from this Conservative Government to improve the facilities there is superb news. Will my right hon. Friend highlight to Aylesbury residents the benefit that this investment will now bring to my constituents?

Stuart Andrew: I congratulate my hon. Friend on campaigning hard on behalf of his constituency and securing that £240,000 for a leisure centre that was feeling

its age—I think I know how it feels. We know how important pools are for our communities, which is why we are providing this funding. At Aqua Vale, the installation of solar panels will improve energy efficiency and contribute to significant savings, ensuring that leisure centre for the people of Aylesbury to stay fit and healthy.

Topical Questions

T2. [902995] **Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): I reiterate my thanks to the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) and Lord Parkinson for the significant support they have given me throughout my time as Secretary of State. DCMS is a team and without their phenomenal work we would not have been able to achieve what we have over the past 18 months or so, so I just wanted to say thank you to them.

Over the past 14 years, the Conservative party in government has helped transform the creative industries. There have been 1 million new jobs since 2010 and the economic value of the creative industries has doubled, to over £124 billion in 2022, powered by investment and tax breaks that Opposition Members voted against every single time. Unlike the Labour party, we have set out a plan to go further, to grow the creative industries by an additional £50 billion and add another million extra jobs by 2030. That is the choice voters will face in July: a clear Conservative plan for growth or back to square one with Labour.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Secretary of State for all her work with my team in Redditch. Can she confirm that, despite the tight timelines, we can ensure that the £5 million in funding, which is hugely valued, is able to be made use of by as many local groups as possible before we break for the general election?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is a huge campaigner. She was awarded £5 million at the spring Budget to support the development of cultural projects in her area. She will know that it is a matter for each council to identify the most suitable project to be funded in their area. I am sure she will work very closely with them to ensure that funding will be distributed appropriately.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I hope that it is in order for me to thank all the ministerial team for when they have been absolutely courteous to us and when we have been able to work together on matters. I particularly pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who is not only a gent, but a champ.

However, we have two music venues closing every week; British artists prevented from touring in Europe; the UK art market falling from second to third in the world; A-level music students down by 45%; museums

and galleries struggling with the cost of living; ballerinas told to retrain; theatre and opera touring slashed; and an apprenticeship levy that does not work for the creative industries. Was that all part of the plan? Or, in the words of RuPaul, is it not time for this appalling Government to sashay away?

Lucy Frazer: There are tax reliefs for every subsector of the creative industries. Whether it is film, studios, independent film or grassroots support, we have supported the creative industries at every level. We have a plan from the first day of primary school to the last day of work. That is what we are doing for our sectors.

T4. [902998] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The reputation of Torbay's iconic tourism sector has been badly hit by recent events relating to local water supplies. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about ensuring that support is provided and paid for by South West Water to compensate for that?

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), whom I met earlier this week, is very engaged in this issue, and our stakeholders in the south-west and Visit England are looking into any necessary information that they can give to tourists. They will continue to keep that under review, but I empathise deeply with local businesses, particularly tourism businesses, and residents. It is important to say that the majority of those businesses in Brixham were not affected by this outbreak. It is a wonderful place to visit. It has a fantastic local MP, and I am sure that he will provide everybody who visits the region with a very warm welcome.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Can I thank our shadow Culture Secretary? I am proud of the work that he has done and that I have been able to do alongside him on behalf of the SNP and the people of Scotland.

Mr Speaker, can I also echo your comments about Liam Laurence Smyth? The number of times I have gone to Liam and said, "I want to get up to some mischief, can you help me?" I have really appreciated all the advice that he has given me.

I would like to ask the Secretary of State whether the Media Bill will be part of wash-up, because a number of organisations, including STV, have contacted me this morning asking for it to be.

Lucy Frazer: That is certainly what I am pressing for and I am very grateful to the hon. Member for her support to ensure that that happens.

T5. [902999] **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): With the Olympics happening in Paris in the forthcoming months, what work is the Minister doing to ensure that the residents of Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and those across the whole country, get to support GB as passionately as if the games were being held on our shores?

Lucy Frazer: We are all looking forward to the Olympics and good luck to Team GB. UK Sport invested £382 million of Exchequer and lottery funding for the Paris Olympics. We also want to ensure, with the change maker programme initiative, that, when our athletes come back from the Paris games, they give back to communities such as those of my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The *Guardian* reports that, as a result of the Conservative Government's Brexit deal, the costs of touring in the EU are now so high that 74% fewer UK bands are now touring there. The UK touring scene is all the more valuable for musicians and bands now, but opportunities to perform here are being lost, as music venues and festivals are forced to close due to rocketing operational costs. Does the Secretary of State see just how the Government have failed the music industry? Is it not time for a Labour Government, who will support our excellent musicians, our venues and our festivals?

Julia Lopez: I appreciate the hon. Member raising the concerns of the music industry because we, too, very much want to support it. When I first joined the Department, the industry was very vocal about some of the challenges of touring, and we methodically worked through those challenges to make sure that some of them were eased. We have also supported grassroots venues. However, I often wonder whether, when Labour Members raise these points in the Chamber, they do not have an ulterior motive. I am keen to see whether they will put in their own local manifestos their desire to rejoin the European Union.

T6. [903000] **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): In my constituency, I have many local grassroots football teams, including Newton Aycliffe, which has just achieved the highest league position in their history, and Ferryhill Town youth, which is looking to provide disability access. Both of them have been well supported by Newton Youth and the local *Chapter* respectively, but does the Minister agree how critical it is that money flows down the football pyramid, and will she congratulate Newton Aycliffe on their achievements and commend the local paper for its backing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I commend Newton Aycliffe and Ferryhill Town youth football clubs for their recent successes, both off and on the pitch. It is great to hear that my hon. Friend has been engaging with organisations such as the Football Foundation, because it really helps us as MPs to support our constituents. I absolutely echo his words.

T3. [902997] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The legacy of 14 years of Conservative Government is a 73% real terms cut in local authority expenditure on youth services since 2010. Will the Secretary of State admit just how profoundly the Tories have failed our young people, and acknowledge that only a Labour Government can restore hope and opportunity for young people across this country?

Lucy Frazer: In addition to the £500 million in the national youth guarantee, which is supporting young people across the country, we are approaching youth in

a cross-departmental way, whether through the £200 million from the Home Office to support young people not to go into a life of crime, the similar amount of funding from the Ministry of Justice to ensure that that funding comes through, or the £64 billion that we give to local councils. We are supporting young people at every stage of their life.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister for sport join me in congratulating Kettering resident Kyren Wilson on becoming the new world snooker champion, and in hoping that Kyren's success will encourage people in Kettering and across the country to take up snooker?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the success of Kyren Wilson. The people of Kettering must be incredibly proud of him, and I hope that he will inspire more people to take up snooker. It is an important sport in this country, and my hon. Friend has been an advocate of supporting it in the many conversations that we have had outside the Chamber.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What steps will the Government take to ensure robust regulation of the special impartiality rules that apply during the election period? This is in reference to my substantive question about the enforcement of the broadcasting code, to ensure that multi-party democracy is respected, devolution is not treated as a sideshow, and the people of Scotland get an accurate picture of public policy that applies to them, so that they are not disinformed and disenfranchised.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member will know that all broadcasters are regulated by Ofcom. I am sure that they will all be aware of the importance of impartiality.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Cotgrave football club does a fantastic job of providing access to football for the local community, but it is limited by its current facilities and needs funding from Sport England for a 4G all-weather pitch. To secure that funding, it must qualify as a level 3 club, with facilities for disabled football and a plan to grow women's football. It would love to do that, but it cannot do it without a 4G pitch. Can the Secretary of State help us to resolve this chicken-and-egg situation, so that Cotgrave football club can secure the funding that it needs and provide access to football for even more people?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend has raised that with me in the past, and I have spoken to my officials. I encourage her to continue to liaise with the Football Foundation to understand what might be possible, so I suggest she passes that on. She is a really successful and staunch campaigner for her local area. I have worked with her on a number of campaigns, and I have every faith in her success in this particular campaign.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank Liam Laurence Smyth, who was the first Clerk who worked for me when I was Chair of the Education Committee. He became a great friend and mentor, and this House will miss him dreadfully.

Is there any special money for communities that have a rich tradition of music and the arts? Huddersfield, my constituency, has the Huddersfield Choral, brass bands,

so many centres of excellence, and an international festival of music. Could we have special money for towns such as mine, which would give a boost to the whole country for the arts?

Lucy Frazer: We have special money for areas across the country, because every year the Arts Council has £444 million to spend. It spends a significant amount of that money in music.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman did not mention the rugby league result on Sunday.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Artificial Intelligence: Government

1. **Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the adequacy of National Audit Office resources to scrutinise the cost of AI in Government. [902963]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): The National Audit Office does have adequate resources to scrutinise the cost of artificial intelligence and, indeed, produced a report in March that found that AI presents Government with significant opportunities to transform public services and that the Government have identified that artificial intelligence could deliver substantial productivity gains, potentially worth billions.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has identified the report in which I am interested. That report, as he rightly says, noted the importance of artificial intelligence in delivering transformational public services, but also noted a number of challenges. In the dying embers of this Parliament, would he be willing to leave a message for the next Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, urging that an inquiry be carried out into that report, as I believe its findings are of considerable importance?

Mr Bacon: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is an important subject, and the Public Accounts Committee was due to take oral evidence on it on 17 June. I will certainly draw his concerns to the attention of the new Chair of the Public Accounts Committee when I know who he or she is.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response. This is a massive subject and will have to be scrutinised greatly in the next term of government. What assessment has been made of the potential negatives of AI within the defence industry and Government, and what steps will be taken to combat them?

Mr Bacon: I think the short answer is that there is inadequate awareness inside Government—although there is some awareness—that there are potentially very large negatives with artificial intelligence. Indeed, one of the inventors of artificial intelligence has written a book on precisely that subject. I suspect that it is something the Government will continue to assess.

NHS Procurement

2. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the adequacy of National Audit Office resources to undertake analysis on the efficiency and effectiveness of NHS procurement. [902964]

Mr Richard Bacon: In its January report, the National Audit Office established that the NHS supply chain has great potential to secure further savings by aggregating the NHS's spending power, but that so far it has not fulfilled that potential.

Mr Hollobone: In its January report on the NHS supply chain, the National Audit Office made seven recommendations to improve the efficiency of the NHS's £8 billion annual procurement programme, including the need to improve prices and make ordering as straightforward as possible. The National Audit Office reports twice a year on whether Departments have implemented its recommendations, so will it use that mechanism to monitor the progress of the NHS supply chain?

Mr Bacon: I am sure the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff at the National Audit Office will want to listen very carefully to what my hon. Friend has said, although I must tell him that the inability of the NHS to use its huge spending power more successfully on behalf of taxpayers and patients has been a hardy perennial throughout my entire 23 years in Parliament. While I wish him well in his endeavours, I would advise him not to hold his breath.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a little-known fact that from 1979 to 1981, I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee. I really enjoyed that experience. This is one of my last questions in this House after nearly 45 years here. Can we do more to show incoming Members of Parliament how powerful a body the Public Accounts Committee is and what an amazing resource it is for Members of Parliament in getting inquiries, looking at funding and looking at the wise spending of Government? Could we have a programme—again, perhaps there could be a note on the desk—to teach new Members how important this national treasure is?

Mr Bacon: Having spent 16 years on the Public Accounts Committee, I completely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. It is, in my view, one of the best places to spend one's time as a parliamentarian, checking that our constituents' money as taxpayers is safeguarded and well looked after by whichever Government of the day happens temporarily to be in office. I commend what he has said to everyone.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Affordable and Sustainable Housing

3. Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Whether the Church of England is taking steps to provide affordable and sustainable housing on its land. [902965]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):

I can tell my hon. Friend that the Church Commissioners are bringing forward substantial new amounts of housing across England, including affordable homes, in accordance with local planning policy in the areas concerned. Where the commissioners are able to, we also seek to go further—for example, through the use of rural exception sites to provide a higher proportion of affordable housing than the local plan requires.

Selaine Saxby: I thank my hon. Friend for his response, but given that affordable housing is such a concern across North Devon, can the Church do any more to assist?

Andrew Selous: I know what a great champion my hon. Friend is on this issue. Unfortunately, the Church Commissioners themselves do not have any land in North Devon that is being considered for housing at the moment, but I will put her in touch with the diocese of Exeter to see whether it has opportunities in its own land portfolio. As I said, I know what a big issue this is in North Devon, and how important it is for my hon. Friend, who has been working on it passionately, so we will do what we can to help.

Diocesan Support: Interregnums

4. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the adequacy of the support offered by dioceses to a parish in an interregnum. [902966]

Andrew Selous: During an interregnum, a diocese will usually arrange for clergy in neighbouring parishes and across the local deanery to take services and to be available to support the church wardens and the parochial church council. It is important that those local volunteers are well supported during an interregnum, when they lack the visible and present leadership of a parish priest.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend will know that the combined parishes of St Paul's and Christ Church serve a large part of Paignton but are currently in interregnum. As he outlined, during interregnums, lay ministers and church wardens have to step forward. What extra support does the Church make available to them when they do so?

Andrew Selous: It is typical of my hon. Friend to take this level of interest in his clergy and churches, as I know he does regularly. I can tell him that the diocese of Exeter has produced a guide to help church wardens and the parochial church council, and a duty of pastoral care is clearly owed to all those who keep the church going in the absence of a minister. The best help that Christ Church and St Paul's, Paignton can receive is for that vacancy to be really well advertised. Having done a bit of research on that church, I can see that the new incumbent would inherit a dynamic worshipping congregation on the beautiful English riviera—I am pleased to be able to provide some free advertising for that tremendous opportunity. I hope that parish priests looking for an exciting new opportunity will be flocking to Christ Church and St Paul's, Paignton to take up that one.

Educational Attainment: Church Schools

5. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the impact of Church schools on the level of educational attainment in (a) Cleethorpes constituency and (b) England. [902967]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England educates more than 1 million children in its 4,700 schools in England. My hon. Friend must be particularly proud of the fact that all Church of England schools in his constituency are currently rated “good” by Ofsted.

Martin Vickers: I recently visited three of the Church schools in my Cleethorpes constituency, and I was impressed by how they are influenced by their connections with the Church. The website of New Holland Church of England and Methodist Primary School says:

“As a church school, New Holland...seeks to live out the church’s philosophy of ‘Valuing all God’s children’ paying particular attention to our Christian Vision, ‘Looking forward with hope. Flourishing. Doing all the good we can’”

and staying true to

“our core Christian values”.

Does my hon. Friend agree that those words exemplify the values of Church schools and what they can bring to their local communities?

Andrew Selous: The fact that those three Church schools are rated “good”, including New Holland primary, which my hon. Friend has visited, shows that they provide not just excellent teaching, which is really appreciated by parents—such schools are generally oversubscribed—but a caring and nurturing environment, as he rightly says. That is well encapsulated by the values of New Holland primary school, which he read out just now. I am grateful to him for highlighting their excellent record, and I think that we all pass on our thanks to those schools.

Parish Churches: Funding

6. Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to provide funding to parish churches. [902968]

Andrew Selous: Parish ministry is at the heart of all that the Church of England does. Between 2023 and 2025, the Church Commissioners are distributing £1.2 billion to support our mission and ministry. That is a 30% increase on the previous three-year period, and the lion’s share of that funding goes to dioceses to strengthen and grow local ministry in parishes and worshipping communities. In addition, the commissioners wish to maintain that level of funding over the next six years, which would mean £3.6 billion being distributed between 2023 and 2031.

Danny Kruger: I am grateful for that very encouraging information, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done during this Parliament on behalf of the Church Commissioners. He has been unfailingly assiduous and courteous—almost holy—in the conduct of his work on behalf of the Church.

Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the forced amalgamation of parishes that many dioceses across the country are undertaking? Vibrant and viable local churches in dioceses such as Liverpool are being

offered the invidious choice of either surrendering their autonomy to become part of new mega-parishes or giving up access to resources from the centre—resources that they themselves contribute to the centre. As my hon. Friend has said and implied, surely the whole value of the Church of England is in the local parish system, not in its regional bureaucracies. Can he tell the House how the Church of England will continue to ensure the integrity of our parish system?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right to highlight to the House that there are pressures in some areas, and he is also right to point out that the parish network across the whole of England—across every one of our constituencies in England—is extremely precious. We must do everything we can to preserve it, and I make that point at every opportunity. I know that many Members of Parliament, including my hon. Friend, also make that point regularly, and that message has been heard at the top of the Church, which is why we are putting the vast majority of our funding back down into parishes. Of course, we are also encouraging parishes to do what they can to raise money at the local level, but my hon. Friend’s point is absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: I call George Galloway—not here.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Digital Tools: Members

8. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent progress the Commission has made on using digital tools to support the work of hon. Members. [902971]

Mr Speaker: First, may I just say to Sir Charles that I am sorry you are stepping down? I thank you for all you have done. You have been a wonderful servant of this House, and I thank you for everything, including your service on the Commission.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne): Thank you for that, Mr Speaker. It has been a great privilege to serve with you on the Commission, and it has been such an honour to be in this amazing institution and to serve my country in the way I have, with the wonderful people here. Gosh, I wasn’t going to get sentimental.

Since my last answer on this issue in February 2024, the Parliamentary Digital Service has been assessing Microsoft’s generative AI toolset, Copilot, which includes artificial intelligence for mailboxes. That tool will aid Members and staff in their management of day-to-day administrative activities across Microsoft 365 applications. PDS is conducting further necessary technical work, and it is expected that a trial of the new capability will start with Members before the end of the year. I am not sure if it is Nokia compatible, but if it is, I hope it can be put on my Nokia.

Chi Onwurah: Mr Speaker, I echo your tribute to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), and thank him for his service on the House of Commons Commission and his engagement with me on this subject on many occasions.

During the dark days of covid, Mr Speaker, when many did not believe that a digital Parliament was possible and some did not want the continued scrutiny, you and I, and the House officials and the Digital Service, worked together to move Parliament online over the course of just one recess. That was an immense achievement, and I pay tribute to you and to the Digital Service for that. Does the hon. Member for Broxbourne agree that while Labour will be campaigning for the change that Britain so desperately needs, the Digital Service will be working to ensure that AI, open source, cloud and all the other digital innovations are at the disposal of Members of the new Parliament to support them in their work?

Sir Charles Walker: PDS and the security services are working really hard to make sure that the House gets it right. There is so much opportunity presented by AI, but given the sensitive and important positions that we hold and that future colleagues will hold, we have to make sure that we get it right so that we are advantaging our constituents, not our enemies.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Academy Schools

9. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to increase the number of academy schools it sponsors. [902972]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England is already the biggest provider of academies in England, with 1,770 academies and 280 multi-academy trusts. Each diocese across England will have its own academisation plans. These schools include pupils of all faiths and none, and they are committed to serving the whole community.

Sir Desmond Swayne: There is a growing need for special education, particularly in the New Forest. What can the Church do to assist in my constituency?

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has had a long-standing interest in these and other Church matters. He is right in what he says because, with two thirds of special schools at or over capacity, the recent decision to allow faith education providers to run special schools will enable the Church of England to alleviate some of those pressures and give families more choice and opportunity in the New Forest as well as across the whole of England. I would say that our strong ethos of community care makes our schools well suited to providing a nurturing environment for all children with special educational needs.

Support for People in Gaza

10. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church of England is taking to provide support for people in Gaza. [902973]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England calls for the immediate release of the hostages in Gaza and an end to the fighting, which has caused the loss of so many

lives and caused so much suffering to the Palestinians. The diocese of Jerusalem and the worldwide Anglican communion continue to support financially the al-Ahli Anglican Hospital in Gaza City, which, as I know from the diocese of Jerusalem synod last week, is still operating with the wonderful medics in it and is still providing care.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Member for his answer. Of course, while Parliament is not sitting we know that the horrendous situation in Gaza will continue, and it is really important that we put the focus on those institutions that can make interventions over the next few weeks. I therefore ask him: how is the Church of England using its soft power and leverage to bring peace and justice to the region, particularly to the people of Gaza?

Andrew Selous: I thank the hon. Lady for her very pertinent and important question. She will know that the Archbishop of Canterbury himself went out to the Holy Land just after 7 October. I can tell her that the Bishop of Chelmsford was there very recently and the Bishop of Suffolk is also a frequent visitor. The worldwide Anglican communion, as well as the Church of England, will absolutely continue to play its part in bringing peace and justice to this terrible conflict, which has gone on for far too long.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that the diocese of Gloucester has been very supportive of those in need—whether asylum seekers, refugees or, indeed, the homeless and rough sleepers in our city of Gloucester. Will he therefore join me in congratulating it on the fact that the planning approval for its first modular housing in Gloucester—with six modular homes—should go through Gloucester City Council imminently, and that more will be coming soon to help people in need?

Mr Speaker: I think the question may also be about the help that Gloucester's diocese has given to the people of Gaza.

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, and he is right that—both in Gaza and Gloucester—there is absolutely the need for significant reconstruction. I know that he has been a long-term advocate of that in Gloucester, and I commend the work he has done with the Bishop of Gloucester. Of course, there will also be a massive need for reconstruction in Gaza, which we all want to see.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Luton South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Elections: Disinformation

11. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Whether the committee has had recent discussions with the Electoral Commission on the potential impact of disinformation on the integrity of elections. [902974]

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South): The committee has had recent discussions with the Electoral Commission on the matters raised. The commission recognises the risk posed to the integrity of elections by disinformation and misinformation, and it is contributing to efforts across the public sector, including other regulators and the Government, to guard against negative impacts. The legal regime the commission regulates is focused on ensuring that political finance is transparent, and that campaigning material includes an imprint showing voters who has produced the material. It does not have a role in regulating the content of election campaign material, but it encourages all campaigners to undertake their role responsibly and transparently.

Deidre Brock: That is good to hear, but we have heard there will be a lot of attempted disinformation around the US presidential elections in the coming months, so what assessment has the Electoral Commission actually

made of the risks of holding a UK general election at a time when there will be a greatly increased risk of hostile disinformation campaigns, with what appear to be grass-roots Facebook groups on low emission zones recently being exposed as having been set up by Conservatives' staff members?

Rachel Hopkins: The commission's role is to ensure the financing of campaigns is transparent; it does not have a role in regulating the content of election campaign material, such as by preventing the use of deepfakes. The commission has highlighted that if additional regulatory responsibility for campaign material were given to a UK regulator, these powers would need careful consideration. Regulating the content of campaign material would require a new legal framework; the commission does not have experience or expertise of such a framework and believes such work would be better managed by other organisations.

Disabled People on Benefits: EHRC Investigation

10.35 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the Equality and Human Rights Commission investigation into the treatment of disabled people on benefits.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): It is a pleasure to be called to the Dispatch Box to respond for the Department for Work and Pensions this morning. The Department is absolutely committed to providing services through which every customer, including disabled people and our most vulnerable claimants, can experience fair opportunity and access to our services to ensure they get the support they need.

The Department has been in negotiations with the EHRC since 2021 on this matter. It is disappointing that we have not been able to come to a mutually agreeable position. As the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions stated yesterday during his Select Committee appearance, our existing legal advice and understanding is that both the EHRC and the DWP are still bound by confidentiality. We are seeking further clarity on what we can share, so I will not discuss those negotiations further.

While I do not believe an investigation is necessary, we at the Department do of course take the EHRC's concerns seriously. We welcome the focus now provided in the terms of reference. We will work constructively with the commission in its investigation to better understand its concerns. I hope the investigation will provide a deeper insight into some of the most complex cases that the Department deals with. Of course, if any improvements are identified by the commission we will, rightly, take steps to address them.

Marion Fellows: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have great respect for her, but if she is telling the House that the Government have been in negotiations with the EHRC for three years and this is where we are now, that is ridiculous and absolutely underlines what many in this House, including myself, have been saying to the Government for more than three years. The Scottish National party has been challenging the Government over their treatment of those with illness or disability, and therefore we welcome this overdue investigation by the EHRC.

Full transparency and accountability are imperative so that the mistakes of the past are never repeated; we know about that from all the other investigations that have been taking place recently. If it does transpire that either the DWP or the Secretary of State, or both, have breached equality law, the strongest possible action must be taken. It is the least those who have suffered at the hands of this Government deserve.

I have spoken over the years to many disability organisations and they are appalled at how disabled people are treated, as am I. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities rapporteur has concluded that the UK Government have

“failed to take all appropriate measures to address grave and systematic violations of the human rights of persons with disabilities”.

That is a further black mark against this Government. I have said it time and again: the UK Government must change course from their cruel and demonising approach to disabled people and start supporting them in the way being done in Scotland. The words dignity, fairness and respect mean something to disabled people in Scotland. The Scottish social security system is designed to treat people with dignity, fairness and respect. When on earth will this Government, or the likely following Labour Government, start doing that in the UK? It is an absolute and utter disgrace.

The proposed welfare reforms are dangerous and look to slash disabled people's incomes during an ongoing cost of living crisis, when disabled people are already facing higher living costs. More people are being pushed into insecure and unsafe work and the Government are undermining the principle of an extra costs benefit for disabled people. Now we have this EHRC investigation. How can the Minister possibly defend her Government's ongoing assault on disabled rights just to cut costs?

Mims Davies: I agree with the hon. Lady. We have much we agree about and real mutual respect, and I know her concerns come from the heart. I reiterate that we are a compassionate Department, welcoming to all, and we are keen to get insights and learnings. I have given evidence on that, most recently to the Select Committee, making it clear that we are a learning Department focused on individuals. In fact, our trauma-informed approach is testament to that. I recently saw that in Hastings, and it is being rolled out in South Yorkshire, Plymouth and all our DWP innovation hubs to successfully drive a programme of understanding into our core business areas, including the child maintenance area and service areas. From a meeting with my DWP colleagues, I know what a big difference it makes.

We engage right across the UK with a multi-agency approach. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that I recently met the independent reviewer of the personal independence payment and benefits—there is that process in Scotland—for a mutual learning and understanding experience. Reforms that are being brought out are about disabled people's voices being fully heard and understood, whether that is through our national disability strategy or our action plan this year. I also recently engaged with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, who covers England and Wales, and this gives me a chance to pay tribute to her. We have been trying hard to understand tragic and complex cases. Our sympathies are always with the families, and we will continue those internal process reviews.

I hope that the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), will reflect on the useful evidence that was given. We have a growing number of visiting officers for some of the most vulnerable—we currently have 500—and we have 200 dedicated prison work coaches. I want anybody watching, studying or reading this urgent question to approach us and talk to us. Many people become involved with the DWP at the most challenging times of their lives. We are here to help people, whether through our youth hubs or our disability work coaches. Please tell us what is going on. We can link people to the right agencies, and we are determined to understand what the commission is thinking and feeling and to work with it.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of the work that my Select Committee has done around the national disability strategy, but I specifically draw her attention to the words of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) earlier this week: nothing about me without me. What reassurance can the Minister give me that disabled people will be fully included in the ongoing consultation on personal independence payments? What reassurance can she give me that she continues to work with Disability Confident to ensure that disabled people are enabled to move into work and supported when they are in work? What reassurance can she give me that the victims of contaminated blood, sodium valproate, Primodos, and mesh will not be subject to ongoing assessments year after year to make sure that they continue their entitlement to benefits? What reassurance can she give me that she agrees that inclusion is not wokery, and that including disabled people is crucial to ensuring that their rights are upheld?

Mims Davies: I was looking forward to giving evidence to my right hon. Friend on many of these matters, alongside my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment. Indeed, there was work to come forward on Disability Confident, Access to Work, the disability employment goal and much more.

I point my right hon. Friend to action we have taken, including just this week. There is the Government-backed lilac review on disabled entrepreneurs, which is absolutely about listening to disabled people and having them at the heart of the conversation. Fantastic engagement on British Sign Language, fully in BSL, has been at the heart of that. There has also been the PIP consultation and the wider reform conversation. We have also brought forward the Buckland review.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about inclusion. It works because when it is embedded, it is right for the bottom line of the business, the organisation and the community. It is not a “nice to do” and it is not woke; it is what we should be doing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This is the first time in history that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has decided to investigate whether a Secretary of State has “committed unlawful acts” by discriminating against disabled people as a result of the way that the Government have run the benefit system. According to a report by the all-party parliamentary group for health in all policies, it may have led to

“the deaths of vulnerable claimants, by suicide and other causes”.

Yesterday, appearing before the Work and Pensions Committee, the Secretary of State feigned surprise at the Equality and Human Rights Commission taking that unprecedented step, yet he previously claimed that he and his Department were close to securing a legally binding agreement to uphold disabled people’s rights. I wonder what has changed.

Will the Minister recognise the seriousness of her predicament and apologise to disabled people for her Department’s obvious reluctance to engage meaningfully with the Equality and Human Rights Commission? Why has her Department presided over a benefit system

that the commission believes could be unlawfully discriminating against disabled people? Will she take the opportunity to apologise to all those disabled people who have had their life torn apart by her Department’s potentially illegal administration of the benefit system?

Mims Davies: Let me first reflect on the Secretary of State’s appearance at the Select Committee. I reiterate that, as he said yesterday, the investigation of the Department is based on a suspicion that something has occurred; that is not in and of itself conclusive proof. The DWP rightly takes its obligations under the Equality Act 2010, including the public sector equality duty, incredibly seriously, and will continue to co-operate with the commission on its investigation. I hope that helps the hon. Lady. We want everyone in the DWP to be able to support customers in an appropriate manner, according to the individual’s needs. Our mental health training and reasonable adjustments guidance helps to empower our colleagues by giving them the skills to support every customer.

It has been the greatest privilege of my life to have been in the most amazing, life-changing Department for almost all of the last five years. We are fully committed to listening to our customers and their representatives about their needs, and to learning from them. Of course people will be concerned about the EHRC’s response, and the Department is genuinely disappointed, because we are constantly learning; work is ongoing to strengthen guidance and training through continuous improvement activity. Our colleagues are local people who live in their community. They know their community and what people need. Whether people are coming through the door are from a local special school, have been made redundant, or have a health condition, DWP staff know those people and want to reassure them. We will continue to give them the necessary tools, and have confidence that our Department will respond in the right way to our most vulnerable customers.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): As I depart this House as a Conservative MP, I thank you, Sir Roger, for your service and mentoring over my years here. Will the Minister make sure that in the response to the investigation, those working in jobcentres and DWP offices across the country are given the support that they need to do their job? In West Suffolk, they do that job excellently, brilliantly led by Julia Nix, who frankly deserves an honour. It has been a pleasure to work with those people. When the Minister considers the investigation, will she look not only at physical disabilities, including engagement with those who support wheelchair use, but hidden disabilities such as neurodivergent conditions, to the extent that they are disabilities, and ensure that they are at the heart of the response?

Mims Davies: I welcome back my right hon. Friend, from whom I learned so much as a Parliamentary Private Secretary. It is pleasing to know that his work on neurodiversity and understanding others continues to be at the heart of what he brings to this House, even in his last few moments here. I was recently at Neurobox in Cambridge, where dyslexia needs were discussed, as well as the wider need in the labour market to learn about understanding, and helping people through, the Access to Work scheme. My right hon. Friend’s interest was mentioned there. Whether we are talking about the

[Mims Davies]

Buckland review, the lilac review on entrepreneurship, which I mentioned, or partnerships in communities, such as with Julia Nix, who is stellar leader, those messages are important for those who only hear about the experience of the DWP through the mouths of those in this House. I urge people to go and see their local jobcentre. This week there is a “recruit Britain” campaign, backed by employers, to enable people to understand our jobcentres’ power to bring about change.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Last week, I highlighted to the Minister a report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that concluded that the UK had failed to take all appropriate measures to address grave and systematic violations of the rights of people with disabilities. She said that the UK Government were

“committed to ensuring that the UK is one of the best places to live and work as a disabled person.”—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 244.]

Does she really stand by that assertion, given the serious concerns raised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission? Does she understand why its chair said that they are extremely worried? The EHRC also said that it believes that the DWP may have broken equality law. What does she have to say to the disabled people watching? She must understand that it is a clear demonstration that this Tory Government are content simply to disregard disabled people, their rights and their needs. If she disagrees, let her tell us specifically why.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. Just this week, I met people with disabilities in the media industry who were thriving while working in ITV, which tries to help people when it comes to wider—

Kirsten Oswald: Will the Minister answer my question?

Mims Davies: I am just trying to. I met a company that is working to ensure that NHS buildings are more accessible, so the DWP understands that. The hon. Lady asked whether I really believed that the UK could be the best place in which to be a disabled person, in terms of accessibility and opportunity. We are engaging and learning in the context of a changing labour market and changing needs. As for her earlier point, we in the DWP want every customer to be supported, and we are committed to providing a compassionate service for all. We take our obligations under the Equality Act 2010 extremely seriously, and that includes the public sector equality duty.

We will, of course, continue to co-operate with the commission’s investigation. I stand by my comment that we are disappointed to be in this position. We often deal with tragic and complex cases, and our sympathies are always with the families concerned. We will continue to review and learn about processes in order to understand better why the commission is taking this action.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Navigating the benefits system is difficult enough for able-bodied people, but for those who become disabled because of illness or accidents, it becomes a virtual nightmare, just at the point when they need the system the most. Also, many

employers concentrate on what people cannot do, rather than what they can do. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the work being done to ensure that people, particularly those who suffer disability owing to illness or accidents, receive the benefits that they need at their time of greatest crisis?

Mims Davies: We are rolling out our WorkWell service, and we have universal support as well. Fifteen integrated care systems will pilot WorkWell; the pilots will be locally designed to fit local needs, and will be linked to our existing work and health systems. Work will be done throughout London. I am not sure whether that will include my hon. Friend’s part of London; I am sure that we will be able to let him know.

As I mentioned, my dad became disabled and was not used to navigating the benefits system. That happens to many people. Many think that people are born with disablement, but it can be acquired as a result of accidents or incidents. The gov.uk website gives information about the benefits calculator and the Citizens Advice help to claim service, and encourages people to see a disability employment adviser.

My hon. Friend asked what more could be done. Notwithstanding the great support provided by programmes such as Access to Work, there is more that can be done, but that safety net is there to protect people when they are at their most vulnerable, whatever the reason.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Disabled people’s confidence in the Department is at a terribly low ebb. We were originally told that these negotiations would be concluded within a few months, but in fact, as the Minister has told us, they dragged on for three years, and they failed. The commission has told me that now that negotiations have ended, there are no restrictions on what the Department can say about what was happening during those negotiations. At the very least, we need some explanation from the Department of why it has not been possible to reach an agreement. Can the Minister give us that explanation now?

