Monday
22 July 2024

Volume 752
No. 8

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 22 July 2024

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House of Commons

Monday 22 July 2024

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Contingencies Fund Account 2023-24

Ordered,

That there be laid before the House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2023-24, showing:

(1) A Statement of Financial Position

(2) A Statement of Cash Flows

(3) Notes to the Accounts; together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's proceedings, I would like to remind hon. Members of what I said last week following the King's Speech. The language we use in the Chamber, and the way we behave towards each other, should reflect the principle that good temper and moderation are the hallmarks of parliamentary language and behaviour.

I am determined that Members in all parts of the House should be treated with courtesy and respect in this Chamber. I remind the House that it is entirely at the discretion of the hon. Member who has the Floor to choose whether to give way. And once it is clear that the Member does not wish to give way, colleagues should not persist in asking them to do so.

I should also like to remind Members about the church service tomorrow to mark the start of the new Parliament. You will all have received information about it and I look forward to seeing those of you who are able to attend.

NATO and European Political Community Meetings

2.35 pm

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Before I start my statement, I would like to pay a short tribute to President Biden, a man who, during five decades of service, never lost touch with the concerns of working people and always put his country first. A true friend of the Labour movement, his presidency will leave a legacy that extends far beyond America, to freedom and security on this continent—most of all, of course, in our steadfast resolve to stand by the people of Ukraine. He leaves the NATO alliance stronger than it has been for decades.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on my recent discussions with leaders around the world, including at the NATO summit and at the meeting of the European Political Community last week at Blenheim Palace, the biggest European summit in the UK since the war.

Mr Speaker, the House knows the significance of Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill—the man who steered the march of European history towards democracy and the rule of law. It was a shared sacrifice for freedom—the blood bond of 1945. At both summits, we reaffirmed our commitment to that bond of security and freedom, as I am sure we do in this House today. NATO is the guarantor of those values, and that is more important than ever, because, today in Europe, innocent lives are once again being torn apart. Two weeks ago today there was an attack on a children's hospital in Kyiv—children with cancer the target of Russian brutality.

Russia's malign activity is not confined to Ukraine. In the western Balkans, in Moldova and in Georgia, it is sowing instability. And let us not forget that it has targeted people on our streets and attempted to undermine our democracy. In the first days of this Government, I have taken a message to our friends and allies of enduring and unwavering commitment to the NATO alliance, to Ukraine and to the collective security of our country, our continent and our allies around the world. That message was just as relevant at the EPC last week. May I take this opportunity to thank the Leader of the Opposition, who brought that event to our shores in the first place?

At these meetings, I took a practical view of how the UK can meet this moment, driven not by ideology but by what is best for our country. That includes resetting our relationship with the European Union, because on these Benches we believe that the UK and the EU, working together as sovereign partners, are a powerful force for good across our continent. That has been my message throughout the many conversations that I have had with leaders in recent days, because countries want to work with Britain—of course they do. They welcome renewed British leadership on security, on illegal migration and on global challenges such as climate change. Our voice belongs in the room, centre stage, fighting for the national interest.

My conversations have focused on issues on which the British people want action, so I would like to update the House on my discussions in three specific areas. The first is European security. In Washington, I told NATO allies that the generational threat from Russia demands a generational response. That is why my right hon.

[The Prime Minister]

Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out a clear path to spending 2.5% of our GDP on defence. It is also why I launched a strategic defence review, led by the former NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson, to strengthen our armed forces and keep our nation safe.

I also took the opportunity at the NATO summit to confirm that we will deliver £3 billion-worth of military aid to Ukraine each year for as long as it takes. And together we confirmed Ukraine's irreversible path to full NATO membership, because it is clear to me that NATO will be stronger with Ukraine as a member—something I reiterated to President Zelensky in person in Downing Street on Friday.

Secondly, I want to turn to the middle east, because that region is at a moment of grave danger and fragility. I have spoken to leaders in the region and allies around the world about our collective response. How can we deal with the malign influence of Iran, address its nuclear programme, manage the threat from the Houthis, ease tensions on Israel's northern border, and work with all partners to uphold regional security?

Fundamental to that, of course, is the conflict in Gaza. I have spoken to the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. I have been clear that I fully support Israel's right to security and the desperate need to see the hostages returned. I have also been clear that the situation in Gaza is intolerable, and that the world will not look away as innocent civilians, including women and children, continue to face death, disease and displacement. Mr Speaker, it cannot go on. We need an immediate ceasefire. Hostages out, aid in; a huge scale-up of humanitarian assistance. That is the policy of this Government, and an immediate ceasefire is the only way to achieve it, so we will do all we can in pursuit of these goals. That is why, as one of the first actions taken by this Government, we have restarted British funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency, to deliver that crucial humanitarian support.

We received the International Court of Justice opinion on Friday and will consider it carefully before responding, but let me say that we have always been opposed to the expansion of illegal settlements and we call on all sides to recommit to stability, peace, normalisation and the two-state solution: a recognised Palestinian state—the right of the Palestinian people—alongside a safe and secure Israel.

Thirdly, I want to turn to illegal migration. This issue has now become a crisis, and in order to tackle it we must reach out a hand to our European friends. We started that work at the EPC, agreeing new arrangements with Slovenia and Slovakia, deepening co-operation across Europe for our new border security command, and increasing the UK presence at Europol in The Hague, to play our full part in the European Migrant Smuggling Centre. The crisis we face is the fault of gangs—no question—but to stop illegal migration we must also recognise the root causes: conflict, climate change and extreme poverty. So I have announced £84 million of new funding for projects across Africa and the middle east, to provide humanitarian and health support, skills training, and access to education, because the decisions that people take to leave their homes cannot be separated from these wider issues.

We will work with our partners to stamp out this vile trade wherever it exists and focus on the hard yards of law enforcement with solutions that will actually deliver results. I have seen that in action, tackling counter-terrorism as Director of Public Prosecutions, and we can do the same on illegal migration. But let me be clear: there is no need to withdraw from the European convention on human rights. That is not consistent with the values of that blood bond, so we will not withdraw—not now, not ever.

The basic fact is that the priorities of the British people do require us to work across borders with our partners, and a Government of service at home requires a Government of strength abroad. That is our role. It has always been our role. Britain belongs on the world stage. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

2.45 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement and join him in praising President Biden for his long career of public service both at home and abroad. Working together, we took our AUKUS partnership to the next level, supported Israel after the terrible events of 7 October, defended our countries from the Houthi threat and led global efforts to support Ukraine as it resisted Russia's assault. On a personal level, it was a pleasure to work with him to strengthen the partnership between our two countries, and I wish him well.

As the Prime Minister indicated, the world is increasingly uncertain—the most dangerous it has been since the end of the cold war. Russia continues its illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine. Iran continues with its regionally destabilising behaviour. Both Iran and North Korea are supplying Russian forces in Ukraine as we speak, and China is adopting a more aggressive stance in the South China sea and the Taiwan strait. Together, that axis of authoritarian states is increasingly working together to undermine democracies and reshape the world order.

In those circumstances, our alliances take on ever-greater importance. I commend the Prime Minister on his work with our closest allies at both the NATO summit in Washington and the European Political Community meeting at Blenheim. Across this House we built a strong consensus on foreign policy in the last Parliament, which has stood our country in good stead in this transition. Our allies, particularly Ukraine, know that although our Government have changed, Britain remains an active, involved and reliable partner.

I am glad that the Prime Minister also shares our view of the value of the EPC community as a forum. I am pleased by and welcome the fact that he used the summit to discuss illegal migration, because it is one of the most pressing problems facing our entire continent. When it comes to illegal migration, we all face the same fundamental question: how to deal with people who come to our countries illegally while respecting our international obligations.

Of course, it is not feasible or right to return Afghans to the Taliban, Syrians to Assad or Iranians to the ayatollahs, but nor can our country accommodate everyone who would like to leave Afghanistan, Syria or Iran and come here. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister say

that he was a pragmatist and that he would look at what works when it comes to squaring that circle. I urge him, in his conversations with other European leaders, to keep the option of further third-country migration partnerships on the table, as other countries have been discussing.

I know the Prime Minister is also interested in pursuing a security and defence co-operation pact with the European Union, and here I just urge him to be alert to the trade-offs involved. I hope he can reassure the House that any closer co-operation with the EU will not adversely affect the technological and procurement aspects of our other alliances such as AUKUS. Of course we are a pillar of European security, as our leadership on Ukraine has shown, but we also have alliances and interests that extend beyond the European continent.

Turning to the NATO summit, it was good to see the alliance reaffirming its commitment to Ukraine, with the UK at the heart of that leadership. I hope the Prime Minister will keep the House updated on how the new unit to co-ordinate our collective support to Ukraine will indeed lead to an increase in vital support. I urge the Prime Minister to continue stressing to our allies that now is the moment to increase, not to pare down, our backing for Ukraine, as the UK has continued to lead in doing.

In the 75 years of its existence, NATO has established itself as the most successful defensive alliance in history. The best way to strengthen the alliance is for its non-American members to do more, to show that we do not expect the Americans to bear every burden, and I welcome the Prime Minister's indication that the Chancellor will soon set out a clear path to investing 2.5% of GDP in our armed forces—I hope by 2030. That would both show the Americans that the other members of the alliance are serious about boosting our own capabilities, and show President Putin and our adversaries that we are serious about defending our borders and allies from Russian or any other aggression.

The Prime Minister also spoke about the situation in the middle east. We all want to see progress towards a two-state solution where Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace, prosperity and security. However, as we make progress towards that goal, our friend and ally Israel must have the right to defend itself against the threat that it is facing—a threat demonstrated by the drone strike on Tel Aviv at the end of last week by the Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels.

In conclusion, I thank the Prime Minister for coming to update the House today. I can assure him that we on the Opposition Benches will work with him on these questions of foreign policy and national security. We will ask questions, probe and push for answers—that is our duty as the official Opposition—but we will always act in the national interest and work constructively with him to ensure the security of our country.

The Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his welcome comments in relation to President Biden, which I am sure will be well received, and for what he said about the consensus on foreign policy in relation to NATO and the EPC. That is important, and I am glad that we have managed to get that consensus over recent years, because we are in a more volatile world, and the world is looking in to see unity in the United Kingdom, particularly in relation to Ukraine. I have commended the role of the previous Government in relation to Ukraine, and I do so again. I took the deliberate decision when I was Leader of the Opposition not to depart on Ukraine, because I took, and continue to take, the view that the only winner in that circumstance is Putin, who wants to see division. It is very important for Ukraine to see that continued unity across this House.

We will of course work with others. In relation to the point made by the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* Old habits die hard. On the point made by the Leader of the Opposition about security and co-operation with our EU allies, I do believe that is to our mutual benefit, but I can assure him and the House that it does not cut across, or come at the cost of, other alliances. We are fully committed to AUKUS—as I made clear in opposition, and I take this early opportunity to affirm it in government—because it is an area on which there is an important consistency across the House.

In relation to the conflict in Gaza, the more that we in this House can be united, the better. It is an issue of great complexity, but the approach that has been shown is the right one, and we take it forward in that spirit.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his flying start on the world stage, and on his determination to build not simply a rules-based order, but a rights-based order rooted in what Churchill called the great charter and we call the European convention on human rights. We want its freedoms and liberties to be enjoyed by the people of Ukraine, but that will take victory over Russia. It will need more than courage; it will need resources. Did he discuss with international colleagues the need not simply to freeze Russian assets, but to seize and put them to work in defeating once and for all the tyranny of President Putin?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question on the centrality of the Ukraine issue. Yes, of course, that requires resource and more pressure in relation to sanctions, but it also requires resolve. A key issue coming out of the NATO council in Washington was the real sense, particularly in relation to Ukraine, of a bigger NATO—with more countries than ever at the council—a stronger NATO, and a unity of resolve in standing up to Russian aggression, particularly in Ukraine. Resources and sanctions were central to the agenda there.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of the statement. Closer co-operation with our European neighbours is absolutely essential, whether on Russia's illegal war against Ukraine or on tackling the criminal gangs responsible for the small-boats crisis, and I welcome the new Government's change in approach. I also welcome their support for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Clearly, we need to put an end to the humanitarian devastation there, get the hostages home, and open the door to a two-state solution. Upholding international law is also crucial. To that end, I hope the Government will respect last week's ruling of the ICJ when they consider it.

On the NATO summit, 70 years on from the foundation of NATO, the alliance has never been more relevant. We support the NATO summit pledge of long-term

[Ed Davey]

security assistance for Ukraine, as well as increased support now to ensure she can resist Russia's attacks and liberate her territory. I am pleased that, in this new Parliament, this House will continue to stand united behind the brave Ukrainians opposing Russia's illegal war, just as we have done together in recent years.

However, I hope Members of this House will not be complacent about the impact that the upcoming US elections could have, not just on the security of the UK and our allies, but on the security of Ukraine. We must hope that the leadership of President Biden continues with his successor—I echo the Prime Minister's tribute to President Biden—but whatever happens in the US, part of the answer is for the UK and Europe to increase defence spending. The previous Conservative Government have left a legacy of the smallest Army since the age of Napoleon and played fast and loose with public money, making our shared ambition to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence a much more complicated route. We look forward to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's plan. I hope this Government will start by reversing the planned cuts to the Army of 10,000 troops. That is a vital first step, so will the Prime Minister reassure the House and the country that it will be a priority within the recently launched strategic defence review?

We also urge the Government to move further and faster in taking steps to seize frozen Russian assets, of which there are £20 billion-worth on our shores and the same amount on the continent. I hope the Prime Minister recognises that we have an opportunity to lead within Europe on this vital issue: if the US cannot, Europe must.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising those three issues. On the international courts, we respect the independence of the Court and international law—let me be very clear about that. I will not get tempted by questions about the US elections later this year, save to say that it will obviously be for the American people to decide who they want as their President, and as Members would expect, we will work with whoever is the President after they have made their choice. I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about the low numbers of troops, which will be looked at in the strategic defence review that we are carrying out into threats, capability and resources.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It was incredibly pleasing to see the Prime Minister both at NATO and welcoming leaders from across our continent to Blenheim palace, at a historic moment for a reset with Europe after the disastrous legacy that the departing Government left behind. Did the subject of youth mobility for students and suchlike arise, and could his Government look into repairing it for its soft power, cultural exchange and growth-boosting properties that have been so valued, as we are now in a post-Erasmus era?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The reset with our European allies was well received, and there was clearly an appetite to work in a different and better way with the UK, which I think will stand us in good stead as we go forward. We did have discussions about a closer relationship with our EU allies, but I made it very clear from the outset—as I have done in opposition—that that does not mean rejoining the EU, it does not mean going back into the structures of the EU, and it does not mean freedom of movement. I took the early opportunity to make that clear to our European allies so that we can move forward progressively, but with the right framework in mind.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on his election victory, and particularly on the very strong commitment he gave at the beginning of his campaign to the maintenance of the strategic Trident nuclear deterrent in the future? Does he agree that, if there had existed in 1914 or in 1939 an organisation like NATO that committed America to the protection from day one of countries such as Belgium in the one case or Poland in the other, those two terrible conflicts might well never have broken out? Does he therefore share my concern that the virus of isolationism is again on the move in certain parts of the American political spectrum?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for that question. First, I was able to make clear our unshakeable commitment to the nuclear deterrent, something I did in opposition. I have been able to make that absolutely clear as Prime Minister, and it was very important that I did so from the outset. In relation to what may have happened in the past, I will not speculate, but I believe that NATO is the most successful alliance the world has ever known, and that it is as needed now as it was when it was founded. The then Labour Government were very proud to be a founder member of NATO, and it was very important for me to reaffirm our unshakeable support for NATO. The world is a more volatile place, the challenges are greater now than they have been for many years, and I think that NATO is as needed now and as relevant now as it has ever been in its history.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the leadership he showed not just at NATO, but at the European Political Community. Working together and collaborating are important, not least in the unstable world that we are in. Could he set out what discussions he had about the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement in the light of its renegotiation deadlines next year?

The Prime Minister: I was able to have early discussion about the EU-UK trade arrangements of a preliminary sort. There is an appetite for that discussion—no one pretends that it is an easy discussion—and I am pleased to have appointed a Minister, the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office, who will take responsibility for that important work. It does not involve rejoining the EU; it does involve resetting and improving the relationship we have with our EU allies.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Can I, first, congratulate the Prime Minister on his election win, and wish him the very best in his new role? Building on the last question, the EPC summit seemed very positive. How does he see using this political locus to get the UK in the best possible position for the renegotiation of the TCA in 2026?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for his comments. There is an appetite now for a different discussion about our future relations with the EU—whether

that is trade, education and research, or security co-operation. Particularly in the light of what has happened in Ukraine, there is a shared sense that there is room for closer work and closer ties there. They are the three main areas. It is at the very early stages, but the reset was well received by many European allies, and I was pleased to have that early opportunity to set out our case.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister's statement will be warmly welcomed by the people of Rochdale, particularly the Ukrainian community, which has flourished in our town for nearly 80 years. So can I pass on to him a direct message from Olga Kurtianyk, who is the chair of the Rochdale branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, who told me yesterday that she is very grateful for the Prime Minister's continued support for President Zelensky in the fight against the illegal war that Putin has waged?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to hear that, and to be able to make that clear commitment. But I want to emphasise that this is the continuation of the work of the previous Government, which we fully supported before and fully support now. What is also important for our communities, and certainly important for the international community, is to see the unity that we have been able to maintain here in this Chamber. The world watches in relation to our unity and it is important therefore that we maintain it as we go forward.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): May I also add my personal congratulations to the Prime Minister on his election win?

The international rules-based system is the cornerstone of peace and security. The Prime Minister talks of a ceasefire in Gaza and the application of the rule of law. What measures is he willing to take to make sure that is implemented? Furthermore, being outside the EU makes us less safe. The populists who want us to turn away from the EU and towards Trump-style isolationism are playing straight into Putin's hands, so what are we doing to get closer to the EU?

The Prime Minister: In relation to a ceasefire, obviously talks are under way at quite an advanced stage and we have already urged all sides in the international discussions that I have had to move forward on a ceasefire, because without a ceasefire it is very difficult to envisage the circumstances in which further hostages can come out safely and aid can go in at the scale that is desperately needed. Also, a ceasefire can be a foot in the door for the beginning of a process, however remote it may seem at the moment, to a two-state solution. In relation to the EU, we have a shared interest in safety and security with our EU allies and that was very much the topic of discussion we had at the EPC summit last week.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): For my constituents in Makerfield, restoring control over our borders is a key issue of concern. It has become a matter of public trust. Does the Prime Minister agree that the new border security command is an opportunity to show how the UK can play a leading role in tackling criminal smuggler gangs?

The Prime Minister: Yes I do, and the command is based on the work I did as Director of Public Prosecutions, working with law enforcement and security and intelligence sharing with our allies—in the cases I was working on to deal with counter-terrorism. I have never accepted the argument that the only gangs that apparently cannot be taken down using the same techniques are the gangs running this vile trade. There was real interest in what we were saying at the EPC summit last week and an understanding that, if we share intelligence, data, strategy and approach, we can all do more to bring down these vile gangs.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's reiteration that the UK remains the strongest supporter of Ukraine against Russian aggression, but what support can we also give to another former Soviet state, Armenia, both in resolving its conflict with Azerbaijan, and in pursuing its ambition to move closer to NATO and the European Union in the face of Russian threats and intimidation?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for that question. This came up in the discussions last Thursday, as would have been expected, with a joint resolve to provide the support and framework needed for peace and security across the entire region. Again, there is a shared intent with our allies to work together on this because it is of such importance. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising it.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I am one of 12 newly elected Members on this side of the House who have served in the armed forces, and in Plymouth so many of my friends and neighbours have served as well. All of us are deeply concerned by the ongoing illegal invasion and the inhumane, increasingly barbaric, tactics Russia is using. Will the Prime Minister agree with me that in an uncertain world one thing we can be sure of is that Ukraine has no firmer friend than the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can confirm that and emphasise just how important it is. We had the honour of hosting President Zelensky at Downing Street on Friday, where I was able to make that clear, and again to take the opportunity to say that we are building on the work of the previous Government, not departing from that work. I think the support of the UK in particular to Ukraine has been leading, important and provided at difficult times, which has often led to others moving in accordance with the moves we have made as a country. President Zelensky is grateful for the role we have played in the past and that we continue to play now.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My constituents in Sleaford and North Hykeham are very concerned about levels of illegal migration, particularly people crossing the channel. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister say that he wants to tackle it. He mentioned two measures: £84 million to tackle root causes and the focus, which is arguably already present, from law enforcement. In the last seven days, 1,500 people crossed the channel. How many of them would he expect to have been deterred by the measures he describes?

The Prime Minister: This is a real problem that we have inherited because not enough attention has been paid to border control in my view. Record numbers have come this year. The measures taken by the last Government were patently not working, so we need to address that.

[The Prime Minister]

That is why we have taken early steps to set up the border security command. It is also why we have already moved more staff into the returns unit, so it can get on with the job of actually returning those who have no right to be here. One hundred staff have moved already in the early days of this Government, but we have to recognise that we also need to address the reasons that people move in the first place, which are very much to do with conflict, poverty and climate change. If we ignore those upstream causes, we will never fully get to grips with the problem that is so obvious to so many people in this country.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and I thank him particularly for his commitment to resetting our relationship with the European Union. It is regrettable that the deal signed by the Opposition when they were in government did real damage to our economy. It put up barriers to trade with the European Union and increased red tape. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time for a new relationship and to take practical measures, such as the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, to increase our alignment with the European Union, so we can help our services and get our economy moving again?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the deal we have is good enough. If we talk to any business that deals with the EU, they complain it is not good enough for them and has made trade harder, not easier, and that is a real problem. We can do better than that. The EPC was an early opportunity for us to reset our relationship and begin progress towards that better relationship, whether that is in relation to trade or defence and security, which are both very important to us.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I welcome that the Prime Minister says that there is an appetite for a reset in our relationship with our European neighbours. A core element of collective European security is collective economic security. He knows that being outside the single market and the customs union has cost the UK economy almost £140 billion. How will he remedy this toxic Tory legacy by continuing to refuse even to consider rejoining those economic structures?

The Prime Minister: I think the relationship can improve. We can have a better relationship, but I do not think we can simply ignore the referendum and go back into the EU. In the discussions I had with our European allies, none of them was urging us to take that course. They were interested in the argument we were making about a better relationship and how that could work in relation to trade, education and security and defence. That is why I wanted to be clear from the outset about our approach.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The Hexham constituency, as the Prime Minister will know, is home to the Otterburn ranges, which have played a key role in training our armed forces for decades. What steps will the Prime Minister take to improve the working relationship between our armed forces and those of our NATO allies?

The Prime Minister: Our armed forces provide huge resource to NATO, particularly in Europe, and across our armed forces we are fully committed in almost every respect to NATO. There is huge room for further such work, building on what is clearly working already.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has given us fine words about the importance of our membership of international institutions, particularly international courts, and I agree with him—it is profoundly in our national interest that we are a member of these organisations—but he will know as well as I that those courts are only as good as the action and consequence that flow from their judgments. Without action and consequence, their judgments just become hot air. In relation to Israel-Gaza, and in particular the occupation of the west bank, can he please assure us that he is considering hard consequences for the very obvious flagrant breach of international law that is taking place daily in that part of the world?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for that question, because I believe in international law and I think it is very important that we keep to our commitments on international law. We are known for that as a nation, and it matters to the world. In relation to the courts, I respect their independence. Obviously, we will have robust discussion about particular actions, judgments that they might publish, and decisions that they come to, but for those who believe in international law, it is important to be equally clear that we support the independence of the courts. Without that anchor, we do not have the framework that is so important to us, in terms of enforcing international law.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and very much echo his words about President Biden. Does the Prime Minister agree with me and the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme that the only way to stop illegal migration and the subsequent tragic loss of life is by our United Kingdom working more closely with our European neighbours to smash the gangs who run this vile trade?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. We have already been able to put further resource into Europol. Last Thursday, we had a very live discussion about sharing data and intelligence, and about an overarching strategy on prosecutions, with our European allies, who were keen to learn more about what we were proposing, and how they could play their part with us to smash the gangs; because the gangs operate across borders, that can be done only in conjunction and collaboration with our EU partners.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The last Government spent quite some time engaging with isolationists in Washington. They sought to influence conservative think-tanks in the US that are listened to by Republicans, such as the Heritage Foundation. I appreciate the Prime Minister's point that it is for the American people to decide who governs them later this year, but what more can his Government do to stress to Republicans, and to candidate Trump, that European and American security are indivisible?

The Prime Minister: On the first part of the question, luckily I do not answer for the last Government; I answer for this Government. We will work with whoever the

American people elect as President, but specifically on the question, the special relationship between the UK and the US was forged in the most difficult of circumstances and has endured for many years, and it is important both to the US and to the UK to maintain that special relationship. I have had an early opportunity to make my position clear on this. Again, it is a continuation of the position of the last Government: that special relationship matters to us, whoever ends up being the President of America.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that we need a "NATO first" defence policy in the face of growing Russian aggression, as seen in Ukraine? Will he join me in paying tribute to the Doncaster Ukrainian Centre in my constituency, which has worked tirelessly around the clock to support Ukrainian refugees, demonstrating the true community spirit of Doncaster?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by joining in that, and making it clear that this work, done in so many communities, is really important, in terms of the support given and the welcome shown to refugees.

The point about "NATO first" is important. As I say, we are proud to have been among the founding members of NATO, and the review that we have put in place has framework principles, one of which is "NATO first". That will inform the way in which we conduct the strategic review.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why do we continue to limit Ukraine's ability to take the fight to Russia?

The Prime Minister: The approach to capability taken by the UK remains the same as it was three weeks ago—no different decisions have been taken—and is based on the principle of recognising Ukraine's right to self-defence and the parameters of international law. I think that is right, and that is why no new decisions have been taken.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the strength and unity of purpose expressed by our international alliances is mirrored and enhanced by the solidarity and friendship that the British people have shown by accommodating Ukrainians in this country? Would he join me in praising the work of the Rugby Ukrainian community, and assure me that his Government will continue to support such groups?

The Prime Minister: Yes on both points. A number of months ago, in Swindon, I was struck by the incredible contribution of Ukrainian women, who were leading workshops on businesses and success. On the main point about the attitude of British people, it was good to be able to say to President Zelensky that we have just had an election and we have been all over the United Kingdom, and pretty much wherever we went we saw the Ukrainian flag and people supporting Ukraine, irrespective of party political difference. There was a real sense that the whole country, as well as the Government and the Opposition, support Ukraine and are determined to do whatever they can to stand up to Russian aggression. We should be proud of the fact that we see that right across the country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the office that he has achieved, and thank him for his statement. I am pleased with the decision to remain part of the European convention on human rights. In all his meetings with both the EU and NATO, was the issue of global war considered—not just the wars in Ukraine and Palestine, but those in Sudan, Congo and Yemen—and the possibility of involving the UN much more in looking towards a more peaceful future, rather than continued greater expenditure on arms? I am pleased that the Prime Minister has called for a ceasefire in Gaza, but surely if we are to follow international law we need to go a bit further and call for the withdrawal of Israeli occupying forces both from Gaza and the west bank, and an end to our complicity by supplying arms to Israel.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that I have a lot more to get in today, and as important as his message is, I need to make others heard?

The Prime Minister: Let me deal with both points. First, conflict resolution did come up, because we had a full discussion about illegal migration—the law enforcement aspect of it, as I have explained, and the root causes of migration, conflict, poverty and climate change being key among them. The prospect of a ceasefire is there. I am urging all parties to take that opportunity; it is an important foot in the door for the political process, which I believe is the only process that will bring about lasting peace and resolution in the middle east.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on a very successful set of meetings last week. Does he agree that the shifting relationship with the European Union led by the previous Government has made us economically poorer, and undermines small businesses such as the toy shop in Horsforth in my constituency, which closed? Will he ensure that small businesses and their needs and prosperity will be at the heart of any renegotiation deal in two years' time?

The Prime Minister: Businesses across the country that deal with Europe feel that the deal that the last Government negotiated is not good enough for them and has made trading much harder. That is why they are encouraging us to reset that relationship and get a better deal—better for our country, our businesses and our economy. Our No. 1 mission in government is to grow our economy, so it is very important to see this in that context.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I too congratulate the Prime Minister on what was obviously a successful series of meetings last week. He has set out some of his new policies to deal with illegal migration across the channel, and to return illegal migrants from this country. In what sort of timescale could the British people reasonably expect his new policies to start having a real effect?

The Prime Minister: We have taken early measures, because the British people want to see an impact and a difference. They feel very much that in recent years there has been a loss of control of the borders. That is a matter of border security and, actually, national security. That is why we have acted quickly to begin the steps to

[The Prime Minister]

set up the border security command. It is why we have already begun to put more staff in the returns unit, and taken a decision on the upstream work needed to reduce the likelihood of migration in the first place. They are early steps, and I am not going to put an arbitrary date on that, but I do understand the thrust of the question; this is an area of great importance, where British people want to see a material change in the situation.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): In Gateshead Central and Whickham, and across the north-east, those who have fled Putin's war in Ukraine want to make the most of their time in our community, but above all they want to know that the British people stand with them, so I thank the Prime Minister for his ongoing support for the people of Ukraine, but can he expand further on Ukraine's future entry into NATO, which is so critically important?

The Prime Minister: Yes I can, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so. The North Atlantic Council committed itself to an irreversible path to membership of NATO. That is a material step forward from a year ago and is among the reasons President Zelensky said that the council was a success in relation to membership of NATO. That is why I said what I said in my statement. That path is now irreversible, and that is a good thing, welcomed across the NATO allies.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The level of infiltration by Hamas of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is well documented—from UNRWA staff taking part in the pure evil that was the 7 October attack, to UNRWA-funded schools being used to store weapons and harbour terrorists, and to terror infrastructure being found under UNRWA's headquarters in Gaza City. Before the Prime Minister took the decision to re-commit UK taxpayers' money to UNRWA, what advice did he receive on that infiltration, and what steps has he demanded be taken, so that UK taxpayers' money can never be used to fund terror or preach hate?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Member would expect, we took the most careful advice and subjected it to the most careful consideration, because we were concerned, as anyone in this House would be, by the suggestions and allegations in relation to 7 October. We looked at that really carefully, took it very seriously, and gave it the utmost consideration. There has, of course, been an independent review and steps put in place, but there is a vital role for UNRWA. Many other countries have restored funding for UNRWA—it is the right thing to do—but I can give an assurance that the most careful consideration was given before that step was taken, as the hon. Member would expect.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I warmly welcome the announcement that the UK will lead an initiative to crack down on Russia's shadow fleet of sanctions-evading ships, which is helping to generate dirty money to fund Russia's war machine. Will the Prime Minister continue to make sanctions enforcement a priority, and update the House on the state of international negotiations on using frozen Russian assets, including those in Kensington and Bayswater, to support Ukraine now?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for that question. Important progress was made at NATO on sanctions, and it is important for the House to have regular updates, so we can commit to giving the next update as soon as it is appropriate to do so. I think across the House there is a resolve to use sanctions as effectively as they can be used, as one of the weapons in relation to Russian aggression.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I hope the Prime Minister enjoyed welcoming fellow European leaders to Blenheim Palace in my constituency. One of my constituents, Rose, is studying Spanish and French at Southampton University. She would like to spend her year abroad working in Spain to strengthen her language skills and improve her employment prospects, yet as it stands she has no right to work there. I hope the Prime Minister saw the benefit of working with his European counterparts and perhaps making a few new friends. I hear his response on not rejoining the political structures, but as a specific measure to improve opportunities for young people, will he open talks with the European Union on a youth mobility scheme?

The Prime Minister: It was very good to be in the hon. Member's constituency, at Blenheim Palace. I cannot tell him how many European leaders said to me that they had previously visited, usually while they were studying in the UK, but had only paid the £5 to get into the grounds, because they had not had the money to get into the building that they were then entering. That was a common theme.

As for the substance of the hon. Gentleman's question, we are not returning to freedom of movement. I understand the desire of people to work in other countries, but I need to make it clear that there is no rejoining the European Union, no rejoining the single market or the customs union, and no returning to freedom of movement. However, I do believe there is a better deal that we can work on, and I think that the more we can work across the House on that, the better, because then it will be the more enduring.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): As the proud home of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, my constituency knows the vital importance of our armed forces in keeping Britain safe, so I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to setting out a path towards spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. Can the Prime Minister update the House on conversations that he has had with our NATO friends and allies to encourage others to match that target?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of the commitment that we already make to NATO on 2%. As would be expected, we did have a discussion at the NATO council on the need for all NATO members to make that contribution and to increase their contribution, and there was a commitment to do so. Our commitment to 2.5% will be set out, and the path will be set out, by the Chancellor at a future fiscal event.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Can the Prime Minister confirm that in seeking to reset Britain's relationship with the European Union, his Government will not accept the automatic application of EU rules in Britain unless they have been specifically agreed by this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Prime Minister for the leadership that he has shown in his discussions at Blenheim, especially those on NATO. I am proud to hear him recommit us to a two-state solution in the middle east, and to an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Does he agree that this conflict is dire, but urgently needs sober and considerate solutions rather than extreme rhetoric from those who might seek to sow further divisions?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do, and I am grateful for that question, because there is the prospect of a ceasefire. It is desperately needed, for the reasons that we have already discussed, but it will only happen if there is international agreement and a sober assessment that provides the framework for the release of the remaining hostages—I shudder to think of the state of some of them—for the aid that is desperately needed to be allowed in at the scale that is needed, and for the beginning of the process, in my view the only process, that will lead to a lasting resolution of this awful conflict. It is not just in all our interests, but our duty, to do everything we can to ensure that that comes about.