Mims Davies: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. As I have said, we will work constructively with the commission during its investigation in order to understand its concerns better. We are seeking further clarity on what information we can share, but until those conversations have ended, I will not be in a position to share any further information.

The Secretary of State, of course, made his comments to the Department, but the permanent secretary told the Committee that the terms of reference had been published, and we welcome that, because it will give us a clearer sense of what the commission wants to investigate. We hope that a deeper insight into that very complex machine will allay some of the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has rightly identified, and if there have been breaches or improvements can be made, we will of course address that. The Department is constantly learning, and work is being done to strengthen guidance and training through continuous improvement activity.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned confidence. It is important that colleagues and those with disablement feel confident that we have the necessary tools to help our most vulnerable claimants, and of course we will take account of everything that the commission says.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am indebted to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for obtaining today's urgent question, and she is correct to say that policy should be based on fairness, dignity and respect. In dealing with cases, I find that those with mental health conditions, including sporadic mental health conditions, are often unfairly sanctioned, go through much deeper stress and sometimes end up in desperate poverty as a result. In advance of the inquiry, could the Minister tell us what the Department is doing to ensure that the sanctions regime against people with disabilities, particularly those with mental health conditions, operates in a much more respectful and inclusive manner that helps them to deal with the horrible problems they are trying to cope with?

Mims Davies: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about fluctuating conditions and needs, which he is absolutely correct to identify. We have a growing number of visiting officers—500—and a growing number of colleagues with a trauma-informed approach, and there is close engagement with wider safeguarding. Having a trusted relationship with one's work coach, job coach and disability employment adviser is so important, and this is at the heart of our safeguarding protocols, which are in place for healthcare professionals who undertake assessments. If they identify a new condition or concern, they will ensure that the individual's healthcare team are aware and communicating directly with them. Again, that is why we have the trauma-informed approach. I recently saw it being used at the Hastings service centre, where decisions are made on child maintenance, and at jobcentres. The approach is being rolled out in order to be at the heart of what we do.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): In all the time I have been in this House—it is quite a long time—I have never picked on civil servants or the people who deliver policies on the ground, because I am always reminded that President Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that said, "The buck stops here". The buck stops here with the Government, but let me reinforce a point that was made earlier. My constituents tell me—as chairman of the Westminster Commission on Autism, I am sympathetic towards this—that the staff they meet are good about physical disability, but are not good when it comes to neurodiversity, people on the autism spectrum and people with little-known mental health challenges. Can we give more training to the people who carry out assessments to make them more effective and efficient?

Mims Davies: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the nature of disability and need has changed, which is what I was trying to draw out earlier. Different types of needs are coming our way. We all know from our own constituency casework about the support that disabled people need in any realm, and it is about understanding the different needs and appreciating that needs change. I can assure him that the Department works closely with healthcare assessors, and has put in a new process to allow personal independence payments to be paused when an appointment has already been scheduled—for example, if we need to have additional information. We are very aware that claimants' needs are different—hence the Buckland review of autism. We know that a huge number of autistic people are very keen to work, but not enough of them do, and this is at the heart of our

understanding. I think the hon. Gentleman and I share the same view on this issue. The Department will need to make changes and develop its understanding, and I want to reassure the House that we come in the spirit of learning.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is always compassionate and understands the issues, as we can tell from the way she responds. As I often say, however, the benefits system leads to incredible frustration. When those who are disabled have their applications refused, they go to appeal. The biggest issue in my office is benefits, including appeals; we have one staff member who does nothing else during the five-and-a-half-day week that she works. Although we recognise that DWP staff do a good job, there needs to be a better understanding of how the system works. When someone fills in their application, there needs to be a better understanding of what it means to have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis, diabetes, blood pressure problems, back pain, chronic pain. Those are the issues. When we win 85% of appeals, it indicates that perhaps the first decision was not right.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way he approaches this matter. It also gives a chance for all of us to thank our casework teams who do so much, and indeed all the staff across DWP. They know that our customers vary. They know that, at times in their lives, they need additional support. That is why we have those specialist services, roles and procedures in place, from the DWP visiting service to the advanced customer support senior leaders. We have the serious case panel review, and we have the customer experience survey. We are always listening and learning, and there is a continuous need to do that. On fluctuating conditions, which other Members have mentioned, we have put a better understanding of needs and diagnoses at the heart of our engagement on reforms, and that is what disabled people have told me as well.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Ministers have had three years to reach a basic agreement to ensure that the services that the Department provides are accessible and do not discriminate against disabled people. Is it laziness, incompetence or the chaos endemic across Government that has resulted in the absolute failure to reach a negotiation? Can the Minister acknowledge that this failure has never been seen in any other Department before, and represents, under the Equality Act, a further demonstration of discrimination against disabled people? The failure of the negotiations itself represents the problem.

Mims Davies: I reiterate to the House, and to the hon. Gentleman, that we take our obligations under the Equality Act incredibly seriously. I have spoken about the changing nature of conditions, understanding and learning, and the public sector equality duty, and we will continue to co-operate and engage with the commission on its investigation. As I said, we do not believe that an investigation is necessary, but we do take its concerns seriously. I undertake to the House that the Department will be focused on those new terms of reference so that we can work constructively with the commission, in its investigation, to better understand its concerns. *[Interruption.]* I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who

[Mims Davies]

is chuntering again, but I reiterate to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) that we are very much determined to work with the commission as a way forward. I agree that it is very disappointing that we have not been able to come to a mutually agreeable position. I assure him that, over the past five years, this very large Department, which deals with many different areas and complex case, has put at the heart of what we do—of which I am extremely proud—a dedicated understanding of the individual and their needs.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this urgent question and continuing her fantastic work in this Parliament on the rights of disabled people. I also congratulate the Equality and Human Rights Commission on opening this important investigation and on retaining its A-grade status as a national human rights institution in the face of malicious attempts to undermine the work that it does for equality and human rights for all.

I work with many fantastic disability charities in my Edinburgh South West constituency, including Health All Round, Tiphereth and Garvald, but charities should not have to fill the huge gaps left by the Government's dereliction of their duties. Discrimination against disabled people is a human rights issue, and that is something about which I care passionately as the elected Chair of Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights.

As we are about to go into a general election period, will the Minister take the opportunity to give a cast-iron guarantee on behalf of her party that she will end discrimination against disabled people in the benefits system and end her Government's continuing breaches of disabled people's human rights?

Mims Davies: I appreciate that there is a general election coming but, when it comes to the most vulnerable people, this is not a morning for politicking. It is about being compassionate, it is about understanding disabled people's rights and it is about listening and learning. We are focusing on individuals by working with the domestic abuse commissioner and through WorkWell's universal support, the national disability strategy, the action plan and the trauma-informed approach.

Vitaly, as the hon. and learned Lady says, it is about hearing not just from disabled charities but from disabled people across the country to understand their needs. It is incredibly important that we take this seriously, and we are determined that, if the investigation under the terms of reference gives us a deeper insight into the concerns—I have spoken to the Select Committee about how the Department deals with the most complex cases—we will take every step to address any improvements identified by the commission. I hope that gives the hon. and learned Lady, disabled people and those with health conditions comfort that we take their needs and wants extremely seriously at the heart of Government.

AI Seoul Summit

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Saqib Bhatti): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on the AI Seoul summit, which the Government co-hosted with the Republic of Korea earlier this week.

The AI Seoul summit built on the legacy of the first AI safety summit, hosted by the UK at Bletchley Park in November 2023. At Bletchley, 28 countries and the European Union, representing the majority of the world's population, signed the Bletchley declaration agreeing that, for the good of all, artificial intelligence should be designed, developed, deployed and used in a manner that is safe, human-centric, trustworthy and responsible. The same set of countries agreed to support the development of an international, independent and inclusive report to facilitate a shared science-based understanding of the risks associated with frontier AI.

At the same time, the UK announced the launch of our AI Safety Institute, the world's first Government-backed organisation dedicated to advanced AI safety for the public good. World leaders, together with the leaders of the foremost frontier AI companies, agreed to the principle that states have a role in testing the most advanced models.

Since Bletchley, the UK has led by example with impressive progress on AI safety, both domestically and bilaterally. The AI Safety Institute has built up its capabilities for state-of-the-art safety testing. It has conducted its first pre-deployment testing for potential harmful capabilities on advanced AI systems, set out its approach to evaluations and published its first full results. That success is testament to the world-class technical talent that the institute has hired.

Earlier this week, the Secretary of State announced the launch of an office in San Francisco that will broaden the institute's technical expertise and cement its position as a global authority on AI safety. The Secretary of State also announced a landmark agreement with the United States earlier this year that will enable our institutes to work together seamlessly on AI safety. We have also announced high-level partnerships with France, Singapore and Canada.

As AI continues to develop at an astonishing pace, we have redoubled our international efforts to make progress on AI safety. Earlier this week, just six months after the first AI safety summit, the Secretary of State was in the Republic of Korea for the AI Seoul summit, where the same countries came together again to build on the progress we made at Bletchley. Since the UK launched our AI Safety Institute six months ago, other countries have followed suit; the United States, Canada, Japan, Singapore, the Republic of Korea and the EU have all established state-backed organisations dedicated to frontier AI safety. On Tuesday, world leaders agreed to bring those institutes into a global network, showcasing the Bletchley effect in action. Coming together, the network will build “complementarity and interoperability” between their technical work and approaches to AI safety, to promote the safe, secure and trustworthy development of AI.

As part of the network, participants will share information about models, and their limitations, capabilities and risk. Participants will also monitor and share

information about specific AI harms and safety incidents, where they occur. Collaboration with overseas counterparts via the network will be fundamental to making sure that innovation in AI can continue, with safety, security and trust at its core.

Tuesday's meeting also marked an historic moment, as 16 leading companies signed the frontier AI safety commitments, pledging to improve AI safety and to refrain from releasing new models if the risks are too high. The companies signing the commitments are based right across the world, including in the US, the EU, China and the middle east. Unless they have already done so, leading AI developers will now publish safety frameworks on how they will measure the risks of their frontier AI models before the AI action summit, which is to be held in France in early 2025. The frameworks will outline when severe risks, unless adequately mitigated, would be "deemed intolerable" and what companies will do to ensure that thresholds are not surpassed. In the most extreme circumstances, the companies have also committed to

"not develop or deploy a model or system at all"

if mitigations cannot keep risks below the thresholds. To define those thresholds, companies will take input from trusted actors, including home Governments, as appropriate, before releasing them ahead of the AI action summit.

On Wednesday, Ministers from more than 28 nations, the EU and the UN came together for further in depth discussions about AI safety, culminating in the agreement of the Seoul ministerial statement, in which countries agreed, for the first time, to develop shared risk thresholds for frontier AI development and deployment. Countries agreed to set thresholds for when model capabilities could pose "severe risks" without appropriate mitigations. This could include: helping malicious actors to acquire or use chemical or biological weapons; and AI's potential ability to evade human oversight. That move marks an important first step as part of a wider push to develop global standards to address specific AI risks. As with the company commitments, countries agreed to develop proposals alongside AI companies, civil society and academia for discussion ahead of the AI action summit.

In the statement, countries also pledged to boost international co-operation on the science of AI safety, by supporting future reports on AI risk. That follows the publication of the interim "International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI" last week. Launched at Bletchley, the report unites a diverse global team of AI experts, including an expert advisory panel from 30 leading AI nations from around the world, as well as representatives from the UN and the EU, to bring together the best existing scientific research on AI capabilities and risks. The report aims to give policymakers across the globe a single source of information to inform their approaches to AI safety. The report is fully independent, under its chair, Turing award winner, Yoshua Bengio, but Britain has played a critical role by providing the secretariat for the report, based in our AI Safety Institute. To pull together such a report in just six months is an extraordinary achievement for the international community; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, for example, are released every five to seven years.

Let me give the House a brief overview of the report's findings. It recognises that advanced AI can be used to boost wellbeing, prosperity and new scientific breakthroughs, but notes that, as with all powerful technologies, current

and future developments could cause harm. For example, malicious actors can use AI to spark large-scale disinformation campaigns, fraud and scams. Future advances in advanced AI could also pose wider risks, including labour market disruption and economic power imbalances and inequalities. The report also highlights that, although various methods exist for assessing the risk posed by advanced AI models, all have limitations. As is common with scientific syntheses, the report highlights a lack of universal agreement among AI experts on a range of topics, including the state of current AI capabilities and how these could evolve over time. The next iteration of the report will be published ahead of the AI action summit early next year.

Concluding the AI Seoul summit, countries discussed the importance of supporting AI innovation and inclusivity, which were at the core of the summit's agenda. We recognised the transformative benefits of AI for the public sector, and committed to supporting an environment which nurtures easy access to AI-related resources for SMEs, start-ups and academia. We also welcomed the potential of AI to provide significant advances to resolve the world's great challenges, such as climate change, global health, and food and energy security.

The Secretary of State and I are grateful for the dedication and leadership shown by the Republic of Korea in delivering a successful summit in Seoul, just six short months after the world came together in Bletchley Park. It was an important step forward but, just as at Bletchley, we are only just getting started. The rapid pace of AI development leaves us no time to rest on our laurels. We must match that speed with our own efforts if we are to grip the risks of this technology, and seize the limitless benefits it can bring to people in Britain and around the world.

The UK stands ready to work with France to ensure that the AI action summit continues the legacy that we began in Bletchley Park, and continued in Seoul, because this is not an opportunity we can afford to miss. The potential upsides of AI are simply immense, but we cannot forget that this is the most complex technology humanity has ever produced. As the Secretary of State said in Seoul, it is our responsibility to ensure that human wisdom keeps pace with human knowledge.

I commend the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for all the work they have done on the issue, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

11.21 am

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

I hope this is in order, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I note that the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) is on the Front Bench, and that she is not standing at the general election. I know she has been very cross with me on occasions over the past few years—she is probably still cross with me now. *[Interruption.]* As the Minister says, she is only human. On a personal note, as we have both been cancer sufferers—or survivors—and have both had more than one rodeo on that, it is sad that she is leaving. I am sure she will continue to fight for patients with cancer and on many other issues, and I pay tribute to her. It has been a delight to work with her over these years; I hope she will forgive me one day.

[Sir Chris Bryant]

The economic opportunities for our country through artificial intelligence are, of course, outstanding. With the right sense of mission and the right Government, we can make the most of this emerging technology to unlock transformative changes in our economy, our NHS and our public services. Let us just think of AI in medicine. It is a personal hope that it might soon be possible to have an AI app that can accurately assess whether a mole on somebody's back, arm or leg—or the back of their head—is a potential skin cancer, such as melanoma. That could definitely save lives. We could say exactly the same about the diagnosis of brain injury, many other different kinds of cancer and many other parts of medicine. There could be no more important issue to tackle, but I fear the Government have fluffed it again. Much as I like the Minister, his statement could have been written by ChatGPT.

I have a series of questions. First, let me ask about the

“shared risk thresholds for frontier AI development and deployment”, which the Minister says Governments will be developing. How will they be drawn up? What legal force will they have in the UK, particularly if there is to be no legislation, as still seems to be in the mind of the Government?

Secondly, the Secretary of State hails the voluntary agreements from the summit as a success, but does that mean companies developing the most advanced AI are still marking their own homework, despite the potential risks?

Thirdly, the Minister referred several times to “malicious actors”. Which “malicious actors” is he referring to? Does that include state actors? If so, how is that work integrated with the cyber-security strategy for the UK? How will that be integrated with the cyber-security strategy during the general election campaign?

Fourthly, the Government's own artificial intelligence adviser, Professor Yoshua Bengio, to whom the Minister referred, has said that it is obvious that more regulatory measures will be needed, by which he means regulations or legislation of some kind. Why, therefore, have the Government not even taken the steps that the United States has taken using President Biden's Executive order?

Next, have the commitments made six months ago at the UK safety summit been kept, or are these voluntary agreements just empty words? Moreover, have the frontier AI companies, which took part in the Bletchley summit, shared their models with the AI Safety Institute before deploying them, as the Prime Minister pledged they would?

Next, the Government press release stated that China participated in person at the AI Seoul summit, so can the Minister just clear up whether it signed the ministerial statement? As the shadow Minister for creative industries, may I ask why there were no representatives of the creative industries at the AI summit? Why none at all, despite the fact that this is a £127 billion industry in the UK, and that many people in the creative industries are very concerned about the possibilities, the threats, the dangers and the risks associated with AI for remuneration of creators?

The code of practice working group, which the Government set up and which was aiming at an entirely voluntary code of conduct, has collapsed, so what is the plan now? The Government originally said that they would still consider legislation, so is that still in their mind?

I love this next phrase of the Minister's. He said, “We are only just getting started”. Clearly, somebody did not do any editing. What on earth has taken the Government so long? A Labour Government would introduce binding regulation of the most powerful frontier AI companies, requiring them to report before they train models over a capability threshold, to conduct safety testing and evaluation and to maintain strong information security protections. Why have the Government not brought forward any of those measures, despite very strong advice from all of their advisers to do so?

Finally, does the Minister agree that artificial intelligence is there for humanity, and humanity is not there for artificial intelligence?

Saqib Bhatti: I share the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman expressed about my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). It was a very sweet thing that he said—the only sweet thing he has said from the Dispatch Box. My hon. Friend has been a great friend to me, giving me advice when I became a new father. Many people do not see the hard work that goes into the pastoral care that happens here, so I am personally very grateful to her. I know that she was just about to leave the Chamber, so I will let her do so. I just wanted to place on record my thanks and gratitude to her.

I am a bit disappointed with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), although I have a lot of time for him. Let me first address the important matter of healthcare. We obviously hugely focus on AI safety; we have taken a world-leading position on AI safety, which is what the Bletchley and the Seoul declarations were all about.

Ultimately, the hon. Member's final statement about AI being for humanity is absolutely right. We will continue to work at pace to help build trust in AI, because it can be a transformative tool in a number of different spheres—whether it is in the public sector or in health, as the hon. Member quite rightly pointed out. On a personal note, I hope that, as a cancer survivor he has the very best of health for a long time to come.

Earlier this week, the Prime Minister spoke about how AI can help in the way that breast cancer scans are looked at. I often talk about Brainomix, which has been greatly helpful to 37 NHS trusts in the early identification of strokes. That means that three times more people are now living independently than was previously possible. AI can also be used in other critical pathways. Clearly, AI will be hugely important in the field of radiotherapy. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has already recommended that AI technologies are used in the NHS to help with the contouring of CT and MRI scans and to plan radiotherapy treatment and external therapy for patients.

The NHS AI Lab was set up in 2020 to accelerate the development and the deployment of safe, ethical and effective AI in healthcare. It is worth saying that the hon. Member should not underestimate the complexity of this issue. Earlier this year, I visited a start-up called Aival, which the Government helped to fund through Innovate UK. The success of the AI models varies depending on the different machines that are used and how they are calibrated, so independent verification of the AI models, and how they are employed in the health sector specifically, is very important.

In terms of malicious actors, the hon. Member will understand that I cannot go into specific details for obvious reasons, but I assure him, as someone who sits on the defending democracy taskforce, led by the Security Minister, that we have been looking at pace at how to protect our elections. I am confident that we are prepared, having taken a cross-governmental approach, including with our agencies. It is hugely important that we ensure that people can have trust in our democratic process.

The hon. Member is right that these are voluntary agreements. I was surprised by his response, because we said clearly in our response to the White Paper that we will keep the regulator-led approach, which we have invested money in. We have given £10 million to ensure that the regulator increases its capability in a whole sphere of areas. We have also said that we will not be afraid to legislate when the time is right. That is a key difference between what the Opposition talk about and what we are doing. Our plan is working, whereas the Opposition keep talking about legislating but cannot tell us what they would legislate for.

Sir Chris Bryant: We just told you. You should have listened.

Saqib Bhatti: There is no robust detail. I see that has exercised the hon. Member, who is chuntering from a sedentary position. The Opposition just have no serious plan for this.

The results speak for themselves. Around two weeks ago, we had a number of significant investments and a significant amount of job creation in the UK, with investment from CoreWeave, and almost £2 billion—*[Interruption.]* Those on the Opposition Front Bench would do well to listen to this. We had £2 billion of investment. Scale AI has put its headquarters in the UK. That shows our world-leading position, which is exactly why we co-hosted the Seoul summit and will support the French when they have their AI action summit. It goes to show the huge difference in our approach. We see safety as an enabler of growth and innovation, and that is exactly what we are doing.

The work goes on with the creative industries. It is hugely important, and we will not shy away from the most difficult challenges that AI presents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before we proceed, this concludes my last session in the Chair for this Parliament. I thank the House for the courtesy and understanding that I have received during my time as a Deputy Speaker. It has been hugely appreciated. Thank you all.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I thought the shadow Minister was wise to draw attention to the potential benefits of AI in particular for health research and treatment—notably brain injury, a subject in which he and I share a passionate interest—but foolish, if I might say so, to be churlish about the steps that the Government have already taken. The Government deserve great credit for taking a lead on this internationally, and establishing the first organisation dedicated to AI safety in the world.

I thank and congratulate the Minister on that, but in balancing the advantages and risks—the costs and benefits—will he be clear that the real risk is underestimating the effect that AI may have? The internet has already done immense damage, despite the heady optimism at the time it was launched. It has brutalised discourse and blurred the distinction between truth and fiction, and AI could go further to alter our very grasp of reality. I do not want to be apocalyptic, but that is the territory that we are in, and it requires the most considered treatment if we are not to let those risks become a nightmare.

Saqib Bhatti: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. We recognise the risks and opportunities that AI presents. That is why we have tried to balance safety and innovation. I refer him to the Online Safety Act 2023, which is a technology agnostic piece of legislation. AI is covered by a range of spheres where the Act looks at illegal harms, so to speak. He is right to say that this is about helping humanity to move forward. It is absolutely right that we should be conscious of the risks, but I am also keen to support our start-ups, our innovative companies and our exciting tech economy to do what they do best and move society forward. That is why we have taken this pro-safety, pro-innovation approach; I repeat that safety in this field is an enabler of growth.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I would like to thank Sir Roger Gale, who has just left the Chair. He has been excellent in the Chair and I have very much enjoyed his company as well as his chairing.

I thank the Government for advance sight of the statement. My constituents and people across these islands are concerned about the increasing use of AI, not least because of the lack of regulation in place around it. I have specific questions in relation to the declarations and what is potentially coming down the line with regulation.

Who will own the data that is gathered? Who has responsibility for ensuring its safety? What is the Minister doing to ensure that regard is given to copyright and that intellectual property is protected for those people who have spent their time and energy and massive talents in creating information, research and artwork? What are the impacts of the use of AI on climate change? For example, it has been made clear that using this technology has an impact on the climate because of the intensive amounts of electricity that it uses. Are the Government considering that?

Will the Minister ensure that in any regulations that come forward there is a specific mention of AI harms for women and girls, particularly when it comes to deepfakes, and that they and other groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 are explicitly mentioned in any regulations or laws that come forward around AI? Lastly, we waited 30 years for an Online Safety Act. It took a very long time for us to get to the point of having regulation for online safety. Can the Minister make a commitment today that we will not have to wait so long for regulations, rather than declarations, in relation to AI?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Lady makes some interesting points. The thing about AI is not just the large language models, but the speed and power of the computer systems and the processing power behind them. She talks about climate change and other significant issues we face as humanity; that power to compute will be hugely

[*Saqib Bhatti*]

important in predicting how climate change evolves and weather systems change. I am confident that AI will play a huge part in that.

AI does not recognise borders. That is why the international collaboration and these summits are so important. In Bletchley we had 28 countries, plus the European Union, sign the declaration. We had really good attendance at the Seoul summit as well, with some really world-leading declarations that will absolutely be important.

I refer the hon. Lady to my earlier comments around copyright. I recognise the issue is important because it is core to building trust in AI, and we will look at that. She will understand that I will not be making a commitment at the Dispatch Box today, for a number of reasons, but I am confident that we will get there. That is why our approach in the White Paper response has been well received by the tech industry and AI.

The hon. Lady started with a point about how constituents across the United Kingdom are worried about AI. That is why we all have to show leadership and reassure people that we are making advances on AI and doing it safely. That is why our AI Safety Institute was so important, and why the network of AI safety institutes that we have helped to advise on and worked with other countries on will be so important. In different countries there will be nuances regarding large language models and different things that they will be approaching—and sheer capability will be a huge factor.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): I pay tribute to the Government for their approach on AI. The growth of AI, and its exponential impact, has really not yet landed with most people around the world. The scale and impact of that technology is truly once in a generation, if not once in history. Ensuring that we work around the world to harness that incredibly powerful force for good for humanity is vital. It is good to see the UK playing a leading role in that and, frankly, it is good to see a cross-party approach, because this is bigger than party politics. Will all those involved—the Minister, Lord Camrose, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister—ensure that the agenda of empowering the development of AI and putting guardrails in place is absolutely at the centre not just of UK policy but of policy across the world?

Saqib Bhatti: I put on record my personal thanks to my right hon. Friend for all that he has done. We worked very closely together on the introduction of the integrated care board when he was Health Secretary, and it continues to be hugely beneficial to my constituents. He raises important points about the opportunities of AI and the building of trust, which I have also spoken about. However, he mentioned a “cross-party approach”. I am not sure that the Opposition are quite there yet in terms of their approach. I say to the Opposition that there is a great tech story in this country: we are now the third most valuable economy in the world, worth over \$1 trillion; we have more unicorns than France, Germany and Sweden combined; we have created 1.9 million more jobs—over 22% more—than at pre-pandemic levels; and, as I have said, just over £2 billion of investment has come in just the last fortnight. We believe in British

entrepreneurs, British innovation and British start-ups. The real question is: why do the Opposition not believe in Britain?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's statement. He is right to say that many Members across the Chamber support the Government's clear goals and objectives. The continued focus on the Bletchley declaration is to be welcomed, and I welcome the drive to prevent disinformation and other concerns. However, although information and practice sharing will be almost universal, we must retain the ability to prevent the censorship of positions that may not be popular but should not be censored, and ensure that cyber-security is a priority for us nationally, primarily followed by our international obligations.

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that AI will play a huge role in cyber-security. We recently launched our codes of practice for developers in the cyber-security field. AI will be the defining technology of the 21st century—it is hugely important—and his questions highlight exactly why we have taken this approach. We want our regulators, which are closest to their industries, to define and be on top of what is going on. That is why we have given them capacity-building funds and asked them to set out their plans, which they did at the end of April, and we will continue to work with them.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It sounds as if there was a fair bit of discussion at the summit about AI in healthcare, particularly on its use as a medical device. The Minister will know that it has great potential, and I heard his exchanges just a moment ago. To give just one example, AI can support but not replace clinicians in mammography readings. Does he agree that we must follow the strong lead of the US in this area by ensuring that the regulatory landscape is in the right place to assist this innovation, not get in the way of it?

Saqib Bhatti: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. I refer him to what I said earlier. It was insightful for me to see how transformative AI can be in health. When I visited Aival, for example, I gained insight into the complexity of installing AI as a testing bed for different machines depending on who has manufactured and calibrated them. The regulator will play a huge role, as he can imagine, whether on heart disease, radiotherapy, or DeepMind's work in developing AlphaFold.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on all his enthusiastic work on AI. In his statement, he referred to the frontier AI safety commitments, and 16 companies were mentioned. One of those was Zhipu AI of Tsinghua Daxue—Tsinghua University in China—which is, of course, one of the four new AI tigers of China. How important is the work that the Minister is doing to ensure China is kept in the tent when it comes to the safety and regulation of AI, so that we do not end up with balkanisation when it comes to AI?

Saqib Bhatti: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I will not try to pronounce the name of that university or that company; what I will say is that AI does not recognise borders, so it is really important for China to be in the room, having those conversations.

What those 16 companies signed up to was a world first, by the way: companies from the US, the United Arab Emirates, China and, of course, the UK signed that commitment. This is the first time that they have agreed in writing that they will not deploy or develop models that test the thresholds. Those thresholds will be divined at the AI action summit in France, so my hon. Friend is exactly right that we need a collaborative global approach.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for his statement.

NHS

11.46 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on this Government's work in the national health service.

First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay)—I have warned him that I am going to refer to him—and welcome him back to this place. His magnificent question at Prime Minister's questions yesterday was an absolute tribute to him and to his family, but also to the national health service, which has done so much to put him back together. My hon. Friend's commitment to public service and dignity in the face of adversity are not only inspiring, but an example to us all. I make this commitment to him: as Secretary of State, I am determined to change the prosthetics policy to support quadruple amputees such as him. He makes the point passionately, and I have heard him.

I also want to reassure the victims of the infected blood scandal and their families that the general election that the Prime Minister called yesterday will in no way affect the process that is already under way. Throughout the election period, Government officials and I will continue to study the report, to make sure that the lessons of Sir Brian's inquiry are learned and that the mistakes can never be repeated. We will work with the NHS Business Services Authority to make sure that everyone who is eligible receives the second interim payment of £210,000 over the summer. The report lays bare the many failings of successive Governments, including historic failings in my own Department. As Secretary of State, I apologise unreservedly for the actions that have hurt and harmed so many people, and I know there is consensus in this House that we will work together to ensure nothing like this scandal ever happens in our country again.

I last updated the House in January, and I would like to use this opportunity to share the steps we have taken since then to make our NHS faster, simpler and fairer for patients and staff. In 2019, we promised 50 million more GP appointments a year, and thanks to the hard work of our GPs and their teams, we have delivered on that promise. In January, we went further by launching our Pharmacy First programme, which empowers pharmacists to prescribe medication for seven common conditions without the need to see a GP. The numbers of people using that programme are encouraging, and when it is at full power, 10 million GP appointments will be freed up.

In the face of industrial action, we have reduced the NHS waiting list by more than 200,000 since September. Outside the pandemic, we have delivered the biggest six-month fall in the waiting list in more than a decade, with waiting lists falling for six months on the bounce. Through our new hospital programme, we have committed to delivering 40 new hospitals by 2030. I am pleased to tell the House that six hospitals are now open to patients, two more are expected to open by the end of the financial year and 18 more are in construction.

We have launched a recovery plan for dentistry that will create 2.5 million new NHS appointments this year alone. That is being done by giving dental practices extra cash for new patients they see, introducing golden

[Victoria Atkins]

hellos and deploying dental vans to isolated rural and coastal communities. Since I launched our recovery plan, more than 500 additional practices have opened their doors to NHS patients. Today, we are going further by publishing a consultation on introducing a tie-in for graduate dentists, which will commit them to a period of NHS work when they can hone their skills, develop a breadth of experience and give back to the people who helped fund their training. It costs the taxpayer up to £200,000 to train a dentist, and we think it is right and fair to ask new graduates to use their new skills in the NHS.

Ensuring that the NHS works for women is one of my priorities, and we have taken a number of steps to support them. We are opening women's health hubs across England, we are helping 50,000 bereaved parents acknowledge their beloved baby with baby loss certificates, and we have helped half a million women to get cheaper hormone replacement therapy. We are also rolling out new maternal mental health services for new mums, which are already available in all but three local health systems.

We are looking to tackle conditions that disproportionately affect the female population, such as osteoporosis. Every year in England, some 67,000 fractures are suffered by people of working age, the majority of whom are women, and many of them are entirely preventable. I have listened to the tireless campaigning of the Royal Osteoporosis Society and the campaigns of the *Express* and *The Mail on Sunday*, so today I want to confirm that this Government have the ambition to expand the use of fracture liaison services to every integrated care board in England and achieve 100% coverage by 2030.

I have also made it my priority to protect our children, who have been questioning their identity in ever increasing numbers. The Cass review laid bare the damaging effect that social media and degrading pornography have had on young people's sense of self. It also set out clearly the need for extreme caution in medical interventions. Today, I want to set out my clear intention to introduce a banning order on puberty blockers, with limited exceptions, under section 62 of the Medicines Act 1968. This is an extraordinary use of that power, but it is the right use of that power because we must protect our children and young people from this risk to their safety.

We know that to make the NHS sustainable in the long term, we need to work on prevention, not just cure. To drive this progress, we need to embed prevention within the structures of the national health service and the Government. That is why we will be benchmarking, identifying and publishing health service prevention spending. To support investment in prevention, NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care will work closely with integrated care systems to develop practical information and evidence that will aid local investment decisions.

As Secretary of State, I have seen how prevention tests across the NHS are not joined up, and I want to make the NHS app the front door for prevention as well as for cure. By 2026, people across England will be able to book vaccinations for 16 preventable diseases, including MMR—measles, mumps and rubella—and human papillomavirus, on our app. This move will make sure that millions more people receive the vital vaccines

we all need, not just saving them from life-threatening conditions, but saving the NHS money and resources in the long term.

We also have a duty to give families the information they need to make healthy choices. There has been a lot of talk about the potential damages of ultra-processed foods, including in the press recently. We want to cut through the noise and give people the facts. That is why I have asked our National Institute for Health and Care Research to gather evidence on the impacts of ultra-processed foods on health to help us support people to make informed and healthy choices.

In conclusion, when it comes to the NHS, this Government have a record to be proud of. We have 50,000 more nurses, 60 million more GP appointments and 7 million tests, checks and scans at community diagnostic centres. We have waiting lists coming down, more dental appointments available, better care for women and more protection for vulnerable young people. We have the first ever long-term workforce plan, and more doctors, dentists and nurses than ever before. We have a clear plan and we are taking bold action to build a secure future for our national health service. I commend this statement to the House.

11.55 am

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Let me start with a few points of genuine consensus. First, I associate myself and my party wholeheartedly with the right hon. Lady's remarks about the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and the extraordinary courage and strength he has shown. I greatly welcome her reassurance to victims of the contaminated blood scandal and the emphasis she placed on the cross-party commitment to continue at pace to deliver justice, whatever the outcome of the general election. I also welcome what she said about the justifiably cautious and responsible approach she is taking in relation to puberty blockers in the light of the Cass review.

That is the end of the consensus, however, because after 14 years of Conservative incompetence, neglect and vandalism, the national health service has never been in a worse state. The Government cut 2,000 GPs and now it is impossible to get an appointment. They wasted billions of pounds on top-down reorganisations, recruitment agencies and crony contracts for useless personal protective equipment instead of training the workforce the NHS needs. They forced nurses out on strike for the first time in history; and now the Prime Minister shamelessly tries to blame them for his own failures, sending the country into an election with strike action still looming. He promised to cut waiting lists; they are up to 7.5 million. Even their claim that waiting lists have fallen in the last six months has been achieved only by excluding the community figures—fiddling the figures. He promised to build 40 new hospitals and the Government have failed to build a single one. They hold people in this country in such contempt: the Conservatives think the public are so stupid that they will fall for the same recycled soggy promise all over again. Vast swathes of the country have been left without a single NHS dentist, forcing people in Britain, in 2024, to perform DIY dentistry on themselves.