Border Security and Asylum

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the Home Secretary, may I just say this to her? The statement did not arrive in my office in time; it was late, and I believe that it was also late for the Opposition. Quite rightly, the Home Secretary made a big thing of this when she was the shadow Home Secretary, so I remind her of her own words: statements do need to arrive on time. This is the second time so far, and I know it will not happen again, because what I have said will be taken on board.

3.33 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for standing up for the Opposition Front Benchers, as I know you have often done for me in the past? I apologise to the shadow Home Secretary for the delay in the arrival of the statement.

Most people in the United Kingdom want to see strong border security, with a properly controlled and managed asylum system where our country does its bit, alongside others, to help those who have fled persecution, but where rules are properly respected and enforced so that those with no right to be here are swiftly removed. At the moment, we have none of those things. Border security is being undermined by criminal smuggler gangs, and the asylum system is in chaos. Tragically, 19 lives have been lost in the channel so far this year, including children. No one should be making these perilous small boat journeys.

Criminal gangs have been allowed to take hold along our border, and they are making huge profit from undermining our border security and putting lives at risk. They should not be able to get away with it. Crossings in the first half of 2024 are up by 10% on last year—the number is going up, instead of coming down. At the same time, the asylum backlog is getting worse, as decision making in the Home Office has dropped. Home Office spending on asylum support has increased sevenfold in the space of just three years. This cannot go on. Since my appointment two weeks ago, I have reviewed the policies, programmes and legislation that we have inherited from our predecessors, and I have been shocked by what I have found. Not only are there already serious problems; on current policies, the chaos and costs are likely to get worse.

On our border security, it is clear that the security and enforcement arrangements we have inherited are too weak. Criminal gang networks are operating with impunity along our border, across the continent and beyond, and across the UK too. Action between Britain and France in the channel has improved, and is preventing some boat crossings. The work of the small boats operational command in the channel is important and will continue, but we need to go much further. We should be taking far more action upstream, long before the boats ever reach the French coast. Co-operation with Europol and other European police forces and prosecutors is far too limited, and enforcement against exploitation and trafficking in the UK is far too weak. Information sharing with our European neighbours has reduced, rather than increased. As a result of these weak arrangements, I am extremely concerned that the high levels of dangerous crossings that we have inherited are likely to persist throughout the summer.

[Yvette Cooper]

Let me turn to the Rwanda migration and economic development partnership. Two and a half years after the previous Government launched it, I can report that it has already cost the British taxpayer £700 million—in order to send just four volunteers. That includes £290 million on payments to Rwanda and the costs of chartering flights that never took off, detaining hundreds of people and then releasing them, and paying for more than 1,000 civil servants to work on the scheme—for a scheme to send four people. It is the most shocking waste of taxpayers' money I have ever seen.

Looking forward, the costs are set to get worse. Even if the scheme had ever got going, it is clear that it would have covered only a minority of arrivals, yet a substantial portion of future costs were fixed costs—for example, the annual direct payments to Rwanda, the contracts for escorts, the staffing in the Home Office, the detention and reception centres, and more. The taxpayer would have still had to pay out, no matter how few people were relocated. Most shockingly of all, over the six years of the migration and economic development partnership forecast, the previous Government had planned to spend over £10 billion of taxpayers' money on the scheme. They did not tell Parliament that. I thank the Rwandan Government for working with the UK in good faith, because the failure of this policy lies with the previous UK Government. It has been a costly con, and the taxpayer has had to pay the price.

I turn to the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which has been in place for a year. We were told that it would stop the boats, but it has clearly failed. The legal contradictions in the Act are so great that they make it unworkable; indeed, 12 months on, the central duty has not even been enacted. It is also costing the taxpayer billions of pounds. Under section 9 of the Act, people who arrive in the UK can claim asylum and get asylum accommodation. However, under section 30, if they arrived after March 2023 and meet key conditions in the Act, no decision can be taken on their case; they just stay in the asylum system. Even if they have come here unlawfully for economic reasons and should be returned to their home country, they will not be, because the law does not work. Only a small minority might ever have been sent to Rwanda; everyone else stays indefinitely in taxpayer-funded accommodation and support.

The Home Office estimates that around 40% of asylum cases since March 2023 should be covered by those Illegal Migration Act conditions. The remaining 60%, under the previous Government's policy, should still have been processed and cleared in the normal way. However, even though previous Ministers introduced this new law 12 months ago, they did not ever introduce an effective operational way for the Home Office to distinguish between the cases covered by the Illegal Migration Act and the other cases where decisions should continue—that is, between the 40% and the 60%. As a result, decisions cannot be taken on any of them.

I have been shocked to discover that the Home Office has effectively stopped making the majority of asylum decisions. Thousands of asylum caseworkers cannot do their proper job. As a result, the backlog of asylum cases is now going up. This is the most extraordinary policy I have ever seen. We have inherited asylum "Hotel California"—people arrive in the asylum system and they never leave. The previous Government's policy was effectively an amnesty, and that is the wrong thing to do. It is not just bad policy, it is also completely unaffordable. The cost of this indefinitely rising asylum backlog in hotel and accommodation support bills is astronomical. The potential costs of asylum support over the next four years if we continue down this track could be an eye-watering £30 billion to £40 billion. That is double the annual police budget for England and Wales.

This newly elected Government are not prepared to let this chaos continue, so let me turn to the action we are urgently taking to restore some grip to the system, to tackle the chaos and to get costs down. First, I have informed the Rwandan Government that we will be ending the migration and economic development partnership. We will save £220 million on further direct payments to Rwanda over the next few years and we will immediately save up to £750 million that had been put aside by the previous Government to cover the MEDP this year.

Secondly, we will invest some of the saved money from the migration partnership into a new border security command instead. It will bring together the work of the Border Force, the National Crime Agency, the small boats operational command and intelligence and security officers. The recruitment has begun for a new commander and we will put in place additional cross-border officers, investigators, prosecutors, and intelligence and security officers with the new counter-terror-style powers against organised immigration crime announced in the King's Speech last week. We are immediately increasing UK officers' involvement in Europol and the European Migrant Smuggling Centre.

Thirdly, we will replace the Rwanda migration partnership with a serious returns and enforcement programme. We have immediately replaced the flight planning for Rwanda with actual flights to return people who have no right to stay to their home countries instead. We are immediately redeploying Home Office staff away from the failed Rwanda partnership and into returns and enforcement, to reverse the collapse in removals that has taken place since 2010. I have tasked the immigration enforcement team with intensifying enforcement activity this summer, targeting illegal working across high-risk sectors.

Fourthly, we will end the asylum chaos and start taking asylum decisions again so that we can clear the backlog and end asylum hotels. The new border security, asylum and immigration Bill announced in the King's Speech will bring in new replacement arrangements, including fast-track decisions and returns to safe countries. In the meantime, I am laying a statutory instrument that ends the retrospective nature of the Illegal Migration Act provisions, so that the Home Office can immediately start clearing cases from after March 2023. Making this one simple change will save the taxpayer an estimated £7 billion over the next 10 years. Fifthly, as the Prime Minister has just set out, we will work closely with our European neighbours to tackle the upstream causes of migration, including through the Rome process.

This country will always do our bit alongside others to help those fleeing war and persecution, but we need a proper system where rules are enforced. There are no quick fixes to the chaos created over the last 14 years. It will take time to clear the asylum backlog, to bring costs down and to get new enforcement in place to strengthen our borders and prevent dangerous boat crossings, but there is no alternative to serious hard graft. We cannot waste

any more time or money on gimmicks. The country voted for change, and that means it is time for a sensible, serious plan. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: This very important statement overran slightly, so I am more than happy for the Opposition spokespersons also to run over, if need be.

I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.45 pm

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome you back to your place, on my first opportunity to do so. In my time as Home Secretary and, before that, Foreign Secretary, you were very kind about my minor indiscretions at the Dispatch Box, my late deployment of statements and my slight overruns. You have always been very kind to my family in sometimes quite trying circumstances, which I very much appreciate.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate the right hon. Member for Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley (Yvette Cooper) on her appointment as Home Secretary. It is a challenging but incredibly rewarding job and, because the nation's security is now very much in her and her Ministers' hands, I genuinely wish her all success in everything she is looking to do.

The right hon. Lady inherits a dedicated team of Home Office civil servants who will help her to keep the country safe and secure. They helped me when I was in her position and, although it is disorderly to recognise their presence, if I were to wave my hand vaguely in their direction, I might take the opportunity to thank my previous private office civil servants.

My notes say that I want to thank the Home Secretary and her team for advance sight of her statement, but I will put a line through that.

The Labour party, and indeed the Home Secretary, likes to talk tough on border security, but today's statement, despite all the hyperbole and the made-up numbers, is basically an admission of what we knew all along, which is that the Labour party has scrapped the Rwanda partnership on ideological grounds, removing a deterrent that the National Crime Agency said we needed.

The level of discourtesy directed towards the people and Government of Rwanda is quite breathtaking. To have them read about this decision in the papers before anyone from the UK Government had the good grace to formally notify them is an error, and no one in this House believes for a moment that this level of discourtesy would have happened had the partnership been with a European country.

Labour has given an effective amnesty to thousands of asylum seekers who were banned under Conservative plans. Labour's plans amount to doing less than the Conservatives were doing when we were in government, merely changing the signs above a few desks in the Home Office with its so-called border security command and returns unit. Before the election, the right hon. Lady said that she would create a returns unit, and now the narrative is that she will redeploy some staff—not increase the number of staff, but redeploy some staff—which shows that the returns function already exists.

There is no safe third country to which to return people who cannot be returned home, so where will the right hon. Lady send people who come here from countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Syria? Has she started negotiating returns agreements with the Taliban, the ayatollahs of Iran or Assad in Syria? If she is not going to send to Rwanda anyone who arrives here on a small boat, to which local authorities will she send them? We were closing hotels when I was in government, so I wonder which local authorities will receive those asylum seekers. If not Rwanda, will it be Rochdale, Romford or Richmond? Most importantly, can the right hon. Lady now confirm that people who arrive here illegally in a small boat will be able to claim asylum? Finally, how long after the right hon. Lady briefed the media that she is scrapping the Rwanda partnership did she have the courtesy to speak directly with the Rwandan Government?

It is because we now have no deterrent that nobody wants to head her new so-called border security command. Neil Basu, a former senior police officer for whom I have huge respect, was Labour's No. 1 choice, and he has ruled himself out. We now learn that General Stuart Skeates, a highly respected former general in the British Army, who was, in large part, responsible for delivering the Albania deal, which cut small boat arrivals from that country by 90%, has resigned from his position as director general for strategic operations. To misquote Oscar Wilde, "to lose one border commander could be seen as a misfortune; to lose two looks like carelessness"—perhaps even incompetence. I notice that the new job advert—it is available online for those who are thinking of applying—for Labour's border security command says that the role is not located in Kent, where the channel is, but is flexible from Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Durham, Glasgow, Liverpool or Manchester, none of which, the last time I checked, are anywhere near the English channel.

The reality is that everybody knows, including the people smugglers, that the small boat problem is going to get worse—indeed, has already got worse under Labour—because there is no deterrent. People are being sold a lie when they are being smuggled into this country, across one of the busiest shipping lanes. We need to stop them. Too many lives have already been lost. Sadly, six more have been lost in the channel in the last few weeks, and our hearts go out to them and their loved ones. We disagree on many things, but we can agree that we need to put an end to this evil trade. Sadly, the initial decisions made by her Government have made the problem worse, not better.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the shadow Home Secretary's words about the dedication of Home Office officials and about the importance of work on national security. As he knows, when I was shadow Secretary of State, I always worked with him and supported him around national security issues. I know he will do the same and I welcome him to his shadow post. I presume what we heard was the first of the Conservative leadership contest speeches.

I will respond to some of the things the shadow Home Secretary said. We need to be clear about what we have inherited from him and his party. Under his party, we have had the highest level of spring crossings ever. Gangs have been left to wreak havoc, not just along the French coast but across our border, through our country and back through Europe. Asylum support costs are set to rise to £30 billion to £40 billion over the next four years as a result of his and his party's decisions.

[Yvette Cooper]

As for the idea of deterrence, I am sorry but four volunteers being sent to Rwanda is not a deterrent to anyone for anything at all. The idea that he would spend £10 billion on this fantasy, this fiction, this gimmick rather than ever do the hard graft—£700 million has already been spent on sending just four volunteers in two and a half years. We have often warned that, frankly, it would be cheaper to put them up in the Paris Ritz. As it turns out, it would have been cheaper to buy the Paris Ritz.

As for the amnesty, I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman has ever understood the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which he voted for and he inherited from his predecessors. He asks if people who arrive illegally can claim asylum—that is exactly what happens under section 9 of that Act. They can all claim asylum, enter the asylum system and be entitled to asylum support. That is what happens in the system, which we have inherited, that he has presided over and run since he became Home Secretary. The problem is that people enter the asylum system but never leave. He did not bring in operational arrangements to try to take decisions properly. His Home Office effectively stopped taking the majority of asylum decisions in May. Perhaps he did not know that, but that is what happened in his Home Office. This party and this Government do not believe in amnesties. We think that the rules need to be respected and enforced. His party is the one that has given an effective amnesty to people who can end up staying in the asylum system forever. We believe that the rules should be enforced. The problem is that that is what the shadow Home Secretary believes too. He does not believe any of the stuff that he has just said. He is only saying it for his Tory leadership contest; he is just too weak to tell his party the truth. He thought that the whole policy on Rwanda was "batshit" and then he went out to bat for it. It is just not serious.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place and thank her for her statement. We all suspected that policy in the Home Office under the previous Government was a bit of a mess, but we did not realise how much of an expensive mess it was until she provided us with the details in her statement.

Let me ask the Home Secretary about the attraction for people to come here illegally to work in the black economy. If people have suspicions, they have to go to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, UK Visas and Immigration and the police to get action to deal with those activities. I note that the Home Secretary is looking to try to combine the approach to deal with illegal working in the car washing sector. Will that be a systematic change of approach, and will it be applied to other sectors as well? It would be very welcome if that were the case.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We must tackle the illegal working and also the exploitation that can often drive a lot of what happens. That is why we are intensifying the immigration enforcement, which is part of our new, huge expansion to the returns and enforcement unit. He is right that the process, which has become too complicated and too bureaucratic, needs to be simplified to make sure that the rules are being enforced. We have set out the high-risk sectors on which we wish to focus this summer, but we need a more systematic approach. We have talked about a single enforcement approach, and we will be setting out more details about those plans.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2018, the number of small boat arrivals stood at 299. In 2023, last year, the number had risen to more than 29,000. What happened in those intervening five years? One thing that happened was the closure of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which was introduced by the coalition Government in 2014 and was designed to select some of the most vulnerable people from refugee camps in Jordan, near Syria. What we have seen since the closure of that scheme is people choosing instead to make for these shores rather than applying in refugee camps. Will the Home Secretary rule out the offshore processing of asylum seekers, or will she consider introducing a scheme similar to the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which could incentivise asylum seekers applying for asylum close to the war zones afflicting them?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member to his new post. He is right to talk about the importance of the UK doing its bit to help those who have fled persecution and conflict. It is why I strongly believe that the Homes for Ukraine programme was immensely important. Personally, it has been important to our family. It is important that the UK has done its bit, including in previous years around Hong Kong and Afghanistan. That must continue to be the case, but that help must operate alongside a properly functioning system, otherwise criminal gangs will continue to exploit the system whatever it is. At the moment, those criminal gangs are getting away with it.

Let me turn to the specific issue of offshore processing. In fact, the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme was a form of offshore processing, just as the Homes for Ukraine scheme was. There are different ways to arrange these things. Our approach is always to look at what works. As long as it meets proper standards in terms of international law, we should be serious about what it is that works in order to tackle the complex problems that we face.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. I think that my constituents will be incredulous when they are informed of the extent to which the previous Government wasted so much money on this scheme. What commitments can she give the House that we will be able to rescind our commitments to spend further money on any such programmes, and that no further public money will be wasted?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I welcome her to Parliament, and I welcome her asking questions on this issue. We have to take a strong, rigorous and robust approach to value for money in every Department. It cannot simply be the responsibility of the Treasury; it has to be the responsibility of the Home Office, and of every Government Department. That is the approach that this Labour Government will take. I am frankly shocked that under the last Government not just the Home Office but the Treasury, the then

Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues all signed off on these incredibly high payments and costs. They must have had the modelling that would tell them how much the costs would go up by, yet they signed off on them. Our Government are determined to pursue value for money at every stage.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): If the number of small boat crossings are higher next summer than this summer, will the right hon. Lady resign?

Yvette Cooper: I realise that the right hon. Member is keen to get rid of me before I have even finished standing up at the Dispatch Box. Unfortunately, we have seen a succession of Conservative Home Secretaries—eight, I think, in the last eight years—none of whom resigned. Two of them were sacked under the last Government—actually, those two were the same person. Look, we have to be serious about this, because the dangerous boat crossings are undermining border security and putting lives at risk. Nobody should be making those journeys, and we have to work not just here but across other European countries to stop boats before they reach the French coast in the first place, to ensure that lives can be saved and the gangs are held accountable for their terrible crimes.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement on the shocking figures that are symbolic of the failure of Conservative Members to restore control over our borders. I note that, despite that spending of taxpayers' cash, removals of failed asylum seekers and foreign national offenders collapsed under the Conservatives. What is the Home Office doing to ensure that those who have no right to be in the UK are swiftly removed and the rules are properly enforced?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I welcome him to his seat in Parliament. He is right that removals of failed asylum seekers have fallen by a third since 2010. Removals of foreign national offenders have fallen by a quarter. That is not good enough. It means that the rules are not being respected or enforced, and it is why we will set up a new returns and enforcement programme. We have committed to 1,000 additional staff to work on returns and enforcement, to ensure that the rules are respected, not only where we have returns agreements in place but looking at individual cases as well. We must ensure that we have a system that people have confidence in. There is a lot of chaos to tackle, but we are determined to do it.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The Home Secretary is absolutely right to lay into the Conservatives for their shambles of an immigration policy, which will define them for years to come, but all I am hearing is her being harder on asylum seekers. Enforcement seems to be her priority. When will we hear about the safe and legal routes that asylum seekers access to come to this country, and will she stop the dehumanising and scapegoating language, and pledge to take no quarter from the belligerents behind me?

Yvette Cooper: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), ensuring that the UK always does its bit to help those who have fled persecution is really important. We have done so through different programmes in the past. We had the Syrian families programme back in 2015, which was important, but we also have to ensure that the system works and has credibility, and that the rules are enforced. Too often at the moment the rules are not enforced, but they need to be, so that everyone can respect the system. Also, too often we have criminal gangs causing havoc, able to undermine border security and making huge profits. It has become a criminal industry along our border, and that is deeply damaging. I agree that this cannot be about rhetoric; nobody should be ramping up the rhetoric, especially alongside gimmicks that do not work. We have to be serious about this issue and put in place sensible plans that work.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary—the Labour Home Secretary—to her place. We have inherited an almighty mess, with asylum accommodation costing £8 million per day. It is absolute chaos and, according to *The Sunday Times*, there are even middlemen and middlewomen taking advantage and profiteering through the system. How is she going to get a grip of this chaos we have inherited from the previous Tory Government?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important question. As well as a failure to tackle the criminal gangs taking hold along the channel, there has also been too much of a focus on gimmicks and a failure to have practical planning in place. For example, there was a failure to ensure that there were proper long-term contracts on asylum accommodation, so that instead the chaos at Manston a couple of years ago led to last-minute hotel procurement, which was completely inappropriate accommodation and cost a fortune as well.

We have to tackle that. That is why we have set out plans and we are determined to make sure that we can get that backlog down and end asylum hotel use. As a result of the chaos with the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the fact that the Home Office had stopped taking decisions, that will now take time and it will be difficult to sort out, but that is why the statutory instrument we are laying before the House today is so important. That alone should save the taxpayer £7 billion.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I know the Labour party managed to go an entire election campaign without answering this question, and the Home Secretary failed to answer it again when asked by the shadow Home Secretary, but I will give it one more try. Where does the Home Secretary intend to send failed asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iran?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman obviously does not understand the system that his party and his Government put in place. All the people who are in the asylum system are staying there. Under his policies for those individuals, they are now being sent all around the country into asylum hotels. That is the system the Conservatives have left us with. We do not think that is the right thing to do. We think that asylum decisions should be taken on a case-by-case basis. That is the right thing to do. We also think we should have proper returns agreements and do what his party should have been doing, under his own policies, for the 60% of people who continued to be entitled to asylum decisions but were not getting them under his Illegal Migration Act. What we will do is run the asylum system effectively, which his Government should have been doing.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the forensic work she has been doing in her Department. What consideration has she given to humanitarian visas for people in Gaza to be reunited with their family, if they are studying in the UK or working in our NHS? My constituent has a wife and two little children in Gaza at the moment; he cannot return home, yet the last Government refused to make provision for them to come and be reunited with him in the UK.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know that there are long-standing arrangements for family reunion and for refugees. There are also different concerns that have been raised around Gaza, because there is a real importance to people's being able to return to their homes in the middle east too. If she has an individual case that she would like to raise with my hon. Friend the Immigration Minister, she is very welcome to do so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): When I was in the migrant camps in northern France last year, the migrants told me and some of my colleagues that one deterrent that would stop them coming would be if they were turned back in the channel or sent back the same day. We saw the Border Force agency take a boatload back just last week. Will the Home Secretary now, with that advice, grow a political backbone and order the Border Force to send the boats back the same day?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member refers to an incident in the channel where there was co-operation between Border Force and the French authorities that also involved returning people to the French coast. That operational co-operation is important, but I would just say to him that "co-operation" is the really important word. If we want to prevent gangs operating and organising, and prevent boats from reaching the French coast in the first place, we have to work closely not just with France but with Germany and other European countries, and with the countries through which some of the supply chains are operating. It is that co-operation that he and some others in his party have quite often refused, but it will be important and is our best way to stop the criminal gangs.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In a few short days, my right hon. Friend has simultaneously saved the taxpayer a tremendous amount of money and got more people in the Home Office working on getting the system sorted than in previous years. I congratulate her on that. Does she agree that it is entirely in keeping with Labour values to ensure safe refuge for those fleeing war zones, and, at the same time, to ensure that those who are not entitled to be here are repatriated, saving the UK taxpayer money?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. There are principles here about doing our bit to help those who have fled persecution while also ensuring that the rules are enforced so that people who do not have a right to be here should be swiftly returned. At the moment, none of those things applies or is working properly. We have to restore order to the asylum system so that we can go back to the principles that, going back many years, the UK has always stood for.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): It is a huge relief that the vile Rwanda scheme has been scrapped. I have listened carefully to the Home Secretary's statement. Given that 94% of people seeking asylum in this country are ready and eager to work to support themselves, and that freezing them out of work leaves them in destitution and means that the UK misses out on tax revenue from their work, and on much-needed specialists and professionals such as the nurse I met recently in an asylum seeker project in Bristol, will the Home Secretary take the advice of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and urgently lift the ban on asylum seekers working?

Yvette Cooper: No, I do not believe that is the right approach, because we need to make swift decisions and ensure that the rules are properly respected and enforced. I am concerned about employers who exploit those who have sometimes arrived as a result of criminal gangs, trafficking or smuggling. I do not believe that employers should be able to exploit those kinds of routes and journeys. If people who have fled persecution are granted asylum in this country, of course they should be able to work and to do so swiftly, but if they are not entitled to be here—if they have not fled persecution—and should be turned down and returned to their home country, they should not be able to work in the UK.

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): My constituents take this issue seriously as they are at the very frontline and the Conservatives have left us with open borders. I thank my right hon. Friend for dealing with the matter with such seriousness. How long will it take to put the border security commander in place, and what sort of impact will they have in assisting law enforcement?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend and welcome him to his position. I know that his Dover and Deal constituency has faced real pressures as a result of the criminal gangs and the small boat crossings. I thank him for his work and experience in tackling these issues. He knows very well the work of the National Crime Agency, for example, in tackling the criminal gangs.

We are putting in place the steps for the border security command straight away. We have already begun recruitment not just for the new commander but for additional staff: hundreds of additional cross-border police, security and intelligence officers, and specialist investigators and prosecutors. That work will start straight away. We have already immediately increased the UK presence in Europol and its European Migrant Smuggling Centre so that we can get on with that work to build those partnerships and take action.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I am sure the Home Secretary agrees that this is a moral issue: we must never again see people dying in the channel. However, does she also agree that deterrence must be a part of the panoply of measures that we put forward? I am not clear on what deterrent measures she is going to put in place or—because this question has failed to be answered a number of times—what will happen to failed asylum seekers from countries such as Syria, Iran and Afghanistan.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the hon. Member that it is devastating that lives are being lost, including children's. We have seen increasing violence from some of the

gangs, crowding more people on to these overcrowded boats, which has resulted in a seven-year-old girl losing her life.

The hon. Member talks about deterrence. The problem with the Rwanda scheme is that it is clearly not a deterrent: four people being sent over two and a half years is not a deterrent at all. There are also no deterrents at all for any of the criminal gangs, which at the moment can operate with impunity, so we have to start by ensuring that the criminal gangs can face justice and that action is taken against the supply chains earlier on—that we have consequences, and that there is a deterrent there.

I would also say that a system whereby people can arrive in the UK and stay in the asylum accommodation system forever, which is the situation under the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which the hon. Member's party voted for, means that there is no disincentive for anyone. It makes it very easy for people to stay indefinitely and work illegally, even if they have no right to be here. That goes against the rules and means that the system is just not working.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, which contained some really quite revelatory points about the state of the finances. Sandiacre in my constituency has been home to two asylum hotels, one of which I was very pleased to see close recently, but the Best Western hotel remains open. This is a huge cost to people in my constituency and across the nation, and it leaves asylum seekers caught in an endless and inescapable limbo. What steps will the Home Secretary take to ensure that we can close asylum hotels once and for all?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We need to clear the backlog—not just let it grow and grow, which is what the Conservatives were doing, but clear the backlog so that we can end asylum hotels, which are inappropriate and extremely costly. Having discovered that the Home Office had effectively stopped taking the majority of asylum decisions under the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly)—who does not seem to know what his own Department was doing as a result of his own policies—I am extremely concerned that that will now take longer to do, but it remains an immensely important thing that we have to do. The other thing we will have to do is tackle the backlog in the appeals process that the Conservatives had allowed to grow, which is also slowing down the system.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I congratulate the Home Secretary on her appointment and on her statements to the House. Following on from a previous question, but perhaps with a nuance, will asylum seekers—perhaps after initial registration—be allowed to work and pay taxes while their applications are pending?

Yvette Cooper: If people have a right to be in the UK—if they have fled persecution and been granted refugee status, or they have come to be here on a visa through the normal processes—we will of course have them contributing to our country. That has been the case for generations, but if people are not here lawfully—if they have not fled persecution, and should fail the asylum process and be returned—they should not be working in the UK. This is simply about having a swift system so that we can make decisions quickly and ensure that the rules are enforced.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend in her place on the Government Benches. I am proud that Bradford is a city of sanctuary, and of organisations such as Bevan Health, set up by a GP in my constituency, which works to deliver vital healthcare to asylum seekers who are awaiting decisions, sometimes for over 12 months and in many cases in hotels. Can my right hon. Friend provide an assurance that asylum seekers will continue to have access to essential healthcare as our Government work to clear the asylum backlog, so that in future fewer people will be left languishing in hotels?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right; it is really important that we try to clear the backlog as rapidly as possible. It includes some people who are very vulnerable and may be in need of support. It also includes people who should not be in the UK, and the system should operate fairly so that they are swiftly returned. But we actually have to get back to decision making. I thought I would be coming to this Dispatch Box and saying, "Well, what we want to do is to speed up or accelerate decision making." I did not think I would be standing at this Dispatch Box saying, "No, no, we actually have to restart asylum decision making in the first place, because the Conservatives just stopped it." I really had not expected that. It really is far more shocking than I had imagined, and I really thought I had a good imagination.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): When you take a drug dealer off the street corner, guess what: another one appears, because of the vile drugs trade and the amount of money involved. My constituents in Boston and Skegness believe it is exactly the same with trying the Home Secretary's policy of smashing the gangs. If she smashes one gang, it is like a game of whack-a-mole: another one will appear and then another one, because there is so much money involved. Here is the point: how long will the Home Secretary give her policy before realising that the only policy that will work is the one she actually started last week, which is to pick people up and take them back to France, which we are entitled to do under international maritime law? It will help British citizens, help British taxpayers and help the French, and it will reduce the magnet factor.

Yvette Cooper: I say to the hon. Member that no one should be making these dangerous journeys, and the criminal gangs are making massive profits from organising these boats. I just do not think they should be able to get away with it, and they are at the moment. We should be taking action against those criminal gangs, and I simply do not accept that it is impossible to go after them. We must ensure that we take action not just on the gangs themselves, but on their supply chains, the routes the boats are taking and their finances, and that we properly and substantially increase law enforcement resources. As hon. Members will know, we have had cases where journalists have identified smugglers and those responsible for being involved in some of the smuggler gangs, and I think those gang members should be

[Yvette Cooper]

facing law enforcement. It is essential that we do this. This is about properly standing up for the rule of law, as well as making sure that we do everything we can to prevent these dangerous small boat crossings.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I am very pleased to see the Home Secretary take her place. My constituents in Aylesbury have two concerns: first, that we re-establish control of our borders; and secondly, that we remember the need for compassion for vulnerable people fleeing conflict and persecution. On that point, will she commit to ensuring that there are resettlement routes for people fleeing desperate and dangerous circumstances, and what will she do to ensure that they are viable?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right, and I welcome her to her place in this House. I think what people in this country have always wanted is that combination of strong border security and a proper, fair system, so that we do our bit alongside other countries to help those who have fled persecution, but also so that the rules are enforced and those who do not have a right to be here are returned. She will know that there is a series of different resettlement routes or different forms of support—for example, the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which continues, and some of the Afghan resettlement schemes. We are concerned about the operation of some of the Afghan schemes, and we are looking further at that to ensure they are functioning properly.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. The tragedy of desperate people dying in the channel is compounded by desperate people dying in the Mediterranean and the Aegean as human beings fleeing all kinds of horrible situations seek a place of safety. Is she co-operating with other European countries on a safe route for asylum seekers? Is she prepared to look in a much more humane way at the desperate situation facing people fleeing human rights abuses and wars around the world?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member makes an important point about what is happening in the Mediterranean, and about the pressures we have seen and the fact that, as the Prime Minister said in his statement, we have seen not just conflicts, wars and persecution, but the impact of climate change, making people travel and sometimes leading them to make dangerous journeys. We should be working to prevent the need for those dangerous journeys in the first place. That is why the Prime Minister announced last week at the European Political Community summit that we will invest over £80 million, alongside work with other European countries, also as part of the Rome process, both to tackle some of the wider criminal gang networks that still operate in the Mediterranean and to ensure that we address the injustices and serious crises that lead to people making such dangerous journeys in the first place.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to her place. One of the consequences of the collapse in our asylum system over the past few years has been the increasing and intolerable pressure on local communities —my constituents in Hartlepool raise this with me time and again. Will she outline how the steps that she is taking will begin to reduce that pressure on communities such as Hartlepool?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. There is a real challenge from the chaotic way the asylum system has been run, which has led to the last-minute procurement of hotels and has ended up being extremely costly. Everybody loses out from spending billions of pounds on this system, but also from local authorities often not having time to work with communities or accommodation providers to ensure that things are managed in the right way. Because asylum decisions stopped being taken, there will now be some challenges in getting the system working again, which means that bringing down the backlog will take longer than we initially anticipated. But we are determined to do this; it is the only way to get back to having a functional system that everybody across the country should be able to support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Home Secretary to her place and wish her well for the future, and I thank her for the helpful and confident answers that she has given.

There is, of course, a glaring issue regarding border security much closer to home: the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This border was patrolled by Republic of Ireland officials, and understandably so as their right to protect their nation is paramount. However, it is also clear that the Good Friday agreement does not preclude the need to conduct checks on the border. What discussions have there been with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and security forces in Northern Ireland to ensure that the open border with the Republic of Ireland does not become a free route for UK immigration?

Yvette Cooper: It is a pleasure to get my first question at the Dispatch Box from the hon. Member, and I look forward to very many more. He raises important issues. The border issues between Northern Ireland and Ireland are of course different; we rightly have different arrangements that reflect our long-shared history. But we also have very close co-operation. We have close policing co-operation, close information sharing, and additional information sharing that is not currently possible under the arrangements we have inherited with other European countries. It is important that those information-sharing arrangements continue, and hopefully we can build on them with other European partners.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. I share her astonishment at the scale of the mismanagement of the asylum system by the previous Government. My constituency of Colchester has hosted many asylum seekers and refugees over the years. We are a city of sanctuary. Our local authorities have played a full part in supporting that work. Will she confirm that those local authorities will be fully engaged in the work going forward to ensure that we have more effective support systems?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of working closely with local authorities. We are determined to do that. The Immigration Minister

already has work in chain looking at how we can have better working co-operation between the Home Office and local authorities. It is also important to recognise that, through many generations, refugees have come to this country and contributed to our economy and society and been a hugely important part of that. It is partly because we have that important history that it is crucial to get the whole system functioning again, instead of the chaos we have at the moment, which undermines everyone's confidence.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. The people of Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield want to see these crossings stopped and these gangs smashed, and they will welcome her tough action today. Because of the previous Government's complete failure to control our borders, they spent millions of pounds a week on asylum hotels. What will she do to speed up the processing of people in these hotels and end their use?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend to Parliament. We have to do all these things. We have to take action on the criminal gangs exploiting the situation in the first place, which involves much stronger co-operation with European colleagues. That must include the new counter-terror powers that will be in the new legislation as part of the King's Speech to strengthen powers against organised immigration crime. Alongside that, we have to get the basics right. We have to start taking decisions again, as well as speeding up asylum decisions and making the system work again.