After 14 years, the fundamental promise of the NHS has been broken: people can no longer be sure the NHS will be there for them when they need it. Listening to

the Prime Minister's interviews this morning, it is clear he has given up on the NHS. He has called this election with no plan to cut waiting lists, no plan to end the strikes, and no plan to reform the service. The Conservatives have taken the NHS to breaking point; if they are given five more years, they will finish the job.

This election is the country's chance to turn the page on 14 years of failure, to end the chaos in the NHS and to rebuild our NHS. No part of our country is crying out louder for change than our health service—not just investment but reform, because if the NHS is to be there for us free at the point of use for the next 75 years, as it has been in the last, it must change. Only Labour can deliver that change.

Our damp squib of a Prime Minister is dripping into this election with a puddle not a plan. In contrast, Labour has a plan to get our NHS back on its feet and make it fit for the future. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members ask what it is: give the people what they want—40,000 extra appointments a week at evenings and weekends to cut waiting lists; double the number of scanners, with AI-enabled scanners diagnosing patients faster; 700,000 emergency dental appointments and reform of the contract to rescue NHS dentistry; double medical school places and train thousands more nurses, GPs and midwives, delivering Labour's workforce plan; bring back the family doctor so patients can see the same GP for each appointment; 8,500 mental health professionals to treat people on time, with mental health support in every school and hubs in every community, alongside landmark reform of the Mental Health Act 1983. That is Labour's plan, and that is just the start. More than that, unlike the Conservatives, we have a record on the NHS to be proud of: a record of the shortest waiting lists and the highest patient satisfaction in history. We did it before, and we will do it again. That is why representatives of the nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland know, and even admit in private, that a Labour Government in Westminster will be a rising tide that lifts all ships across our United Kingdom.

I say to people that it is not enough to send MPs to Westminster to oppose the Conservatives; they need to send Labour MPs to replace the Conservatives. If they are given five more years, nothing will change. The chaos will continue, and the NHS crisis will get worse. As we approach this general election, be in no doubt: the only way to deliver the change our country needs is to vote Labour. I have every hope that our country will do just that.

Victoria Atkins: I know that the hon. Gentleman has spent a lot of time in recent days studying that infamous pledge card. It has obviously taken up a lot of space in his brain, because he seems not to have understood that not only did we settle months ago with the consultants, so they are not on strike, but we have arrived at a settlement with the specialty and specialist doctors, which is going out to ballot. He asked about junior doctors, and he has obviously missed the news that we have just entered mediation with them. We are bringing together, with the workforce plan, the progress we are making on working conditions. The Labour party does not like conversations about mediation—no, no, no—because we all know that Labour MPs are beholden to their trade union masters and have never condemned a single strike that has affected our constituents and their access to healthcare.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the new hospital programme, and I was wondering whether he would. It is, as some might say in politics, bold. I have taken the trouble—it was a lot of trouble—to read the Labour party's health mission. One of its pledges is that one of the first steps of a Labour Government would be to pause all capital projects in the NHS. Our constituents should be clear: the Conservatives have a new hospital programme, which we are delivering; the Labour party has a no new hospital programme.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the ideas for the NHS—ones he could not quite remember over the weekend—and the number of appointments that Labour would bring. I think it was appointments, because when he was asked to clarify whether he meant appointment or treatments, he could not define it. I hate to break it to him, but there is a difference between an appointment and, for example, a triple heart bypass. I would love to know whether he is talking about appointments or treatments. Just to help him understand the scale of NHS England's activities on a weekly basis, it provides 575,000 out-patient appointments a week. His pledge sounds like a big number, but the truth is that it will not even touch the sides, even when Labour has worked out where the sides are.

The hon. Gentleman also bravely talks about the Cass review, and I genuinely welcome the fact that he has thrown away his long-held principles and relied on the evidence that Dr Cass provided, but I wonder whether he ought to have a conversation with his fellow shadow Cabinet members, because they announced a policy this week that is self-identification by the back door. They want to put the responsibility for self-identification and the gender recognition certificate process on the shoulders of our GPs, when we have been clear that we want our GPs focusing on the 60 million more appointments they are making in the past year. He does not understand—*[Interruption.]* Forgive me, he is chuntering at me, and he needs to go away and read the Gender Recognition Act 2004, because it is a panel that looks after that process, and Labour is seeking to change that to make it a single GP.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the record of the Conservative party, and we are proud of it. I am particularly proud of the fact that we have record funding under the Government for mental and physical health. I wonder whether he is quite so proud of the record in Wales. By the way, Labour runs the NHS in Wales; I wish I had responsibility for Wales, but I only have responsibility for England.

Wes Streeting: How is that going?

Victoria Atkins: It is going better than it is in Wales. Under the Labour-run NHS in Wales, a quarter of people are on a waiting list in that part of the NHS. The number of patients waiting two years is higher in Wales than it is in England. Patients are waiting on average six weeks longer in Labour-run Wales than in England. If that performance were replicated here in England, waiting lists could be as much as six million higher. The choice is clear: unfunded Labour failure or a clear plan for a more secure future with the Conservatives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Record funding, a long-term workforce plan finally in place and serious investment at last from the Chancellor on health tech in the spring Budget. That is really welcome and a record to be proud of, as the Secretary of State said, but she will be aware that if demand continues to exceed supply, we have a problem.

My right hon. Friend told us that she does indeed believe that prevention is the new cure, so throughout the general election campaign and from here on as she continues as Health Secretary, will she please bang on remorselessly about the big drivers of ill health—smoking, alcohol addiction, obesity, poor housing and bad diet—because, remember, we can only protect the NHS if we are a healthier society?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend not just for his question, which was excellent as always, but for his long record in the House, particularly in the world of healthcare. He was a superb Minister in the Department of Health and has chaired the Select Committee with great skill. He has scrutinised many a Minister, which I promise him is not a relaxing experience. I really pay credit to him.

May I also thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of prevention? We want to bend the demand curve on the NHS. We know that demand has risen in recent years—we are seeing more people in A&E, we are seeing more cancer referrals and we are seeing more people accessing scans, checks and diagnostics—and we need to help people to understand that we can take responsibility for our own health. Through work such as that on using the NHS app as a gateway to prevention, I genuinely think that we will be helping not only our generations but, importantly, younger people, who sometimes get forgotten in our conversations about healthcare.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the commitment from the Health Secretary to paying the £210,000 interim payment to those infected under the contaminated blood scandal. But can I say that there is no clarity at all from the Government about the payments that Sir Brian recommended in April 2023 to those who have received nothing so far—the parents who have lost children and the children who have lost parents?

Can I seek a guarantee from the Health Secretary that we will see psychological support services put in place in England immediately? They are in place in Northern Ireland, in Scotland and in Wales. Since 2020, Ministers in the Department have been saying that those services would be made available. That is four years ago; it is not acceptable. After the statements earlier this week by the Prime Minister and the Paymaster General, that is something that the NHS could do quickly and which would have enormous impact, especially because, with the general election having been called, people do not quite know what will happen to the Government's promises.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady for all her work. She may recall that, when the inquiry was announced by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), we had a debate on that matter where I spoke as a Back Bencher on behalf of a constituent; I very much hope that he and others gain some reassurance from the fact

that I understand exactly the issues they have faced over many years. As Health Secretary, it is my responsibility, and indeed my privilege, to try to help them now.

In relation to the compensation schemes for those who have not yet received payments, I know that the right hon. Lady will have carefully pored through the responses of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General. We want to give the independent compensation authority—I underline independent because I am sympathetic to the sensitivities of families and victims around the role that the Department of Health and others played in their pain—and Sir Robert the chance to set up the scheme, assisted by the expert panel.

I promise the right hon. Lady that I have been discussing psychological support with the chief executive of NHS England for some time. We want to recruit the right people to conduct that incredibly sensitive work. It will take us a little more time, but I assure her that NHS England is acting quickly to bring in those services, we hope, by the end of the summer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her answer to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I hope that the letter that her Department received from us will get a full reply, and I thank her for her interim words.

I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to come to the opening of the new integrated care centre by the town hall in Worthing—a local authority enterprise carried on by the present administration in Worthing. There has been great concern about dentistry in my constituency. The pressure is coming off, but not fast enough. Would she please encourage everyone in NHS England to ensure that dentists are encouraged to provide the kinds of service that all our constituents want?

Victoria Atkins: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the opening of those services. I look forward to attending that opening with him and colleagues across his area. In the dental recovery plan I set out a number of ways in which we will improve the delivery of dental care across England, including immediate, medium and long-term work. The immediate-term work is already seeing results. Having switched on the new patient premium, we are already seeing practices opening. We want to bring forward the golden hellos to encourage dentists into areas that do not have the services that we would like. There was a slightly misinformed Prime Minister's question yesterday; we are in the middle of tendering our dental vans, because as a rural MP I want services as quickly as possible while we are building the foundations to ensure that people get the care they need.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Let me say that it has always been a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall miss you terribly; your fairness, insight and wit has brought colour to this Chamber. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Moment of consensus over, I stand here as the Member of Parliament for a constituency that will have listened to the Secretary of State with horror. For 14 years we have been desperately waiting for Whipps Cross Hospital

to be redeveloped. The Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and I had a meeting about it this morning that she had to cancel, presumably because the general election has been called. The failed new hospital programme has cost my constituents dearly. We were told under that programme that works would be finished by 2025. They have not even started, because the Government still have not committed the funding. The board meeting notes admit that they will not even start next year, and they certainly will not be finished by 2030. What a damning indictment of this Conservative Government.

My constituents have to be treated in corridors at Whipps Cross. The physical layout of the mangled, broken building is directly impacting on the quality of care that my constituents receive. There is an amazing team at Whipps Cross, doing incredible work, almost in tears that we still do not have our new hospital, because of the impact on patient care. Will the Secretary of State answer the question that I wanted to ask her colleague in that meeting this morning? We need urgent confirmation that we will get the funding to build the hospital at Whipps Cross, to finalise the plans and to start talking to a contractor so that works can begin in 2026. Conservative colleagues in my borough pledged to start works last year, but that was not true. Will the Minister at least confirm that under her plans we will finally get the funding? Walthamstow deserves better.

Victoria Atkins: Madam Deputy Speaker, I had not heard the news that you were stepping down. I share the House's dismay, but also pass on our thanks to you for having been a Chair. It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, although it is a steely pleasure because you let us know, most of the time, when we speak for too long. *[Interruption.]*

Stella Creasy: Answer the question.

Victoria Atkins: I am trying to; the hon. Lady's colleagues are trying to prevent me.

We have committed to Whipps Cross Hospital. It takes time to build hospitals. We have six new hospitals open to the public already, and another 18 entering construction. I hope that the hon. Lady is challenging her own leadership, including the shadow Health Secretary, because Labour's health mission—or first step, or pledge; who knows what the terminology is—says that one of its first steps in government would be to pause all capital projects in the NHS. The Labour party needs to answer on that.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): May I add to the tributes, Madam Deputy Speaker?

This is my final contribution to the House. Having served in the Secretary of State's shoes, I know how hard it is to deliver on manifesto commitments. Delivering on the commitment to 50,000 more nurses and the commitment on GP appointments, and being on track with the 40 new hospitals, is a great achievement. Could I urge her to say a little more about how all that is supported by the incredible improvements in technology in the NHS in the last decade? Without them, there is no way for the NHS to succeed in the next decade. Harnessing extraordinary opportunities such as AI, but not only that, will stand the NHS in great stead, if we can get the data used properly. And with that, that's over.

Victoria Atkins: My goodness me. I thank my right hon. Friend. I have an inkling of the responsibilities and pressures that he bore during the pandemic. There will be many thoughts about how the Government and society handled the pandemic, but he devoted his absolute all to keeping people safe, and to moving our society out of the lockdowns. I thank him sincerely for all his work.

True to his character, my right hon. Friend wants to talk about the future. Outside the pandemic, he had a particular focus, when he was Health Secretary and in previous Cabinet positions, on the role that technology can play in our lives. Our NHS app now has three quarters of adults in England signed up to it. That is a testament to him and to those in the NHS who helped to deliver it. There are more subscribers to the NHS app than to Netflix. The most common users of the NHS app are those over the age of 65. We can see just how powerful the app can be, and the role that it will play in prevention, but we need to invest in the technology. I view the long-term workforce plan as critical to building the next 75 years of the NHS, as is the tech plan that the Chancellor announced in the spring Budget, which provides £3.45 billion for technology to drive forward progress in the NHS—a plan that the Opposition has not supported.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I take this opportunity to thank all NHS staff for their dedication, professionalism and care, which are really quite extraordinary in the light of the circumstances that they face? I spent 30 years working in and around the NHS, and I know that it was on its knees in 1996 and 1997, before the Labour Government made such a difference, but nothing compares to the state of it today. I am thinking particularly about NHS dentistry; my constituents are having to wait seven years for an appointment with an NHS dentist. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) will meet dentists on the first Monday after Labour come to office.

The Secretary of State has not adopted a plan that would have worked, the one produced by the Health and Social Care Committee. Can she tell us why she did not adopt that plan in full, and what she will say to my constituents, who will vote at the polls for a service that works, as opposed to one that is broken?

Victoria Atkins: I join the hon. Lady in thanking her local NHS staff, and, indeed, NHS staff throughout the country. The NHS employs more than 1.3 million people, and every single one of them contributes in their own way, from clinicians to nurses to hospital porters to administrative staff. All those people play a really important part in keeping us well and safe.

Notwithstanding the picture that the hon. Lady has sought to paint, I hope she will have the graciousness to acknowledge that we are diagnosing more cancer cases, and diagnosing them more quickly at stages 1 and 2. I hope she will acknowledge, for example, that some nine out of 10 cancer patients are treated within 31 days of a decision to treat them, and that the average waiting time in England—not Wales—is just under 15 weeks. Of course there is more to do, but we have plans in place.

I also urge the hon. Lady to look carefully at our dental recovery plan. We have seen more practices open up to provide more NHS appointments, and as the

[*Victoria Atkins*]

recovery plan is rolled out, we will see up to 2.5 million more appointments, roughly three times as many as will be seen under Labour's dental recovery plans. Compare and contrast!

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Let me add my best wishes for your retirement, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope it will be a long and happy one.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. As waiting-list figures continue to fall, which is fantastic, it is vital that we continue to boost access to primary care, so will she join me in welcoming the news that the excellent Garth surgery in Gisborough, in my constituency, is seeking to expand by creating six new consulting rooms and more space for the recruitment of GP registrars?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for presenting us with what is happening on the ground, rather than the relentless doom and gloom that we hear from the Opposition. There are excellent examples in our local areas of people not just enjoying working in the NHS, but thriving in it. My right hon. Friend's general practice will be one of those that have contributed to the 60 million more GP appointments made available in the last year—an election promise that we made in 2019, and have kept. Let me explain the maths to the Opposition: that means more than 1 million primary care appointments each working day. That is something of which we should all be proud, and for which we should thank our GPs.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): May I say how sad I am, Madam Deputy Speaker, that whatever the result of the general election, it will not bring you back to the place that you so wonderfully occupy?

Waiting lists, dental services, mental health services, clinical trials, workforce morale, cancer care, innovative treatments, childhood obesity—whatever the measure, the Tories have failed us on health. Is the Secretary of State really asking the people of this country to vote for five more years of Tory failure, when they can, by voting Labour, vote for the change that the health service, and indeed the country, so desperately need?

Victoria Atkins: May I gently remind the hon. Lady that her party leader is a former barrister? I declare an interest: so am I. In the old days, we barristers used to rely on the evidence, but the evidence on which the Leader of the Opposition relies is produced in Wales. He says that it is a blueprint for what will happen in NHS England. My goodness me! As I have said, a quarter of the people on NHS waiting lists are in Labour-run Wales. The highest number of patients who are waiting two years is in Labour-run Wales, and patients wait on average six weeks longer in Labour-run Wales than in England. I am genuinely surprised that, having been in his post for as long as he has, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting)—for whom I have considerable respect—has not been able to influence or direct his Labour colleagues in Wales to follow his ideas, if he thinks that they are so good. That is clearly not working.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): May I add my best wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you become one of the Members of this place who have chosen to leave it voluntarily in the coming weeks, and may I say, advisedly, that I wish you all the best as you leave this Chamber of Parliament?

May I return my right hon. Friend to the subject of her statement: an NHS update? Recently, on International Nurses Day, I visited Poole Hospital to see the amazing new barn theatres that have resulted from the huge investment going into the NHS in Dorset. When we talk about the money that we are putting into the NHS, that often appears to the public to be mere statistics. However, in Dorset, and in Bournemouth in particular, we see not only the new barn theatres in what is becoming the primary elective part of the local NHS, but, as a result of the £250 million overall investment, the development of the BEACH building—BEACH stands for birth, emergency and critical care and children's health. These are real investments, which—notwithstanding the outbreak of hyperbole that I confidently predict we will see more of in the coming weeks, and which, sadly, we have not been able to cure in the last 14 years—are tangible examples of this Government's commitment to delivering on the frontline.

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear that, and also to say that on my travels last Thursday, I had the great pleasure of visiting Dorset and seeing for myself not just a wonderful community hospital in Shaftesbury, but the brand new A&E unit that is being built in Dorchester. It is thanks to the hard work of the local trust, but also to Government investment, that that important hospital—alongside those that my right hon. Friend has described—can ensure that people in Dorset receive the care that they need in a modern way. That is the modern national health service as we Conservatives see it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Does it not concern the Secretary of State that we are spending a great deal of money because of the private sector, which is an undermining factor in the NHS? The NHS paid £11 million to the private health sector in 2022, and many hospitals are spending 15% of their budgets on private finance initiative contracts. Does she not think that we could save an awful lot of money by concentrating on expanding the NHS workforce? Their loyalty, dedication and efficiency are far better and far greater than the atomisation of our services into myriad private sector providers. It is cheaper and more efficient to provide the service publicly, thus providing a better service for everyone.

Victoria Atkins: Let the record reflect this rare moment of agreement between the right hon. Gentleman and me. The PFI contracts signed by the last Labour Government have been an unmitigated disaster for our hospitals, and for the integrated care boards and others who are trying to fund them. The Labour Government drafted the contracts so incompetently that we cannot leave them without a massive cost to the taxpayer. That is the real cost of Labour-run private finance initiatives.

However, I part company with the right hon. Gentleman on the role of the independent sector. We already rely on that sector to provide something to the tune of 10% of elective procedures. I want our residents treated

as quickly and as well as possible, and to my mind the independent sector must play an important role in that. We Conservatives want to make it even easier for patients to choose where they receive their treatments, so that they receive them more quickly, as well as the quality of service that they want. I do not know whether he will be here after the election campaign, but we there is at least one area on which we have agreed, namely PFI.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am extremely grateful for all the terribly kind comments, which means that I am a bit reluctant to say this, but we need to crack on, so I ask for brief questions and brief answers. *[Interruption.]* It appears that the Whips agree with me. They know that we have the business statement and then the Finance Bill to get through. A good example will be set by Sir Christopher Chope.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving such as good example to this House, as always.

My right hon. Friend was kind enough to meet me and our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) to discuss the plight of people who are victims of covid-19 vaccine damage. She sounded very sympathetic at the meeting and promised to look into the vaccine damage payment scheme, so it was rather disappointing this week to be told in answer to a written question:

“Formal consideration of whether any reforms to the VDPS are necessary will form part of Module 4 of the COVID-19 Inquiry”.

The inquiry will not be heard until January next year, and it smacks of kicking the can down the road and ignoring the victims, who need help. The sum paid—£120,000—has not been increased since 2007.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I fear that my authority is draining away, so I will make another plea for brief questions. I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to set a superb example. However, I am sure the Secretary of State will now respond briefly.

Victoria Atkins: I very much share my hon. Friend's concerns. I will take away what he has said, but I want to look into this issue, because I understand the points that he and our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) have made.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Secretary of State comes to the House, at the end of a Parliament, to paint her Government's record on the NHS in the most positive light possible. I have to say to her that the picture she paints will not be recognised by staff working in the NHS or patients anywhere in my constituency. I will give her an example: it is impossible for my constituents to get an appointment at some GP practices in a timely manner. At the same time, our local hospital, which is under severe financial pressure, is reporting a record number of patients attending its urgent care centre because they cannot get an appointment in primary care. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge

her Government's failure to tackle primary care, which is placing unbearable pressure on doctors working in our hospitals to do the best for their patients?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I pay tribute to our general practitioners and all the staff who work with them in practices, because we know that they have delivered some 60 million more appointments than in 2019. That was an election promise made and kept. On the hon. Lady's wider question about primary care, that is precisely why we have rolled out Pharmacy First to free up GP appointments. It is precisely why we have a focus on prevention, because we know that if we can help people through the NHS app, it will take the burden off GPs. It is also why we are looking at fit notes in an imaginative and thoughtful way, because I have listened to GPs, who say that if we can reduce these sorts of responsibilities on GPs, it will leave them with more time for patients.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her support in ensuring that my community diagnostic centre in Rochester will have extra funding so that an MRI scanner can be secured, which will make a big difference to my local community. As she knows, I have been working with the hospital and having conversations about my campaign for a second hospital site in Medway. Could my right hon. Friend have some conversations with her colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities? We have a Homes England, Government-owned site on the Hoo peninsula that is absolutely primed for a second hospital site. Medway Council is doing its local plan, and it is imperative that the area is used as a health site, rather than a housing site.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has been such a firm campaigner on these issues. Her constituents should be very pleased with everything that she has done to press upon me the importance of this matter. The community diagnostic centre is opening and will provide more tests, checks and scans for her local residents. I will take up those conversations, and I am very much looking forward to coming to visit her in the next Parliament to celebrate the opening of the centres.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Dame Rosie, in the words of “South Pacific”, if we ain't got dames, where would we be?

In November 2021, Boris Johnson and the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid) appointed me to co-chair a programme board to create a national strategy on acquired brain injury. This issue matters in every single one of our constituencies, and I am afraid we are still failing. Despite the months that have passed, it has not been possible to put the strategy together for a whole series of reasons, including churn of ministers and the fact that the Government are not able to put a single penny into it—not even enough money to check how many people suffer a brain injury every year. This is a cross-party issue. How can we ensure that later this year—regardless of who forms the Government—we end up with a national strategy for acquired brain injury, so that we do not just save people's lives when they have been in a road traffic accident, but give them back the quality of life and independence that they so dearly deserve?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I know that he has been working very closely with the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), on this issue. He will remember the cross-party working that we had when I took the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 through the House, and our concerns about the disproportionately high rate of ABI among female prisoners. I will take away the hon. Gentleman's thoughts. He will appreciate that I might not be able to enter into detailed discussions with him on this issue during the campaign, but I very much look forward to continuing our discussions from the Dispatch Box in six weeks' time.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Thank you for your service. Madam Deputy Speaker.

A long time ago I was a medical student, and improving access to general practice is really important to me. I am proud that the record funding that we have put into the national health service has enabled us to have not just 50,000 extra nurses, but 56% extra clinical staff in GP surgeries in my constituency. The average surgery is doing 44 extra appointments every working day compared with at the start of this Parliament, but an ageing society means more and more pressure. What is the Minister doing to take the pressure off with things like Pharmacy First?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend not just for his early commitment to the medical profession, but for his work as a Health Minister. He did so much to help prepare the dental recovery plan, and I am so grateful to him for all his work.

On his question about prevention and the scale of the demand on the NHS, he is absolutely right. One piece of work that we are trying to bring together is about looking at the whole person, rather than individual conditions, because we know that, as we age, we will develop more conditions and live with more than one condition. Part of my work to reform our NHS and make it faster, simpler and fairer is about ensuring that we are living longer, healthier lives and concertinaing the period of ill health towards the very end of life, so that it is better not only for us as individuals and for our families, but for society and, of course, for the NHS.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): In the first few weeks that I have been the Member for Blackpool South, many of my constituents have contacted me about the lack of NHS dentistry in the town. No NHS dentist is taking on adult patients, and children with tooth decay are forced to go to our local A&E. This is a huge issue in our town, which has so many other troubling issues. Will the Secretary State finally admit that this Government have let my constituents down, and that only under a Labour Government will we get access to the dentistry we desperately need?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, and I say to him that Blackpool has a very special place in my heart, because I went to school there. Indeed, I could hear the cheers from the "Big Dipper" and the "Pepsi Max Big One" from my classroom. I had coastal towns such as Blackpool and Mablethorpe, which is in my own constituency, at the forefront of my concerns when we were looking at how we could help some of these dental deserts. It is why I have been

focused on getting dental vans into tender so that we can try to push out some of these services. They are not a permanent fix, but they will help people in the short term while we are building up new practices through golden hellos and suchlike. Of course, today we have had the announcement of the consultation for dental graduates. If the taxpayer has contributed to their training, we would love them to have experience of the NHS.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for arranging for the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) to come to Scunthorpe hospital. We were absolutely delighted to show him our brand new A&E, our ambulatory care unit and the renovated wards that have now been completed.

The Secretary of State will know that we are also midway through the construction of our community diagnostic centre, which we are really looking forward to getting up and running. Is she aware of my campaign to ensure that the small number of services that the hospital is indicating might be moved to Grimsby remain in Scunthorpe? It might only be a small number of patients who are affected, but it is incredibly important to them. I know that she cannot influence it at this point, but will she acknowledge the great strength of feeling on that issue?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has devoted her career in this place not only to representing the steelworkers in her constituency, but to her constituents' healthcare, and it is thanks to her campaigning, and that of other colleagues, that we have a CDC, and facilities like that, in her local area. She has very tactfully described my position. I, of course, acknowledge my awareness of her campaign, and I really look forward to working with her in the future to see whether we can ensure that the residents of Scunthorpe—and the residents of Grimsby—have those services that we all hold so dear.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement. It is clear that the NHS is, in some cases, in need of critical care. While we all prepare for an election, there are ill and vulnerable people unable to prepare for the surgery and treatment that they so desperately need. How will the Secretary of State ensure that, while this Parliament dissolves, the NHS continues to consolidate and grow, and delivers much-needed diagnoses and operations for its patients—our constituents?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman. One of the joys of this Parliament has been to have him contributing in every statement and debate. On the particular healthcare needs in Northern Ireland, he will appreciate that healthcare is devolved, and that we are all very mindful of recent history, in terms of the devolution of power in that particular set of circumstances. However, I have very much enjoyed working with the Health Minister, Minister Swann.

Clearly, we value our United Kingdom, and we want to do whatever we can to help all corners of the United Kingdom in healthcare—although, of course, we respect that they are devolved matters. That is why I want to work closely with my counterpart in Northern Ireland, and, as I have indicated—or am indicating now—

I would be very happy to work with the Health Ministers in Scotland and Wales to help them with their waiting lists.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): This Conservative Government have invested hugely into the NHS. Doctors are working extremely hard, but because of the rapid growth of Aylesbury, unfortunately, there are still many local residents who have to wait too long to get appointments. Innovative ideas such as Pharmacy First and health hubs on the high street are already undoubtedly helping, but I believe that we can do even more. That is why, in this election, I am campaigning for a permanent walk-in health centre in the heart of the town—a one-stop shop where people can go for check-ups, see a nurse, physio or paramedic, and receive expert medical advice and support. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is exactly the sort of clear plan for bold action that will secure the future of our NHS?

Victoria Atkins: I most certainly do, and it is a pleasure to hear that my hon. Friend, who is such a great campaigner in his constituency, has that as a clear target for his area to represent his constituents. On the recruitment of general practitioners, we have set out, through our long-term workforce plan, our ambitions—and, importantly, the plans underlying those ambitions—to ensure that we recruit even more doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, and so on, to build the NHS of the future. My hon. Friend might want to share this fact with his constituents: since 2010, there are more than 41,000 more doctors in our NHS in England and more than 73,000 more nurses. Those are figures to be proud of.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I associate myself with the good wishes that have been sent to you this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Prevention is, of course, better than cure, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that she is doing all that she can to ensure that the Government's world-leading Tobacco and Vapes Bill is passed during the wash-up? She knows of my concern about children's exposure to vaping. If the Bill will not be passed through wash-up, will she confirm that a Conservative Government would act quickly, once re-elected, to protect our children from deadly nicotine addictions?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who, of course, brings her professional expertise into the Chamber. On the Bill, she will appreciate that we are at a very delicate stage, which I am not allowed to say anything about at the Dispatch Box, but she should be confident of my commitment, and that of the Prime Minister, to this important legislation and to a smoke-free generation.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Buckinghamshire has seen significant improvements to the NHS estate, not least with a new paediatric A&E at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, but my right hon. Friend will know that we have had many conversations about getting a new primary care facility into the village of Long Crendon and about critical upgrades to Wycombe Hospital to replace the ageing tower. Can she confirm that a future Conservative Government will remain absolutely on track to deliver on those facilities?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to not just support my hon. Friend, but commend him for his campaigns. This Conservative Government are committed to building the facilities that we need in the national health service, and it is a pity that the Labour party does not seem to be in the same place.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for visiting Southend Hospital last month. She knows that, when I was elected, ambulance handover times in Southend were the worst in the region. They are now often the best, and the emergency village is helping thousands of residents. She also helped to launch the first trust-wide fracture liaison service in the UK in Southend, which will save thousands of fractures, millions of pounds and thousands of bed days. Will she join me in congratulating CEO Matthew Hopkins, CEO Andrew Pike and consultant rheumatologist Dr Way Main Wong on this life-transforming service?

Victoria Atkins: May I say how delighted I am to see my hon. Friend back in one piece, given her abseil down the hospital recently, and also say how much I enjoyed seeing the confidence, ambition and professionalism of the new services being provided by her local hospital? I hope that she is pleased that I can confirm today that the Government have the ambition to expand the use of fracture liaison services to every integrated care board in England, achieving 100% coverage by 2030, which is very much inspired by her hospital.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Since being elected to represent North West Norfolk, I have campaigned, with strong local support, for a new hospital. Can my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary confirm that only this Conservative Government are committed to building a new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn by 2030, for patients and staff, as part of our fully funded plan?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, and very much understand and acknowledge his campaigning on this matter. Yes, we want to ensure that his county has the modern hospital facilities that it needs. I note in passing that, in the Norfolk and Norwich trust, this summer, we will see the opening of more surgical capacity precisely to help to deal with some of the waiting lists in his county. This is positive, practical action to secure a bright future for his local NHS.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the incredible work that the late James Brokenshire MP did for Old Bexley and Sidcup constituents, particularly with Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup. Building on James's legacy, I have been proud to work with my right hon. Friend's Department, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust and other partners locally to deliver new services for patients in Old Bexley and Sidcup.

Will my right hon. Friend join me today in thanking all the teams and all staff at Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup? Will she join me in thanking particularly the project team that is working very hard to deliver the new community diagnostics hub, which will open in Old Bexley and Sidcup early next year?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in thanking the staff in his local area who support that very important hospital, and I praise the confidence and ambition for his local area through the opening of that community diagnostic centre. He is going to see more constituents being diagnosed and getting treated more quickly because of the investment that this Government have put in to that centre in his constituency. I thank all his staff and particularly the project team.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): Dame Rosie, I thank you for your service to this Chamber.

Will my right hon. Friend recall the conversations that we have been having about a community diagnostic centre in South Derbyshire, where we do not have one? We do not have a hospital; everybody has to travel. Could I invite her, not only during the next six weeks but after the six weeks—when she is back at that Dispatch Box and I am back here—to visit us and talk to the great teachers, doctors and nurses that want to put this project together?

Victoria Atkins: That is an irresistible invitation, if I may say so, and I will very much look forward to visiting my hon. Friend's constituency to support her in her campaign for a community diagnostic centre.

I think we are on the last question, Madam Deputy Speaker, so, as we enter into this general election period, may I give my sincere thanks to every single member of our NHS staff and to every single person working in social care across England? You all do amazing jobs, and it is my great privilege to serve as your Secretary of State. I wish everybody a very calm—not quiet—six weeks. The medics will understand what I mean by that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): On that note, I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Once again, I thank everyone who made very kind comments.

Business of the House

12.50 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Further to my business statement last night, the business for today is expected to be as follows:

Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of a Lords message to the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of any further Lords messages.

The business for tomorrow, Friday 24 May, will include:

If necessary, consideration of Lords messages, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Victims and Prisoners Bill, followed by debate on a motion to approve the draft Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments and Revocations) Regulations 2024, followed by an opportunity for matters to be raised ahead of the forthcoming Dissolution, to allow for valedictory speeches by Members of Parliament, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords messages.

The House will prorogue following a message from the Lords Commissioners.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I start by expressing to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) my huge admiration for his return here after his unimaginable and life-changing illness. As he joked, he broke all the rules and we were only too happy to reciprocate, with the whole House giving him a standing ovation. It was a fitting and moving moment.

Cheekily, may I also take this opportunity to congratulate my club—the club I also represent—Manchester City, on winning the premier league for a historic fourth time in a row? Saturday's FA cup final will be the only day that I support the blues, not the reds, for the next few weeks.

This week also marks the seventh anniversary of the Manchester Arena attack. It is a day that Mancunians will never forget. We remember those who died, who were injured and who are still affected. Yesterday, the Prime Minister promised Figen Murray, the mother of Martyn Hett, who was killed in the attack, that Martyn's law would be introduced before the summer recess. Regrettably, that now seems unlikely, but I hope whoever is returned after the election can bring in Martyn's law as soon as possible.

Yesterday's announcement came as a surprise. Despite being drowned out by "Things Can Only Get Better", we hear that the real reason the Prime Minister called the election is that he thinks things will only get worse for him. His abrupt Dissolution of Parliament means that he will start the campaign by leaving many Government commitments and Bills up in the air or in the bin. His pledge on a smoke-free generation, plans for a football regulator, promises to renters and leaseholders and protections for our broadcasters are now all at risk. I am pleased that very important commitments to victims of the Post Office and infected blood scandals will be honoured in our final business this week.

This is going to be a change election, but change comes sooner than expected for Members who are standing down. I will not mention them all, because I know we will have an opportunity for valedictory speeches tomorrow, but there are a few I want to mention today.