CrowdStrike: IT Outage

4.32 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): On Friday 19 July, we saw a CrowdStrike software update on Microsoft systems result in a major global IT outage. It caused significant impacts around the world. Impacts were seen in the transport sector, with flights grounded in Europe and the US, and delays and cancellations here in the UK. Live train departure boards were impacted during the morning rush hour, and some media outlets lost the ability to provide live coverage. The outage caused substantial inconvenience for passengers hoping to travel for the summer holiday getaway on the busiest travel weekend of the year. Airports and airlines across the UK had measures in place to maintain safe operations, support passenger welfare, extend operating hours and deploy additional staff to support late-running operations and keep people moving where possible. As with all incidents, the sector will review its response and implement any learnings.

More concerningly, large parts of the local UK healthcare system lost access to test results and appointment information, affecting mostly GP services. Tried and tested NHS contingency plans were enacted and services are expected to be operating at full capacity in the next few days. Small businesses without dedicated IT support systems were heavily impacted due to disruption to card-only payment systems and ATMs, with many resorting to operate cash-only while firms worked to fix their systems. Many firms were able to get back online quickly and the remainder are expected to restore operations this week.

Officials from the National Cyber Security Centre quickly established that the outages were not the result of a security incident or malicious cyber-activity. The cause was instead identified to be a flawed CrowdStrike software update that caused Windows machines to crash.

On Friday morning, CrowdStrike issued guidance on how to solve the problem, giving users a manual fix for each affected device or system. I now believe that CrowdStrike is in the process of implementing an automated update, which can be applied remotely and should therefore speed up recovery. However, there are still residual impacts from the failed update, and it is important that we continue to monitor the situation and the longer-term impacts to UK sectors and secondary impacts from international disruption.

Ever since the incident occurred, the Government have worked closely with both Microsoft and CrowdStrike. My Cabinet Office officials have been leading co-ordination of the Government response across all impacted sectors of the economy. That included close monitoring of affected public services to ensure that business continuity plans were enacted and services were supported as they came back online. Two Cobra senior officials meetings were also convened on Friday to co-ordinate the response, and officials from across His Majesty's Government met over the weekend to continuously monitor the impacts and the recovery process. I am pleased to say that Government services and the online services that the Government provide were and remain largely unaffected. My colleagues including the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Health Secretary and the Transport Secretary attended briefings with officials throughout, and the Prime Minister was kept informed.

[Ellie Reeves]

The majority of the sectors that were impacted have now mostly recovered. The UK transport system—aviation, rail, road and maritime—is running normally. NHS staff worked hard over the course of Friday and the weekend to quickly apply the fixes required, and my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care have confirmed that systems are now back online, including for GPs. Their advice is that patients should continue to attend their appointments unless told not to. There may still be some delays, and GPs will need to rebook appointments that could not be made during the IT outage. The public should continue to contact their GPs in the normal way.

As IT systems are complex, we can expect that minor disruption will continue in some areas while systems continue to recover, but my officials expect those to be resolved in the next couple of days. I would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard to get systems up and running again, and all staff who have worked tirelessly to support individuals impacted by the outage.

Following this incident, the Cabinet Office will work with the National Cyber Security Centre and other partners across Government to review the lessons learned. The Central Digital and Data Office will work with the NCSC to implement any improvements to the existing response plans to cover both technical resilience features as well as cyber. The Cobra unit will work with Departments to support their processes for establishing how the organisations and sectors they represent manage the impacts of the outage and what lessons have been learnt.

As soon as the Government were elected, we took immediate steps to begin legislating to protect public services and the third-party services they use. Our cyber-security and resilience Bill, included in the King's Speech, will strengthen our defences and ensure that more essential digital services than ever before are protected. For example, it will look at expanding the remit of the existing regulation, putting regulators on a stronger footing and increasing reporting requirements to build a better picture in Government of cyber threats. Technology failures can be as disruptive as cyber-attacks, and the move to create the centre for digital government within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is aimed at creating a more resilient digital public sector.

What this incident shows is how dependent the modern world is on complex and interconnected IT systems and how essential preparedness for such events is, including business continuity planning. Notwithstanding the immense frustration and inconvenience that the outage has caused, I am pleased to see that effective contingency plans mitigated the very serious impacts that the outage could have had. I am pleased also that there is to be a comprehensive process to identify the lessons from this episode. I hope that they will lead to improvements that both help prevent similar incidents and further improve our resilience to system outages and the impacts they can have. In that spirit, I commend the statement to the House.

4.39 pm

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): May I begin by welcoming the hon. Lady to her role and thanking her for advance sight of the statement? In that role I know she will be supported by a dedicated team of civil servants, who represent the very best of public service. I have no doubt that they will serve her as well as they did me.

The hon. Lady will be aware of the enormous challenges facing this Government and those around the world in relation to cyber-security. As I warned when I was the responsible Minister, threats to public services and critical national infrastructure come from a range of challenges, from hostile state actors to human error and design flaws. Last week we saw those challenges vividly brought to life. Following the corrupted antivirus update by CrowdStrike on Friday, 8.5 million Microsoft devices globally were rendered unusable. That left airports disrupted, patient records temporarily lost and GPs unable to access important patient data, creating significant backlogs. That is more than an inconvenience.

I pay tribute to all those working in our public services for the efforts they undertook over the weekend to restore those services, and to the work of dedicated cyber specialists across Government, including in the National Cyber Security Centre. In government we undertook a wide range of measures to enhance the nation's cyber-security: creating the National Cyber Security Centre, introducing secure by design, setting cyber-resilience targets, launching GovAssure and transforming the oversight of governmental cyber-security.

I note, as the hon. Lady said, that the Government intend to build on that progress by bringing forward a cyber-security and resilience Bill. Will she therefore outline the timetable for the Bill, and will the Government consider mandatory cyber-security targets for the UK public sector? Are the Government considering obligations to ensure that infrastructure is designed to be resilient against common cause problems, such as this one? What steps are being taken to enhance cyber-security in the devolved Administrations and in parts of the public sector such as the NHS, which are operationally independent?

Specifically in relation to this incident, what assessment has been made of the prevalence of CrowdStrike within critical national infrastructure? What further reassurance can the Government give in relation to the timetable for full recovery of key systems and data? In particular, can the Minister assure employees that this month's payroll will not be adversely affected?

Britain's cyber industry is world leading. Cyber-security now employs more than 60,000 people and brings in nearly £12 billion-worth of revenue annually. This transformation was in part due to our £5.3 billion investment, which launched the country's first national cyber-security strategy. I therefore urge the Government—I see the Chancellor in her place—to continue such investment.

Incidents such as that of CrowdStrike should not deter us from the path of progress. We must embrace digitalisation and the huge improvements to public services that it offers. The adoption of artificial intelligence across Government is the closest thing we have to a silver bullet for public sector productivity. However, if we are to command public confidence, people must be assured that technology is safe, secure and reliable. Such incidents demonstrate how reliant the Government and public services are on large technology companies, and how much responsibility they have for the services that have become critical to people's lives and livelihoods.

That is why, in government, I called for us to work more closely with leading technology firms to address these shared challenges. The best solution is partnership. To that end, what further engagement will the Minister undertake with Microsoft, CrowdStrike and the wider sector to ensure that there is no such recurrence?

The task for us all is to build on existing progress that has transformed Britian's cyber defences, and to enhance protections for British families, businesses and the very heart of Government. In that mission, the Government can rely on the support of the Opposition.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the shadow Minister for his contribution and his questions. In particular, I echo the thanks to all those in Departments across the civil service who were involved in dealing with the outage last Friday and in mitigating its effects. I set out in my statement that our cyber-security and resilience Bill, which was included in the King's Speech, will strengthen our defences and ensure that more digital services are protected. That is a priority for this Government. The Bill will look at expanding the remit of regulation, putting regulators on a stronger footing and increasing reporting requirements, so that the Government can build a better picture of cyber-threats. We will consider the implications of Friday's incident as we develop that legislation, but rest assured that we are working across Government to ensure resilience.

As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said in his statement on the covid inquiry module 1 report, he will lead a review assessing our national resilience to the full range of risks that the UK faces, including cyber-risks.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Minister in her place. As she said, the CrowdStrike outage is a reminder not only that technology is so integrated into all our lives, making them better, but also of our dependence on the standard of development, deployment and integration of new technology, which is largely not visible to us. I was reassured to hear about the steps that the Government and businesses have been taking to mitigate the impact, but I fear that small businesses and consumers do not have the same resources. Does she agree that people should not have to be able to reboot from a blue screen in order to enjoy the benefits of technology? Will her Government move to ensure that consumers are better protected?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, and I want to acknowledge all the work that she has done in this area. It has been hugely valuable. She makes really important points about ensuring that consumers and small businesses are protected, as well as Government Departments and bigger businesses. I am sure that will form part of the lessons learned from this incident, and will feed into the Bill that we will introduce.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): This is my first opportunity to welcome Ministers to their places. I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I want to focus on the impact on the NHS. My thanks, and I am sure those of the entire House, go to all NHS staff who have been scrambling to deal with urgent inquiries from distressed patients.

I wonder if I might press Ministers for assurances on two patient groups who need time-critical care. First, some patients require blood test results before they can commence urgent treatment or have operations. Are there any assurances on the attention that they will be given by the NHS, both now and in any future scenarios? Secondly, there are patients at great risk of becoming extremely ill from getting covid. Since the previous Government scrapped the covid medicines delivery unit, many vulnerable patients have been struggling to get the anti-virals that they need from their GP in time. That situation is made much worse when this kind of disruption happens. Can the hon. Lady provide assurances about any attention that NHS England has given to those two patient cohorts? If not, is she willing to meet me to discuss what we might do in future?

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Member for her question highlighting the issues facing vulnerable patients. I am pleased to report that there was no reported impact on 111 or 999 services, and that patients were able to access emergency care. The majority of the impact on GP services was in accessing patient records, GP appointments and prescriptions. Patients who could not access GP appointments were able to attend urgent care services, and GPs were able to issue paper prescriptions. However, I will pass on the hon. Lady's concerns to my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, because they are incredibly important issues and we need to ensure that vulnerable patients are protected, going forwards.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to your very temporary position, and to welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to her role? Can she give the House any further details of the impact of this outage in Scotland, and what conversations has her Department had with the Scottish Government in recent days?

Ellie Reeves: I welcome my hon. Friend back to the House; it is fantastic to see her, rightly, in her place. I thank her for the points that she raised, which are important and will be taken into account in the review of the lessons learned.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on her appointment. Does she agree that these events demonstrated that we are very far from being in a position to move to a cashless society? Given that the Chancellor is present, will the Minister confirm that her Government will do everything that they can to support the continued use of cash, which is so important to some of the most vulnerable people in society?

Ellie Reeves: Cash remains the second most commonly used form of payment in the UK, and we remain committed to ensuring that individuals and businesses have access to it. We have committed ourselves to providing 350 banking hubs, so that cash remains available to them.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to welcome the Minister to her position, particularly as she is sitting alongside the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I welcome the points

[Mark Ferguson]

made about resilience in public services, but can she assure me that similar efforts are being made to ensure resilience of IT in a defence context?

Ellie Reeves: As I said in answer to an earlier question, as soon as this Government were elected, we took immediate steps to start legislating to better protect all our public services and the third-party services that they use, and the cyber-security and resilience Bill will come before Parliament.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister to her position. Congratulations are due to her: I understand that she was in charge of the Labour party's election campaign, so she can take some credit for its success. It is good to see a reward for endeavours, and for hard work. I say to her: well done.

On airlines, as 171 flights were cancelled, some of my constituents were stuck in London and could not get home to Belfast. When it came to banks, some of my constituents who were out shopping found that their credit cards did not work because the system was down. When it came to the health system, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland said that hospital services and about two thirds of GP surgeries faced problems; there had been, for instance, problems getting patients into operating theatres and with accessing staff rosters. The whole system was in absolute chaos.

Does the Minister not agree that the issue has underlined the necessity of ensuring that we are prepared for cyber-breakdown, whether caused by an intentional attack or caused unintentionally? Can she say something about our preparedness for situations such as this, and about our resilience in moving forward from these technological problems, for the benefit of those in all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Member for his kind comments. I am sorry to learn that some of his constituents were unable to secure flights home or GP appointments. In my statement, I spoke about ensuring that we expand our cyber-resilience, put regulators on a stronger footing and obtain a clear picture of cyber-threats and how they can be dealt with, and he raises important points in that regard.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): This was an extremely serious incident that I suspect may well be detectable in the next GDP figures that come out of the Office for National Statistics. I have two questions. The hon. Lady said that she was "pleased to say that Government services, and the online services that the Government provide, were and remain largely unaffected." Could she tell us which services were affected, or is "largely" just a euphemism for "not affected at all"?

Secondly, it is quite difficult for Members to get a handle on the full impact and spread of this contagion. Will she commit to laying before the House some kind of report detailing the sectors that were affected, how seriously they were affected—including Government systems—and whether and how there will be any resolution in the future? Obviously, we need to report to our constituents that these things are less likely to occur in the future.

Ellie Reeves: I set out the impact that the incident had on, for example, GP services, but things like the emergency services remained unaffected, as far as we are aware. We are learning the lessons from the incident, and I am sure that we will report back once that has been completed.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Like so many others, GPs in my constituency were affected on Friday, and I thank them for the work they did. Even though patients were not able to get test results and appointments were missed, GPs managed to make sure that people received the best care possible. What assurances can the Minister give me that the lessons learned from Friday will mean that patients can continue to receive care when they need it?

Ellie Reeves: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House, and I place on record my thanks to GP surgeries in Maidenhead, which did what they could to make sure that the disruption for patients was at a minimum. We will undertake the lessons learned exercise from this incident; I hope that offers some reassurance to his constituents, as well as the Bill that will be going through Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am aware that the Minister is new to her role, so I will ask her to consider things, rather than to commit to doing things. Will she please consider continuing with the annual statement to Parliament on civil contingencies and risks, which the previous Government committed to? When she looks at the cyber-security and resilience Bill, will she consider assessing whether there is widespread use of certain software or hardware that could cause mass outages in the event that it is affected, as happened with CrowdStrike? I am not aware that we have seen an analysis of that in previous outputs by the Cabinet Office, and it would be incredibly helpful for us to be aware of where those risks are.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Member for those suggestions. I am very happy to consider the points that she has raised.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): I cannot be the only Member who thinks how proud Mr and Mrs Reeves must be today.

Debate on the Address

[4TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 19 July).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Economy, Welfare and Public Services

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (h), tabled by the Leader of the Opposition.

4.58 pm

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, at the end of the Question to add:

"but humbly regret that there is no mention in the Gracious Speech of the improved economic conditions the Government is inheriting, with the fastest recorded growth in the G7, inflation at the Bank of England's target for the second month in a row, and unemployment at half the rate that it was in 2010; further regret that there is no mention of how to make necessary savings on welfare; urge the Government to meet the commitment set out in the Labour Party's manifesto not to raise taxes on working people; regret that the Gracious Speech fails to make a commitment not to use changes to reliefs to raise taxes; and call on the Government to increase income tax thresholds to prevent income tax from being charged on the State Pension."

It is an important and rather painful part of our democracy that today I am a shadow Chancellor, responding to the King's Speech in exactly the same way that the new Chancellor responded to me just a few months ago, so I start by congratulating her, as well as Mr and Mrs Reeves. As the father of two girls, one of whom has her 10th birthday today, I warmly welcome the smashing of a glass ceiling by Britain's first female Chancellor. As I said on election night, she has led the Labour party on a difficult journey, which has changed it for the better. Her stated commitment to fiscal responsibility, stability and economic growth has been consistent and, I am sure, not always easy. Unfortunately for us, her success in holding the line means that we face rather a lot of Labour MPs on the Government Benches, but I wish her well in her new role.

I also commend to the right hon. Lady the superb Treasury officials she now inherits, and put on record my gratitude to them for the excellent work they did for me, staying up in the middle of the night ahead of fiscal events, engaging in tense negotiations with spending Departments—and occasionally, it has to be said, with No. 10—bringing me endless flat whites and Pret lunches to keep me going and, most of all, making my family feel welcome in the goldfish bowl that is Downing Street. It is part of the magic of democracy that those same officials have seamlessly transferred their allegiance from me to her, and I know that they will serve her extremely well.

In opposition, we will not oppose for its own sake, and there are a number of Bills in the King's Speech that we welcome. The right hon. Lady is right to focus on growth, and the improvements on planning will build on many reforms introduced by the last Government, including the 110 growth measures I introduced in last year's autumn statement. Any boost to house building is also welcome. We delivered 1 million homes in the last Parliament, and she will soon find out that if she is to deliver 1.5 million, she will not be able to duck reforming environmental regulations—a change that Labour blocked in the last Parliament that would deliver an extra 100,000 homes. I caution her not to over-rely on bringing back top-down targets. In the end, we will build more houses only if we change attitudes to new housing, and that is unlikely to happen if unpopular targets are steamrollered through local communities.