On this side of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House but also the political mum to many of us, has done so much for women and to bring about change. There are also the great Dames, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you have been a great friend to me and a wonderful parliamentarian over many years—and my right hon. Friends the Members for Derby South (Dame Margaret Beckett) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge): all powerful and highly respected women who have made a big and lasting impact.

My wonderful and popular hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Caerphilly (Wayne David) will be greatly missed.

Despite a T-shirt I wore recently, I have a number of friends on the Government Benches. The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was an outstanding Chair of the Education Committee, on which we served together—we share a mutual enjoyment of “Love Island”. I also have great respect for: the hon. Members for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), having worked alongside them on the House of Commons Commission; the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Dame Tracey Crouch), for all she has done on football regulation; and the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who needs to be found a seat fairly soon, for his great work on that issue, too.

I also take this opportunity to wish the Leader of the House well. She is perhaps best known for carrying a sword, but she is highly regarded in this place. She has been a formidable opponent and I shall miss our weekly exchanges. I am not sure that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) will miss them quite so much. I probably will not miss some of the Leader of the House’s more tortured metaphors, but I hope that she has the chance to install that new boiler and get herself a decorator crab, and has some time to put clothes on her action toy Ken, who of course has no balls—those who were here will remember that one well.

At least the election will give the Leader of the House ample opportunity to stand up and fight. We will be campaigning ferociously for different outcomes but, whatever happens, I thank her for her co-operation and collaboration, for making me raise my game in this place and for reminding me of how important a good blow dry is on these occasions.

Finally, although this place will be quieter in the coming weeks, I know that a lot of work is going on behind the scenes, with the hard-working House staff preparing for the next Parliament. I thank the Clerk and his teams in advance, and I also thank Liam Laurence Smyth for his decades of service to this House.

Until next time.

Penny Mordaunt: Madam Deputy Speaker, I start by sending you and all Members who are retiring from this place my good wishes and thanks for your service and friendship. I consider many of the hon. and right hon.

Members mentioned by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) to be hairdresser buddies. I wish everyone good luck for the next chapter.

Although today’s headlines are focused on Westminster and the forthcoming election, I take this opportunity to reassure people that all of us, especially those who hold ministerial office, will remain focused elsewhere, too.

Yesterday, I met some of the families of those still held hostage in Gaza: the families of Eli Sharabi, the late Yossi Sharabi, whose body is still held by Hamas, Naama Levy, Alon Ohel, Yair and Eitan Horn, Evyatar David and Guy Gilboa-Dalal. Our thoughts and focus will continue to be with them and all others who need our attention during this election period.

I also echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Manchester Central on the Manchester Arena bombing. She will know that matters such as Martyn’s law, which is a brilliant initiative, will be part of the wash-up process. I hope to be able to update the House in the coming day.

As this is the last business statement in this Parliament, I place on record my thanks to all those who work for the House, including the legislative, drafting and parliamentary teams, and my officials. Their professionalism throughout two very demanding and record-breaking legislative programmes has been exemplary.

I also thank my fellow cast members at business questions, my opposite numbers and commissioners, and their respective parties, and all those who have shown up each week to do their duty—none more so than the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I also thank the clerks and staff of the Privy Council. It has been a huge honour to have been able to assist His Majesty the King and the royal household through the loss of the late Queen Elizabeth II, and to support His Majesty during his early time as our sovereign. I am very proud of him and our royal family. They, and the service that surrounds them, are a reflection of the best of us.

That brings me to another group I must thank. We had the good news this week that inflation is down to 2.3%, which means that the cost of fuel, food and housing is beginning to stabilise, and we can all plan ahead with much more confidence. It is the British people we have to thank for that, as it is their achievement. Ours is the first major country to defeat inflation and we have done better than our neighbours. I want to remind us all why we have done so. It is because we are an experienced, determined, dynamic and innovative economy and country. We have made tough decisions and made the changes needed, and we took the consequences and it came good.

I thank everyone who tightened their belt and worked hard for their stoicism in the face of war in Europe, global shocks and the legacy of covid. I thank the public servants who knew that pay rises needed to be sustainable and kept services going. I thank business leaders who put in place efficiencies, did more with less, motivated and retained staff, and continued to grow their ventures. The public had many concerns, but chief among them was the cost of living. That is why the good economic news this week is so welcome. It shows that when we work together, all is possible.

I want to give my assurance to the victims of the infected blood scandal that this Government stand by the commitments made earlier this week. There is a

[Penny Mordaunt]

clear desire across the House to ensure that legislation to compensate those who have been infected and affected as a result of this scandal is passed, and that will be done on a cross-party basis. Today, the Lords will consider the Third Reading of the Victims and Prisoners Bill, and tomorrow this House will consider Lords amendments to the Bill which will establish the compensation scheme within three months of the Bill's receiving Royal Assent.

I want to give those same assurances to the individuals who have been victims of the Horizon Post Office scandal. This House will consider Lords amendments to the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill today, and I want to give this Government's commitment to those victims that, subject to the agreement of both Houses, which I am sure we will receive, the legislation to quash the convictions of those sentenced will be secured before the House prorogues.

Let me deviate from my script briefly to say that we will not leave this place until we have done our duty by those people. There are ongoing discussions about the remaining business on other Bills, which will be done on a cross-party basis. As is common practice during the wash-up, those negotiations will be ongoing and we will hope to update the House on further business.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central talks about the election, and democracy is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to think about what we want our nation to be in the next decade and the decades to come. The UK has been through tough times, but the choices we have made collectively have given us the freedom to be ambitious, both at home and abroad. The Chancellor's statement this week is testament to that, and this is why so much is at stake in the next few weeks. We Conservatives are undoubtedly the underdog in this fight, but I go into this election, where I will indeed be standing up and fighting, filled with optimism and hope. I say that because I am proud of our record, from our soaring literacy rates to our halving of crime. I am proud of my colleagues, none more so than my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). I am proud of my party and its mission to encourage and reward people who take responsibility, and I have always been proud of our country.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central and her leader are at a disadvantage as they go into this fight, because they are not proud of Labour's record; they are trying to disown it. The Labour leader has been distancing himself from his own MPs and candidates: the anti-business, anti-Israel, anti-opportunity, anti-responsibility, Britain-bashing brigade that sit on the Benches opposite. It says much about her party that its sole campaign narrative is that the Labour party is not really the Labour party at all. But recognising that it is at odds with the values of this nation is not the same as being supportive of them.

The public have been angry at us because of what we have had to deal with and because we have put the country first. The question is whether that red mist will blind them to what is on offer under the red flag: the burdens on business; Britain being tied back into the EU's regulatory straitjacket; the undermining of NATO through an EU defence pact; the undermining of our border through an EU migration pact; higher taxes; less disposable income; the wrecking ball that would be taken to our constitution; and the cuts to the NHS budget that Labour has so viciously made in Wales.

The fact is that nothing matters more to the Labour party than the interests of the Labour party and its paymasters. These are ruthless socialists led by a weak and unformed leader. In six weeks' time, we will know the answer from the British people. We Conservatives may be the underdog, but we are on the right side, and that is on the side of the British people.

Further business will not be announced in the usual way. [Laughter.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House and her Opposition counterparts for agreeing to get through changes to deal with the infected blood compensation and with the convictions of sub-postmasters and others.

I note that we have not heard that the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill can be brought forward. If that could be done, I would greatly welcome it. If it is not done, I hope to be back here in six weeks' time to campaign for it, because, like many of the MPs who are standing again and many who are not, I can say that most of our national campaigns come from the experience of a constituent, a friend or a member of our family. Translating what is individual and what is local into what is national and important is part of our role here.

May I join both Front-Bench spokespeople—through you, Madam Deputy Speaker—in thanking all the staff who have supported us and all those who, while we are away getting more exercise, will be making this place ready for our return?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his consistent appearances at business questions. Although there is a lot of speculation about the legislative programme, he will know that the negotiations with the Opposition parties are ongoing. However, I hope to update the House soon with regard to the Bill he mentions and further Bills.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): There are so many things I could ask the Leader of the House about today—and I know that tributes will be paid later by my right hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) to SNP Members who will be standing down—but yesterday I experienced another moment this week, along with the statement by Sir Brian Langstaff, that I will never forget. I was sitting in a room with infected blood survivors and families as the news sank in that just days after making a rightfully repentant statement to Parliament, her Prime Minister had decided to throw a snap election. I know that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) will be raising specifics with her, but will the Leader of the House give the House a guarantee now that the concerns that the infected and affected have arising from the Paymaster General's statement on Tuesday, about issues such as the continuation of support schemes, will be addressed and taken forward?

May I remind the Leader of the House of the offer she made to arrange at least a ministerial meeting with the chief executive officer of the Cold Chain Federation,

so that he can discuss the Brexit chaos at our borders? After the week's National Audit Office report on the £5 billion bill for Brexit border charges, that offer of a meeting between him and an appropriate Minister could not be more timely.

Given the general reluctance to talk about Brexit chaos, perhaps we might ask for a statement tomorrow on the legacy of 14 years of Tory chaos, as this Government stutter to their end. What a list we have to choose from: English rivers so filthy that the chief medical officer warns people not even to paddle in them; endless strikes in the NHS in England, with nurses using food banks to feed their families; national debt standing at more than £2 trillion; the highest personal tax burden since 1948; mortgages doubled or trebled almost overnight thanks to Tory incompetence; the multibillion-pound scandals of HS2, Ajax tanks and, of course, dodgy personal protective equipment covid contracts.

We could debate alternatives, but with Labour meekly accepting £18 billion in public service cuts, junking its £28 billion green spending promise and carrying on with the Brexit chaos, we will not find change on the Labour Benches. If this place ever looked to Scotland for inspiration instead, I would happily discuss the benefits of having a water service owned by the people, where profits do not fly into the hands of shareholders; a Scottish NHS, where there are no strikes; or a Government who protect their citizens and mitigate the cost of living crisis. I have only just scratched the surface, but I am aware that I am time limited, just like this Government.

Lastly, may I pay a genuine tribute to the Leader of the House for the enormous help she has been to the cause of Scottish independence? I wish her very well in her next career, whatever her future brings.

Penny Mordaunt: It is going to be a fun six weeks. I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to her colleagues who will be standing down at the election. I also pay tribute to the hon. Lady, whom I admire greatly. Rather like Monty Python's Black Knight, she returns every week, with no discernible loss of enthusiasm, threatening to bite my legs off. Her resilience in the midst of the implosion of her own party has been impressive; I gently say to her that that is a rather British quality. I do not know what she means about the cause of independence—the polls say that independence is losing considerable support—but our weekly exchanges have certainly gone down well with the Scottish Unionist contingent. What they will do, given that this will be our last exchange, I do not know.

I do not know where to start with the hon. Lady's list this week, but let me content myself with a two points. First, I say to her again that our economy is growing faster than the eurozone and our exports are at a record high. During the debates that she will have in the next six weeks, I hope she will learn more about the trajectory our nation is on and the new found freedoms businesses have, and congratulate businesses in Scotland, whether they provide goods or service, on how they are capitalising on that.

I gently remind the hon. Lady that when the Scottish NHS was struggling, it was this Government that offered support, which the Scottish Government turned down. They turned down additional help for Scottish citizens to get treated on the NHS for political reasons. That says something not just about her party's record, but about its political dogma and approach to the single

issue that it cares about above all else, including the wellbeing of Scottish citizens. I thank the hon. Lady and I wish her good luck in the following weeks.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is the last time I shall rise to speak in this greatest of all legislative Chambers. You have been a great friend, full of advice and support.

We are here not to build a legacy, but to get stuff done. In that spirit, I ask the Leader of the House to lend me her support. I chair the Country Food Trust, which works with over 1,000 food banks to bring prepacked venison to hungry people. We have been working tirelessly with fantastic officials and Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to get the deer management strategy launched. We are moments away from doing it, but we find ourselves in the wash-up. Please can I ask the Leader of the House to put her shoulder to the wheel and get this management strategy over the line? It will feed hungry people and save our woodland.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank Alison, Huw, Zoe and Martyn, who have been my Principal Clerks over my 12 years as a Select Committee Chair. And that is it. Good afternoon, thank you and goodbye.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Penny Mordaunt: I am glad that my hon. Friend attended business questions because we all owe him a huge debt of gratitude. The public may not know this, but my hon. Friend has worked behind the scenes to ensure that MPs are supported and can do their jobs well. He has introduced many new positive initiatives to take this place into the modern world, not least ensuring that when new Members of Parliament arrive in the next Parliament, alongside their parliamentary career they can gain qualifications that will enable them to go on and have careers after being in this place.

On behalf of us all, I thank him for his diligence and care for all of us. Given that stellar record, the least I can do is put my shoulder to the wheel and ensure that the Country Food Trust and the deer management strategy are taken care of. Although I cannot tell him the outcome, I shall certainly ensure his case is made.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): One consequence of holding a snap general election is that many Backbench debates that we had on the list and that were scheduled for forthcoming weeks will be put to one side. Some 14 debates had already been scheduled for Westminster Hall and the Chamber in the coming weeks. We have written to the successor Chair of the Committee, whoever that may be after the general election, care of the Leader of the House, so that she can act on it, pass on the note or leave it in a drawer for whoever succeeds the right hon. Lady, to suggest these subjects might be taken before the successor Committee is established in the new Parliament.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will sit down. I thank all the Clerks of the Backbench Business Committee, including Nick Taylor, the most recent Clerk, and Jim Davey,

[*Ian Mearns*]

who used to work in the Speaker's office. Many others have gone on to do great things within the clerking service of the House, having served as the Clerk of the Backbench Business Committee. Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am retiring, so with that, I sit down.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all that he has done as a fantastic Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. He has been diligent and brought in new innovations, and he has been a great addition to business questions every single week. I thank him sincerely for all he has done and wish him all the best in the future.

I am sorry that those who had debates scheduled will not be having them. In whatever capacity I can, I will ensure good facilitation between his tenure and the new tenure of the Backbench Business Committee.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your service. We have known each other for a considerable amount of time—perhaps too long. This is not a valedictory speech on my part—I will be standing and I intend to come back here on 5 July—but I wish you very well for a very happy future.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that I am sad that I was not asked to be a member of the hairdressing club—I simply cannot understand why. None the less, I would like to raise a couple of matters with her. The sudden election means two important matters that were passed into the Criminal Justice Bill by unanimous consent are in danger of falling: the cuckooing amendment, which will make it an offence to threaten people and take their household from them in order to run crime from there; and the dangerous cycling legislation, which will bring cyclists within the criminal justice system and the highway code. There was no opposition to either amendment, so will she take them forward for discussion? I do not know whether it is feasible, but can those two amendments get through the wash-up just as they are?

Finally, a hospital project in my constituency is being signed off this coming week and building is due to start on the scheme, for which my constituents have fought for over 50 years. Considering such projects need to be signed off by officials rather than Ministers, can work that was ready to go start anyway? Will she check that out for us?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising these important matters. He was right that those two measures had huge—unanimous—support across the House, and I will certainly make sure that all those involved in the wash-up process have heard what he has said today.

I will also send my right hon. Friend's office some advice about the ongoing work and the status of it and whether it can continue through the next few weeks.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I also pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker? I think you are a class act.

May I also thank the Leader of the House for all her work in delivering on the infected blood report, the apology and this week's statement on compensation? I take some comfort from what she said about the

Victims and Prisoners Bill. I hope very much that that Bill turned into law in the wash-up, particularly because it establishes the compensation authority, which will start to pay out compensation. It also has a clause in it around interim repayments for those who have never received a penny—the parents who lost children and the children who lost parents.

I noted that the Leader of House said, "We will not leave this place until we have done our duty." I just ask her whether she would put her shoulder to the wheel on one last thing, which is lobbying her colleagues to ensure that those infected and affected, who are now entering into a period of engagement with Sir Robert Francis to look at the detail of the compensation scheme that has been put forward, have access to lawyers and legal representation. This is a complicated matter. People are rightly concerned about it; they want to get this right and they want to engage, but they also need professional legal advice to be able to do so effectively. I wonder whether the Leader of the House might be able to help in this regard.

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by thanking the right hon. Lady for the incredible work that she has done on the infected blood issue? As well as helping on a number of occasions to get important things to happen, she has also been in communication with enormous numbers of people infected and affected by this and has given them confidence and comfort in the ordeal that they have gone through, and I know that the whole House thinks that of the right hon. Lady. I hope that my words at the Dispatch Box have given assurances to those people. I am very conscious that, having heard those statements on Monday, people will want to know that this will be delivered this week.

On the matter of interim payments and support schemes, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned, those things and that work will continue, and the support schemes will, as the Paymaster General said, run into next week. I will make sure that the right hon. Lady gets an update this afternoon on the specific issues that she raises. I also remind her that, when Sir Robert Francis started the compensation study, part of that initial process—even when the terms of reference were being set—was ensuring that those infected and affected had access to legal representation. And I do not think that Sir Robert Francis would want to progress in any other way. I will get an answer for the right hon. Lady with regard to the specifics.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish you well for the future.

Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate in these final days of this Parliament on protecting the green belt? Not only does it protect communities such as Barnet from urban sprawl, but it provides vital space for nature and habitats. Nature recovery and conservation is something that I have championed throughout my time in this Parliament, and I want the opportunity to reiterate my strong commitment to that crucial environmental goal.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work that she does in this area. We Conservatives will always take care of our rural areas and protect the green belt. Our revised national planning policy framework makes it clear that we have protection for the green belt.

We have also provided hundreds of millions to encourage development on brownfield land, instead of green belt, including the £550 million brownfield housing fund and the £180 million brownfield land release fund. May I take this opportunity to thank her for this important work not just in her own constituency, but around the country?

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I join others in wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the very best for whatever comes next.

As an election has been called and there is little time for Members who are standing down to be able to make arrangements to be here tomorrow, can I ask the Leader of the House to join me in thanking and welcoming the contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), and my right hon. Friends the Members for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie). They have all contributed so much to this place, but far beyond that, they have contributed to our party and to the independence movement over a significant amount of time. Their efforts have gone to great good, and I have no doubt that they will continue to do so.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for using this Business Statement to get on record his thanks and appreciation to all of his colleague. I wish them all well and I thank them for their service to this House.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you for your service to this House, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I place on the record my tribute to the director and staff of the Intelligence and Security Committee for their outstanding dedication and commitment to an area that is particularly important in this difficult and dangerous international environment? May I thank them for the work that they have done on preparing comprehensive annual reports and specialist studies on extreme right-wing terrorism, on the UK's international intelligence partnerships, and on a very well-received report on China, with a similar one on Iran to follow as soon as the redaction process is complete?

May I just bring to the attention of the Leader of the House the fact that the Committee has resolved that it will no longer be under the aegis of the Cabinet Office? The basic conflict of interest, whereby the careers of the staff of a Committee that oversees bodies that are housed in a Department are in the hands of people in that very same Department, has become unsustainable.

Finally, may I thank the Members of the Committee from all three parties and both Houses, who kept to the tradition of leaving party politics at the door? Despite an unpromising start, when an attempt was made to do away with that important principle, they came together and have shown complete unanimity and dedication to carrying out the work of the Committee, which is necessarily not done in the public view.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure the whole House will join my right hon. Friend in thanking all who enable this very important Committee to carry out its work. It is unseen work, but it is vital. I thank him also for the

outputs and those important reports that will strengthen our democracy and protect this nation from those who would do us harm. May I also thank him for ensuring that the Committee can remain properly independent, which he has safeguarded with this new innovation?

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Although we welcome the forthcoming election, long-awaited Bills on smoking, leasehold, rental reform, which is desperately needed, and football governance will all fall. Is that not somewhat breaking a promise made in 2019?

Penny Mordaunt: The motion that I will bring forward shortly will give us flexibility to put through all that is required before the end of this Session. The hon. Lady will know that the wash-up negotiations are still going on, so I cannot say at the moment exactly which Bills will or will not be in, but we need cross-party support at this stage of the Parliament to get this legislation through. I will do all I can to make sure that the Bills that are supported are in that final wash-up.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your service, and for calling me to make my last contribution in this House, after over 40 years. I also thank the staff of the House and of my European Scrutiny Committee, which I have had the honour of chairing since 2010, and all Members of the House, of whatever stripe, for their massive contribution to our democracy in this great Parliament.

My Committee is looking at the question of the UK's sovereignty in Gibraltar. The UK-EU treaty, which is under negotiation, and on the subject of which the Foreign Secretary appeared before us the other day, deals with vital UK defence and Schengen border issues that cause us great concern. Has the Leader of the House been made aware that the constitution of Gibraltar, including its section 47, per section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, sets out specific UK sovereignty reservations regarding external affairs, defence, internal security and the functions of the Secretary of State for Defence? None of those must be compromised.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his decades of service to this House and the country. The work that his Committee has done in particular is considerable. I served on it briefly, for about three years, and in our first sitting I needed a trolley to get the papers for the meeting to the relevant Committee Room. It is a huge amount of work, and we have been enormously helped by his attention to detail and huge expertise in this area. On many highly technical issues, he often turns out to be right. I am aware of the issue that he raises, and have expressed my interest in it to the relevant Departments. He leaves a great legacy in this place, and whatever the future holds, I am assured that the issues that he cares deeply about—of course, in large part due to his efforts, we now have opportunities and freedoms to exploit, and can enjoy and protect the interests of this country—will be in good hands, and that is largely down to him.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I have been contacted today by Action on Smoking and Health, which does important work on curbing the harms of smoking and vaping. Like me, it is perplexed and very

[Kirsten Oswald]

disappointed that the Tobacco and Vapes Bill will apparently not progress because it is not included in the wash-up. I should not be surprised that the Government also appear to have abandoned the commitment that they gave me last week on banning vape advertising in sport. The Prime Minister stood in Downing Street yesterday and trumpeted the Bill as his legacy, but that is absolute nonsense if it has been abandoned. Can the Leader of the House bring pressure to bear regarding the Bill? There is the potential to stop the terrible devastation that tobacco causes, and to curb the damage that vapes are doing to our environment and young people. Will she do what is necessary to add it to the wash-up?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that the Bill was supported by a large number of people in the House, and clearly the Prime Minister also feels passionately about it. I will ensure that what the hon. Lady and others have said is taken into account during the wash-up. I hope that the House will be updated soon.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): When my right hon. Friend is promoted to an even bigger job in the Cabinet after the election, will she leave a note on her desk for her successor? Unlike a previous note, it will not say that there is no more money, or anything like that; it will concern restoration and renewal. I am her representative on the programme board. Frankly, for too long we have wasted time on endless sterile debates on whether we should decant. Under her leadership, the programme board and the House of Commons Commission are now promoting the idea of enhanced maintenance around us. Will she confirm that we can get on with that work, and do not need a new Act of Parliament? The real threat to this building is fire. We have a responsibility to future generations. We have to get on with this work now.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for all his work on the programme board and under previous governance structures to champion a pragmatic approach to restoration and renewal. Obviously a huge amount needs to be done in future years, but we can also get on with things now. One product of the programme board on which he has served is that we have projects that we can do now, while increasing our knowledge about how to approach such projects on the estate. All the options in front of the House are much more pragmatic. They are based on a realistic timeframe, and will give people, not least the British taxpayer, confidence about the future.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I, too, wish you well in the future, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 6 December last year, the Justice Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and promised this House a debate on the Government's response to Bishop James Jones's report, "The patronising disposition of unaccountable power": A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated". The House had to wait seven years for the Government to respond, and then failed to hold a debate in the new year, as they promised. Will the Leader of the House convey to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State the deep disappointment of the families and survivors of the Hillsborough disaster? I hope that in the next Parliament, we will finally see a full Hillsborough law put on the statute book.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for getting that important point on the record. I will ensure that the relevant Departments have heard what he said.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am sure that you will be missed by many in this House. Back in 2019, it was an honour to come to this place to represent Hyndburn and Haslingden, and really push forward the Government's levelling-up agenda. Since then, we have seen over £55 million of levelling-up funding, a banking hub coming to Great Harwood, school rebuild programmes in Haslingden, and funding for Haslingden market. Does the Leader of the House agree that investing in northern towns needs to continue to be a priority, so that we truly level up the north of England?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all her hard work and achievements for her constituents. I have visited her constituency and know that her work is appreciated by many people she represents. She is absolutely right, and has fought for the things that will make the biggest difference to her constituents. I congratulate her on it.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Shocking figures announced yesterday showed a 416% increase in weapon and knife crime in Blackpool—the fourth-largest increase in the country. Violent crime has doubled, and public order offences are up by nearly 500%, with neighbourhood policing cut by a drastic 33% in my area. What will the Government do to rebuild community neighbourhood policing in Blackpool and tackle the huge knife crime issue that we have?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. Knife crime devastates lives, and we now have some of the toughest laws in the world to tackle it, with bans on particular knives, and a huge effort made by our local police. Since 2019, we have taken 138,000 weapons off our streets, and violent crime has fallen by 44% since we took office in 2010, but there are pockets where it is still a huge issue. I commend the work that the voluntary sector is doing, including the Knife Angel and many other groups, many of which are led by victims of knife crime or their families. I will ensure that the Home Office has heard what he said.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I endorse the thanks to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker and his other Deputies. In the spirit of conviviality and equanimity that has prevailed, and knowing from experience that Members from across the House are here because they want to do the best for their constituents, I urge the Leader of the House in the national interest to arrange, even at this late stage, an urgent statement on how public procurement can serve the common good. My constituency in Lincolnshire is the food basket of Britain, making products that fill shelves and shops across the country. We really need to use public money to buy British and back Britain.

Penny Mordaunt: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. As he knows, there has been a huge focus in our food strategy on ensuring that we do that, and some of our colleagues have provided additional innovation: people can now ensure that they are buying

British produce when they shop at a supermarket, or order from a supermarket online. I cannot promise him a statement, but I will ensure that the Department hears what he said. I thank him for being a champion of all things British, including British produce, and for supporting our farmers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I wish you a happy retirement—from this place, at least, Madam Deputy Speaker? I am sure we will see you in many other guises in times to come.

We are so grateful to our constituents for holding our feet to the fire and raising their greatest concerns. Housing injustice has been the issue at the top of my constituents' list in York Central. However, the legislation to try to change the environment around housing does not seem to be progressing. Can the Leader of the House say what exactly is happening to the Renters (Reform) Bill, which would have a significant impact on my constituents? Furthermore, after my championing of my Short-term and Holiday-let Accommodation (Licensing) Bill, what is happening to the regulations to put controls on Airbnbs and other short-term holiday lets? Those regulations were promised by this summer, and as we enter the holiday season, 2,000 properties in my city are being used for holiday homes, as opposed to family homes.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady mentions some very important legislation, and she knows that it will be partly the subject of the negotiations that are going on. I hope to be able to update her soon. I will ask the Department to provide her office with an update on the regulations, so that she knows where the Department is in that process.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): May I associate myself with earlier remarks about your pending retirement, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Ever since I first rose to speak from this very spot 14 years ago, I have tried to champion my constituency in this place. The impending Dissolution brings to mind unfinished business. In that light, may I raise with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House again the tragic and brutal murder of young Thomas Roberts on the Old Christchurch Road in my constituency, just over two and a half years ago? The perpetrator of that murder should never have been in the United Kingdom. He is now rightly serving life behind bars. He lied about his age: he said he was 14 when he was in fact 18, and he was placed in a secondary school in my constituency. He was reported to social services and the police, but little action was taken. There was a litany of failures by public institutions, leading to that senseless and needless murder two and a half years ago.

Replying to an Adjournment debate, the then Minister for the Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), told me he could not go into the detail while a Home Office investigation was proceeding. Twice now the Home Office has refused to publish even the headline findings of the inquiry that it commissioned. I spoke recently to Thomas's father Philip, who does not understand why internal processes are preventing the Home Office from bringing into the public domain the findings of that report, what lessons have been learned and which individuals will be held to account. Even at 10 minutes to midnight in this Parliament,

can my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House think of any mechanism to draw the matter to the attention of the Home Office? I hope that I and other Members will not let it go in the next Parliament.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he is doing on behalf of Thomas and his family. It was a tragic situation, with layer on layer of failure leading to an appalling outcome. I will write to the Home Office following this business statement and ask that a Minister or senior official updates my right hon. Friend on the situation. I will do all I can in the remainder of this Parliament to help him make progress on this extremely important matter, as I know is necessary to bring some comfort to Thomas's family.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I take this opportunity to wish you well for the future, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I raise with the Leader of the House the issue of the global ocean treaty? The papers to ensure ratification of that treaty, which would bring about the protection of 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, were laid before Parliament a year ago. The treaty is supported by all parties in the House, obviously including the Government, and the legislation could go through very quickly in the wash-up. That would allow us to join other nations that have ratified the treaty, and help to bring it into international law. It would be a step towards reducing pollution in our oceans, and an opportunity to say thank you to the many environmental groups, including Greenpeace, that have done so much campaigning to make sure that the law comes about, and against pollution going into our oceans from our privatised water companies, which pour far too much sewage into the sea. Can the Leader of the House give us some hope that legislation will be passed quickly during the wash-up, to hasten progress on protecting the world's oceans?

Penny Mordaunt: This is a matter close to my heart. My own campaign staff and the Conservative Friends of the Ocean have campaigned particularly on this issue. What is needed to ensure that our rivers and seas are clean is a massive investment in infrastructure—the largest investment in infrastructure and the largest infrastructure project of its kind in the world. That is what is taking place in the United Kingdom because of this Conservative Government, and in short order we will have eradicated storm overflows. The public can follow that work: it is being tracked on the Water UK website and they can see all the projects that are under way and contributing to that goal. I will certainly ensure that the right hon. Gentleman's concerns have been heard. I do not think it is necessary for the treaty to be part of the wash-up, but it will clearly be an issue for the new Parliament and I shall ensure that people have heard what he has said.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I hand over to the Chairman of Ways and Means, may I thank right hon. and hon. Members for the very kind words they have said during this business statement? It will obviously be the last business statement that I will be in the Chair for. It is always a highlight of the week to see colleagues raising a dizzying array of concerns on behalf of their constituents and a great opportunity for them to pursue the causes in which they

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

believe. Thank you very much for everything you have said, and I particularly thank those colleagues who have praised our very hard-working staff members in the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is goodbye from me and it is goodbye from her.

Sir Conor Burns: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before you took the Chair, numerous Members paid tribute to the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton). I have been looking at the Twitter machine—something that would not have been allowed when I was first elected to this place—and I have seen that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have also announced you are leaving the House of Commons when we dissolve. May I be the first to wish you all happiness and success and thank you for your many years of service to this Parliament?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much indeed. I will not say too much in reply, lest the tears come back to my eyes again. My fellow Madam Deputy Speaker and I have carried out quite a double act these last few years. I will miss all of you, and her, very much indeed. Thank you.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I feel it is incumbent on me to say, “There’s nothing like a Dame.” I am very grateful to both of you in a personal regard. You have always helped me enormously, mainly through your sense of style, and I hope the House will continue to benefit from your legacy in that regard.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much. I suppose it could be said, “What’s worse than encountering a Dame? Encountering two Dames together!”

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a fellow Doncaster MP, it is only right that I thank Madam Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), for all her hard work, which is very much appreciated. I know that it must have been difficult for her sometimes to listen to a Conservative Member of Parliament, but throughout my time in this place, she has been nothing but professional and fair in the Chair, so I thank her on my behalf and that of the people of Doncaster.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That is very nice.

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday in the House, every single Member was moved by the account of my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) about the extraordinary challenges that he has faced and overcome, but many Members of this House face extraordinary challenges, including with their health. Those challenges are often invisible—known to us but not beyond this place. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, have been a model, as someone who has faced such challenges, overcome them and returned to this House to preside with dignity and grace. It has been a great pleasure to be in the

House for the whole time that you have been here. I hope to continue, and I hope that I can follow your example as I do.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much indeed, Sir John, my dear friend of 27 years. Doesn’t time fly when you are enjoying yourself?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I also add my thanks to you and the other Madam Deputy Speaker? You have always been enormously kind to me. I know that I am often quite eager to make a contribution, and you have always done your best to ensure that that happens. I suspect that, because of my language and the way I speak at 100 miles an hour, it may not always be possible to know exactly what the words are, but I know that you understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, given that we are Gaelic cousins—you are Scottish and I am Northern Irish, so we share that interest. I was very pleased to find out that you are a Rangers supporter. Next year will be our year, and I hope that we will remember it more than most. I will miss you and the other Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for keeping me right, as well as for telling me off the odd time as well—I probably needed it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman speaks in this House more than anyone—possibly more than everyone else put together—but it is always a pleasure to hear what he says, and I thank him very much for his kind comments.

I think that I had better not take any further points of order lest we deflect from the business statement and the work that the Leader of the House has to do. I call Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to you and Dame Rosie for your service to the House, which has been long and very valuable.

Colleagues are asking for items to be dealt with in the wash-up, so may I give a big push to my private Member’s Bill? The Zoological Society of London (Leases) Bill, is currently in the Lords, where it has been given its Second Reading, having passed unopposed and unamended in this place. If we could get it into statute, everyone would be grateful.

As we approach the 4 July election, it is fair to say that the voters of this country have a choice. In exercising that choice, they can look to Wales, where Labour has been in power and a disaster, and to Scotland, where the SNP has been in power and another disaster, but we in London can look even closer at what it has been like to live under the Labour Mayor. I could go through a litany of his disasters, but his latest ruse to improve the air quality in London is to order electric buses from China, even though suitable buses are available in this country and would provide jobs for people here. Will my right hon. Friend set out the choice that people will have come 4 July?

Penny Mordaunt: I will ensure that all those involved in wash-up have heard what my hon. Friend has said about his private Member’s Bill, which I know is popular and well supported. I thank him for all his work on it.

With regards to the Mayor of London's choice to purchase buses from China, I think it is consistent with Labour's policy towards green energy, the main beneficiary of which does appear to be China.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the other Madam Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton). You have both generally dealt with my requests with pragmatism and kindness, unless I deserved otherwise.

The Media Bill was well supported across the House. It is not perfect, but a huge number of people did a huge amount of work to get it through. The Government's timetable for Committee stage was incredibly tight, and Committee members pooled together and worked incredibly hard on it. Today, we have had a letter from those in charge of Channel 4, BBC, STV and MG Alba, among others, making clear the importance of the Bill. The last media Bill was passed when teletext was still cutting edge, so we really need this Media Bill to go through. In her discussions about wash-up, I urge the Leader of the House to stress the Bill's importance for media organisations, particularly those in broadcast media. I believe that there is significant cross-party support for the Bill, particularly as it relates to broadcasting and on-demand radio services.