We will also look carefully at the right hon. Lady's Budget Responsibility Bill. We are proud that a Conservative Government set up the Office for Budget Responsibility, and I commend the work of Richard Hughes and his team. We did not always agree, but in the end, that is the point of an independent watchdog. We all understand the politics of a Bill that allows the Government to make endless references to the mini-Budget, but if the right hon. Lady is really committed to fiscal responsibility alongside growth, I hope that she will today confirm that she will not fiddle with the five-year debt rule to allow increased debt through the back door. We—and, it has to be said, markets—will be monitoring the overall level of debt very carefully to make sure that that does not happen. I also hope that she will commission the OBR to do 10-year forecasts of our long-term growth rate rather than five-year forecasts, as at present, in order to bake long-term decision making into Treasury thinking.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor was talking just now about fiscal responsibility. During the election campaign, he committed to a series of tax cuts, but I noticed that yesterday on Laura Kuenssberg's show he said that it would not have been possible for him to proceed with those tax cuts. What has changed, and why did he make that commitment during the election campaign, knowing full well that he could not afford to carry it out?

Jeremy Hunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because it allows me to explain why he is completely mistaken in what he is saying. We offered a set of carefully and fully funded tax cuts—unlike the £38.5 billion of unfunded spending commitments that came from the Labour party—but we always said that they would be brought in over time over the next Parliament. We did not make a commitment that they would come in immediately, and indeed they would not have. We would have done it in a responsible way.

When it comes to dubious claims, the new Chancellor herself has been making some that do not withstand scrutiny. She said, for example, that the economy would have been £140 billion bigger if we had matched the average OECD growth rate, but she knows that the OECD is a diverse group of 38 countries, including many with economies very different from our own, such as Turkey, Mexico or Luxembourg. A much more meaningful comparison is with other similar G7 economies, which shows that since 2010 we have grown faster than

[Jeremy Hunt]

France, Italy, Germany and Japan. Indeed, the International Monetary Fund says that thanks to difficult measures taken by the last Conservative Government, we will grow faster than any of those four countries, not just in the short term but over the next six years. One reason for that is our record on attracting investment.

Since 2010, greenfield foreign direct investment has been higher in the UK than anywhere in the world except the United States and China. In the last year alone, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover, Tata, BMW Mini, Google and Microsoft have all voted for the UK with their dollars, not least because of cuts in business taxation, such as full expensing, introduced by the last Government. If the Chancellor now looks for back-door ways to increase business taxation, as many fear, she will risk the UK's attractiveness to foreign investors, of which she is now the beneficiary.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): That investment is very important to my constituents in Stockton North, where many companies are poised to make billions of pounds of industrial investment. They tell me that they prize economic stability above all else, so will the right hon. Gentleman now commit to supporting the Budget Responsibility Bill to give those investors the security they need?

Jeremy Hunt: Yes, we are minded to support the Bill, subject to having had a close look at it, because we think it is perfectly sensible. Whether it is completely necessary is a different question, but it is perfectly sensible.

We have grave concerns about some elements of the King's Speech, with a *Times* editorial this week describing some of its Bills as

"a dose of traditional socialist dogma".

Tony Blair came to office having removed the old clause IV of the Labour party constitution, because he knew that state-run businesses are rarely successful and usually end up being bailed out by the taxpayer. Last week, with their railway and energy plans, the Government brought forward more nationalisation than Blair ever did—indeed, more than any Government in modern times.

If the Chancellor really cares about fiscal responsibility, she should beware. The reason why unions like publicly owned utilities is that they give them more leverage on pay and more ability to demand bail-outs. Unlearning the lessons of history will mean more strikes and bigger bills for the taxpayer.

An even bigger concern for business is the impact on jobs of Labour's new deal for workers. We have seen the creation of almost 4 million jobs since 2010, which is nearly 800 jobs for every single day that Conservative Governments were in office. The president of the Confederation of British Industry described the UK as a "job-creation factory" but, like many others, he expressed concern that the Deputy Prime Minister's new labour laws could put that at risk.

Day one rights sound attractive, but employers fear they will mean a flood of tribunal claims, meaning it is safer not to offer a job at all. That is why the Federation of Small Businesses responded to the King's Speech by saying that companies are worried about increased costs and risks. In the end, French-style labour laws will lead to French levels of unemployment, which are nearly double our own—indeed, they are close to what they were when the last Labour Government were in office. By contrast, the Conservatives nearly halved unemployment over the last 14 years, and it would be a tragedy for working families up and down the country if the new Government turned the clock back.

Finally, the most dubious claim of all is this nonsense about the Government having the worst economic inheritance since the second world war, which everybody knows is just a pretext for long-planned tax rises. People can see what nonsense this is by simply comparing it with the last time we had a change of Government in 2010. Inflation was 3.4%, compared with 2% today. Unemployment was 8%, compared with 4.4% today. Growth was forecast then to be among the slowest in the G7, compared with the fastest today. Instead of an economy in which markets and the pound were facing meltdown, the Chancellor has inherited an economy in which the Office for National Statistics has said that growth is "going gangbusters."

That has been backed up by even more data since the election. May's GDP figures show that Britain's growth was double the rate predicted by economists, and the fastest in more than two years. New figures from S&P show that, in February, British businesses were among the most optimistic in the world—top of the league again, according to the ONS. Inflation has remained at its 2% target level.

In her BBC interview yesterday, the Chancellor glossed over those figures, putting on the most shocked expression she could muster, to pretend that public finances are worse than she expected. But the root cause of the pressure on public finances—£400 billion in pandemic support and £94 billion in cost of living support—was never a secret. Indeed, the Labour party supported those measures and, in some cases, called for us to go further. Nor were the difficult decisions we had to take to pay for them a secret either. When we had to increase borrowing, increase tax and reduce spending plans in the autumn statement of 2022, Labour did not oppose us.

Like all Chancellors, she faces fiscal challenges: welcome to the job. But that job is a whole lot easier because, faced with an economic crisis two years ago, Conservatives took decisions that her predecessor Labour Government ducked completely after the financial crisis. That is why she has a deficit of 4.4% this year compared with 10.3% left behind for the Conservatives in 2010. She did not just compare her inheritance to 2010; she claimed to have the worst inheritance since the second world war. Is she really saying that she faces conditions worse than Geoffrey Howe in 1979, with a winter of discontent, stagflation, an 83% top rate of tax and a Labour Government who went with a begging bowl to be bailed out by the IMF? The Chancellor knows perfectly well that that claim is nonsense, otherwise why, in her first week, would she announce £7.3 billion of spending on her national wealth fund, without a spending review, a Budget or any external validation from the OBR? As Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies says, thanks to the OBR the nation's books are "wide open" and "fully transparent", so pretending things are worse than expected "really won't wash." As she establishes her reputation, it is surely unwise to base her big central argument on a claim so patently ridiculous.

But we all know exactly why the Chancellor is doing it. She wants to lay the ground for tax rises she has been planning all along, which leads to two major concerns. First, she says her No. 1 mission is growth, but all around the world, evidence suggests countries with higher taxes tend to grow more slowly. Lower taxes, when funded properly, boost growth, as we saw with full expensing and the national insurance cuts last year, both of which the OBR confirmed add to our GDP. However, keeping taxes down is hard work.

I saw the numbers the Chancellor has seen just a few weeks ago, and the official advice was clear: with public sector pay restraint, productivity plans such as those we announced in the Budget, and welfare reform, it is perfectly possible to balance the books without tax rises. It is not easy—government never is—but not impossible. Yet all those three things—pay restraint, productivity improvements and welfare reform—were glaringly omitted from the King's Speech. Instead, she has chosen an easier path: what Labour party sources told *The Guardian* was a "doctor's mandate" to raise taxes.

The Chancellor has ruled out raising income tax, national insurance and VAT, but she should not think for one second that other tax rises will not impact working people. Capital gains tax destroys the pensions people build up over their lifetimes; business tax rises are passed on to customers, leading to higher bills; and taxes on banks and energy companies lead to fewer companies operating in the UK, a lower tax take and less money for public services such as the NHS.

That is the biggest contradiction in the new programme—a Government who say they want the fastest growth in the G7 but, in the very same breath, plan tax rises that will make that growth harder, if not impossible, to achieve. Even if such an approach were misconceived, it is none the less a legitimate choice for a governing party. What is not acceptable is, just 18 days after the election, to be laying the ground for tax rises after the Chancellor promised us 50 times in the election campaign that she had no plans to raise them. Every Labour Government in history have raised taxes and raised spending. If she wanted to do the same, she should have had the courage to make the case for that before the election. Instead, she is softening us up for a colossal U-turn that will lead to lower growth, less money for public services and massive public anger, which is why I commend to the House the amendment in the Opposition's name.

5.15 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): It is a pleasure to open today's King's Speech debate on behalf of His Majesty's Government. I always enjoy debating with the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), though I must say I rather prefer doing so from this side of the Chamber. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

I appreciate the shadow Chancellor's generous words on my appointment and also his tribute to officials, who I can confirm are indeed first rate. It has been more than 14 years since a Labour Government were in office for a state opening of Parliament—14 years of chaos, 14 years of economic irresponsibility, 14 years of wasted opportunities and 14 years since there has been a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer standing at this Dispatch Box. Today, I pay tribute to my most recent Labour predecessor, the late Lord Darling. He was an outstanding Chancellor, a kind man and a good friend.

Mr Speaker, it is also the very first time that there has been a female Chancellor of the Exchequer. On my arrival at the Treasury, I learned that there is some debate about when the first Chancellor was appointed. It could have been 800 years ago, when one Ralph de Leicester was given the title of "Chancellor of the Exchequer" for the first time, or, 900 years ago, when "Henry the Treasurer" was referenced in the Domesday Book. It could even have been 1,000 years ago, when Alfred the Great was in effect the first Master of the Mint. Whichever it is, I am sure the whole House would agree on one thing—that we have waited far too long for a woman to be the Chancellor of the Exchequer. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

I stand here today proud, but also deeply conscious of the responsibility that I now have: a responsibility to women across the country whose work is too often undervalued; and a responsibility to every young woman and girl, who should know that there is no ceiling on their ambitions and no limit on their potential.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Seven Tory men have stood at that Dispatch Box over the past 14 years and the result has been an economic crisis, crumbling public services and a cost of living crisis. Can we expect a change of approach from the new female Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Rachel Reeves: One thing is that I hope to be in post for a bit longer than some of my predecessors.

As tempting as it is, I do not intend to conduct a full sweep of the past 1,000 years of economic history from the Dispatch Box today—[Hon. Members: "Ah"!] I am sorry. However, we must talk about the past 14 years. I warned that whoever won the general election would inherit the worst set of circumstances since the second world war, and I have seen nothing to change my mind since I arrived at the Treasury. I will update the House on our public spending inheritance before Parliament rises for recess.

I heard what the shadow Chancellor said from the Dispatch Box now and on the television yesterday, which was to claim that I should be grateful for what he has left us. That is unbelievable, because he knows the truth and is now trying to rewrite history. In doing so, he has reminded the British people why the Conservatives lost the election. They are out of touch, deluded and unable to defend the indefensible. In the weeks ahead, it will become clear what those in his party did. They stored up problems, failed to take the tough decisions and then they ran away, leaving it to us—the Labour Government—to pick up the pieces and clear up their mess.

Today, I want to focus on one thing above all else: economic growth. Since 2010, Conservative Chancellor after Conservative Chancellor, including the now shadow Chancellor, stressed the importance of growth. We have had more growth plans than we have had Prime Ministers or Chancellors, and that is quite a lot, but growth requires more than talk; it requires action. Like so much else with the previous Administration, when we scratch beneath the surface the façade crumbles, and all that is left is the evidence of 14 years of failure.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment; she is making an excellent speech. Friday's ONS report showed that public sector borrowing was 25% higher than forecast. Does she agree that that underlines why it was so important to have a fully costed and fully funded manifesto to restore confidence in the public finances, and that it was a surprise that certain other parties did not follow the same route?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He speaks powerfully, and I pay tribute to his work in the last Parliament, particularly around education and skills. This is a really important point. For me, the most important pages of the manifesto that we stood on were the three grey pages at the back of it, which set out all our spending commitments and how they would be paid for. That was important, because to earn the trust of the electorate parties must be really clear about where the money will come from and what they will use it for. That is what we did in our manifesto, and it is what we will do in Government.

The shadow Chancellor made some points about GDP, comparing ours with that of other countries, but since 2010 UK GDP per capita—that is the most important measure, because it reflects how people feel and the money that they have—has grown slower than the G7 average, slower than the EU average, and slower than the OECD average. Treasury analysis that I requested when I became Chancellor shows that, had the UK economy grown at the average OECD rate these last 14 years, our economy would be over £140 billion bigger today. That could have brought in an additional £58 billion of tax revenues in the last year alone—money that could have been used for our schools, hospitals and other vital public services. Growth is about more than just lines on a chart; it is about the money in people's pockets, and Treasury analysis shows that achieving the rate of growth of similar economies would have been worth more than £5,000 for every household in Britain.

The shadow Chancellor stood up and once again claimed that he bequeathed a great legacy. Seriously? The last Parliament was the first on record where living standards were lower at the end than at the start. The highest level of debt since the 1960s, the highest tax burden in 70 years, mortgages through the roof, the economy only just recovering after last year's recession, economic inactivity numbers last week showing a further rise, and borrowing numbers last week showing over £3 billion more borrowing than the OBR expected—that is the Conservatives' legacy. If that is a good inheritance, I would hate to see what a bad one looks like. I think deep down the shadow Chancellor knows that. In fact, he does know it.

Yesterday, the shadow Chancellor admitted what we all know: that the manifesto that he campaigned on was undeliverable, and the money for the tax cuts that he promised simply was not there. If he wanted to show the country that his party has listened, and learned from its mistakes, he would have used his speech this afternoon to apologise, but he did not, and that tells us everything that we need to know about this Conservative party: party first, country second; political self-interest ahead of the national interest; irresponsibility before the public good. Let me say this to the Conservative party, "We will not stop holding you responsible for the damage that you have done to our economy and to our country." Never again will we allow the Conservatives to crash our economy. They failed this country. They shied away from tough choices, and we will not repeat their mistakes. It falls on us, this new Labour Government, to fix the foundations so that we can rebuild Britain and make every part of our country better off. We will govern through actions, not words, and we have already begun to do just that, because there is no time to waste.

Less than 72 hours after I was appointed as Chancellor, I put growth at the very heart of our work. Working alongside my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, I set out reforms to our planning system—reforms that the Conservative party did not deliver in 14 years. Our reforms restore mandatory targets to build the homes that we desperately need, end the absurd ban on onshore wind to deliver home-grown cheap energy and recover planning appeals for projects that sat on the desks of Ministers in the last Parliament for far too long. Those are tough decisions that the Conservative party already opposes.

Why was that my first act as Chancellor? Because getting our economy growing is urgent, and this King's Speech shows that we are getting to work.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On the matter of mandatory housing targets, having been a constituency MP for 23 years and seen them tried in a number of different ways, may I humbly offer the Chancellor this, with all sincerity? There is such a thing as good development, but it only works if it is something that we do with people and not to people. This Stalinist approach will not work.

Rachel Reeves: I have been compared to a lot of things, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have never been compared to Joseph Stalin.

Our approach is a brownfield-first approach. We will reintroduce those mandatory targets; of course it is up to local authorities and local communities to decide where the housing should be built, but the answer cannot always be no. If the answer is always no, we will continue as we are, with home ownership declining and mortgages and rents going through the roof. On the Government side of the House, we are not willing to tolerate that.

This King's Speech shows that we are getting to work. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out, our programme for government is founded on principles of security, fairness and opportunity. Our No. 1 mission is to secure sustained economic growth in our great country through a new partnership between Government, business and working people that prioritises wealth creation for all of our communities.

We will fix the foundations of our economy so we can rebuild Britain and make every part of our country better off. There are a number of important pieces of legislation in the King's Speech that will help us to grow the economy. In this speech, I will focus on three in particular: the Budget Responsibility Bill to restore economic stability, the national wealth fund Bill to drive investments and the pension schemes Bill to reform our economy. Those Bills speak not just to our programme for government, but also to trust in politics. They show that we will govern as we campaigned and that we will meet our promises to the British people.

In the election campaign, I said the first step we would take would be to restore economic stability, because stability is the precondition to a healthy, growing economy. It is how we keep taxes, inflation and mortgages as low as possible. After years of irresponsibility, we are putting our economy on firm ground once again. We introduced the new Budget Responsibility Bill on Thursday to deliver on our manifesto commitment to introduce a fiscal lock so that I can keep an iron grip on our country's finances.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Chancellor and I sat on the Treasury Committee together many years ago, and she will know from our time together that economics is as much art as it is science. Given that she is effectively giving a veto over economic policy to the OBR through this Bill, she must recognise that we need to understand what the people in the OBR believe, what their theories of economics are and what principles they attach themselves to. What further scrutiny of the chair of the OBR and the people doing the forecast will be available to this House, given that effectively they will be co-Chancellor with her during the next few years?