Penny Mordaunt: It is a very important Bill, and I know that a huge amount of work has been done by Members on both sides of the House. It was awaiting its Third Reading in the House of Lords. I cannot tell the hon. Lady at the moment, but I hope that the House will soon be updated about all the Bills that can be brought forward.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I wish you all the very best in your future life, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Leader of the House for her weekly feast of "Penny TV" every Thursday, which keeps many colleagues and constituents inspired and enthused. Will she join me in paying tribute to all those who are leaving this place at the end of this Parliament by agreeing that the privilege of serving in Westminster is, in reality, about good people working together by consensus and as a team to make the country a better place, and doing their very best under huge pressure?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. All the issues raised in these sessions are very important, but so is morale, and I hope that we have all contributed to it in these sessions. He is right that these sessions quite often show the best of this House, not just this week but in previous weeks. I hope that that encourages people to consider whether they might be able to serve in this place.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I would be remiss if I did not thank members of the all-party group on post offices for the huge support that they have given me in my time as chair. I thank especially the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—who I do not think is a member but has been a huge help to me in my time—and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). The APPG is a prime example of cross-party working in this place.

I cannot go without mentioning Lord Arbuthnot, who has sought to amend the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill during its passage through the other place. He introduced me to Sir Wyn Williams, who chaired the inquiry. All Members—me especially—will follow what is happening closely. Paula Vennells, the former chief executive officer, faced questions yesterday—and will again today and tomorrow—and some of the absolutely awful things coming out should make us all greet.

I lost my fight in this place to have Scotland included in the Horizon Bill, but I am sure that it will go through, as it is included in wash-up, for which I am grateful. I assure Scottish postmasters who were affected and have not yet been exonerated that once the Bill is officially passed in this Parliament, the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences (Scotland) Bill will go through the Scottish Parliament, although they may have to wait a day or two, because that is how Parliaments work. I thank the Leader of the House for the help she has given me personally when I have been at her every week on a certain topic. I just add that what is said in this place is not personal, and from my point of view, it never has been.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for all the work she has done on many issues, but in particular on the matter of the Post Office, and for getting her thanks to her colleagues on record today—chief among them my noble Friend Lord Arbuthnot, who has been a fierce champion for all those who fell victim to the Horizon scandal. She will know that Scotland needs to legislate on this issue, and I am glad that she has been able to get on record some comfort about the timeframe once the Bill receives Royal Assent here and what will follow in Scotland, for the benefit of those who may be watching. I also thank her for the fact that she has never played the man, and always the ball, which is very much appreciated by all Members of this House.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): May I express my deep sadness at hearing that you are no longer going to be in this place, Madam Deputy Speaker? You have been formidable, yet incredibly kind, and for me personally you have been a mentor and a friend, so thank you. I feel very sad that you are moving on; I will leave further remarks for private, before I get teary myself.

On that note, will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House join me in thanking Rev. Tony Rindl, the current Vicar of Watford, for his many years of service to our town of Watford before he moves to new pastures in the coming months? He has been an incredible force for the town—a force for good, as one might imagine—and over the past year or so, I have been fortunate to spend 48 hours with him, during which we shadowed each other. I spent time in St Mary's church, seeing the work that he did there, and I brought him to Parliament and we spent time here so that he could see what I was doing in this place. We realised our commonality of purpose in serving the community. He has been an incredible advocate for those who are vulnerable in our town, and has made a very considerable contribution to Watford. He will be sorely missed, so I hope my right hon. Friend will join me in thanking him and wishing him well in his new role.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure the whole House joins my hon. Friend in what he has said about Rev. Tony Rindl. We all wish him well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for her very kind comments earlier, which were much appreciated.

As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, and as the Leader of the House and others in this House know, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, each week I bring to the attention of the Leader of the House human rights issues and persecution across the world. In the APPG, we speak up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith. It is really important to have that opportunity, and the Leader of the House always makes sure that the relevant Minister is made aware of the issue. I almost always get a letter from the Minister to reassure me and let me know what is happening, so I thank the Leader of the House very much for that.

Today, I will take this last opportunity to ask a question, and speak on the threat to religious diversity and inclusion in Nepal. Amid political unrest in the country, many Hindu nationalists have been actively seeking radical governmental change that would lead to Nepal becoming a Hindu nationalist state, meaning that those with Christian faith and other ethnic minorities will be persecuted, ostracised and discriminated against. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is in His Majesty's Government's interest to take a firm stand against institutionalised religious or belief discrimination anywhere in the world, including in states that are privy to the UN's universal declaration of human rights, which Nepal has ratified? It is for those people that I bring these issues to the attention of the House every week, and every week, the Leader of the House takes them forward to the next stage.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and his very important question. This week will be no exception: I will make sure that the Foreign Office hears what he has said. The relationship we have with Nepal is an important one, and we want to make sure that human rights are being upheld.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I join those who have said kind words? You, the other Deputy Speakers, and Mr Speaker have made sure that when I have been overly zealous, I have been put down to the bottom of the list. I have now been called before the very end of questions, so it seems that the penny has finally dropped on that front.

We have had a lot of funding for Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, but it would be remiss of me not to have one more go—one more bid to make sure we get one more important piece of funding for the great mother town of Burslem, where I have been working with Port Vale football club and Stoke-on-Trent College. We want the levelling-up partnership to be enacted in that great town. We want to see Sproson Park get a new special educational needs and disabilities playground, fenced with multi-sports fields, a café and classrooms for Port Vale's exciting future England talents, such as Baylee Dipepa, who has just been drafted into the England under-17s team for the Euros championship.

We also want an advanced skills centre at Stoke-on-Trent College's Burslem campus, equipping the next generation with the skills we need for the jobs and technologies of the future. Sadly, there is not time for another Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Question

Time, so I hope the Leader of the House will write to the relevant Minister to lend her support and say that that bid must be approved before we dissolve Parliament, so that the people of Burslem get that long-overdue investment in their great town.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend, and congratulate him on all he has achieved for his constituency. He is an absolute champion—although, as we have established, not always a well-behaved one in this Chamber. I will certainly make sure I do all I can to assist him in getting something further, and it is a great credit to him that on the penultimate sitting day of this Parliament, he is still fighting for his constituents.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Thank you for your service, Madam Deputy Speaker, and for all the support you have given me, as well as—I am sure—all new by-election winners in this Parliament and previous ones.

The Government have stood four-square behind my vision to make the city of Southend safer, healthier and wealthier for all. They have banned nitrous oxide, tackled zombie knives, provided £180 million for south Essex hospitals, and approved the first new clam fishery in the Thames estuary for centuries. However, can I ask the Leader of the House to put her shoulder firmly behind the wheel to get the Pet Abduction Bill through wash-up and on to our statute book? My No. 1 mission is to build on Sir David's legacy. The Pet Abduction Bill is a big part of that, and I would like to end this Parliament as I began it, by saying that if we get that Bill on to the statute book, Sir David's light remains.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend, and congratulate her on all that she has done for her constituency. I may have dreamt this, but I think my hon. Friend recently abseiled down something very tall dressed as Wonder Woman. I would like to suggest to her that she campaigns over the next six weeks as Wonder Woman, but I have some reluctance about doing so, because she might actually go through with it.

My hon. Friend has done a huge amount for her constituency, taking forward our dear, late colleague David's legacy on so many things: not just the status of Southend, but the Music Man Project and many other fantastic local organisations. The Pet Abduction Bill will be part of the negotiations that are going on, but we have managed to get many manifesto commitments with regard to animal welfare over the line, and I will do my best to ensure that they all do so.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all colleagues who are either standing down voluntarily, or are advised to do so by our constituents, very happy years outside this House.

As I come towards the statutory end of six years as chairman of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, I thank our patron Mr Speaker for his support, and all fellow cross-party governors over the years for their help in promoting, supporting and shaping the strategy of that great British democracy organisation, which has wonderful staff from, and in, many countries around the world. Whatever our differences, we are all strong believers in democracy, and we should go on sharing our successes and failures around the world for decades to come.

Can I also highlight to the Leader of the House the importance of the Criminal Justice Bill, not least the fact that if it goes through, spiking will be a criminal offence under the law for the first time ever?

Lastly, will my right hon. Friend join me in offering her support—perhaps everyone in the House could do so—to Gloucester Rugby in the final tomorrow of the European Challenge cup against the South African Hollywoodbets Sharks? Will she make sure that officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Sport England are working hard to resolve the issue of the covid loans, so that great British rugby clubs such as Gloucester Rugby, which is in its 51st year, can go into next season financially secure?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done over the many years for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy—an organisation with which we are all familiar and with which many Members have worked—to ensure that democracy is strong in many places around the world. Of course, we have an opportunity over the next few weeks to demonstrate how well elections can be done and how well we can conduct ourselves during the course of an election. I assure him that I will ensure that those who need to hear will have heard what he has said about the Criminal Justice Bill, and I will also write to DCMS on his behalf about the loans issue.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you have given great service to this House. I alerted the other Madam Deputy Speaker to the fact that I would mention somebody else who has done that. We have just arrived at the point where Shirley Tovell in my team has been working for Members of this House for 55 years. [HON. MEMBERS: "Wow!"] She has been working for the people of Harborough, Oadby and Wigston since 1992. Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, she is incredibly hard working and has wonderful energy, so I thought I would pay tribute to her in this House.

Will the Leader of the House allow a debate on and talk to the Department for Transport about the crucial issue of bridge closures during rail electrification works? I lobbied for the extension of rail electrification through Harborough up to Wigston at an early stage, and we are now getting the whole of the midland main line electrified, which is a wonderful investment that make trains quieter, greener, cheaper and faster. It is a great thing, but the bridge closures during it have been disruptive. I am chasing Network Rail about sorting out a massive puddle it has created at the end of a bridge at Kibworth. In Newton Lane, a bridge has been shut for too long. I have had endless meetings, and it is finally opening next week.

Most importantly, I organised a meeting about the lessons learned, and the first place we need to learn those lessons relates to Spion Kop bridge, which is a vital artery between Wigston and South Wigston in my constituency. The next stage of the electrification works will take the wires under that bridge, and Network Rail is looking at the different options. There are options that involve the bridge closing, and there are potentially more expensive options that could keep it open. Will the Leader of the House write to the Department for Transport about that? The project is currently ahead of schedule and under budget, so let us use some of that resource to do whatever it takes to stop that bridge closing, as it would be a disaster if it shuts. Will she please

write to the Prime Minister and the Department for Transport about this, so that we do not have to shut Spion Kop bridge?

Penny Mordaunt: I will absolutely do what my hon. Friend asks—I shall do that this afternoon—and I thank him for the diligence with which he is approaching this issue for his constituents, even on the penultimate sitting day of this Parliament.

When my hon. Friend mentioned his colleague Shirley and her incredible decades of service to this House, there was an audible noise of support in acknowledging that huge achievement and the depths of her duty to this place and to his constituency.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I associate myself with the very justifiable compliments that have been paid to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your work in this place.

Would the Leader of the House be good enough to make representations for my private Member's Bill, the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill, to be included in the wash-up business to be considered tomorrow in the other place? The Bill is fortunate to have strong support from Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, to be a manifesto commitment and to have had very strong cross-party support during the progress on and completion of its stages in this place. I am confident it has support from every party and, in fact, I do not know of a single Member in this place who opposes the Bill. Its aim is to do good for the most disadvantaged and persecuted across the world, so I thank all those who have supported it, not forgetting—how could I?—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), with his enduring and heartfelt support not only for this Bill, but for all those across the world who suffer on account of their religion or belief. He truly is, and I hope will continue to be, a voice for the voiceless in this place.

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly make sure that those involved in the wash-up negotiations have heard what my hon. Friend has said. I do understand how well supported the Bill is. I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for all she has done in this Parliament to promote religious freedom. Again, along with many Members from across the House, she has done not just this place but many nations and many people around the world a huge service.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): First, let me put on the record my thanks to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You were very kind to me when I first entered this place, and it has not been forgotten. I would also like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for his help over the past few years, and for all the years he has put in here. It has been the greatest honour to represent the people of Doncaster, and I hope they will return me to represent the people of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), because Axholme is part of that seat at the moment, and when I talk to people on the doorstep, they speak very highly of him, so I would like to put on record my thanks to him.

Does the Leader of the House agree that Doncaster has been given huge amounts of money and huge support from this Conservative Government? The two things I have campaigned on most were for a new hospital

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and for Doncaster airport to open again. Does she agree that the best way of achieving those two goals, and getting people flying from Doncaster airport once more, is to elect a Conservative Member of Parliament for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme?

Penny Mordaunt: I have many diligent colleagues, but I think my hon. Friend is one of the most determined champions for his local community. I know that he has managed to get the airport to reopen, and that a 125-year lease was signed in March. He has a new university technical college—it opened a few years ago—which I know is providing a new route for young people to keep them in education and provide them with an incredible start to very exciting careers. He has new bus routes, he has sorted out fly-tipping and I know personally how hard he has worked to get money into local high streets. He has delivered tens of millions for local towns and levelling-up projects, as well as for many others. I think his constituents are in good hands, and I hope he gets the opportunity to do much more for them. I congratulate him on all that he has done.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I add my voice to those across the House in thanking you for your service?

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House may know that I have an interest in steel. I am pleased to tell her that, after four and a half years of hard work and support from this Government, when I go home tomorrow there will still be a steelworks in my home town of Scunthorpe, and that steelworks will still be making the finest steel in the world. However, she will know that negotiations are ongoing between industry and Government for further support. Can she say anything in general terms about whether such conversations between Departments and the industry will continue over the coming weeks?

Penny Mordaunt: Our party has long had an iron lady, and it now has a steel lady. I congratulate her on all her achievements, not just those her constituents will benefit from in keeping that vital industry going—it is vital for the economic wellbeing of her constituents—but the service she has done to the nation in retaining this incredibly important sovereign capability and the wider steel industry. I will ensure that she gets an update on progress on the specific point she raised. Of course, no new policy decisions will be taken during the election period or purdah, but the Government are of course still going and we will be looking out for her constituency's interests.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I will be the last Member of Parliament for Sedgefield, but I hope to be the first Member of Parliament for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor. Like many colleagues, I would like thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues for welcoming me to this place. He is not in the Chamber at the moment, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a perfect example of cross-party working and engaging with people, and I really thank him for that.

Could I encourage any possible progress on the Prison Media Bill, led by my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher), to restrict social

media access in prisons, which would give some comfort to my constituent Zoey McGill, who sadly lost her son to knife crime?

We have had strong decisions and clear direction from the Prime Minister since he came into post, enabling the Leader of the House to manage business particularly well. How does she think business questions would survive in the event of a Labour Government, because with the speed at which the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) changes his mind, we might need them daily?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all that he has achieved for his current constituency. I hope that he has the opportunity to continue serving, because he does a fantastic job for his constituents and is one of the hardest working Members in this place. I also thank him for his kind words about cross-party working. A lot of good is done on that basis in this place, although it rarely gets a lot of attention, so I am glad that he has shone a spotlight on it this afternoon. He is right that the prospect of Labour being at the helm during business questions is not something I wish to contemplate, which is why I will do everything I can over the next six weeks to ensure continuity on this side of the Dispatch Box.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Danny Kruger.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): My sincere thanks to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all Members who are stepping down, particularly my great friend the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), to whom, more than any other individual, this country owes the restoration of parliamentary sovereignty, and there can be no greater legacy for an MP.

It is very good news that inflation is coming down, particularly because of global energy prices, but business energy costs remain high for many of our constituents. In particular, one agricultural business in my constituency is facing an extraordinary rise in the standing charges it has to pay: it has to pay £32,000 before it even starts to pay for electricity, and the electricity itself will cost only £12,000. The Government, commendably, are asking Ofgem to look at the impact of standing charges on household consumers, but will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to request that Ofgem also looks at the impact on businesses?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and I will certainly write to the Department and ask that it makes that request to Ofgem. I remind colleagues that clearly people will want casework and support for constituents and businesses to continue. I know that Ofgem is particularly interested in the practices of individual suppliers, so I would encourage my hon. Friend to do that. For as long as I can, I will be able to assist hon. Members in that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Robin Millar.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and thank you also for your kind and carefully chosen words to me at different times through

this Parliament; they have been much appreciated. The contributions in this Chamber over the past day or so have given me cause to reflect that each of us owes our place here not just to desire and effort, but actually to the mercy of God as well.

When I was growing up in north Wales, it was with an unspoken expectation that I would have to leave in order to find a job, build a career and make something of myself. But now, after four years, I can say that the Conservative MPs in north Wales have managed to secure a freeport in Ynys Môn and an investment zone in Wrexham, both of which will bring new business, new technology and new jobs to north Wales. We have also secured £1 billion for investment in the north Wales main line, which will connect families to each other and people to business, and connect to more investment and even to public services across the border. And of course yesterday we heard that there will be a nuclear future in Wylfa, which will bring thousands of jobs and the creation of green energy to north Wales. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given that record of delivering for the people of north Wales over the past four years, young people there can now look to a future where they can develop the skills they need for the jobs they want, and build the homes and make the place for themselves that they deserve in north Wales?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I congratulate him on the role he has played in securing the investment and opportunities for his constituents and for Wales more widely. I know that he has also brought in a long-term plan for towns, with up to £20 million for his local area, and of course there is £5 million for the agrifood launchpad. In addition to the rail investment he mentioned, we have two new investment zones for Wales, as well as the extension of the existing zone project from five to 10 years and an additional £111 million for round 3 levelling-up projects supporting a further seven projects. Over £1.5 billion of levelling-up funding has been allocated to Wales since the start of the current spending review. He has been involved in all of that. He is a huge champion for Wales and for his constituency, and I wish him good luck in the coming weeks.

Points of Order

2.25 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I spoke earlier, you had not yet announced that you will standing down, so I did not have the opportunity to thank you enormously for being such a wonderful Deputy Speaker. You are formidable, you are fair, and you offer this House a great deal of humour and good interjection. You will not have heard me say earlier that I very much respect your style; you, me, the Leader of the House and the other Madam Deputy Speaker all share a love for getting our hair done nicely, so thank you very much for that inspiration.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I, too, wish to pay tribute to you and offer you immense thanks for being such a wonderful colleague. People know you for many things: you are formidable in the Chair, and you are an incredibly stylish and generous individual. I will share just one instance with hon. Members. In the week of the late Queen's death, I had arrived on Monday as a junior Trade Minister with enough clothes for four days. I do not have a home in London and was unable to go back to Portsmouth, so I had no clothes to wear, let alone anything black. It was thanks to your initiative and kindness that I was dressed for the Accession Council—your hairband, in particular, became a global viral sensation. It is just one example of your care for all of us. Thank you also for being a role model for women in this place. I wish you well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you very much indeed—the tears are definitely coming now. Who would have known of our skills in millinery, but it is amazing what one has to turn one's hand to in this place, especially in an emergency. People see the tip of the iceberg; they have no idea how much is going on underneath the surface.

It is very difficult to leave a job that one loves. For me, being Chairman of Ways and Means is the tip of my iceberg, or the summit of my Everest—something like that. As far as I am concerned, it is the best job in the world, and it is very difficult to leave. I am also honoured to have served the people of Epping Forest for 27 years. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. I would like it to be thought that I was 20 when I started, but that is not quite correct. But 27 years has flashed by and this is very difficult; I guess that is why it took me until 1 o'clock today to tell people I will not be coming back after the election. But the time comes when the right thing to do is stand aside and give others the opportunities that I have been so fortunate to have. I am very touched by everything that everyone has said today—and I will stop now in case the tears come. Thank you.

BILLS PRESENTED

PRIME MINISTER (NOMINATION) AND CABINET
(APPOINTMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Patrick Grady, supported by David Linden, Marion Fellows, Alison Thewliss, Kirsty Blackman, Kirsten Oswald, Gavin Newlands, Alan Brown, Chris Stephens,

Carol Monaghan and Owen Thompson, presented a Bill to make provision for the House of Commons to nominate the Prime Minister and approve appointments to the Cabinet; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 May, and to be printed (Bill 226).

SCOTLAND (INDEPENDENCE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Patrick Grady, supported by David Linden, Marion Fellows, Alison Thewliss, Kirsty Blackman, Kirsten Oswald, Gavin Newlands, Alan Brown, Chris Stephens, Carol Monaghan and Owen Thompson, presented a Bill to make provision for the dissolution of the Union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom; to make provision for the transfer of powers from the UK Parliament to the Scottish Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Thursday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 227).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Oh dear! I have stood here for 10 and a half years not saying what I think, but the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) knows very well what I think of that Bill.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

House to sit on Friday 24 May

(1) That, notwithstanding the Order of 30 January 2024 (Adjournment (February, Easter, May Bank Holiday and Whitsun Recesses)), the House shall meet on Friday 24 May at 9.30 am.

Order to make provision about Thursday 23 May and Friday 24 May

(2) That paragraphs (3) to (13) shall apply to today's sitting and to the sitting on Friday 24 May.

Government business to have precedence

(3) Notwithstanding anything in Standing Order No. 14, government business shall have precedence.

Deferred divisions

(4) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.

Motions by Ministers

(5) No notice shall be required of any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown.

(6) Any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(7) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which proceedings on a Bill are taken, to recommit a Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(8) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(9) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under paragraph (7) shall thereupon be resumed.

Consideration of Lords amendments

(10) Proceedings on Lords Amendments or any subsequent Lords Message in respect of any Bill may be considered forthwith without any further Question being put.

(11) Such proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) one hour after—

(a) the commencement of those proceedings, or

(b) if earlier, the commencement of any proceedings in relation to the Bill concerned on a Money motion, Ways and Means motion, Procedure motion or motion to alter the order in which proceedings on or in respect of the Bill are considered.

(12) Standing to shall apply to such proceedings as if paragraph (11) were a provision of a programme order.

Private business

(13) No private business may be considered after this Order has been agreed.

Emergency debates

(14) The start of any emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held at today's sitting shall be postponed until the conclusion of government business; and no such debate shall be held at the sitting on Friday 24 May.

Urgent business on Friday

(15) That at the sitting on Friday 24 May, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 11(4) and (5), urgent questions and statements may be taken before the commencement of public business.

Close of business

(16) That at today's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Messages from the Lords have been received and any Committee to draw up Reasons has reported.

(17) That at the sitting on Friday 24 May, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until a Message has been received from the Lords Commissioners.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

2.30 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is important that the motion is aired and that the detail of what is happening today is put formally on the record. The wash-up is an important part of the United Kingdom's strange constitutional practices, but the decision of the Prime Minister to call a snap election in the way that he did yesterday has meant an incredibly truncated wash-up and a very short period before Dissolution. He seems to have done that without very much consideration of the impact it will have on the mechanisms, procedures and people of this House that try to make everything run relatively smoothly.

The Prime Minister also appears to have made the decision, frankly, without much consideration of the impact it will have in Scotland on many of the expected electoral mechanisms, such as the staff who run elections, who might have expected to be on their holidays. The rooms we use for our polling places in schools and so on would also not generally be expected to be open. It is a bit unfortunate that the Government are taking this option, when they could have taken a little longer.

There was no reason not to have a slightly longer Dissolution period or a slightly longer wash-up for the whole of next week, which would have allowed for much more of the stalled legislation—very good legislation in some cases, particularly the private Members' Bills—to come forward. That legislation will now not be able to progress, including the two Bills I have just presented, which I am sure the House would have welcomed the opportunity to debate at great length. It is important that that is put on the record before the House simply approves the motion that the Leader of the House has moved.

With a little of your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for all your service to the House. Many of us in the SNP have enjoyed someone with

Scottish heritage and an understanding of Scotland's place in the world being in the Chair during our time here.

It has been a privilege to represent people in Glasgow North for the past nine years. I am grateful to all my staff, the staff here in the House, and all my colleagues and staff in the Scottish National party. In Malawi, where I spent time, we have a tradition of asking forgiveness when we take leave of a place from anyone who might have been offended or hurt in any way during our time in that place, so I do that today. For now, I wish all my colleagues who are standing to be very blessed, but for me, Caledonia is calling, and so I am going home.

2.33 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): In all sincerity, may I wish the hon. Gentleman well? It would not be a Thursday without a little bit of argy-bargy with the SNP. I am sorry that the First Minister will not be able to go to the Dordogne over the next couple of weeks, but I gently remind the SNP that a former First Minister tried to hold a referendum during the October school holidays and was only thwarted in doing so by this Government in the High Court. I am glad that this motion is supported to enable us to get as much legislation through as we can.

Question put and agreed to.

FINANCE (NO. 2) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 17 April 2024 (Finance (No. 2) Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (8) and (9) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(*Paul Holmes.*)

Finance (No.2) Bill

Bill, not amended in the Committee and in the Public Bill Committee, considered.

Third Reading

2.35 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): I beg to move, That the Bill now be read the Third time.

May I take the opportunity to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the other Madam Deputy Speaker for your professionalism, kindness and robustness in this place? You will be sorely missed, and I express my appreciation to all those who have announced that they will be standing down at this election and thank them for their service in this House. I think I speak for everybody when I say that everybody who comes into this place does so with very positive motivations, because they want to make the world a better place for their children and grandchildren. That may sound trite, but it is a motivation we all share. We may disagree on the route to achieve that, but anybody who comes into this place does so with incredible professionalism, and we should all thank them for that service.

Moving on to the politics and policy of today, this Bill helps to deliver the priorities of the Prime Minister and the Government following the autumn statement and the spring Budget. The economy has vastly improved. It is growing again. Real wages are increasing and, as we found out this week, inflation is down to its lowest figure in nearly three years. The Finance Bill builds on that economic improvement by rewarding work, encouraging investment in our economy and boosting home ownership.

As the two recent fiscal events outlined, we have rewarded work by making national insurance tax cuts. Some 27 million employees will get an average tax cut of £900 a year, and 2 million self-employed people will get a tax cut averaging £700. That is the largest ever cut to employee and self-employed national insurance, and this Bill furthers the work done on rewarding work by increasing the high income child benefit charge threshold from £50,000 to £60,000. In addition, the rate of the charge will be halved, so that child benefit is not repaid in full until someone earns £80,000, taking 170,000 families out of paying this tax charge. Some 485,000 families will benefit by an average of £1,260 from these child benefit changes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Government for that change. It is a policy that my party and I have pursued over a number of years. The Government took it on board and they are very kindly changing the law. I thank the Minister, but also the Government, because it is one of the things that we can put to our constituents, including my constituents in Strangford, and say, “Here is delivery of what you asked for. Here is what we did.”

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his gracious and pertinent intervention, as ever. I thank him and all those who have campaigned for this change, because we know it will make a difference to the budgets of many households across the country in what we recognise are still challenging times.

The Bill will drive investment in the economy through various measures, including additional support for our world-leading creative industries, and we are making

tax reliefs for theatres, orchestras, museums and galleries permanent, at a rate of 45% for touring theatres, museums, galleries and touring productions, 40% for non-touring productions and 45% for orchestras. That will ensure that our creative industries have the support they need after the unprecedented economic shock of the pandemic.

We will further support the UK’s independent film sector through a new UK independent film tax credit, at a rate of 53% for films with lower budgets. That will support the production of UK independent films and the incubation of UK talent. Our creative sector is vital to our national life, and the Government are committed to supporting UK businesses in the sector.

This is also a Bill that will boost transactions in the housing market. It will cut the higher rate of capital gains tax on residential property from 28% to 24%, encouraging landlords and second home owners to sell their properties, which would in fact increase revenues because there would be more transactions. That will make more homes available to purchase for a variety of buyers, including, of course, first-time buyers.

We need to ensure that the property system is fit for purpose. The Government are clear that where policies are not meeting their objectives, we will take clear and decisive action. That is why we are abolishing multiple dwellings relief—a bulk purchase relief in the stamp duty land tax regime—from 1 June 2024. Abolition follows an external evaluation that found no strong evidence that the relief is meeting its original objective of supporting investment in the private rented sector. His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has recorded many instances of abuse and attempted abuse.

We are amending the rules so that individuals buying a new lease over a leasehold residential property through a nominee or bare trustee will be able to claim first-time buyers’ relief on their stamp duty land tax bill. That change will ensure that, for example, victims of domestic abuse are not unfairly penalised if they wish to buy their first homes anonymously. It will ensure that those in difficult circumstances do not face additional barriers to purchasing homes.

The Bill will also make the tax system fairer by closing tax avoidance loopholes and making relevant changes to VAT.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for their helpful and insightful contributions to the debates during the Bill’s quicker than expected passage. I thank the many stakeholders who have provided their views on the issues raised and provided evidence to the Public Bill Committee, as well as Treasury and HMRC officials and, of course, the House Clerks and officials who have supported us in getting the Bill to this point so quickly.

The Bill rewards work, encourages investment in our economy and boosts home ownership. It is part of the Government’s clear plan of action. For those reasons, I commend it to the House.

2.42 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I begin by paying tribute to you for your years of service and thank you for your guidance? If I may, I will tell one brief anecdote, which is actually from a previous Finance Bill. I had not quite realised that it was my duty to move the Opposition’s amendments before the time of voting, as I was distracted by being in

conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) at the time. The Chamber was full. I think that you cleared your throat three times at me until I finally moved the amendment. On the way out, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said to me, “You will never forget that, will you?” It is true—I will not. That was great advice and guidance that will stick with me throughout any future years that I may have in this place, depending on the election. Thank you very much.

We are here to consider the Third Reading of the Finance Bill, which the Opposition hope will be the last in the line of 14 years’ worth of Conservative Finance Bills. The Bill comes after 14 years of Conservative failure on the economy and leaves a legacy of higher taxes, falling living standards and stagnant economic growth. The truth is that whatever the Conservatives say or try to do, whether in the Chamber today or on the campaign trail over the next six weeks, it is too late to repair the damage that they have done to the economy and to people’s standard of living.

I do not think that any of us were expecting to be completing the Bill’s remaining stages in the rushed end of this Parliament. Many of us had assumed that the Prime Minister would call the election later in the year, and I still have not heard why he ultimately decided to call it for July. I have one theory, which is that he realised that prolonging the general election would raise the prospect of there being another Finance Bill in which the Government may have had to legislate to end the non-dom tax status.

Let us face it: the Prime Minister really does not want to get rid of the non-dom tax status. Maybe he thought this was a way to avoid the Conservatives having to keep their promise to end it. I am afraid that he may still be disappointed as, if Labour wins the general election, we will end the non-dom tax status and the new loopholes planned by the Conservatives once and for all. Now that we are to have a general election, perhaps the Conservatives will finally tell us how they will pay for their £46 billion unfunded spending commitment to abolish national insurance altogether. Given their track record, I will not be holding my breath.

The Opposition have tried to amend the Bill during its passage to force the Government to come clean about the impact that their six-year freezing of the income tax personal allowance and the higher rate threshold is having on taxpayers across the country. We have tried to force the Chancellor to set out what impact his and his predecessors’ policies are having on pensioners, and how more of them will pay tax and more of them will have higher tax bills as a result of decisions made by the Conservatives. Alongside the impact on individual taxpayers, we have tried to amend the Bill to encourage the Government to follow our plan to bring back certainty for businesses by capping the rate of corporation tax at 25% for the whole of the next Parliament.

Finally, we sought to give certainty to the oil and gas industry by being clear that our strengthened windfall tax or energy profits levy would end no later than the end of the next Parliament. We were disappointed, though sadly not surprised, that none of our amendments became part of the Bill.

The Opposition will not oppose the Bill’s Third Reading, but let me close by saying two things. First, I pay thanks to the Clerks and the House of Commons staff for all their support throughout the Bill’s passage and to outside

organisations, including the Chartered Institute of Taxation in particular, for all their help not just with this Finance Bill, but with all six Finance Bills for which I have been responsible as a shadow Minister. May I also put on record my appreciation for the way in which the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury have drawn a line between the tough and sometimes barbed exchanges we have in the Chamber and their courtesy and respectfulness outside the Chamber? That is not always the case in politics, but when it happens, I believe that it makes the House of Commons a better place while not for a second compromising on the sharpness of the political questions that we are here rightly to contest.

Ultimately, we are all here to do what is best for our country, and I do not believe that five more years of the Conservatives would serve that goal. Not only have they become defined by chaos and division, and put party before country at every turn, it is also clear that they have done too much damage to the economy. They have squeezed living standards too much, and they have stretched public services to breaking point. I hope that this is the last in a 14-year line of Conservative Finance Bills, because the country needs change. We finally have the chance to ask the British people what Government they want for the next five years. I hope that they will put their trust in our changed Labour party to change our country for the better.

2.47 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker? The best type of umpire or referee is one who is formidable but fair and greatly respected, and you tick all three boxes. I am most grateful to you for calling me to speak. I do so as I have some concerns about unintended consequences arising from clause 7, which is on the abolition of multiple dwellings relief for stamp duty land tax. My hon. Friend the Minister set out some of the reasons for abolishing it. I wish to go a little further and perhaps pry a little more response out of him to allay those concerns.

I make these observations as a former chartered surveyor, as the MP for a constituency that might be adversely affected and having received representations from the British Property Federation. I am aware that a number of pension funds, investors, builders and professional advisers have written to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer expressing their concerns.

The build-to-rent sector rose from a combination of the introduction of stamp duty land tax multiple dwellings relief in 2011 and the implementation of some of the Montague review’s recommendations in 2012. Subsequently, it has been extremely successful. Some £40 million has been invested in the build-to-rent sector, resulting in 100,300 additional homes being completed, with a further 166,000 in the planning and delivery pipeline. The sector still represents a relatively small proportion of the delivery of new homes, but it is growing rapidly. The number of completed build-to-rent homes increased by 17% year-on-year in the fourth quarter last year. Investors and developers initially focused on London, then the larger cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds. Now, their interest is rippling right out across the UK.

Build to rent acts as an anchor in large development schemes. It helps get homes of other tenures built, and multiple dwellings relief enables much-needed homes to

[*Peter Aldous*]

be built outside London and the south-east in areas where there are lower property values and development otherwise would not be financially viable. My concern is that the abolition of multiple dwellings relief in the form proposed could have a variety of unintended consequences, which I will go through briefly. First, as I know from my own inbox and postbag, which I anticipate is the case for all colleagues, we need to build more homes to rent. The Bill potentially removes one of the ways of doing that. Secondly, it will have an impact on specialist sectors—student accommodation and sheltered housing—where, in response to demand, developers are increasingly looking to provide units to let.