Rachel Reeves: The Treasury Committee, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, can call in the chair and other members of the Office for Budget Responsibility, but his comments show exactly why we need this Bill: so that never again can we have a repeat of the mini-Budget. The Bill will require every announcement that makes significant permanent changes to tax and spending to be subject to an independent assessment by the Office for Budget Responsibility. Why? Because unfunded, reckless commitments do not just threaten our public finances; they threaten people's incomes and they threaten people's mortgages. We saw that in the wake of the mini-Budget presided over by the former Member for South West Norfolk. I understand that she has taken umbrage in recent days at the idea that that episode was disastrous. Well, if any Conservative Member would like to dispute that fact today, I would be more than happy to give way. [Hon. Members: "Come on then!"] They cheered it at the time, but they are not cheering it now, and I do not imagine that they would put it on their leaflets.

The Conservatives should be ashamed of what they did because people up and down the country are still paying the price for the chaos that they caused. We say: never again. The Budget Responsibility Bill will enshrine that commitment in law.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): During the pandemic, the friends and family of Conservatives were awarded contracts for work that were never fulfilled. My constituents would love to know how we can get their money back, perhaps through the covid corruption commissioner.

Rachel Reeves: I enjoyed campaigning for my hon. Friend in York Outer, and it is great to see him in his place today. Stability means a tough set of fiscal rules, but it also means spending public money wisely, as he says. The last Government hiked taxes while allowing waste and inefficiency to spiral out of control. At no time was that more evident than during the pandemic, especially when it came to personal protective equipment. The former Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, signed cheque after cheque after cheque for billions of pounds-worth of contracts that did not deliver for the NHS when it needed it—that is simply unacceptable.

Today, I can announce that I am beginning the process of appointing a covid corruption commissioner to get back what is owed to the British people. That money, which is today in the hands of fraudsters, belongs in our public services, and we want it back. The commissioner will report to me, working with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and their report will be presented to Parliament for all Members to see. I will not tolerate waste. I will treat taxpayers' money with respect and return stability to our public finances.

The second Bill I will speak to is the national wealth fund Bill. We know that economic stability is vital for investors and for business—the small business looking to grow; the global business looking to expand in the UK; the entrepreneur looking to take their first steps. To support them, stability must sit alongside investment.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): On the effective use of public funds, is the Chancellor aware not only of the alleged corruption in the way that covid aid was distributed, but of the large number of tax loopholes in this economy? For example, in Cornwall, over £500 million of taxpayers' money was handed out to holiday home owners not only through covid aid but through the small business rate relief scheme and other tax loopholes. At the same time, only a third of that amount has gone into social housing for first-time users. Will she look at the whole issue of parity in the way public funds are used, to support people who need housing?

Rachel Reeves: I welcome the hon. Member back to this place. I enjoyed sparring with him in my early days in Parliament, and it is great to see him back in the House. He is absolutely right that we need to get value for money for all tax incentives. I will ensure that the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government look at the changes that he suggests.

The last Government's record on investment was dismal. We now sit behind every single member of the G7 when it comes to business investment as a share of GDP. That is not an abstract economic problem. Weak investment holds back productivity and hurts living standards; it leaves households poorer and wages lower.

The King's Speech deals directly with the need to unlock private investment through a new national wealth fund Bill. That will be supported by an injection of capital, part funded by an increase to the windfall tax on oil and gas giants. It will make transformative investments in industries of the future, such as carbon capture and storage, and green hydrogen. It will mobilise billions of pounds-worth of additional private sector investment in our industrial heartlands and coastal communities while generating a return for taxpayers. The national wealth fund will work with local partners including mayors, as well as the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to develop an investment offer that meets the needs of all our nations and regions. It will simplify a complex landscape of support for businesses today, aligning key institutions such as the UK Infrastructure Bank and the British Business Bank under the one banner of the national wealth fund.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I heartily applaud what my right hon. Friend is saying about the renewed windfall tax. Will she also look at the fact that, in this country, we have the lowest basic rate of tax on oil and gas companies anywhere in the world? The average is 74%; in this country, it is 38%.

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend knows, we committed in our manifesto to a three percentage point uplift to the current energy profits levy, which we will use to fund the national wealth fund. That fund will power jobs and prosperity in all parts of our country, and that work is already well under way. In my first week in office, I welcomed the report of the national wealth fund taskforce, and I thank the former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, and the whole taskforce for their outstanding work. This Bill will put the national wealth fund on a statutory footing with clear objectives, crowding in private investment to create wealth across Britain.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Under the Conservatives, businesses and working people were held back by a complete and abject failure to build the new homes that my constituents in Ealing Southall were crying out for, the laboratory spaces that will provide the jobs of the future, or the national infrastructure needed for businesses and working people to prosper. Will my right hon. Friend assure this House that, under her chancellorship, we will finally get Britain building again?

Rachel Reeves: I welcome the election of my hon. Friend in Ealing Southall—I think her constituents and the whole House can see what a strong advocate she will be for her local community. She is absolutely right: we have to get Britain building again. We have to build the homes and the transport, energy and digital infrastructure that our country desperately needs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chancellor for giving me the chance to intervene. When it comes to rebuilding and the house building programme that she has suggested should happen, in the papers today, it is suggested that people on a wage of £70,000 cannot get a mortgage. In Northern Ireland, those on a smaller wage cannot get a mortgage either, so can I ask the Chancellor this direct and hopefully positive question, which will hopefully receive a positive answer: what can she do to improve access to mortgages for those who want to own their accommodation, rather than rent it? What can she do to make sure that everyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit, as she has clearly said they will?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. One of the biggest challenges people face with getting a mortgage is building up the deposit. That is why we have committed to a mortgage guarantee scheme, to help those people who cannot rely on the bank of mum and dad to get on the housing ladder. That is a really important commitment, as is our commitment to build the homes: unless we build more homes, home ownership will continue to go backwards, as it did over the past few years.

Alongside stability and investment in our economy must come reform, because delivering economic growth requires tough choices. It means taking on vested interests and confronting issues that politicians have too often avoided. The last Government refused to engage with those choices, and refused to level with the British people about what was required. This Government will be different. We have already demonstrated that through a series of reforms to our planning system, and are bringing forward further legislation in the King's Speech to get Britain building.

Today, I want to focus on another area of our economy where reform is vital: our pension schemes. People across our country work hard to save for the future; they want a better, more secure retirement with the most generous pension possible. At the same time, British businesses with high growth potential need capital to support their expansion. Pension funds are at the heart of this. There will soon be over £800 billion of assets in defined-contribution pension schemes, but for too long, those assets have not been targeted towards UK markets. That has impacted British savers, and it has impacted British business.

The last Government also said that this was a problem, and I welcome that acknowledgement, but they never introduced the legislation needed to make the change. We believe in deeds, not words, so we will strengthen investment from private pension providers by bringing forward the pension schemes Bill announced in the King's Speech. It will boost pension pots by over £11,000 through a new and improved value for money framework. Through an investment shift in DC schemes, just a 1% shift in asset allocation could deliver £8 billion of new productive investment into the UK economy.

To ensure that the Bill is as strong as possible, I am today launching a pensions investment review, led by the first ever joint Commons Minister appointed between the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions—my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), the Pensions Minister. This will include a review of the local government pension scheme, the seventh largest pension fund in the world, to ensure it is getting the best value from the savings of nearly 7 million public sector workers, the majority of whom are women and the majority of whom are low-paid. They deserve a pension that is working for them. Together, these reforms will kick-start economic growth by unlocking investment that has been tied up for too long.

Kit Malthouse: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Reeves: I have already given way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): Order. Could I just urge the House to think about interventions? There is a very long list of Members who want to speak and lots of people who want to make their maiden speech, and it would be great if they could all get in.

Rachel Reeves: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will not apprise the House of every Bill that supports economic growth in the King's Speech. Needless to say, there are many more—from the English devolution Bill to transfer power back into the hands of local communities to the employment rights Bill to make work pay, and the Great British Energy Bill to take back control of our country's energy

and create new jobs across the United Kingdom. Growing our economy flows through almost every word of this King's Speech.

The British people put their trust in us on 4 July to fix the foundations of our economy, to rebuild Britain and to make every part of our great country better off. I do not take that trust for granted. We will not let people down, and I am ready to deliver the change that we need. I know it will take time and I know it will require hard work, but we are already getting on with the job by ending a reckless, chaotic approach to economic management, by putting politics back in the service of working people and by making economic growth our fundamental mission. I commend the Address to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.42 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

It is a real pleasure to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, not just because I am speaking on behalf of so many more of them than I used to, but because it gives me an opportunity to welcome the Chancellor of the Exchequer to her place and express my personal congratulations on becoming the first woman in the UK's history to hold the position. I am personally delighted. I spent many years working in banking and finance, and I know how male-dominated those industries still are. I wish her well in her new role and look forward to working with her over the coming Parliament. The Liberal Democrats will be vigorous in scrutinising her plans, but we will always work in the national interest, and I can assure her of the support of the Liberal Democrats on all those matters on which we can agree.

I am sure that one of the things on which we can certainly agree is that the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have received a dismal inheritance from the departing Conservative Administration. The numbers reveal a dispiriting picture of low growth, high interest rates and a record fall in living standards delivered by an out-of-touch and incompetent Conservative party that took people for granted for years. Our constituents see this situation reflected in the increases in their mortgage payments, the hike in their energy bills and the prices they pay at the tills for their weekly shop. They see it in public services that are in a state of crisis and an NHS that is failing to deliver the care they need. The Liberal Democrats welcome the seriousness with which this King's Speech focuses on stability, reinvesting in our crippled public services and growing the economy.

We welcome measures such as the introduction of an industrial strategy council to co-ordinate policy on economic growth, but the immediate and pressing problems that our constituents are facing in their everyday lives cannot just be addressed by centralised, top-down institutions run from Whitehall. Our economy needs to grow from the bottom up, bringing prosperity to every community, taking away the barriers to entry for small businesses and enabling individuals across the country to make the most of their skills and talents. The Liberal Democrats want urgent measures introduced to give immediate support to families and small businesses.

While out on the doorsteps during the general election campaign, I and my 71 colleagues heard a clear message from our constituents that their biggest priority was fixing the NHS. We are here because we promised to fight hard for a better NHS for our constituents and for communities across the country. That is why we are calling for the Chancellor to immediately draw up a Budget for health and social care. We cannot deliver economic growth without fixing the crisis in our NHS and in social care. NHS waiting lists are at an all-time high, it can take weeks to see a GP and it is now almost impossible to see an NHS dentist. Everyone deserves access to the care they need when they need it and where they need it. A successful health and social care system is fundamental to a fair society and our country's prosperity.

The failures of the Conservative Administration led to a dramatic increase in the number of people experiencing long-term sickness conditions and the Liberal Democrats will continue to push for public service investment to help reduce NHS waiting lists to get people back to work.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that reforming social care should be one of the most urgent priorities of this Government? The Royal Cornwall hospitals NHS trust recently announced that £26 million a year is spent on patients who are medically well but unable to be discharged due to a lack of social care packages.

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is right, and it is wonderful to see him in his place; the people of North Cornwall will be well served by his championing of social care, which was front and centre of the Liberal Democrat manifesto in the general election.

The most direct way to alleviate poverty is to increase the money paid to the poorest households. We know that our fellow citizens who are living in the severest poverty are likely to be families with small children. Growing up in poverty affects children's educational chances and is likely to impact their physical and mental health, holding them back from achieving their true potential. Taking immediate steps to tackle child poverty should therefore be a priority. We believe that removing the two-child cap is the most cost-effective way of immediately lifting 500,000 children out of poverty, while helping to make costs more manageable for parents. That would have a direct benefit to families struggling with the cost of living crisis. Not only do we have a moral obligation to change this unnecessary policy but it is the most cost-effective way of alleviating poverty with a broad range of economic advantages, including supporting more parents back into the workforce. So I urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to remove the two-child limit on social security payments in her Budget to ensure that all families who need it receive immediate reassurance and support.

But families of all sizes are suffering under the cost of living crisis and desperately need help. Our schools are increasingly having to battle the effects of poverty to ensure children are able to attend school and have the best chance of reaching their potential, and too many children are distracted from their lessons because they have not had enough to eat. The Liberal Democrats set out plans in our manifesto for free school meals for all children living in poverty, with an ambition to extend them to all children once public finances allow. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to

[Sarah Olney]

consider funding free school meals as a priority to alleviate the pressure on the finances of the families who are struggling the most. This will also contribute to positive educational outcomes that will benefit us all in the future.

The Liberal Democrats welcome many of the measures in the King's Speech that aim to boost economic growth, and we support the Government's objective to make that a priority. We welcome moves to boost stability and provide strategic leadership via an industrial strategy council and to increase investment through pension reform. However, our small businesses and local high streets need immediate support, and the Government need to do more to ensure economic growth can reach every part of the United Kingdom and that small businesses and entrepreneurs can quickly rediscover the confidence that they need to invest after years of Conservative chaos and mismanagement. Liberal Democrats want to see more direct support which will impact local community businesses. We believe we need swift action specifically to tackle high energy costs and we continue to call for business rate reform.

A new Parliament presents a real opportunity to begin to properly rebuild our trading relationships with Europe. From speaking with many small business owners I understand the pressures and limitations that current trade deals with Europe pose to businesses. We must tackle the arduous legislation around importing and exporting goods, which significantly limits the opportunities for small businesses to grow. The Liberal Democrats have a comprehensive plan to rebuild trust and co-operation with Europe, and we understand that to be a crucial aspect of the support that businesses urgently need. We welcome the Government's acknowledgment of the need to reform the apprenticeship levy. However, we would like to see them go further and replace the current scheme with a broader and more flexible skills and training levy. We hope that the Government will join us in encouraging the take-up of apprenticeships, particularly for young people, and support our calls to guarantee that they are paid at least the national minimum wage by scrapping the lower apprentice rate. We understand the broad economic benefits of supporting the development of skilled workers and are optimistic about the advantages that can bring to business.

The recent years of chaos and irresponsible Conservative administration have left a substantial challenge for the new Government to tackle. We do not underestimate the work lying ahead to get the economy back up and running, to nurture an environment that will allow businesses to thrive and to restore the public services that provide care for people when they need it. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I will hold the new Government to account to ensure that they deliver on the promises outlined by His Majesty on Wednesday as we work to rectify the damage done by the Conservatives: rebuilding our economy, supporting individual communities and small businesses, and urgently investing in health and social care.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): The dilemma we face is self-evident: many hon. and right hon. Members want to speak, and we will do all we can to get in as many people as possible. Unfortunately, there will now be a five-minute limit on speeches. The clock will not be used for maiden speeches, but we ask Members to keep an eye on the time.

5.51 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this King's Speech debate, and a privilege to have heard the first female Chancellor in our history deliver such a remarkable opening salvo. I will say a word not just about the King's Speech itself, but the strategy behind it. When the Chancellor and my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister launched our manifesto, there was a clear ambition at its heart to ignite a revolution in wealth creation in this country not just for some, but for all. That strategy was absolutely right, because among the worst of our inheritance is the scandal—the moral emergency —of the inequality of wealth that now scars our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I could take a walk this afternoon down to a coffee bar called Shot in Mayfair, which would serve us coffee for £265 a shot. We could go next door to a restaurant called Aragawa, where they serve steak for £900 apiece. Some, if they were lucky enough, could book a night at the Raffles hotel for £25,000. These are extraordinary prices, but not unremarkable in a country that now has the highest sales of Rolls-Royces, superyachts and private jets. This absurdity of affluence sits alongside a country where, on the last figures, more than 1,000 people died homeless, tens of thousands of people are dying from the diseases of poverty, and 2.1 million people can put food on the table only because of the tender mercies of food banks. That is the inequality of wealth bequeathed to this Government. It is best illustrated perhaps by one figure: the wealth of the top 1% has grown by 31 times the wealth of everybody else over the past 14 years. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was right to say that there has to be a revolution in wealth creation in this country—not just for some but for all.

The measures that my right hon. Friend has set out are the right ones: a plan for growth and a plan to devolve economic power out of the paralysis of Westminster and Whitehall and down to mayors and local councils. Alongside that is a revolution in planning law, infrastructure law and skills finance. I urge my friends on the Government Front Bench to maximise the amount of power held locally, because it is local people and local leaders who know best how to grow our economy. If we have a growing economy, the key is then to ensure that growth is fairly shared. That is why the employment rights Bill is so important. As my right hon. Friend said, there has not been growth in living standards for more than 14 years. That is why we need to ensure that there is a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

Alongside that, the draft equality Bill is extremely important, and I urge my right hon. Friend to go further and to use the consolidation of pension funds to inaugurate an era of civic capitalism in this country, where we use the combined £2 trillion-worth of pension savings to encourage businesses that are good, not businesses that are bad, such as those that she revealed when she was a brilliant Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, or the scandals that we exposed in the last Parliament with McDonald's, Asda and other firms behaving in a way reminiscent, frankly, of Victorian capitalism.

Once we have begun raising incomes, we must help people build well. That is why the changes to the housing market that my right hon. Friend proposed are so important. We can underpin that and maximise investment into the infrastructure of this country by ensuring that there is a national wealth fund, but I would go further, and I ask her to look at how we can put together not just the national wealth fund but the Crown Estate fund, which is set for reform under a Bill in the King's Speech.