Thirdly, the relief is most needed in areas where the property market is weaker—outside London and the south-east—and often in areas where the need for more housing is most acute. Fourthly, we have a problem in the UK of too few house builders. The small and medium-sized house builder is an increasingly endangered species. Clause 7 could undermine an alternative means of housing delivery.

Finally, I am mindful of the enormous task of urban regeneration and town centre renewal that we face right across the UK—in other words levelling up, which has been the theme of much of this Parliament. This task is enormous and incredibly expensive. It is neither practical nor possible for the state to do that heavy lifting on its own. Private finance must be leveraged in from pensions funds and investors. Multiple dwellings relief is a means of doing that. Some might say it is a small thing, but its abolition could send a negative message that there is no place for the public and private sectors to work together.

We could amend clause 7 to retain the multiple dwellings relief for transactions of six or more dwellings, on the basis that it would underpin the development proposals of large rented housing schemes, and would result in significantly more rental homes being built than if the relief were completely abolished. The threshold of six mirrors the existing rule that purchases of six or more dwellings can be treated as a commercial property transaction for stamp duty land tax purposes, and is at a level at which multiple dwellings relief is hard to abuse.

I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who has been incredibly patient listening to my various concerns about this Bill during its course, could comment a little more and seek to allay my genuinely held concerns.

2.54 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I very much liked the earlier comment, Madam Deputy Speaker, about your being a good example to women in this place and someone whom people look up to. I agree with that, and I wanted to begin by thanking you.

Let me now say something about the washing up of Finance Bills in general, and about this particular Bill in the context of washing up. It seems to me that I have spent a great deal of my time in Parliament dealing with Finance Bills, and I have also spent far too much time dealing with Finance Bills during the washing-up process. I do not know whether anyone remembers the Finance Act 2017, but because an election was called the Bill had to go through that process, and it was massively gutted beforehand. My problem was that I had tabled

amendments to all the clauses that were now being removed, and I was somewhat unhappy about the fact that I had done a significant amount of work that would never see the light of day.

On that occasion I gave a speech that I think lasted more than 50 minutes, in which I spoke about every amendment I had tabled, but I can reassure that House that I will not be doing the same today. I have not tabled amendments to this Bill, and neither has my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). In fact, I have come in at the last moment to take over from my hon. Friend, because, sadly, he had returned to Inverness before the Prime Minister made the announcement of the election, and there was no physical way for him to get back in time today. I appreciate the hard work that he has done during the Bill's earlier stages. He is sorry that he cannot be here, and unfortunately I am a poor substitute, but I will do my best.

We will be voting against the Bill's Third Reading. I am sure that no one will be surprised by that, given that we tabled a reasoned amendment on Second Reading and that this is consistent with the approach that we have taken throughout the Bill's progress.

Let me say a little about the way in which Finance Bills—specifically this Finance Bill, and other recent Finance Bills—go through the House. There has been an ongoing issue with Ministers, including Chancellors, refusing to include “amendment of the law” resolutions. Refusing to include a Budget resolution for amendment of the law is a genuine constitutional change, and it has taken place without much of a fanfare—pretty much on the basis that it was done during that wash-up in 2017, or in the case of a Finance Bill that was introduced with a very tight timescale. After that, the resolution was never brought back, although it is important to Finance Bills and it is important for scrutiny purposes. I hope that, should they become a Government at some time in the future, the official Opposition will commit themselves to bringing it back.

I am also concerned about the fact that Finance Bill Committees continue not to take oral evidence. The Procedure Committee will be sick of hearing me talk about this, because I bring it up at nearly all its meetings, but the lack of oral evidence means that scrutiny is not as good as it could be. I appreciate that the Minister mentioned those who submit written evidence, but I do not think that that is an adequate substitute. I understand the argument of Ministers that Finance Bills are taken by a Committee of the whole House followed by Public Bill Committee sessions, but much of the stuff that is considered in the Public Bill Committee is extremely technical, and it would benefit Members to be able to question external organisations with real experience. The Association of Accounting Technicians, for example, would be able to give us a significant amount of information about how such measures would work. When Committees dealing with Bills with which I have been involved have taken oral evidence, Members have relied heavily on quoting that evidence throughout the progress of those Bills, and I think that this would greatly improve both the Finance Bill and its scrutiny.

Let me now turn to our specific concerns about this Bill. The Chancellor made a number of comments on Radio 4 yesterday morning, before the announcement of the election. One of the excellent journalists on the programme pushed him to say whether or not he felt he was better off now than before. The Chancellor did not

answer that question, but the reality is that if we ask people up and down these islands what their biggest concern is at the moment, they overwhelmingly say it is the cost of living crisis. They are massively concerned about the fact that food, electricity and gas prices have gone through the roof, and about the extra money that they are having to shell out.

The Budget was an opportunity for the UK Government to recognise that concern, take it seriously, and do what we did in Scotland: we have put tackling child poverty front and centre of decision-making processes. We have the Scottish child payment, which has taken 100,000 children out of poverty. We are doing everything that we can to mitigate the UK Government's policies, but the reality is that all we can do is mitigate, given that the block grant is the lowest percentage of UK Government spending that it has been since devolution. With capital budgets for the Scottish Parliament being slashed, we find that increasingly difficult, because we are not in control of all the levers. We are not in control of all our finances. We cannot increase the minimum wage to a proper living wage, rather than a pretend living wage. We cannot scrap the two-child cap. We mitigate as far as we possibly can, but we do not have all the powers that we require.

People in Scotland are better off as a result of the decisions taken by the Scottish Government. They are getting a free university education, and they can go to the dentist for free; I cannot believe the low percentage of NHS dentists in the rest of the UK. People in Scotland can receive the Scottish child payment, and a higher number of children from deprived areas go to university in Scotland. There is a huge amount of good being done in Scotland, but it is being done by the SNP Government, who have one hand tied behind their back by Westminster.

The Chancellor's refusal to say whether he felt better off shows the difference between the haves and the have-nots throughout these islands. If we ask people who come to receptions in Parliament—people who have high salaries—how they feel about the cost of living crisis, they might say that they feel it a bit, and that they will have slightly fewer holidays or slightly fewer cars, but they do not have to make decisions, every moment of every day, about every penny that they spend. They are not, like our constituents, lying in bed at night worrying about how they will pay the rent and electricity bills, and how they will manage to buy bread, potatoes or pasta.

The inflation figures announced yesterday do not show that things are better. They show that inflation is less high than it was, but does it really make a difference to those buying pasta that it has gone up by only 47%, rather than 49%, over the past few years, given that there has been a 25% overall increase in the cost of food, and that benefits and social security have not kept pace?

The UK Government had the opportunity to provide help with the cost of living crisis in the Budget, and they did not take it. They talk about the changes that they are making to national insurance and tax, but those changes impact only people who are working and earning above the thresholds, and a good chunk of them, particularly those on the lowest earnings, also get universal credit. There are major issues with universal credit, particularly for single people but also for those with larger families, because of factors such as the two-child cap.

The reality is that this UK Government had an opportunity to make a difference to people's lives, and they refused to take it. They do not have the same priorities as us. We will always put Scotland first. We will always fight in this place against UK Government decisions that the people of Scotland are unhappy with. Whether under a Tory or Labour UK Government, we will do everything that we can to ensure that Scotland's voice is heard. We will do everything that we can to disagree with legislation that the people of Scotland disagree with, and everything we can to work cross party when legislation is in the interests of the people of Scotland. I have made it very clear that we disagree with this legislation, and will oppose Third Reading.

3.5 pm

Nigel Huddleston: I thank those who contributed to the debate, and, of course, those who have contributed to debates on the Bill throughout its progress. I turn first to comments made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). I respect her views about scrutiny of Bills in this place. However, I hope that she recognises that finance Bills often contain many, many clauses, some of which have been developed over many years, been subject to multiple consultations, and had a huge amount of input. I appreciate that she acknowledged that a lot of written evidence, which is hugely valuable and very much appreciated, is also provided. The fact that she and her colleagues are pressing for a Division on the Bill this evening evidences that there is scrutiny, holding to account, and a diversity of opinion on these matters.

I disagree with many of the hon. Lady's other comments. On who is better off, 27 million workers are better off because of the national insurance cut, and 2 million self-employed people are better off. If she does not believe that, I suggest that she looks at her payslips; she will see that national insurance is going down. That makes a meaningful difference. She may be snippy about it, but £900 is a meaningful difference for an average worker—for many of my constituents, and constituents across the country. For those not in work, of course, we also increased benefits by 6.7%, and pensions by 8.5%. We Conservatives always make sure that all people in society are looked after.

The hon. Lady made comments about support with the cost of living. The Opposition consistently seem to have a collective sense of amnesia, and have completely forgotten the last five years and the global challenges that all economies faced, with the pandemic followed by the global cost of living crisis. This Government have had to intervene in a way that nobody anticipated. It meant that taxes had to be higher, but as soon as we get the opportunity—as soon as we have the choice—to bring them down, that is exactly what we will do, because we know how difficult this has been for people and want to put more money in their pockets as soon as we can. We have a plan, and it is working.

I always respect the opinions and views of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and I am never alarmed or disturbed by his frequently holding me, and the Government, to account for policy decisions. I can give him some reassurance, though. The multiple dwellings relief is being abolished for very good reason: it is not working as intended. Of course, a considerable amount of money is involved. When we

[Nigel Huddleston]

spend taxpayers' money or allow a relief, we need to make sure that it has the intended impact. The relief was not working as intended, and was subject to considerable abuse, so we are abolishing it.

However, I can give my hon. Friend some assurance, particularly on certain issues that he mentioned. For example, large investors, including those in the build-to-rent sector who purchased six or more properties in a single transaction, can still continue to benefit from the non-residential rates of stamp duty land tax, which can be quite beneficial. We are engaged in discussions with stakeholders, including some of the bodies that he has mentioned, because we do not want there to be unintended consequences. We appreciate their input on this Bill, as always. I thank my hon. Friend for his fantastic interventions, as always. He is an amazing MP for his constituents, and I always appreciate his contributions.

I thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) for his gracious comments. He is correct that what is written in *Hansard* and what the public see of our sometimes rather robust debates is not always a reflection of our generally positive relationships on a personal level. However, that does not mean we do not have robust disagreements on policy, and I am afraid that I will have to raise quite a few points of disagreement today.

Every single time I have appeared at the Dispatch Box, the hon. Gentleman has complained about the Government not calling a general election, and now that we have called a general election, he is still complaining. That really takes the biscuit. He continued with his familiar refrain; he never misses an opportunity to talk Britain down. I refer him to my earlier comments about our interventions during the pandemic and their immense £400 billion cost to the UK economy. I do not believe the Opposition opposed a single one of our interventions at the time, so it is a bit rich to complain about the obvious impact on taxation. If he had an alternative plan, I would have loved to have heard it then, and I would love to hear it now, but it is non-existent. The hon. Gentleman is hoping to alarm, disturb and depress the British public into voting Labour, which is not a particularly bright strategy. The British public deserve better, and we need to hear confidence and optimism, not pessimism, about the UK economy.

I will not repeat the comments I have made on many occasions about Labour's ridiculous scaremongering on the national insurance cuts and the impact they could have on pensions. He knows that the cuts will not have a negative impact on pensions, for the obvious reason that I had hoped he would now understand. National insurance does not wholly pay for pensions, welfare or the NHS, so why on earth is Labour going around the country trying to scaremonger old people and people who rely on the NHS into believing otherwise? I do not know. It is not an admirable way to try to win an election.

The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues keep repeating the mantra of "a changed Labour party". Maybe in some ways that is true. Labour has certainly gone from embracing the hard left of British politics to embracing the hard right. That unbelievable journey speaks volumes about Labour's values: it has none. Or, as the old saying goes, "These are our values. If you don't like them, don't worry: we have others." On policy, too, there is a

constant string of flip-flops, U-turns and uncertainty, which I am sure we will see during the general election. We will be holding Labour to account.

For example, Labour has abolished its £28 billion green spending commitment, but it seems to have retained the policy. Is Labour abolishing tuition fees? Maybe not. Will it abolish the House of Lords? Maybe not. Will it return to free movement and the single market? Maybe not. Will it abolish universal credit? Maybe not. Will it increase income tax on top earners? Maybe not. Rent caps, the ultra low emission zone, bankers' bonuses and zero-hours contracts—we have had constant flip-flops from the Opposition. Not even they know what their actual policy is. It completely lacks credibility. As I said, they cannot expect the British public to be taken for such a ride.

The British public know where they stand with the Conservatives, because we have a plan. They can see it in the recent autumn statement, the spring Budget and this Bill. No matter what stage of life they are at, they can be confident that the Conservatives are there to support them. With our childcare measures and the child benefit changes in this Bill, it is clear that when they bring children into this world, we are there for them. Through our national insurance cuts and our measures to support businesses, it is clear that we are there for those in work or running a business. If they have finished work and have retired, we have shown through the triple lock and other measures that we are always there for them.

We can have strong public services and a strong welfare system that helps the most vulnerable in society only if we also have a strong economy to generate the taxes to pay for them. A strong recovery is vital for both the public and the private sector. That means that we on this side of the House are unapologetically pro-business.

Despite the challenges of the past few years, we are now on a clear path to recovery: the economy is growing again; inflation is falling; real wages are increasing; and people who look at their pay packet will see that their national insurance taxes have been cut too. That is more money in people's pockets because of the actions and decisions of this Government—we have a plan, whereas the Opposition do not. We cannot put that at risk, so stick with the Conservatives for a brighter future. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 215, Noes 19.

Division No. 159]

[3.14 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Bhatti, Saqib
Aldous, Peter	Blackman, Bob
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Ansell, Caroline	Brady, rh Sir Graham
Argar, rh Edward	Brereton, Jack
Atkins, rh Victoria	Brine, Steve
Bacon, Gareth	Britcliffe, Sara
Bacon, Mr Richard	Browne, Anthony
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Bruce, Fiona
Baker, Duncan	Buchan, Felicity
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Burghart, Alex
Baynes, Simon	Burns, rh Sir Conor
Bell, Aaron	Butler, Rob
Beresford, Sir Paul	Cameron, Dr Lisa

Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul

Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Amanda Milling*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth

Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mark Jenkinson and
 Joy Morrissey

NOES

Blackman, Kirsty
 Brock, Deidre
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cherry, Joanna
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Fellows, Marion
 Grant, Peter
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Stephens, Chris
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Williams, Hywel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Kirsten Oswald and
 Patrick Grady

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I suspend the House pending the arrival of Lords messages, may I take a moment to thank everyone for being so kind to me this afternoon and for their good wishes? It had not occurred to me when I put out a tweet—or whatever it is now called—just before 1 pm that, by 1.30 pm when I came into the Chamber, people would actually have read it. That was a real surprise to me. It would appear that the power of social media is great and I really ought to use it more.

I have been very touched by the kind comments, which show that we all make friends on all sides and in every corner of this House. That is because we all have something in common. We are not the people who sit at home moaning and shouting at the television; we are the people who get up and do something about it. Everyone who sits in this House has come here with the object of making the world a better place. We have different ways of doing it, but we all have that one objective.

As I mentioned earlier, to me, being Chairman of Ways and Means is the best job in the world by far, and I have been very privileged to be allowed to do it. When

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

I was a little girl studying Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest", it was my ambition to play Lady Bracknell and, since I first climbed the steps of this Chair 10 and a half years ago, I have had the great pleasure of playing Lady Bracknell every day—[HON. MEMBERS: "A handbag?"] Order! The House will now suspend pending the arrival of Lords messages. I will cause the Division bells to ring five minutes before the sitting resumes.

3.38 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day).

Business of the House

7.12 pm

The Comptroller of His Majesty's Household (Rebecca Harris): Further to this morning's business statement, it may help the House if I confirm that, prior to the House rising tonight, we intend to consider the following business:

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Media Bill.

For the further convenience of the House, it may help if I also confirm that the business for tomorrow, Friday 24 May, will include the following items:

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

Debate on a motion to approve the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments and Revocations) Regulations 2024.

Debate on a motion to approve the draft Coroners (Suspension of Requirement for Jury at Inquest: Coronavirus) Regulations 2024.

Debate on a motion to approve the draft Energy Act 2023 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2024.

Debate on a motion to approve the Tribunal Procedure (Upper Tribunal) (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) (Amendment) Rules 2024.

If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments to the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill.

General debate on matters to be raised ahead of the forthcoming Dissolution, to allow for valedictory speeches by Members of Parliament.

If necessary, consideration of further Lords messages.

The House will prorogue following a message from the Lords Commissioners.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Comptroller of His Majesty's Household for delivering that beautifully read business statement, and for the advance copy of it. I am sure it will aid Members to plan their business over the coming days.

Post Office (*Horizon System*) Offences Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I confirm that nothing in the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 2

MEANING OF “RELEVANT OFFENCE”

7.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment 2.

Kevin Hollinrake: This is an historic day. It has been a great privilege to be the Minister for the Bill, and I thank our officials for moving with lightning speed to get it to this point, only five months from when the process commenced. I also thank Members in all parts of both Houses for their co-operation and their collegiate approach to the Bill, including the Opposition Front Benchers, who have provided great support, which we greatly appreciate. I thank the Justice Secretary, my Department’s Secretary of State and the Prime Minister—the Bill would not have been possible without their support.

This is an historic day because, as a result of the Bill, convictions will be overturned on Royal Assent. With His Majesty’s agreement, that means they will be overturned tomorrow.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Along with the contaminated blood scandal, the Horizon scandal remains a terrible stain on our nation’s recent past. It is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation’s history, and over the course of the debates on the Bill we have heard the testimonies of victims, and the lies and obfuscations of those who were responsible, expressed by Members across the House. That has rightly made Members of both Houses and the public deeply frustrated and angry at the injustice that sub-postmasters and their families have faced.

It is right that the Government have introduced legislation to exonerate those who have suffered for so long, and the time provided for the Bill today allows us to ensure that it is concluded. We must not lose sight of the task at hand during this wash-up, and we must ensure that the hundreds of innocent people who were wrongfully convicted get the justice that they deserve, and the compensation and exoneration that they desperately need. The Opposition have supported the Bill, and we support the independent inquiry and wish to see it continue its work. Even this week, with the testimony of Paula Vennells, shocking new information has been revealed, and we will continue to push for justice for the victims.

At previous stages, the Minister provided assurances that he would ensure that cases from the Capture IT system are looked at, because this Bill does not cover the wider extent of the scandal, and that the company responsible for Horizon, Fujitsu, and its executives will honour the commitment that they made to provide

compensation, rather than leaving it to taxpayers to do so. I hope he can update us on any progress he has made since giving that undertaking in the House. This Parliament will soon dissolve, but Ministers of the Crown carry on for a few more weeks. I hope the Minister will make every effort to ensure as much progress as possible is made, so that the families receive the redress they desperately need.

In the other House, the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson highlighted Lord Arbuthnot’s desire to see those convicted by the Court of Appeal included in the Bill before us. At the time of speaking, the Government opposed that. We are sympathetic, but we nevertheless remain opposed to Parliament becoming, in effect,

“the appeal court for the Court of Appeal”.

We would, however, support appropriate proposals to give the 13 people not covered by the Bill the opportunity to seek redress in the courts. I hope the Minister is able to look at what might be done to work with Lord Arbuthnot to find a satisfactory solution for those 13 cases.

In conclusion, I am grateful to colleagues from across both Houses for the work they have done, particularly the Members of Parliament who worked so tirelessly to ensure that the plight of sub-postmasters and their families was raised. Their work highlighted that in this and other scandals, such as the contaminated blood scandal, it is the constituency connection and our relationship with the people we represent that is often the most powerful insight into seeing injustices early on, and seeing broader patterns that expose major failures in our system, be that in the contaminated blood scandal or the Horizon scandal. The message is very clear: whoever and whichever party is in power, Ministers, civil servants and those in positions of power must listen very closely and not dismiss the concerns of Members of Parliament who raise those cases, which can expose a bigger pattern of injustice, or the citizens we represent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call Marion Fellows, I note that earlier today Kevan Jones announced that he will not be standing at the next election. On behalf of all the victims, I thank you, Kevan, for the doughty fight that you have put up on behalf of them all. You have been absolutely amazing in what you have done. You are sitting next to Jackie Doyle-Price—I knew it was only a matter of time before she crossed the Floor. More amazing things have happened recently, so it doesn’t surprise me.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I had decided that I would not speak, but I feel compelled to do so. I am very pleased that the Bill has passed. I am very pleased that all the victims who have been exonerated by the Bill will be exonerated tomorrow, except those in Scotland, which I am still unhappy about. I think it is a huge pity and shame that that did not happen, and that the three sub-postmasters who came down here especially the last time the Bill was before the House did not even get a chance to hear what was being said because of the ways of this House, where nothing is ever fixed. We can bring people 400 miles, but they have to go back the same day and they cannot stay.

I want to pay tribute to someone I can safely say is my friend, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), for all the counsel and help he has given me. I already gave a little tribute earlier today, but I could

[*Marion Fellows*]

not possibly not say thank you to Lord Arbuthnot and to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who so stoutly defended Scotland the last time the Bill was before the House. This place is sovereign, but not when it comes to Scotland, so independence had better come soon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call our right hon. Friend, Kevan Jones.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Thank you for your kind words, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think this will be the last time that I speak in this Chamber, and I cannot think of a more fitting debate in which to do so, because it is the culmination of many years of fighting. I played a small part in getting justice for the sub-postmasters; much of it was down to Alan Bates and the families who went through this complete nightmare. Hopefully, they will get justice and truth when the inquiry reports next year.

This Bill was always going to be important because of the individuals involved. Unless you actually sat with many of these victims, they would not have come forward to clear the stain on their reputations or to gain access to compensation. It has been a long fight, and my partner in crime was Lord Arbuthnot. Someone asked me how we had got together on this. If people look back, they will see that we both served on the Defence Committee—he was the Chair at the time. He has been a very effective advocate and I pay huge tribute to him.

There have been many Members from all parts of the House—some are no longer here—who made a contribution over the years, and I think that their support needs to be recognised as well. Turning to the Ministers involved, I would like to mention the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who showed such tenacity in his determination to get justice. He was followed very ably by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I have called him a poacher turned gamekeeper, but he is a very effective one. He has driven this case forward, not in a belligerent way, but with patience and determination to ensure that people who have been wronged get justice. That is something that we should all think about.

People can turn round and say, “No, you are wrong, the system cannot be questioned.” And there are times when you can feel like you are ploughing a lonely furrow. But if you know in your gut that something is wrong, it is important to just keep going. This was one of those cases. But it has certainly been championed by the Minister, who has been an excellent advocate on behalf of all these people. It has not been easy. I accept that some of the decisions that he had to make were not easy and were not always welcomed by everyone, but he tried his best and we have this Bill today because of him.

I have one final thing to say, and this is unfinished business. The Minister knows what I am going to say now and it is about Capture, the pre-Horizon scheme, which I have been investigating. Hopefully, we will get justice for those individuals as well, and, again, the Minister is determined to get to the bottom of that by appointing an independent investigator to look at the cases that have been referred to him. I shall be looking

from afar with interest, but I know that whoever picks up his brief or takes on this case will not be able to put it down unless they get that justice.

In politics, people often ask whether you can actually achieve anything. There is a lot of cynicism these days. I say to anybody who is aspiring to be a Member of this place that they can change things, they can make a difference, but they have to be persistent. Most of the time, people across the other side of this House may be political opponents, but they are not our enemies. We do the best in this place when we work together, and, in this case, cross-party working has achieved final justice for these people.

Kevin Hollinrake: With the leave of the House, I have a few final comments. The shadow Minister asked about the Capture software that was used prior to the Horizon software. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has pushed strongly on these matters, and we are having an independent investigation into them, which we anticipate will report later this year. I am sure that he will take a keen interest in that, as will those on the Opposition Front-Bench team. It is important that we get redress as soon as possible. The Bill opens the door to rapid redress for hundreds of victims of this scandal. We believe that we can get redress paid from July onwards, when the new scheme will be put in place. On the Court of Appeal, we are very interested to ensure that those people also get a fair hearing, and a rapid rehearing of their cases, and can be exonerated wherever possible.

7.30 pm

I thank many of my predecessors who worked on this, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who did a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances. Clearly, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has done a tremendous job on the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. It is always a pleasure to work with her. We do not always see eye to eye, but we usually do. I understand her points on Scotland. Of course, the legislation is now in its final state and, hopefully, Scotland will be able to effect it before the Scottish Parliament's recess, which is only a few weeks away. It shows what can be done when we all work together, as the right hon. Member for North Durham says.

The right hon. Member does tremendous work on the Horizon redress advisory board, which is the reason we are here. Victims of this horrendous scandal want to see two things: redress paid for their losses, and people held to account. Both those things will be achieved because of his work and that of the noble Lord Arbuthnot. I do not believe that either of those things would have happened had they not worked as hard as they have. The shocking evidence to the inquiry this week has been revealed because of their work, and we should be grateful to them. I concur with the right hon. Member: many people are cynical about this place, or people's motivations for entering it, but people enter this place to try to do some good and make change for the better. He has, both Houses have, and it is my pleasure to have been a part of it, too.

Rushanara Ali: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to thank a number of colleagues who are stepping down. As has been mentioned, the Minister's predecessor,

the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), is stepping down. I thank him for taking the Bill and this work to the point that he did. I also thank the Deputy Chief Whip for the Labour party, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I discovered today that she is stepping down, and I am pretty gutted.

Most crucially, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). As others have pointed out, his work has been profound, along with that of Lord Arbuthnot and all the sub-postmasters involved in this important, powerful campaign. Again, I am very saddened that he has decided to leave the House, but I know that he will be a tireless campaigner to ensure that, whoever is in power after the general election, the work continues and victims get the justice and exoneration that they need. We are all incredibly grateful for the work that he has done with others across the House, and with the wider campaign. As has been pointed out, it is campaigns such as this that highlight the power of our democracy, and show it, and our political representatives, at their best. Kevan is the epitome of that, along with other colleagues who have exposed other scandals, working with their constituents. I thank all my colleagues across the House, and the Minister for the work that he has done on this important issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This is such an emotional time for us, today and tomorrow. Holly, I did not know. We wish you well for the future. We will miss you greatly, but do not be a stranger, please. The same to you, Kevan.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 agreed to.

Media Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I confirm that nothing in the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 1

REPORTS ON THE FULFILMENT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE REMIT

7.36 pm

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 25.

Julia Lopez: It was a proud moment to be in this Chamber—a moment of justice—as the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill passed its final stages. Coupling that with the return yesterday of our hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), it feels a privilege to be able to stand at this Dispatch Box.

I rise to ask that all amendments to the Media Bill from the Lords be agreed to—namely, that we retain the Reithian principles of public service broadcast and include an explicit reference to children's educational programmes in the public service broadcast remit. The Media Bill will enable viewers and listeners across our country to continue to access public service television and radio content as technology changes. The Bill will also deliver the manifesto commitment to repeal section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which, if commenced, could have a chilling effect on the freedom of the press.

I am tremendously grateful to the very talented Bill team in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and everybody who has contributed to and worked on this piece of legislation. It is the first communications law in this country in two decades and I am proud, as Media Minister, finally to have delivered it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): May I take this opportunity to say what an absolute delight, privilege and honour it was to be in the Chamber yesterday when Craig took his seat post his sepsis? I visited Craig in hospital every week that he was there, and I must say his resilience and positivity were an example to me. He really did raise my spirits and I am delighted that he was able to come back yesterday.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I associate myself with those comments, Mr Deputy Speaker, and echo the Minister's comments about the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill.

I am pleased to be here tonight to see the final passage of the Media Bill. It has been 20 years since the last broadcasting laws were introduced, and in that time the media landscape has changed dramatically. This Bill ensures that our broadcasting sector can continue to thrive with regulation fit for the modern era. The measures in the Bill have been through several layers of scrutiny, from the White Paper to the pre-legislative inquiry conducted by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I thank the Committee for its work, and I will take this opportunity to say some other thank yous.

[Stephanie Peacock]

I thank the range of stakeholders, including those throughout our broadcasting sectors, who engaged so extensively with the content of the Bill. I thank the noble Lords, including of course our Labour Lords team, the civil servants and officials, and the ministerial team. I also thank my office, particularly Anna Clingan. While Labour would have added some further measures to future-proof and strengthen the Bill, I am pleased to welcome its passage this evening. Further to that, I am happy to support the amendments from the other place, which I believe will strengthen the position and purpose of our public service broadcasters.

First, it is right that the fundamental Reithian principles of public service broadcasting are reinstated, and it is important that educational programming for children and young people has an explicit basis in the Bill. Labour has spoken in detail at every stage of the Bill about the importance of children's access to public service content, including educational content.

As we enter a general election, our media—be they our public service broadcasters, our commercial radio and television stations or our local media outlets, including my local paper, the *Barnsley Chronicle*—will play an incredibly important role in holding accountable all of us who stand for public office. Our media and broadcasting sector will, and always does, play a fundamental role in our society and democracy. I am pleased that this legislation, which will secure their future, will enter into statute.

As we enter the election period, I would like to wish colleagues across the House, especially those who are retiring, my very best, including of course my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and the Deputy Speakers who sit in your Chair, Mr Speaker: my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), and the right hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Hear, hear.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I will hold on to the thank-yous because I will probably be here again tomorrow, and can say them then.

We have supported the Media Bill throughout its passage and will continue to do so, but I must flag a few concerns that we still have about it, although we will not vote against the Lords amendments. There are some positives in the Bill, including the changes to radio services, particularly on-demand services such as those accessed through Alexa. The Government could have gone further on in-car broadcasting, for example. Local radio is so incredibly important. In Aberdeen, we have Northsound 1 and Original 106, which are absolutely fabulous—I get on very well with them most of the time. Those local radio stations are incredibly important when it comes to resilience. As the SNP Cabinet Office spokesperson, I know how much people rely on them, particularly when it comes to local events such as flooding, to learn what is happening in their area. I am really pleased that Ministers have recognised the importance of local radio throughout the Bill's passage.

On the public service remit, I am pleased to echo the comments made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), about education.

We are happy to support the changes that involve the inclusion of educational content and programming quotas, although more could have been done on regional quotas—particularly those that just specify “outside the M25,” for example. We could go further to ensure that regional content is spread across the United Kingdom. I appreciate that a significant number of public sector broadcasters do that, but we could have legislated to keep to quotas in future.

Prominence in on-demand services is incredibly important, because those services are such a common way for people to watch television nowadays. I still have concerns about the fact that gaming consoles are not included. The provisions on giving prominence to public service broadcasters does not apply to those watching content on a PlayStation, for example; the provisions apply only to devices that are mainly for watching television. The Government may have to change that in the future.

I have concerns about listed events, in relation to Scottish football. Given that we have the Euros coming up, and Scotland is finally doing decently and getting to the finals of an event—it has been an awfully long time since we have had this optimism around football in Scotland—more could have been done on listed events, particularly those relating to Scottish football. Given the massive support in Scotland for football and our national team, that would have been a positive step forward. I would appreciate a commitment to changes in future to ensure that we have free-to-air football, so that we in Scotland are not the only ones excluded from seeing our national team on free-to-air TV.

The future of terrestrial broadcasting was mentioned a significant number of times throughout the Bill's passage. I appreciate the Government's ongoing commitment to the ability to access terrestrial services. I have concerns about this issue from the point of view of resilience and ensuring that people are not excluded from watching television if they do not have fast internet. My main concern is that we will accidentally end up with terrestrial broadcasting services being dismantled, or not invested in, because there is no commitment to keeping them. The next Government will have to make commitments to those services to ensure we have access to them post 2030.

7.45 pm

My last, and probably biggest, concern is about the changes that clause 50 makes to section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Many promises were made to people after Leveson. There were many victims of press intrusion whose lives were devastated by journalists who were not acting ethically. Press regulation is not nearly as good as it could be. I appreciate the Government's position that section 40 is inappropriate, and that they disagree with how it might be implemented, if it ever were to be implemented. I understand that, but nothing has been put in place to ensure proper regulation, and that when people contact the Independent Press Standards Organisation—the press regulator—they get proper redress.

There is a balance to be found between the Government's position—they disagree with state-backed regulation of the press—and ours; we disagree with self-imposed regulation of the press, especially when it seems to be able to do what it wants, and IPSO upholds so few complaints. My biggest concern about the removal of

section 40 of the 2013 Act is that promises were made to victims during and after the Leveson inquiry. They were promised that the system would improve, but it has not seen significant improvement, and the Government's removal of section 40 with nothing proper and sensible to replace it means that we continue to face the risk of press intrusion. People could find themselves in the same position again, with no opportunity for redress. However, as I made clear at the beginning of my speech, I will not oppose the Bill; the SNP has been supportive of it throughout its passage.

My last point is personal. I led on the Media Bill because my colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), the culture spokesperson, was unavailable at the time. I had to learn a huge amount in a very short time to lead on this Bill for the SNP, and I am indebted to all the organisations that gave me briefings, sat down and spoke to me, and answered all the stupid questions that I brought to them. I am genuinely indebted to them for all the work they did to ensure I could speak in this Chamber and in Committee and not sound too stupid. Of course, any mistakes that I have made are mine, not theirs.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to speak on this Bill. We will support it, even though we have a number of reservations.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). She is an extraordinarily diligent Member of Parliament, and I admire her for that. I simply want to thank her, and the hon. Member for Barnsley—

Stephanie Peacock: East.

Julia Lopez: East—apologies. I thank both Members for all the work that has gone into this legislation. Since we have discussed all these matters at length many times, I simply commend the Bill to the House; I am very glad that we have finally got to this stage.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 25 agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That concludes consideration of Lords amendments to the Media Bill—congratulations.

PETITIONS

Annual swimming lessons in schools

7.49 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of two residents of the constituency of Loughborough on the need for annual swimming lessons in schools, alongside an online petition that they started, which has been signed by over 66,000 people.

Sadly, the son of one of the petitioners, 13-year-old Kieran Wharton, drowned in the River Soar in Barrow in my constituency last year. Since then, the petitioner has been keen to raise awareness about water safety, and to promote new measures to prevent further drowning incidents. This petition highlights the fact that many children do not learn to swim confidently, or even enough to save their life. To address this, the petition calls for schools to provide annual swimming lessons to all children. They would involve a badge system, under which a child could not move on to the next stage until they were confident in the current one.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a requirement for schools to provide annual swimming lessons as part of the physical education curriculum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Loughborough,

Declares that too many people die from drowning each year, including an alarming number of children; notes that, despite swimming requirements in the curriculum, many children do not learn to swim confidently or even enough to save their own life; further declares that the Government should introduce a requirement for schools to provide annual swimming lessons as part of the physical education curriculum; further that this should include a badge system where a child is not able to move on to the next stage until they are confident in the current one; and further notes that a Change.org petition started by petitioners on this issue garnered over 62,000 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a requirement for schools to provide annual swimming lessons as part of the physical education curriculum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002977]

Road network in Shropshire

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): In my final appearance in this House, I present a petition gathered by Les and Lynn Ginns on behalf of 174 residents of Earls Ditton Lane near Cleobury Mortimer in my constituency, where the road surface condition has become so poor as to be unsafe. I very much hope that some of the £289 million of funding announced by this Government for roads in Shropshire will be spent correcting this.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that a permanent solution to the road is sought through the resurfacing of the road and a no large vehicle sign is imposed from the junction of Withypool Farm to Ditton Mill Ford.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Earl Ditton Lane in Shropshire,

Declares that the stretch of road from Doddington, past Earls Ditton Farm down to Ditton Mill and from Hollywaste Cross to Withypool Farm is in such a state of disrepair that it is impacting adversely the daily access of delivery vehicles, emergency vehicles, HGVs and service vehicles; further that residents are reluctant to leave their homes for fear of further damage to their vehicles and that visitors are being deterred from seeing relatives and using the caravan park which is further impacting on the owners business.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that a permanent solution to the road is sought through the resurfacing of the road and no large vehicle sign is imposed from the junction of Withypool Farm to Ditton Mill Ford.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002997]

National Grid Proposals: North East Lincolnshire

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

7.52 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am delighted to have this opportunity to raise the issue of National Grid's proposals for the Grimsby to Walpole route, which, if realised, will see stretches of pylons constructed across the countryside in Lincolnshire and neighbouring regions. There can be no doubt but that this would have a major impact on the environment and economy along the length of the route. My focus today is on the section passing through North East Lincolnshire, though I note the presence of Members from other affected constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) led an excellent Westminster Hall debate on this matter on 2 May, and I fully support the points that he and others raised, but such is the concern—and to some extent anger—of local residents that I wanted to wait for an opportunity to focus on the effect on North East Lincolnshire. I am pleased, thanks to Mr Speaker, to have the opportunity to put on record my concerns about National Grid's proposals.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is generous in allowing me to intervene to emphasise the case for South Holland and The Deepings, which faces exactly the menace he describes. What is proposed would compromise food security by using valuable agricultural land and blight the landscape, as well as endangering, in my judgment, the wildlife in the site of special scientific interest that covers the saltmarsh on the coast. This must be stopped, in the public interest and for the common good.

Martin Vickers: As my right hon. Friend says, it must be stopped, and that is what I and my constituents want.

My concerns reflect those of my constituents, a significant number of whom have been in touch with me in recent months to voice their understandable anger and concern at the National Grid plans. The main villages impacted are Brigsley, Ashby cum Fenby, Barnoldby le Beck and Waltham. These are attractive traditional villages that face being blighted by monstrous metal structures and cabling. While it may not be the legal case, the reality is that projects on this scale require popular consent if they are to be delivered well. There is no point in bulldozing through public opinion; this will lead to further resentment and distrust. There are alternatives and they must be considered. Decisions such as these are an opportunity for Governments to show that the views of local communities matter and that there are ways of delivering the much-needed improvements to the grid that take account of those views.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I am further down the east coast but I recognise the problems my hon. Friend is describing in terms of the impact on north-east Lincolnshire. In Suffolk Coastal—I see that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) is also here—we have been concerned

for some time about the lack of vision in using new technology to avoid the devastation not just of pylons but, thinking of Friston and Saxmundham in my constituency, of converters and other substations. Those would have a truly damaging impact on greenfield sites, and we should be doing everything we can to get them on to brownfield sites closer to where the electricity is being used. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) has indicated that must be stopped. I agree, and I also suggest we should at least have a moratorium until the 2025 strategy is ready.

Martin Vickers: I thank my right hon. Friend for the intervention and she is absolutely right: a moratorium is the way forward.

I have attended one National Grid consultation meeting and met representatives privately. It is not ideal that its plans remain vague as to the exact route; more concrete proposals would be beneficial to all involved. The National Grid has also given the impression to some local residents that this is a *fait accompli*, and I am sure the Minister will reassure them that is not the case. I also want to reassure them that is not the case. The consultations that National Grid is holding in the constituency and up and down the country must be meaningful, and they must be certain that Members from across the House will ensure they are meaningful.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate because what he describes affects Norfolk, Suffolk, and Harwich and North Essex in particular, and other Essex constituencies where the Government are not considering new technology at the moment. Instead of pylons, we could have high-voltage, direct-current underground systems of the kind that are now the default option in Germany, for example. Getting that on to the agenda would speed up that infrastructure, because it would not be nearly so controversial and mired in judicial review and courts processes.

Martin Vickers: Like other colleagues who have intervened, my hon. Friend highlights the point that new technologies are available which must be considered before a final decision is taken.

Infrastructure that transmits electricity across the country is nationally significant, and we accept that upgrades in one form or another are needed. Expanding the network will indeed lower consumer bills. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) noted in the debate on 2 May, transmission and distribution costs are now roughly 15% of every electricity bill. It will also secure our energy supplies as we decarbonise our energy production in pursuit of net zero.

Of course the most ideal routes from a resident perspective are also, according to National Grid, the most expensive. Building pylons is cheaper than burying cables or taking them offshore. Once we consider that this infrastructure is needed up and down the country, we realise that the cost becomes staggering. The Government argue that power lines buried underground are up to 10 times more expensive, although that is disputed and the cost often falls on to the bill payer. However, cost should not always be the primary factor in decision making: Governments and their agencies have wider considerations such as ensuring that the

quality of life for their citizens is as pleasant as possible. They need to carry people with them by seriously considering every alternative and sharing their deliberations with the communities involved.

Similarly, there are indirect costs of building pylons that have nothing to do with their construction, but have been imposed as a tool to buy local support. An example of that is the announcement of community benefits schemes to be provided for the areas. That will be funding—although compensation might be a better phrase—for every overhead line and underground cable in an area, and the cost of that must be taken into account overall, as must the discounts of up to £1,000 for households closest to the new infrastructure. I am never opposed to local communities being given much-needed funding to improve the areas for the benefit of local residents—of course, it is only right that communities are compensated for inconvenience, particularly when it relates to such nationally significant work—but those costs will soon add up, and they must be included in calculations.

Unfortunately, constraints imposed by Government seem to have placed an emphasis in favour of pylons, as opposed to alternatives such as underground and offshore. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), standing in for the Minister in the debate on 2 May, said,

“overhead lines should be the strong starting presumption”.—[*Official Report*, 2 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 200WH.]

The phrase “strong presumption” is a loaded statement and does not indicate that full consideration will be given to alternatives. Though he did clarify that flexibility is possible

“where there is a high potential for widespread adverse landscapes and/or visual impacts.”—[*Official Report*, 2 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 200WH.]

Some clarity on what “high potential” and “widespread” means here would be welcome, given that many communities will have a valid case to say that both terms apply to developments in their area.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, as he is discussing the debate I secured in Westminster Hall. I welcome the contribution of many Members to that. Does he agree that the Minister rightly expressed that there is a huge amount of real feeling on our constituents’ behalf? It is right that the Government should listen to that and that this process needs to consider those feelings. Perhaps we should ask whether it should be paused while those feelings are taken fully into account.

Martin Vickers: I agree with my hon. Friend. Whether we call it a pause or a moratorium, we need to stop and reflect on where we have arrived.

I hope the Minister will confirm in his reply that although planning guidance contains an assumption in favour of pylons, full consideration of the alternatives will be put before Ministers. The proposals are short-sighted and incoherent, given the obvious necessity to rewire the grid to make it fit for the future and ensure we have the infrastructure in place to reach net zero. By 2050, the country will require two or three times the amount of electricity as today, but in respect of these plans, there is a clear failing of strategy in relation to how we ensure the necessary infrastructure.

My constituency is largely a rural one, as Lincolnshire is more broadly, and there are significant regional concerns regarding the impact of erecting pylons on prime agricultural land and what that will mean for our food security. In fact, when it comes to this land, even underground wiring is not ideal, given the disruption that might cause.

We are fortunate to benefit from an ever-increasing amount of electricity generated from offshore wind farms, and my constituency is fortunate to be on the Humber estuary, which is a leading force in the renewable energy sector. That presents an opportunity for an offshore grid transmitting much of our electricity away under the sea. At some point that electricity will have to come on land, but it would significantly reduce the need for pylons and overhead cables. We can learn here from examples in Belgium and Denmark.

I conclude by delivering a few messages to relevant stakeholders. To National Grid, I reiterate my previous remarks, where I stressed that it must consider the impact on residents in nearby villages before making any decisions and look to mitigate the impact on the visual environment to the greatest extent. I, like many of my colleagues, am in favour of extensive underground and undersea sections rather than utilising open countryside. I desperately hope that will be taken on board.

In that regard, I was encouraged by the Prime Minister’s reply on 20 March when, referring to me, he said:

“He will recognise the balance we need to strike by making sure that we give our country the energy security it needs but doing it in a way that is respectful of the impact on local communities. I will make sure that Ministers take into account the concerns he raised and that all the views of local constituents are taken into account.”—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 934.]

I do not want to make this speech too political. However, given that the ultimate decision on this matter is unlikely to be taken until next year, and consequently after the election, my message to whoever sits on the Treasury Bench and is responsible for deciding this matter is that I and my Conservative colleagues will not let it rest. The proposals as they stand will not get my support.

Finally, I say to the Minister that the Government have set out ambitious but sensible environmental targets. If we are to achieve those targets to reduce emissions, we will need to produce more electricity, and clearly that means that the additional infrastructure is required, but we must protect our visual environment.

I appreciate that Ministers cannot pre-empt National Grid’s final recommendations and must not prejudge issues that they will later have to determine, but I hope that the Minister will ensure that the views of my constituents, as well as those of others across the House, are front and centre in the process and that the wider impact on the environment and economy of north-east Lincolnshire, which I am privileged to represent, will be taken seriously. I assure my constituents that their voice will be heard and that I—and I know my colleagues—will fight any proposals that have a detrimental impact on their communities.

8.6 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): It is a real pleasure to respond to the final Adjournment debate of this Parliament. Earlier today, I responded to the final Westminster Hall debate—yes, I have literally been doing the washing up.

[Justin Tomlinson]

In the spirit of the tributes that we have been paying to our soon-to-be-departed colleagues, I want briefly to pay tribute to my dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). While he claims that his proudest moment was the looped Sky News footage of him carrying the bag of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), I disagree. I would say that he was one of our finest performers at the Dispatch Box and is one of our strongest performers in the media and in debates. I made that clear to each and every one of the Chief Whips and Prime Ministers at various reshuffles. Our party underused him, which was a great loss. He will be sadly lost in the future.

I turn to this incredibly important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) for raising this important issue, which I know is of importance not just to his constituency but to his region and across many areas of Great Britain. I assure him as a Minister that I have been lobbied heavily by so many colleagues on it.

An expanded electricity network is critical to lowering consumer bills, securing our energy supply, delivering green growth and skilled jobs, and decarbonising our electricity system. Nobody denies that, but that must be delivered in a strategic and sensitive way, which considers and mitigates impacts on communities and our treasured landscapes. I thank all hon. Members present for their contributions.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): The offshore wind grid will come in through Grimsby West substation and skirt around the Great Grimsby constituency, but residents are concerned that it will go through beautiful countryside, passing by an area of outstanding natural beauty. Does the Minister understand people's concern that if this development were in another area of the country, that area would not be getting ridden roughshod over as much as we feel that we are in north-eastern Lincolnshire as a whole?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has championed the voice of her community. I will come specifically to the importance of residents' concerns. We all recognise that this is an important subject for communities. My Secretary of State and I are clear that community voices must be heard in our transformation of the electricity system.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that we are making the transition to net zero in a way that supports communities and families. That is true of new electricity infrastructure, and the organisations that plan and deliver it are working to ensure that. Members will be under no illusion that to bring new home-grown electricity on to the system, we must expand the electricity network considerably, rewiring from where new generation is being built in our wind-rich seas and new coastal nuclear sites to connect it to areas of demand. We also anticipate that by 2050 we will need to meet double the current demand, and we need an efficient, high-tech electricity network to transport that power from where it is generated to where it is needed, to drive our country forward.

The Government are acutely mindful of the potential visual impacts of electricity transmission infrastructure—particularly overhead lines—on communities. That has

been raised by Members, whether through parliamentary questions, tonight's Adjournment debate or the recent Westminster Hall debate. As it stands, although the use of undergrounding is the starting presumption in nationally designated areas—national parks or areas of outstanding natural beauty—to protect those landscapes, overhead lines are the strong starting presumption. In theory, that remains flexible. Undergrounding may be used in other areas in certain circumstances, namely where there is a high potential for widespread adverse landscape or visual impacts. Such decisions will be weighed up through the planning process.

The Secretary of State and I are mindful of the constructive challenges made by colleagues, whether individually or in their sub-groups. OffSET—offshore electricity grid task force—is one of those groups. On my first day in the Department, I thought it was just another WhatsApp group I had not been invited to join, but it is a powerful group of Conservative colleagues making sure that their communities' voices are heard.

On the back of that, this week I met my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), who has detailed and extensive knowledge of future opportunities that could and should be considered. We had a deep dive discussion about overhead cables being the strong starting presumption, which in simple terms is based on the cost, as per the electricity system operator's 2012 figures. I am sure that the House would recognise that, since 2012, significant advances have been made to new technology. As has been mentioned, Germany has already made underground cables the default.

The ESO's own recent figures for the East Anglia study suggested that, when considering lifetime cost—not just the up-front cost but the potential for long-term lower constraint cost—and challenges around delivery speed, each variable raised important questions. We cannot answer with certainty whether those questions are valid, because the data simply does not exist. If we are to let communities' voices be heard and championed by my hon. Friends, those communities would expect at the very least that we have those answers, not just to protect their communities but to ensure that we deliver on our commitment, as we race towards our net zero target, to lower consumer bills. We have to take the public with us, or we lose everything. At that meeting, we were mindful to explore how we could carry out an urgent review to consider those variables and challenge those long-standing presumptions.

You may have noticed, Mr Deputy Speaker, an announcement this week that may delay what we had hoped would be an urgent review. Whoever is in government when we return, they need to ensure that they get the facts. This review is an opportunity to ensure that communities' voices have been listened to, and that we champion the best value for money for bill payers. I will continue to support that.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Minister was very generous about me at the beginning of the debate, but what he missed out in his generosity was the fact that one of the biggest privileges I have had in this Parliament was living with him for a period as his flatmate. I should make it clear that I was the clean one.

The Minister is a great friend of mine, but he is also a very good Minister and a really decent chap—and obviously my two colleagues from north Lincolnshire, my hon.

Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), are fantastic champions for our area on this issue—

Matt Warman: What at about the rest?

Andrew Percy: Of course there are those in broader Lincolnshire; I was talking about north Lincolnshire.

The really important point is the one that the Minister was making just now. Our constituents feel that this is something that has been done to them. They understand that we must increase our grid capacity, but they feel that it must be done in a way that makes them feel that they have had a voice, that it has not been done to them, and that every single option has been considered.

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has summed up exactly the point of this. It is a tribute to each and every one of my colleagues, who have been constructive and have engaged in a pragmatic way. Whoever is in my position when we return after the election should take forward this opportunity to conduct a review to ensure that communities' voices are heard and we deliver those cheaper community options.

Dr Coffey: I greatly appreciate what the Minister is saying. He is showing great wisdom and has grasped all the issues, even though he has been in the role for a relatively short time.

There are problems in that connections are still being offered for stations that have not even been granted planning permission, but the key point that I want to make to the Minister relates to what is happening in the middle of the consultation and planning processes. Before he leaves office—and he will continue to be a Minister at least until the decision of the electorate on who will form the next Government—will he and the Secretary of State please make every effort to ensure that Members of Parliament do not lose their voice in the consultation, and that, if necessary, the Planning Inspectorate is instructed to add time in recognition of the pre-election period that is under way?

Justin Tomlinson: My right hon. Friend was a wonderful boss when I had the pleasure of serving under her stewardship in the Department for Work and Pensions. She has made her plea crystal clear, and I hope that common sense will be applied. In effect, things are paused during a general election period, and whatever

the format and whoever is the decision maker, that person should always be mindful of community engagement.

That brings me back to the core point: the review gives us an opportunity to obtain up-to-date facts, recognising modern technology and the lessons that can be learned from Germany, and recognising the lifetime costs so that we can be confident that we are doing our best to deliver lower consumer bills, which are crucial not just to helping with the cost of living but to ensuring that we carry the public with us in respect of net zero.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his endorsement of OffSET. It is encouraging to find that we have had a bit of influence. Will he clarify, however, whether this background work will be continued during the general election period so that it is ready for an incoming Minister, whether it is him returning to office or another Minister?

Justin Tomlinson: Tempting as it is to bind a future Government, I cannot do so, although I know that my policy teams felt it was important to look at those principles. What I can and will do, however, is ensure that I am part of the process after the general election.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As this is the last Adjournment debate of this Parliament, I congratulate Martin Vickers and Justin Tomlinson.

They say that “There is Nothin’ Like a Dame”. Well, there is—two Dames. I have worked alongside two Dames for the past four and half years, Rosie Winterton and Eleanor Laing, and they have been absolutely superb. We have worked as an incredible team, along with Sir Lindsay Hoyle, who has been the best Speaker I have ever worked under or alongside. He too has been absolutely superb, along with Sir Roger Gale, who has given us tremendous support over the past several months.

I just have to say what an emotional time this is, because I do not know what tomorrow will bring—I do not know whether or not I will be in the Chair—and I wanted to put on record my grateful thanks to all those people. Let me also ask the Serjeant at Arms to pass on my grateful thanks to the staff who have looked after us for the past four and a half years, ensuring that our democracy has continued in the way that it has.

Question put and agreed to.

8.19 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 May 2024

[SIR PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Floating Offshore Wind and Contracts for Difference

12.30 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered floating offshore wind and Allocation Round 6 of the Contracts for Difference scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Philip. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for the debate and the Minister for agreeing to continue it despite yesterday's announcement. This topic will be ongoing, regardless of what happens over the summer. I also thank the Department, the Minister and the rest of the ministerial team for their ongoing engagement on the issue, and for increasing the administrative strike price for allocation round 6, which I will refer to as AR6.

The industry welcomed the administrative strike price for AR6, with the uplift of £60 from £116 per MWh to £176 per MWh, demonstrating that the Government have listened to the industry and signalled a policy change that acknowledges the changing economic landscape for developers. Following the Climate Change Committee's recommendations, floating offshore wind, which I refer to as FLOW, is set to make up to 5 GW of our energy generation by 2030 and 50 GW by 2050. The UK is a leader in FLOW, having the largest pipeline of floating projects globally, with leases of 33 GW and two pioneer projects in Scotland—Kincardine and Hywind.

FLOW has the potential to bring 29,000 jobs and £43.5 billion in gross value added to the UK by 2050, a prospect that should fill us with optimism. We need to ensure that we are ahead of the curve and not just deploying this technology for energy generation, but harnessing its full potential by developing the manufacturing element. However, all that is technically feasible only if we develop FLOW at a large scale. To do so, we need port investment from FLOWMIS—the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme—and, most importantly, a co-ordinated strategy with stepping-stone projects to make that happen.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea, I will make a strong case for FLOW in that region. I have had significant input from Professor Deborah Greaves at the University of Plymouth and the team at RenewableUK. I thank them for their contribution to my speech.

FLOW in the Celtic sea offers unique advantages, allowing us to harness energy regardless of wind direction. Despite its previous neglect due to seabed depths, FLOW can now be deployed in waters deeper than 60 metres, unlocking 80% of our offshore wind resource. That technology presents a significant opportunity for the region's economic growth and net zero benefits. In 2024, the Crown Estate launched the leasing round for up to 4.5 GW in the Celtic sea, a crucial component in the battle to mitigate climate change and to make progress

to net zero greenhouse gas emissions. I am pleased that the Crown Estate is taking what steps it can to drive onshore benefits through its leasing round, but a tender process is only one mechanism for realising the opportunities arising from such projects.

A co-ordinated national infrastructure approach for the Celtic sea is crucial. Such an approach, ideally as a bespoke strategy, is necessary to overcome the ongoing delays and issues we are facing and to ensure the successful development of FLOW in the region. I am glad to hear that RenewableUK, the Crown Estate and others have published an industrial growth plan to co-ordinate the investments needed to realise the opportunity, including prioritising where those investments will have the most impact. Using the growth plan as a blueprint for an industrial strategy for the Celtic sea—to give clarity on how those private investments can co-ordinate with public investment in critical infrastructure such as ports—will provide other investors with the long-term certainty they need to ensure that allocation round 5 and future Celtic sea projects are as successful as possible.

The importance of AR6 cannot be understated. At the moment, investor confidence is low, partly due to the failure in 2023 of AR5 of the contracts for difference, or CfD, to secure any contracts for offshore wind. That has been compounded by international competition and the attractiveness of other markets, which are investing significantly in FLOW infrastructure. Competition, in my mind, is stopping the evolution of FLOW. Currently, four FLOW projects can bid into AR6, with a total capacity of 658 MW: Blyth, which is a 58 MW project in Northumberland and is presented by EDF Renewables UK and Ireland; Erebus by Blue Gem Wind, which is a 100 MW project in the Celtic sea and is backed by TotalEnergies and the Simply Blue Group; Pentland, which is a 100 MW project in Scotland and is backed by Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners; and one new innovation and targeted oil and gas project, Green Volt, which received consent in April and can bid 400 MW.

The budget for AR6 needs to be big enough to accommodate not only the projects that lost out in AR5, but those that would have bid into AR6, so as to not have a knock-on effect on future allocation rounds. I cannot stress enough the future benefits of getting the budget right in this round, and of getting as many viable projects out to sea as rapidly as possible.

The opportunity is to not only regain lost ground, but support FLOW's growth into the future. That means that while a typical budget might accommodate one or two projects, this year's budget needs to accommodate three or four. Without these stepping-stone projects, we run the risk of higher costs for future commercial-scale projects and of creating mixed signals for investors in projects, supply chains and ports. Every project that bids and has cleared the hurdles set by the Department should be able to progress, especially if projects are ready to float.

Historically, Celtic sea ports have not received the same investment that has helped their North sea counterparts to develop the supply chain and port capabilities necessary to deploy FLOW. It is indeed hugely disappointing that the only successful FLOW project in AR4—the Hexicon project in Cornwall—did not see its associated port, Falmouth, receiving any funding from FLOWMIS. The dislocation of these spending decisions is bewildering to those of us working with developers in the region.

[Selaine Saxby]

As I said, investor confidence is low following the lack of bids into AR5, so we have to encourage external investment, but that is simply not the direction of travel we have seen in recent Government spending decisions. I understand that the budget is a matter for the Treasury—the future Treasury—and I have met the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury to ask for a pot 2 budget big enough to accommodate multiple projects, so that we can maximise the number of winning projects and accommodate those that could not bid in AR5. That is essential to allow Celtic sea projects to move forward at the same pace as North sea projects.

The Celtic sea region of the south-west and Wales includes economically deprived areas, so there is a great opportunity for impact on the economy and society there, but there also needs to be huge innovation to fully commercialise the sector. With my Celtic sea hat on, effective routes to investment could include Celtic sea ringfenced CfD allocations—indeed, I would allow each region to have its own pot. We need these small test and demonstration sites to succeed before any business will invest the kind of money required to deliver the FLOW of the future that the country needs. I was told yesterday that developers are spending £50 million before they even get in their bid for their contract for difference, and that it costs £1 billion to build a stepping-stone project. We should also look to the past, as fixed offshore wind projects were not required to bid in this competitive way until 5 GW had already been secured.

We also need dedicated Celtic sea FLOWMIS allocations, place-based investment, regional co-ordination of public funds and proper net zero plans for the region. The CfD budget plays a vital role in supporting the development of FLOW in both the North sea and the Celtic sea, but it must be substantial enough to ensure the progress of multiple FLOW projects each year, thereby preventing a monopoly in the North sea and ensuring a fair distribution of resources.

On port investment, I am pleased that one Celtic sea port has been supported through Port Talbot in Wales, but I urge the Government to look at a multi-port strategy. We know that no single all-purpose port can accommodate the scale of FLOW development and the need to serve such a large area of ocean. An increase in budget requires more FLOWMIS funding rounds. The decision criteria for allocating grant funding should be reviewed to better apportion the budget to support multiple ports in the Celtic sea region, taking into consideration the stepping-stone nature of the Celtic sea FLOW projects.

I was, as I mentioned, hugely disappointed that no funding had been made available to Port Falmouth, given its partnership with Hexicon's TwinHub. It had successfully bid for its CfD in AR4, and the TwinHub project is therefore far more advanced than others. However, the absence of FLOWMIS funding will now make it more challenging for those partners to deliver their project, and will almost certainly see all the onshore benefits of that vital project go overseas. The stepping-stone nature of the Celtic sea FLOW project seems to have been omitted from the decision criteria for FLOWMIS. The all-party parliamentary group will continue to seek to engage with Ministers to secure additional port funding for Falmouth and other ports around the Celtic sea as more projects secure a lease.

I will take this opportunity to share the diverse mix of port facilities across the region, including Falmouth, which is ideal for deep-water logistics and fabrication; Appledore, which has shipbuilding, low-carbon vessel innovation and servicing; Plymouth and South Devon freeport, which has marine innovation, blue tech investment and the Smart Sound Plymouth autonomous vehicle test range; Portland port, which is a potential logistics hub; and Ilfracombe in my constituency, which is ideally located for ops and maintenance. In Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) made me aware of the challenges with the port of Milford Haven. Although he could not be here today, he has worked closely with me as vice-chair of the APPG for the Celtic sea to ensure the Department's support of the port of Milford Haven project.

The port of Milford Haven stands ready to create a new green energy terminal in Pembroke Dock. As the closest port to the Celtic sea development sites, the port of Milford Haven's development ambitions at Criterion quay for a 400 MW test and demonstration phase and a fit-for-purpose site for integration and operations and maintenance activities are crucial to support future commercial-scale phases of FLOW in the Celtic sea.

The APPG's main ask today is for subsequent rounds of FLOWMIS grants and an increase to the £160 million scheme budget. The Government's support of Hexicon's TwinHub project is crucial, especially as the sector has been battling a much-changed economic environment since its bid. With Falmouth port ready to match Government funding, this first stepping-stone project needs that vital FLOWMIS leg-up to see optimal onshore benefits alongside this innovative, leading offshore project. Funding decisions should be made on FLOWMIS as quickly as possible to allow our ports and supply chain to gear up for that huge opportunity to ensure that ports work collaboratively and optimise supply chain expertise.

Another issue that can pose a stumbling block for FLOW, which I am dealing with at first hand in my constituency of North Devon, is the National Grid and cable routes with the White Cross wind farm project. Since my election, I have championed floating offshore wind, and getting the Celtic sea projects right would create huge economic opportunities for the local economy in North Devon.

I have previously raised concerns about the White Cross wind farm because of the route submitted to planning, which would involve tunnelling through several miles of highly designated sand dunes and would severely disrupt several businesses for many years to come. Although some community engagement has been ongoing this week, the community benefit proposed for the project and the manner in which engagement has progressed has been severely lacking. Although local communities are hugely supportive of FLOW, there are environmental concerns with cable corridor routes, and certain developments risk undermining all the support that has been generated along the south-west coastline in particular.

Because of the scale of the project, the decision on whether it goes ahead now lies entirely with the Marine Management Organisation that approved the work to the shoreline and North Devon Council's planning authority. Although I have no influence on that decision, I am pushing for the community to be properly recompensed for any associated disruption. The White

Cross project is not yet through the planning process and is now blighted by an issue with bats. Bizarrely, there are now objections from Natural England, which was the main reason that that cable route was chosen in the first place, as well as nearly 1,000 objections on the North Devon Council planning portal.

The site has been leased from the Crown Estate, and apparently the only viable grid connection is at Yelland, which is a highly contentious site in its own right. Getting from the wind turbines to that connection will be hugely problematic, whichever company tries to develop it. I know that strategic work on the grid is ongoing, but we need to better link these huge infrastructure projects together, as the current piecemeal approach is causing unnecessary distress to communities and businesses and untold environmental damage as a result of a project that is designed to help to reduce our carbon footprint in the long term. Frankly, we need to follow Tim Pick's strategy to deliver FLOW right around the coast effectively and efficiently.

My genuine fear is that if the budget is not increased adequately for AR6, the Celtic sea project, which we hope has bid, may not proceed, as Hexicon alone will not be a big enough step to the next project. As I have said countless times, for those doubters of wind, the wind blows the other way in the Celtic sea—to the north-east. We therefore optimise our wind resource and energy security by ensuring that all the regions are able to participate in FLOW. Again, I urge the Minister to hear the objectives of the APPG for the Celtic sea to co-ordinate a more strategic approach to this new region for offshore renewables to avoid some of the cabling issues we have already seen on the east coast. The National Grid also needs to work to minimise onshore disruption from that vital infrastructure.

Let me restate the asks. We need dedicated Celtic sea funding and an integrated port and infrastructure strategy, working across the Celtic sea region to derive maximum benefit from FLOW developments and ideally treating the entire region as one national infrastructure project. That could also include establishing sector-based working groups that engage developers, the Crown Estate, National Grid, ports and regional stakeholders to ensure strategically phased developments to support supply chain engagement and prioritisation of infrastructure spend in the region.

Future CfDs need to support multiple FLOW projects a year to ensure their progress and to make up for lost ground in AR5. The individual support for the Celtic sea's first FLOW project, TwinHub, with recognition of its stepping-stone nature, is vital to ensuring the development of the supply chain. We need to remove the barriers to FLOW and although I know the Celtic sea is a different kettle of fish to FLOW elsewhere, there is one thing in common and that is the barriers to planning and applications.

The barriers to delivering FLOW must be removed to ensure lasting benefits. Streamlining the planning and consenting process and increasing co-operation between Government Departments—from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to the Department for Transport and others, taking a whole systems approach—could be transformational. For the Celtic sea, the APPG preference throughout has been that a single cable corridor to Devon and Cornwall and one to south Wales should be established to reduce sea floor

damage and cabling onshore, as the bigger projects go out to sea. A strategic view taken on cable corridors might also reduce costs.

At a deeper level, there is also a skills piece that interlinks with our FLOW projects. The Crown Estate estimates that up to £1.4 billion could be generated for the UK economy, with up to 5,300 new jobs created within the supply chain. The creation of a skills taskforce to strategically bring together sector developers and education providers will unlock the workforce needed to deliver and ensure that local people, particularly those in economically deprived areas, develop career opportunities for now and for future generations. Getting that right has financial implications, so I know some of the decisions will involve the Treasury.

I will continue to lobby for a budget big enough to maximise the number of winning projects and accommodate those who could not bid into AR5. One part of my six-point plan for North Devon is to ensure we fully benefit from the green economy. I am doing that today because, if fully recognised, FLOW will create high-value jobs and strengthen local economies, while bolstering research and development within the industry so that the UK can become a world leader and exporter of FLOW.

12.47 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a slightly strange experience to realise that the summing-up of the debate could well go on for quite a bit longer than the debate itself. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing the debate and commend her on the quality of her speech, which she has clearly put a great deal of time into researching.

It seems to me that the byword for a future energy security strategy has to be diversity, or variability. We should be looking at every opportunity out there for us to secure renewable energy; we should not be turning anything down just now. Offshore wind has been recognised for some time, and given that the technology now allows us to float wind turbines rather than trying to anchor them to the sea massively increases how much of our waters can potentially be tapped for wind. As the hon. Lady pointed out, having installations around different parts of the UK also increases the chances that the wind will be blowing in the right direction somewhere.

The Government set a target of 50 GW of offshore wind by 2030—that is not that long ahead now—and they hope that 5 GW will come from floating offshore wind. At the moment we probably have less than 100 MW, so we are nowhere near where we need to be. That is about a 50th of what the Government are looking for. As has been mentioned, there was welcome news in November when the Government increased the strike prices for both floating and fixed offshore wind, but the announcement of how much the budget would be was not nearly so welcome. My concern is that if the Government—whichever Government we have in a few weeks' time—do not listen again to the industry, we could have a rerun of the calamity that was AR5, where nobody put in a bid for offshore wind.

We have to view round 6 against the backdrop of two previous failures. In allocation round 4, almost 3 GW did not come into fruition, and as we have mentioned, in round 5 there was no interest at all. In round 5, the Government managed to set the strike price for offshore

[Peter Grant]

wind energy so low that not a single wind producer could afford to sign up for it. That should not have surprised anybody, because industry leaders had been telling the Government for some time before the official auction that they would have to increase the strike price. The Government decided that they knew better, and as a result, there were no bids at all in round 5. That has put us seriously behind where we need to be and where the Government want to be.

If the Government are now aiming to reach their 2030 target of 50 GW, they need to secure another 21 GW over the next two allocation rounds, as there is unlikely to be time for a round 8. That means that round 6 and round 7 both need to average about 10.5 GW each. To put that into context, that is almost double the highest figure achieved in any single previous round. We have already left ourselves in a position where we have to increase massively the pace of build and increase the scale or number of projects that we fund. We cannot continue to fund only one project with each round.

Energy UK has forecast that, based on the current budget, round 6 is likely to deliver between 3 GW and 5 GW of offshore wind capacity. That will leave us looking for 16 GW from round 7—an almost impossible task when we consider how little we have produced over the previous rounds. When the budget was set, it was set at a level that the industry is telling us was too low. Okay, businesses are there to make a profit and they are good at telling the Government they need more money when they do not, but they were not crying wolf last time. They were not crying wolf in round 5, and I do not think that they are crying wolf in round 6. The disaster and humiliation that was round 5 was completely preventable, and the current jeopardy facing round 6 is preventable as well. If the Government are really serious about supporting innovation and the development of new renewable energy technologies, such as floating offshore wind, they need to be prepared to invest in it. As has already been mentioned, other people are; they are going to take the lead from us.

We are—and certainly should be—a leader in this technology. Scotland is a world leader in a number of renewable energy technologies. Floating offshore wind, as has been mentioned, gives creative flexibility. About 80% of Europe's offshore wind resource is estimated to be in waters that are more than 60 metres deep, which is too deep for a fixed wind turbine but is very exploitable for floating turbines. In Scotland, we know that we are an energy-rich country. We already produce significantly more energy than we need. We are a world leader in a lot of renewable energy technologies, including offshore wind and hydrogen, which is being developed—as Members will know—in my constituency, along the coast in Methil and Buckhaven. We have the capacity, the world-leading technology and the expertise, but what is holding us back is a lack of enthusiasm and a lack of visible commitment from a succession of Governments. We have a long history in Scotland of developing floating systems to use in the oil and gas sector. That technology is adaptable, and we have the people with the ability to adapt that expertise, in the same way as they adapted the previous expertise in fixed drilling installations for oil and gas. That was used in the design of the earlier generations of wind turbines.

It is maybe hard to believe now, but when the contracts for difference model was originally set up, it was hailed as the gold standard. It was one of the best ways of securing renewable energy investment that anyone had ever come up with, and it has achieved quite a lot. However, one of the lessons of the failure of allocation round 5 is that, while other countries and economies have continued to push forward at pace, the UK has started to fall back. In recent years, while successive allocation rounds in the UK have failed, we have seen the implementation of, for example, inflation reduction in the US and the green deal in the European Union. That means that, when green energy companies are looking for somewhere to invest—and a lot of those people will invest anywhere—they see tax credits in America and subsidies in the European Union, but all too often they see what looks to them like half-hearted commitment from the United Kingdom. If that continues, we will start to lose that investment.

The UK Government should be doing what they can to make sure that Scotland, and indeed the rest of the UK, retains its world-leading position at the front of the green energy transition revolution. We can do that by increasing funding to green energy programmes, including floating offshore wind and fixed onshore wind. It is estimated that between 8 GW and 12 GW of offshore wind projects around the UK already have planning consent—they are ready to go if somebody would just provide some of the investment they need. They are already there. If the contracts for difference had the capacity, they could all be brought on stream much more quickly. They are ready to start building to produce the clean, reliable and cheap energy we know we will need to meet our net zero climate change targets.

The SNP will continue to call on whoever is in government after the election to introduce a comprehensive industrial strategy that includes identification of where our longer-term energy needs will be met. They should be aiming to match the Scottish Government's just transition fund, and invest at least £28 billion a year into green transition. The potential Government in waiting have ditched their promises; I hope they will reinstate them in their election manifesto.

The renewable energy industry is an essential component of Scotland's long-term growth strategy. We can be world leaders—we are already world leaders. We want to maintain that position. We cannot allow a UK Government of any persuasion to hold Scotland back in the 2020s in the same way they did back in the 1970s and 1980s.

12.56 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this debate. It is sad, but understandable, that there are not more Members present in the Chamber to take part in or listen to it. I have to say that if more hon. Members had been present, they would have heard a comprehensive and substantive contribution from the hon. Member in support of floating offshore wind, as she has given on so many occasions. I could not disagree with much of what she had to say, and I and the Labour party could strongly support a great deal of it.

The potential of floating wind is now pretty much undisputed. It is a technology that can go where other offshore wind cannot. It is particularly adaptable for

deeper waters, more difficult circumstances, and parts of the UK that otherwise would not have much in the way of floating offshore. Floating offshore's ability to take the offshore wind revolution to its next stage is manifest in the Celtic sea, Scotland and the north-east of England. It will ensure that we take advantage of the wind speeds around the UK, which are such a national and international asset for our country, wherever we can.

Labour want to see at least 5 GW of floating offshore wind—I emphasise “at least”—deployed by 2030. Not only that, but we want to see the arrangements in place to properly support that deployment. We envisage Great British Energy playing a substantial role, taking stakes in future flow as it goes forward and supporting it all the way. We also propose establishing a national wealth fund. That fund will play a substantial role, along with other bodies such as the Crown Estate, in developing the necessary future infrastructure for FLOW.

As we know, at present the infrastructure is sorely lacking, as the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned. The assembly, erection and future servicing of floating platforms all require substantial upgrading of the port facilities. While it is a little bit encouraging that the FLOWMIS programme allocated some funding for port development, it is clearly by no means enough to get the infrastructure properly under way. As RenewableUK recently said, we need at least 11 ports to support floating offshore wind, not just Port Talbot and the port in Scotland supported by FLOWMIS.

We come then to the question of how we actually get at least 5 GW of FLOW installed by 2030. As the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) pointed out, if we do the sums on our ambitions for offshore generally and FLOW in particular, we have to move ahead far more quickly in allocation rounds than we have done in the past and are anticipated to do in the immediate future. That is against the backdrop of pretty total failure to fund and support either FLOW or offshore fixed wind in the most recent allocation round, and to a considerable extent in the allocation before that.

The figures for how much we must put in place per allocation round, in both fixed and floating offshore wind, over the next several rounds are compelling. We have to move far faster and far more extensively to secure those arrangements for the future.

For FLOW, moving into AR6, the prognosis appears pretty bleak. It looks like perhaps just one FLOW project will actually fit in the pot 2 budget—the budget FLOW sits in—despite, as the hon. Member for North Devon said, there being at least four shovel-ready projects, ready to go right now, that could easily fit within that allocation were it made available. I do not think that includes the Hexicon project—a really important project which needs enormous support, because it has twin-turbine capacity, which is a further step forward in FLOW technology and can take the whole FLOW arrangement forward.

We have the beginnings of a real breakthrough as far as FLOW is concerned, but it is probably directly hampered by what AR6 has in store for us. That should not be allowed to stand. Of course, we are in rather different circumstances than we were in yesterday morning. I might have been standing here today asking the Government to do various things over the summer to sort out some of the problems; what I will be doing is asking the next Government, whoever they are, to get on with it quickly,

particularly because AR6 is already well through its various design iterations and there is a limited window for changing anything in it before the tendering for the various projects. Whatever party comes in after the election, this issue will pretty immediately land on the desk of the Government, and by “pretty immediately” I mean that the new Government will have to get AR6 and floating offshore wind right possibly within a month.

The problem for FLOW is not the uplift in administrative strike price. The Government actually did not do a bad job of looking at where the price was and where it should be for AR6. The problem is the budget that has been allocated to this particular pot. Were there to be a reasonable uplift in that budget, it is highly likely that a number of the shovel-ready projects would be successful in AR6 pot 2. Of course, I cannot specify what a new Government are likely to do, but the case for early action to put that right is compelling. Even today, I hope that the Minister will commit himself to getting that action under way in his Department, as far as he has any capacity in the few days before we all pack up and start knocking on doors—if he has not already.

This is a looming loss of opportunity for floating offshore wind, and there is a wider prospect that a technology in which we are world leader will almost immediately start falling away. As the hon. Member for North Devon said, if we do not get the projects under way early, there will be a chain reaction: people lose confidence in the investment, they take their investment elsewhere, the projects do not progress, the appetite for investment in infrastructure starts to fall away and the whole thing starts to disintegrate. We are at a vital juncture. In their last few days, I hope that the Government can grasp the opportunity of making investment in FLOW right.

1.9 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Philip. Normally, a Westminster Hall debate would have an overwhelming number of speakers. Heaven knows what has distracted our colleagues from what we can all agree is a very important debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) who could easily have been distracted herself today, but will never miss an opportunity to champion her community.

I will return to my wonderful hon. Friend shortly, but first I will take a slight deviation. As I was bounding up the steps with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), it dawned on me that this is his final contribution as he will sadly be retiring. He is held in high regard across both sides of the House. In the coming weeks, as we seek re-election, we will all be championing our local credentials, but the local candidate for Southampton, Test will be hard-pressed to beat the shadow Minister's credentials. He has been the student union chairman at the University of Southampton and the leader of the council, no less. Not only has he been elected since '97, but—God loves a trier—he also ran in '83, '87 and '92. For colleagues who do not quite get the result they feel they deserve, just keep going and you will get here.

The shadow Minister has always conducted himself with a real passion for his areas of interest. His contributions are always backed up with thorough research, which is

[Justin Tomlinson]

why he is held in the highest regard. As the newest member of the DESNZ team, I admire the way in which he has performed his various shadow roles since 2015. He will genuinely be a loss to this Parliament and it was a pleasure to listen to his final contribution, powerful as it was. Although he recognises that nobody can definitely say who the Government will be, he has had that one last opportunity to shape what happens going forward in this important area. Finally, we do share one interest, which is that we both played for the parliamentary football team. While he looks excellent for 73, having seen some of his performances over the years as a goalkeeper, I think there is still a chance for a late call-up now that he has a bit more time on his hands, and we all look forward to cheering him on in Portugal.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon on securing this important debate, building on the Westminster Hall debate that she obtained last year. I feel that I am a cheerleader for her, because only this time last week when I was doing the ITV “West Country” programme and she appeared as one of the vox spokesmen, I heaped praise on her for her work on water quality. She is a tireless campaigner, and particularly a vocal champion of floating offshore wind, particularly through her role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea—how does she fit it all in?—and she rightly highlights the benefits that this new technology could bring to the UK.

The world’s first floating offshore wind farm was built in UK waters. Today we have 80 MW of installed capacity, making us a world leader in the sector. That builds on our world-leading status in fixed-bottom offshore wind deployment, where we have over 14 GW of installed capacity—more than any other European country. In 2010, just 0.8% of the UK’s annual electricity was generated by offshore wind. Last year it was 17.4%, which is a significant transformation. It plays an important part in our overall transformation from just 7% of power generated by renewables in 2010 to 47% currently, and it continues to expand rapidly.

Looking to the future, we are committed to furthering our position at the forefront of the sector. Our ambition is to install up to 50 GW of offshore wind by 2030, of which 5 GW will come from floating offshore wind. Based on seabed exclusivity, we have the largest pipeline of floating projects in the world, at 25 GW. The 5 GW is a stretching ambition, so we are working hard to create the right environment for investment and address barriers to deployment. I am a mere deputy today. The Minister for Nuclear and Renewables leads this work, and he is passionate that this is a key part of our overall strategy.

First, I will address the main point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon on the contracts for difference mechanism and the budget for floating offshore wind. The CfD scheme is recognised worldwide as a model for supporting renewables deployment. Our CfD auctions have so far awarded contracts totalling around 30 GW of new renewable capacity, including around 20 GW of offshore wind. Last year’s allocation round was a success story for many technologies, including marine energy and the UK’s first three geothermal projects. But—we would not be having this debate if there were not a “but”—we recognise the shortfall of fixed-bottom and floating offshore wind, and I acknowledge the concerns that my hon. Friend voiced at the time.

We reflected carefully on the results of allocation round 5 and, following a comprehensive review of the latest evidence, we raised the administrative strike price for floating offshore wind by 52% in real terms, recognising the unprecedented upward pressure on project costs. We also recognised the importance of the right support mechanisms for new technologies that may not yet be cost-competitive. That is why this year’s allocation round 6 pot 2, which is dedicated to emerging technologies such as floating offshore wind, has its biggest ever budget—£105 million. But for the announcement yesterday, which may have passed some people’s attention, I would have gone to view one of those in Norway next week. Unsurprisingly, I now will not be doing that, but there is always YouTube if hon. Members want to learn about new technologies, as I discovered when I learned about hydrogen. I assure my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Nuclear and Renewables have met directly with eligible floating wind developers for allocation round 6 to understand their concerns.

I stress that there has to be a balance. The thrust of this debate has been about the need to be more generous to unlock more; I absolutely get that, because we have legally binding commitments and we need to expand our basket of renewable energy sources, but we also have to be held to account by the Public Accounts Committee. I served on the Committee for three years and I know that the current Chair, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), will not let taxpayers’ money be wasted unnecessarily, so there is always a balance. If we are overly successful, perhaps we have overpaid, so we have to strike that balance. There are few colleagues more interested in making sure that we do not forget the impact on consumers’ bills.

The Government are proud of our record on tackling climate change, but we will never lose sight of the need to do so in a pragmatic way and to ensure that ultimately we deliver a cleaner and, crucially, more efficient energy system that leads to cheaper consumer bills. If we lose sight of that, we lose public support and endanger all the good will that collectively we are seeking to unlock.

Secondly, we recognise that port infrastructure and supply chains are critical to the long-term future of floating offshore wind in the UK. The floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme is worth up to £160 million and will support investment in port infrastructure for floating offshore wind deployment. The port of Cromarty Firth and Port Talbot have both been placed on the FLOWMIS primary list, meaning that we will take those projects to the next stage, which is due diligence. We are also supporting ports in the region through the Celtic freeport, backed by up to £26 million in UK Government funding. I acknowledge the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon has raised about the FLOWMIS decision, and her letter to the Minister for Nuclear and Renewables about the issue. FLOWMIS is a competitive scheme, and I recognise that the results are disappointing for the port of Falmouth and for the port of Milford Haven.

My officials are engaged in the ports task and finish group, led by RenewableUK. The group is looking into the barriers to port investment and identifying the most appropriate levers to overcome them. There is no stronger champion than my hon. Friend to ensure no stone is left unturned so that her constituents and neighbouring constituents will not miss out in future.

We are taking significant action to support supply chains through the green industries growth accelerator, a fund of nearly £1.1 billion to support investment in manufacturing capability for clean energy sectors. That will enable the UK to seize growth opportunities from the transition to net zero by unlocking private investment and creating new jobs, for which we are the envy of the world.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend is right to highlight the potential of the Celtic sea region for floating offshore wind. I can assure her that the Government are determined to ensure that that potential is realised. As she will know, the Crown Estate has launched leasing round 5, making available areas of seabed that could support up to 4.5 GW of capacity in the Celtic sea. The Government worked closely with the Crown Estate to unlock that opportunity and will continue to do so as the sector grows. In last year's autumn statement, we committed to bringing forward additional floating wind in the Celtic sea through the 2030s, which could see an additional 12 GW of generation deployed in that important region.

Britain's geography makes it ideally suited to offshore wind, and floating offshore wind enables us to make the most of our natural resources by unlocking the potential out at sea. We are aware of the challenges involved and are taking actions to address them. We know that this technology is an enormous opportunity for our journey to net zero and for our economic growth. It is local communities such as those in the Celtic sea region that stand to gain the most from the economic growth and the highly skilled roles that will be created.

I look forward to working with my hon. Friend as we harness the enormous potential of offshore wind power. I am sure we will return to this issue in a matter of weeks.

1.19 pm

Selaine Saxby: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I echo the Minister's comments about the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead): I wish him all the best.

This debate has been small but perfectly formed. We very much agreed, as has been the case for all Celtic FLOW debates and projects that I have worked on. Whatever happens over the next few weeks, I very much hope that that cross-party consensus continues. Having been with developers and the Crown Estate this week, I know that there is a huge drive for it to succeed. It is about how we get those projects over the line in a pragmatic manner to bring bills down in the longer term. We need to get these things moving; otherwise, we will not get there in the end. I thank everyone for their contributions to the final Westminster Hall debate of this Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered floating offshore wind and Allocation Round 6 of the Contracts for Difference scheme.

1.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 May 2024

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bluetongue Virus

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is publishing its framework for managing an outbreak of bluetongue virus serotype 3 in England.

Bluetongue is a disease affecting ruminants (such as cattle, sheep and deer) and camelids (such as llamas and alpacas) and is spread primarily by biting midges. It does not affect people or food safety.

BTV-3 first appeared in the Netherlands in September last year. We immediately stopped imports of susceptible species and related products from the affected region and required all imports from neighbouring regions to be tested for bluetongue to prevent the potential import of disease, and we continue to do this.

However, our proximity to the continent and the prevalence of disease puts us at risk of wind-borne incursion of infected biting midges, regardless of our stringent border controls. We detected our first case of BTV-3 in November 2023 as part of our annual bluetongue surveillance programme in Kent, then later in Norfolk.

We moved rapidly to contain disease by establishing temporary control zones in both locations, humanely culling animals that presented a risk of onwards transmission, and undertaking extensive testing and surveillance to understand prevalence and spread. Some 47,425 tests were undertaken, identifying 126 infected animals across 73 premises in four counties. Following this surveillance, there have been no further detections of BTV-3 and there are no current bluetongue temporary control zones in force.

While this represents a very low prevalence, we must not be complacent about the challenge this could pose to our livestock sector. Our latest risk assessment indicates that there is a high likelihood of a new introduction of bluetongue into livestock in Great Britain from wind-borne biting midges from northern Europe this year.

This disease control framework for bluetongue virus serotype 3 in England in 2024, published today by the Department, looks to mitigate the impacts of such an incursion on our vitally important livestock and farming sectors.

Although animal health and disease control are devolved matters, disease does not respect boundaries and the Government and devolved Administrations work closely through the UK-wide animal diseases policy group to consider and plan for animal disease outbreaks, and BTV-3 is no exception. Close working on the response to last year's incursion and planning for 2024 has taken place, and continues to take place, to ensure consistency of approach as far as possible. This framework recognises that England's proximity to disease on the continent confers a likely additional responsibility on the Department to stem spread to other parts of the United Kingdom.

The Government will work closely with the devolved Administrations to support the objectives of the Great Britain bluetongue disease control strategy <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bluetongue-gb-disease-control-strategy> and the UK contingency plan for exotic notifiable diseases of animals

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-britain-and-northern-ireland-contingency-plan-for-exotic-notifiable-diseases-of-animals>.

The framework has been developed on the back of extensive analysis of the potential trajectory of disease and close engagement with sector representatives on our livestock core group, as well as roundtables held with a wide range of sector groups. It provides an overarching guide to how any bluetongue outbreak will be managed so that livestock keepers and other potentially affected businesses can understand the possible effects for them individually and collectively. We want to ensure that our control strategy is proportionate. We will continue to work with industry to keep it briefed on the latest disease and veterinary assessments.

A safe and effective vaccine will be the best long-term protection against BTV-3. The Department and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate began conversations with manufacturers back in February and several vaccines are in development. Some have in recent weeks been expedited for emergency use on the continent. This is not the approach that the Department has settled with industry.

It is clear that confidence in the safety and efficacy of any vaccine is of paramount importance, not only for encouraging good take-up among keepers, but in protecting exports of beef, lamb and dairy products. The vaccine approved by the Dutch authorities has emergency use approval but not market authorisation. Vaccines without market authorisation can have potentially negative implications for trade and may impact our strong export market for meat and dairy products.

That is why we continue to actively engage with vaccine manufacturers on the development of an authorised BTV-3 vaccine and published a prior information note on 10 May to identify further potential suppliers. We are also actively monitoring vaccine data from EU countries and engaging with their Governments to learn from their experiences.

While this essential due diligence is undertaken, aside from some potential small-scale culling at the outset to prevent disease becoming established, disease control efforts primarily centre on movement controls of susceptible livestock and germinal products. These have the effect of delaying spread but cannot hold back disease indefinitely or eradicate it—as circulation becomes established in biting midge populations and their range expands over time, movement controls lose their effectiveness and will need to be modified or withdrawn. The plan sets out some of the steps that will be considered in tightening or lifting movement controls over time.

The framework also recognises the impact that movement controls can have on animal keepers and other affected businesses. It seeks to minimise burdens as far as practically possible, while maintaining the integrity of measures to mitigate risk of spread of this exotic disease. This includes, for example, a new online system that keepers can use to apply to the Animal and Plant Health Agency for licences to move their animals from disease control zones in the event of an outbreak.

Supporting farmers to take preventative action, the Government will offer free bluetongue tests to keepers in the high-risk south-east and eastern counties, from Norfolk down to East Sussex, who are planning to move animals out of these counties. This testing will be available as soon as the risk increases but before the first detection of disease. Keepers will be able to check on the APHA bluetongue interactive map if they are in an eligible area. We are introducing the scheme to give animal keepers the tools to manage the risk of disease spread outside of the higher-risk counties during the period before disease is confirmed.

All testing will be carried out at the UK's bluetongue virus national reference laboratory at the Pirbright Institute, supported by our official laboratory network, where needed, to ensure sufficient capacity, and this scheme will go live when the risk level changes—this is likely to be in the coming weeks when temperature increases, wind patterns from the continent and prevalence of disease there coalesce to make incursion and spread likely.

We recognise how important it is that farming businesses across the country have access to the best possible advice to help them understand the disease, prepare and access the support that we are putting in place. That is why we have had and will continue our programme of engagement with industry, to ensure that they have all the information that they need and we understand the key issues they are facing. This is alongside our ongoing preparedness work, regular meetings with key stakeholders and webinars for vets and show organisers. We will continue to strengthen and expand our guidance to farmers, livestock keepers, show organisers, importers, exporters and associated industries—available via www.gov.uk/bluetongue—as the situation develops.

Finally, vigilance for bluetongue clinical signs in susceptible animals is key. We encourage keepers to monitor animals frequently, getting in touch with APHA immediately if they have any suspicions of this notifiable disease.

[HCWS500]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I hereby give notice of the Department of Health and Social Care's intention to seek a Contingencies Fund advance to make the recently announced interim infected blood payments.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was absolutely clear in his announcement on 21 May that additional interim payments of £210,000 will be delivered within 90 days, starting in summer, to all UK living infected beneficiaries of the UK infected blood support schemes.

The Department of Health and Social Care's capital annually managed expenditure ambit does not provide cover for compensation payments already approved by Parliament through legislation. While this will be received through the main estimate, this advance will enable interim payments to be made ahead of Parliament formally approving the ambit and the associated expenditure through an estimate, in line with the Government's commitment.

Parliamentary approval for additional capital of £837,000,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a main estimate for the Department of Health and Social Care. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £837,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS498]

Dentistry

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): On 7 February 2024 the Government published our report, "Faster, simpler and fairer: our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry", to accelerate the recovery of NHS dentistry from the covid-19 pandemic. The plan will fund up to 2.5 million additional appointments, or more than 1.5 million additional courses of dental treatment and is already delivering, with over 500 more dental practices showing themselves as open to new patients as of 9 May. Our commitment is to improve access to NHS dental care so that those who need to see a dentist are able to, especially in under-served parts of the country.

A key priority for this Government is to grow capacity within dentistry so that there are more NHS dentists delivering care to patients. The NHS long-term workforce plan sets an ambition to increase dentistry places by 40%. This is the biggest numerical expansion of NHS training places in the history of the NHS and will mean that by 2031 we are training 1,100 dentists each year.

However, training more dentists is not the sole solution to current workforce challenges in NHS dentistry. We need dentists to do more NHS work alongside, or instead of, their private work.

More than 35,000 dentists are registered with the General Dental Council in England. However, only 24,151 dentists delivered at least some NHS activity in England in 2022 to 2023. This means that nearly one third of registered dentists are not contributing to NHS dentistry and may be exclusively working in private practice. Furthermore, data published today by the NHS Business Services Authority shows that of those that are delivering NHS dental activity, some dentists are making only a token commitment to NHS dentistry.

The Government estimate that training an individual dentist from the beginning of dental school through to graduation can cost up to approximately £292,000, of which costs in the region of £200,000 are not repayable by the student. We believe it is right and fair to seek better value for the significant investment that the taxpayer makes in the education and training of the dental workforce, and for graduate dentists to invest their skills and expertise in the NHS for the benefit of patients. This NHS experience will be of great benefit to them throughout their practice, as well as enabling better access for patients.

That is why we are today publishing a consultation on introducing a "tie-in" for graduate dentists. The introduction of a minimum NHS service requirement, or "tie-in", would aim to ensure that newly qualified dentists spend at least some of their time delivering NHS dental care in the years following the completion of training. This may include working in a "high street" primary care dental practice, secondary care, community dentistry or dental public health.

The consultation will seek views on two main principles:

Newly qualified dentists should commit to delivering at least a minimum amount of NHS dental care, for a minimum number of years after graduating.

Newly qualified dentists should repay some of the public funding invested in their education and training if they do not deliver a minimum amount of NHS dental care.

The morale and wellbeing of our highly skilled and hard-working dental workforce is of utmost priority. I want to thank the many hard-working dentists for all their efforts as we have seen real improvements over the past year. We want to make NHS work more attractive to ensure NHS dentists are incentivised to deliver NHS care. As part of this, we have already announced a package of reforms to improve patient access and provide fairer remuneration for dentists. We are also supporting our excellent dental staff to work at the top of their training, and encouraging more hard-working dentists

to those areas of England that are currently under-served. This is accompanied by detailed policy work on further reforms to the 2006 dental contract, in discussion with the profession, to properly reflect the care needed by different patients and more fairly remunerate practices. We want the outcome of this work to be better for patients and better for the workforce.

The publication of this consultation marks an important step in the delivery of both our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry and the NHS long term workforce plan. We aim to make dental services faster, simpler and fairer for patients and the dedicated dentistry workforce. I would encourage all those with an interest in the policy proposal, whether professionals, organisations or members of the public, to share their views and to shape our approach.

[HCWS499]

Petitions

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Thursday 23 May 2024

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Housing development in Farrington Gurney

The Humble Petition of Residents of Farrington Gurney,

Sheweth, that the petitioners are concerned about the potential impact of the large allocation of housing for the village of Farrington Gurney as set out in Bath and North East Somerset Council's updated Local Development Plan, alongside the proposals for other areas of Somer Valley.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House ask His Majesty's Government to consider the opinions of local residents and farmers in this regard.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg.]

[P002996]

Pedestrian Safety in Crawley

The petition of residents of Crawley,

Declares that 12-year-old Tyler Wills tragically lost his life crossing the road following the flooding of the underpass on the A23 in November 2022.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ensure the Department for Transport assist West Sussex County Council in ensuring there are safe and accessible pedestrian crossing points on the A23 in Crawley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Henry Smith.]

[P002999]

Unite the Union's 'Workers' Plan for Steel' campaign

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that after decades of managed decline, our UK steel industry is in crisis, and we face the imminent loss of primary steelmaking capability; notes that the demand for steel is growing, and Unite the Union research shows that UK steel could have a bright, green future; further notes Unite's "Workers' Plan for Steel" campaign and five pledges for steel; and further declares that we do not want to be reliant on imported steel, and that the UK Government should support UK steel jobs and the communities that depend on them.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to show its support for the steel industry through responding to the pledges of Unite the Union's 'Workers' Plan for Steel' campaign.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002998]

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Youth Mobility Scheme

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

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

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

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 8 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 660.]

[P002974]

Observations from the Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):

Mobility remains an important pillar of our relationships with our European neighbours. The Government recognise the cultural value of youth mobility and the importance of facilitating cultural exchange opportunities for young people.

The UK currently operates 13 successful youth mobility arrangements with countries including Australia, New Zealand and Canada. These are subject to bilateral, reciprocal arrangements that also provide benefits to British citizens seeking to experience overseas life, with the detail negotiated and agreed between the relevant parties.

The Government note the publication by the European Commission on 18 April 2024 setting out a proposal to EU member states and seeking their agreement to negotiate a UK-EU wide youth mobility arrangement. This is currently a matter for the EU and its member states and the UK has not been formally approached by the EU on this proposal, but the Government have been clear that they have no plans to agree to an EU-wide YMS.

The Commission's proposal goes far beyond any scheme the UK or EU member states currently operate, and while it may appear like a generous offer to the young people of the UK, in fact, the proposed arrangement would allow UK nationals entry to only a single member state and therefore not allow "intra-Union" mobility beyond the up to 90 days in every 180 days of travel throughout the Schengen zone already offered.

The Government are willing to explore new, precedent-based, bilateral YMS arrangements with international partners, including individual EU member states who are interested and where it is in the UK's interests and supports the skills and opportunities of our youth. This is an offer that I, and other Ministers, have consistently made to our friends in the European Union and is in keeping with other bilateral arrangements that EU member states have with various third countries, including Australia and Canada. That offer from the UK Government stands, and I am keen to engage further on it if member states wish to approach us.

Further details of any additional YMS arrangements will be announced once they are concluded.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water booster proposals in Buckland

The petition of residents of the constituency of Aylesbury,

Declares that Thames Water should be required to make residential amenity the top priority when considering the location of a new large water booster station in Buckland which will have a severe negative impact on the lives of those living in neighbouring properties.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that Thames Water locates this new water booster station well away from residential properties.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rob Butler, *Official Report*, 24 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 1106.]

[P002961]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay):

Thank you very much for sharing your petition with me, as Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We note and share the concerns raised by your constituents regarding the proposed location of a new water booster station in the Buckland area, which is being developed by Thames Water.

We note the petitioners' concerns regarding the potential impact of infrastructure projects on residential communities. With any new infrastructure project, it is important to ensure we consider the wellbeing and quality of life of nearby residents. This should include consideration of a range of options.

The design and specific location of the water booster proposal is being developed by Thames Water, who held a public consultation in December 2023 where concerns were raised by Buckland Parish Council and MP Rob Butler. Following these discussions, Thames Water committed to assessing the feasibility of relocating the station to an alternative site suggested by Buckland Parish Council. Once feasibility of the alternative site is confirmed, Thames Water plans to conduct further public engagement sessions before submitting a planning application to Buckinghamshire Council.

Thames Water has also taken steps to address concerns raised by residents regarding the impact of the new water booster station on residential amenity. The current design of the station was developed to incorporate feedback from the local planning authority, following multiple rounds of pre-planning application advice considering various locations. However, following the public engagement session in 2023, it became evident that not all stakeholder feedback had been adequately incorporated. As a result, Thames Water is currently assessing the feasibility of relocating the water booster station to an alternative site to minimise the impact on residential amenity. Additionally, the station has been designed to blend in with the local surroundings, featuring an enclosed timber barn-like structure and incorporating screening landscape planting.

It is right that Thames Water take the appropriate steps to look at a range of options and continue to consult those affected, adapting plans where necessary to minimise any impact on local residents.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Protection of the Amazon rainforest

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and makes up half of the planet's remaining tropical forests, home to about three million species of plants and animals and 1.6 million indigenous people; further notes that the forest is the world's largest natural carbon sinks, absorbing and storing an amount of carbon equivalent to 15 to 20 years of global CO₂ emissions from the atmosphere; and further declares continued deforestation of the Amazon is contributing to the forest's inability to recover from droughts, fires and landslides.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Brazilian Government to protect forest land and end large-scale deforestation, to prevent nearly half of the Amazon rainforest from collapsing and that these irreversible consequences for the Amazon and the planet are avoided.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 30 April 2024; Vol. 749, c. 229.]

[P002964]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

The UK is committed to working with Brazil to address deforestation of the Amazon and its detrimental impact on global climate, environmental conservation and the communities who reside there.

Following his election in October 2022, the UK welcomed President Lula's vocal commitment to Brazil's domestic action on climate change, including net reduction in deforestation by 2030. We commend Brazil for delivering impressive results already, notably a 51% reduction of deforestation levels in 2023.

Climate and nature have long been central to the UK's relationship with Brazil, and we are proud to be the third biggest contributor of climate finance to Brazil, with more than £511 million committed.

The Prime Minister met President Lula in May last year, when he announced a UK contribution of £80 million to Brazil's Amazon fund. An additional £35 million was announced at COP28, making the UK the fund's second largest donor.

This funding supports initiatives under the green and inclusive growth partnership, announced by former Foreign Secretary James Cleverly during his visit to Brazil last May, for which an implementation plan was launched at COP28 in December.

The GIG partnership is driving strengthened co-operation and dialogue to support Brazil's economic transition to net zero, turn the tide on deforestation, and develop a bioeconomy to generate new commercial opportunities for Brazil and the UK. Taking care of forests and its peoples is a key pillar. Our aim is to combat deforestation and promote a socio-bioeconomy involving non-timber products, in addition to fostering biodiversity goals more broadly and tackling illegal gold supply chains.

Promoting the rights and engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities who reside in the Amazon is also a priority. This year, our partnerships for forests

programme came to an end, with a total of £24 million invested in Brazilian bioeconomy businesses. In the state of Pará alone, which is set to host COP30 next year, P4F reached more than 3,500 people and secured more than 16 thousand hectares under improved management of sustainable land use.

This year, with Brazil holding the G20 presidency, the UK continues to engage closely to support concrete outcomes on climate, nature and energy. The second permanent under-secretary of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Nick Dyer, visited Brazil in March. He visited a UK Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions project on sustainable supply chains in Pará and met with civil society representatives to discuss the threat posed by deforestation to indigenous communities and the alternative bio-economies that could enable sustainable livelihoods.

Minister Rutley's visit to Brazil in May, shortly after the devastating extreme weather and flooding in Rio Grande do Sul, highlighted the importance of working together with Brazil and other international partners to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis to lessen the impact of similar incidents in future.

Looking ahead to 2025 and Brazil's hosting of COP30, at a pivotal moment 10 years on from the Paris agreement, we are exploring how to support Brazil's vision and have already started a series of COP26-to-COP30 dialogues to share expertise from the preparation and delivery of COP26. This includes engaging with Brazil on their proposal to develop a "tropical forests forever" fund by COP30.

We will continue to work with Brazil through to COP30 and beyond to protect forests, address the global climate and nature crisis and build a more sustainable, just and inclusive future together.

Written Correction

Thursday 23 May 2024

Ministerial Correction

TRANSPORT

E-scooters: Deaths and Serious Injuries

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on E-scooters: Deaths and Serious Injuries on 22 May 2024.

Anthony Browne:...First, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned the statistics on deaths. In 2022, there were 12 deaths

from e-scooters; 11 were the riders themselves, and two of those were within the trial. So far, four people in total have been killed on the trial scooters. Clearly, with the non-trial scooters there is a far higher incidence of deaths.

The latest figures that I have seen on accidents are from 2022. There were a total of 1,492 accidents, of which 12 resulted in death and 440 were serious accidents.

[*Official Report*, 22 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 404WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne):

Anthony Browne:... The latest figures that I have seen on accidents are from 2022. There were a total of **1,402 collisions, resulting in 1,492 injuries**, of which 12 resulted in death and 440 were serious accidents.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 23 May 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	1021	CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
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Heritage Buildings	1010	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	1020
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WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 23 May 2024

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ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	57WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	59WS
Bluetongue Virus	57WS	Contingencies Fund Advance	59WS
		Dentistry	60WS

PETITIONS

Thursday 23 May 2024

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Water booster proposals in Buckland.....	15P	Youth Mobility Scheme	14P
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WRITTEN CORRECTION

Thursday 23 May 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	13WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued	
Transport	13WC	E-scooters: Deaths and Serious Injuries	13WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 30 May 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
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