We could go a step further and review the whole portfolio of investments held by the Government and by UK Government Investments. The last Government made some pretty strange investments during covid, including, I understand, buying shares in Bolton Wanderers, shares in a bespoke boutique whisky company, and even, it is said in some newspapers, shares in a strange firm that organises international sex parties called Killing Kittens. I say to my friends on the Government Front Bench that it is time we had a Domesday Book that consolidated assets in this country. Let us look at what we need and what we do not. Crucially, let us look at how we maximise dividends going to ordinary working people in this country to help them build wealth for themselves.

I conclude with this: on the Government Benches, we have long known that we only deliver and maximise freedom and opportunity for people in this country, and make those freedoms and opportunities real, if there is security. There is no security without wealth, which is why the ambition that my right hon. Friend set out not simply to build a wealthy democracy but a democracy of wealth, is the right one.

5.56 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): May I start by adding my congratulations to the Chancellor on being the first woman to hold that office in the history of our country? At this rate, the Labour party might even have a female Prime Minister some time this century. I also thank the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt) for everything he did while in office. In particular, I thank the voters of West Worcestershire for returning me here for the fifth time.

I was one of those who was here in 2010. It is ironic that I should be following the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), because he was the one who left that famous note, "I'm sorry: there is no money left." If people want to know what a bad economic legacy looks like, I was here in 2010 when we received one from the Labour party. The deficit was over 10% and rising and unemployment was over 8%. Inflation was nearly twice its target, and the banking system had just collapsed and had to be bailed out by taxpayers. We can contrast that with the economic legacy of 2024 that the new Government inherit.

Despite the economic costs of the pandemic and the energy crisis, the UK is enjoying the fastest growth in the G7. Unemployment is now half the rate it was in 2010. Inflation is back on target. We have a well-capitalised banking system, almost completely out of taxpayers' hands. Wages are now rising faster than inflation. We are the fourth-largest exporter in the world. Members do not have to take my word for it; they can take the words of the International Monetary Fund, which in a recently published report said that

"the UK economy is approaching a soft landing",

with

"growth recovering faster than expected…inflation has fallen faster than was envisaged…The banking system remains healthy".

So I approach the economic measures in the King's Speech with a degree of trepidation, because they come at a time when the economy was back on track. While I agree that "securing economic growth" is a fundamental mission of government, I would add the word "non-inflationary". I have looked and looked through this King's Speech, and I cannot see any measures that magic up economic growth. Growth does not just happen because it is written into the King's Speech.

In my time as Chair of the Treasury Committee, we had the opportunity to have a private session with the IMF. It is interesting to observe that many of the measures put forward by the Government in the King's Speech were in the IMF's prescription for the UK economy. Reforming planning and building on our beloved green belt were from the IMF, as was strengthening the role of the Office for Budget Responsibility and crowding in private capital on net zero projects via a national wealth fund.

What else does the IMF want? Well, colleagues may not be surprised to learn that it also wants to see more taxes. It does not quite say it like that—it calls it "closing tax loopholes" or "mobilising additional revenues". Some of the measures we heard about in our private session with the IMF were as follows. The first was setting capital gains tax rates in line with income tax rates. I hope that Ministers will rule that one out. The second was subjecting the sale of primary residences to capital gains tax. I hope that Ministers will rule that one out. The third was ending inheritance tax loopholes for pensions, family businesses and farms. I hope that Ministers will rule that one out. The fourth was revaluing all of England's homes for council tax, and especially those over £320,000 in value. I hope that Ministers will rule that one out. The IMF also liked the idea of road pricing; I hope that Ministers will rule that one out. It also wants to bring forward considerably the date at which the state pension age increases.

Given that those are all tax measures that the IMF recommends, I am sure that the Chancellor is beginning to contemplate them. When the Government respond to today's debate, I hope that they will specifically rule those things out, because the tax rises that the Government admit to already—the pensioner tax, the tax on education, and regulatory costs galore—are bad enough. Let us hear some specific denials on those other taxes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): I call Georgia Gould for her maiden speech.

6.1 pm

Georgia Gould (Queen's Park and Maida Vale) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in a debate with so many strong female representatives, including the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), and I am really honoured to speak in a debate led by the first female Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has shown today what a force for change she is. I have found it

[Georgia Gould]

incredibly moving to hear MPs across the House talk with such love and dedication about the places they represent. It has given this Parliament a deep grounding in the stories of people from every part of the UK.

I feel deeply the trust put in me by the people of Queen's Park and Maida Vale. In speaking here, I stand on the shoulders of some extraordinary women who have represented the different parts of Queen's Park and Maida Vale. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) is someone who breaks through glass ceilings and lifts others up behind her. Nothing ever dims her spirit and her passion for tackling injustice. You need only walk down Harlesden High Street with her to see how she inspires people by her example—and sometimes her music.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq) is a formidable campaigner who was in the Chamber the day she was due to give birth because she needed to give her constituents a voice. She did not stop campaigning until her constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was safely home with her family. Those who know her will quickly learn that she never, ever gives up. She is always a voice for the people she cares about.

Karen Buck gave an extraordinary 27 years of service to the residents of Westminster North. I was at a school in my constituency last week where the head said that Karen was the fourth emergency service, always at the end of a phone ready to help. I remember going to an elderly people's lunch where the residents said, "You can be our MP—you are very nice. Just make sure that Karen comes to our residents' meeting in July."

The wonderful team at the House Library sent me Karen's maiden speech. It was no surprise to me that it was a passionate call to action on the housing conditions of her constituents. That passion has not dimmed for a second; it could be heard in every line of her 37 interventions on the Renters (Reform) Bill over 25 years later. She has shown that somebody with community running through their veins can move mountains. I will work every day to live up to the women who came before me—that includes you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your sister Baroness McDonagh, who have both showed such amazing, dedicated service and have never given up fighting for constituents and the people of this country.

Queen's Park and Maida Vale is a place that means a huge amount to me. My great-grandfather came over to the UK when he was a teenager, fleeing the poverty and pogroms of Lithuania, and worked his way up to open a shop on Kilburn High Road. My family have lived and worked in the area ever since. Growing up in the heart of London, I attended Hallfield primary school and saw how many children were cut out of the opportunities on their doorstep; that has driven me ever since. The need that we see now is greater than ever. My inbox and my surgeries are full of people facing the homelessness crisis and skipping meals to feed their family—all in walking distance of the Chamber.

Queen's Park and Maida Vale is a place with huge need, but also with huge heart. It has welcomed not just my family but families from so many different backgrounds. We are home to the Bangladesh Caterers Association; the Lauderdale Road synagogue; the UK Albanian Muslim Community and Cultural Centre; Harlesden, which is the unofficial capital of reggae and the starting point for so many iconic artists and producers; Kilburn, a centre of creativity with a claim to be the birthplace of cinema; and the amazing, diverse community of Church Street.

We are a community that is rich in spirit and dynamism. In 1879, Queen's Park was chosen to host the royal agricultural show, the Victorian equivalent of the Olympics. It was a very British affair—it rained most of the time—but ordinary people campaigned to preserve the open space, and it is still a thriving park today. Down the road, Walterton and Elgin Community Homes is a shining example of community leadership. We also have the country's only urban parish council.

Queen's Park is the birthplace of the pride of west London, Queens Park Rangers football club. I can tell the House that being a QPR fan is almost as good as this Chamber for getting to know the communities of the UK; it means spending rainy days in Cardiff, Preston, Southend and Tranmere, embracing again and again the triumph of hope over experience.

I have always been an optimist. Despite 14 tough years in local government, including seven as Camden council leader, I have never lost hope, because every day I can see the power of communities. I was elected as a councillor in 2010, and at events, when people used to say to me, "What do you do?", I would proudly say to them, "I am a councillor." They would say, "That is so wonderful; you do such wonderful work as a therapist." I would have to say, "No, not that kind of counsellor. I am a Labour party councillor." They would either swiftly go and get a drink or talk to me about dog mess.

Street cleaning and rubbish collection are essential services that councils deliver—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) once introduced me as the person who makes sure that Keir Starmer's bins are collected—but we often forget how much more local government is. I see that every day, watching the work of Brent and Westminster, two brilliant Labour councils in my constituency.

Councils are lifelines for communities. They provide care for the children and adults who most need support. They are leaders of place, bringing services and people together to make change. I have seen local government staff go above and beyond time and again, fuelled by love and dedication, because there was no one else there, whether they were working with communities to deliver food during covid or supporting Afghan evacuees. When things have been hard, they have held together our communities, finding unity in difference.

The Gracious Speech sets out bold new proposals in the English devolution Bill to unlock the energy and creativity of communities. It sets out Bills to fulfil Karen Buck's long-held campaign to end no-fault evictions and reform the leasehold system. The proposals will support the people of Queen's Park and Maida Vale who come out every day to build their community—the youth workers, the community gardeners and those running the North Paddington food bank, who wish it did not have to exist. These are people putting hope into action because they believe that things can change. I know that as I sit in the Chamber, I will have their voices and stories with me, but I will also have the stories that I have heard from hon. Members from across the UK. We all have that in common: the privilege and the responsibility of bringing the voices of our

community to this place. We may debate and disagree, but I hope to always listen and learn, and remember that we are being entrusted to weave those stories, hopes and ambitions together into a national vision for this country—one that governs for all and leaves no one behind.

6.9 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould) on a simply superb speech that follows the best traditions of the House. She has done her constituents proud, and I know that she brings huge expertise and commitment to this House. I wish her all the best.

I put on record my thanks to the good people of Fareham and Waterlooville for sending me back to Parliament. We had a fantastically energetic—let me put it that way—and hard-fought campaign. I am honoured and humbled to have the privilege to speak on their behalf in this Chamber.

One thing struck me in the King's Speech—not the long list of policies that will no doubt damage our economy, or the vague promises that will not survive contact with reality. For me, the thing that was conspicuous by its absence was the total failure of the Labour Government to deal with child poverty and scrap the two-child benefit cap on welfare. *[Interruption.]* Yes, hon. Members heard that right. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): Order. Could we show respect and listen to the Member's speech?

Suella Braverman: I detect a bit of surprise on the Government Benches. I have risen to speak on scrapping the cap. In the grand tapestry of British politics, where the warp and weft of policy and principle interlace, it is not often that a Conservative MP will find threads of agreement with friends across the aisle, but here we are, discussing a proposal backed by Labour MPs, led by the hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) and backed by the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party and many Opposition parties. It is one with which I agree, because it speaks to my profound sense of justice and, dare I say, compassion. I will say why Conservatives can and should back scrapping the cap.

Let us not rewrite history, because there has been a lot of nonsense from Labour Front Benchers about the situation that we inherited in 2010. To put it simply, we inherited no less than an economic catastrophe, and we worked hard to recover from that situation. The deficit stood at 10% in 2010; we got that down to 1.9%. Public sector net borrowing was at 10%; we got that down to 3%. We were in a deep recession, and we now have the fastest growing economy in the G7.

We had to make incredibly difficult decisions back in 2010 to reduce our welfare bill, but it is clear to me that through those welfare reforms, spearheaded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), we overhauled an overly complex, bureaucratic system, and helped millions of people get back into work. Four million more people are in work now than in 2010. The unemployment rate is down to 4.4%—almost half what it was in 2010. We can make changes to some of the decisions that we made back then.

It is clear to me from my work with vulnerable families in Fareham that the cap is not working. It is pushing more children and families into relative poverty, causing them to use more food banks. There are three good reasons for scrapping the cap.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Will the right hon. and learned Lady tell the House who introduced the cap, why, and which way she voted when the measure went through this House?

Suella Braverman: I just set out that the parlous economic situation forced us to make impossible choices, but thanks to the improved economics and the improvements brought about by universal credit, I believe that it is time to put child poverty first and scrap the cap. There are three big reasons for Conservatives to support that. First, it is affordable. For about £1.7 billion—0.14% of total Government spending—we could quickly bring around 300,000 children out of poverty. In this improved situation, that is the fair and right thing to do. Secondly, the reason why it was introduced in the first place was to disincentivise poorer families from having more children, but that has not necessarily worked. The number of children born has remained relatively stable. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found, heartbreakingly, 43% of children in larger families are in poverty. The children hardest hit are those under four. It predominantly affects younger children, and those in large families. I believe that the cap is aggravating child poverty, and it is time for it to go.

I know that there is the argument, "Don't have children if you can't afford them." To me, that is not compassionate, fair or the right thing to say. As Conservatives, we should be proudly and loudly the party of family. We should encourage families on lower incomes to have more children. For those families on middle and higher incomes, we should change our tax regime so that they are incentivised to have children. We have better parental leave policies, better childcare provision policies and better maternity care. I am a Conservative because I believe in the strength and the sovereignty of the family unit. We should support it, not suppress it. This is not about right or left. This is about right or wrong. Let us come together, in a spirit of compassion and common sense, to scrap the cap and end child poverty for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Sarah Sackman to make her maiden speech.

6.15 pm

Sarah Sackman (Finchley and Golders Green) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman). Like other Members, I am somewhat surprised by her rewriting of recent economic history. She had 14 years to fix the problems of child poverty, and did precious little to do that. I listened today to the Chancellor of the Exchequer lay out this Government's plans to restore economic stability and growth to this country—that is what will lift millions of children out of poverty in the long term.

It is a privilege to stand here today representing the place where I was born and raised, Finchley and Golders Green. I would like to start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Mike Freer. Although we disagreed on many things, Mike was dedicated to our area, both as a Member of Parliament and as leader of Barnet council.

[Sarah Sackman]

I admire his commitment to public service and, in particular, his role in securing equal marriage legislation for same sex couples—a legacy that he can take enormous pride in. But the circumstances under which Mike decided not to stand for re-election are appalling. We should have been able to face each other on the basis of our ideas, but Mike's life and office were threatened by those who believe in the bullet, not the ballot box. It is a stark reminder of the fragility of our democracy both at home and abroad.

I want to use my time in this place to stand up for the democratic values and processes that I believe in. Witnessing the dignified and smooth transition of power last week in all parts of this House is something we can take pride in. We must ensure that we work together to defend the safety of public servants. I wish Mike and his husband Angelo all the best in their future.

I also pay tribute to the much missed Dr Rudi Vis, who holds a special place in the heart of my local community, not least as the first Labour Member to represent this special patch of north London. In over a century, I am only the second person from my party to be sent to this place by the people of Finchley and Golders Green. I am also only the second woman. Some Members may remember the first. When Mrs Thatcher entered this place, she was made to wait two whole years to make her maiden speech, but in our era of breakneck news cycles, and with so much work that I want to do, having to wait just two weeks has felt like a very long time. Having delayed long enough, Mrs Thatcher did not waste a second when she rose to her feet, breaking convention by making her maiden speech on a private Member's Bill that she introduced.

"This is a maiden speech",

she said, her sonorous tones echoing through this hallowed place,

"but I know that the constituency of Finchley…would not wish me to do other than come straight to the point".—[*Official Report*, 5 February 1960; Vol. 616, c. 1350.]

The people of Finchley and Golders Green rightly remain as demanding of their elected officials today, so I, too, will come straight to the point. Like Mrs Thatcher, I am a patriot and I want our communities and our country to prosper and be an influence on the global stage. But unlike her, I fundamentally believe that there is such a thing as society. Society is not an abstract idea to be buried in sociological essays. We can see it in the rich tapestry of communities that come together across Finchley and Golders Green. I may be the first female, Jewish, Gibraltarian MP from this constituency, but I would not be here without the support of my neighbours and my community: the Cypriot community, the Somali Bravanese, the Kosovan, the Japanese, the Irish and Hindu communities, the lawyers and the Uber drivers, the charity workers and the campaigners, the Spurs fans and the fans of some other north London team. Whereas in recent times some politicians have chosen to use "north Londoner" as an insult, my constituents and I wear it as a badge of pride. It symbolises a place that celebrates diversity, hard work and looking out for your neighbour.

Our diversity comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the history of our area. Where else can boast the parish where Archbishop Desmond Tutu honed his ministry in the terrible years of exile during apartheid in South Africa, and the childhood home of the late and great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a man who taught us that a good society is one that offers all its members equal access to hope? It was in East Finchley that George Michael first tinkled the ivories and Amy Winehouse first took the stage.

Finchley and Golders Green has a quiet radicalism baked into its history. Take Hampstead Garden Suburb, where I grew up, a project driven by the extraordinary Henrietta Barnett in the early 20th century. One of the first garden cities, it was a groundbreaking development. She also set up Toynbee Hall in London's east end, where I began my legal career as a volunteer at the Free Legal Advice Centre. I saw there just how important the law could be for tenants facing eviction and women suffering unequal pay. Now I want to take those values of access to justice and a commitment to the rule of law into my new role as Solicitor General.

When, in 1907, we witnessed the opening of Golders Green underground station, adverts at the time dubbed our area a "place of delightful prospects". I can vouch for the fact that never a truer word has been spoken, but this place of delightful prospects has suffered in recent years. My community has witnessed rising levels of antisemitism and Islamophobia. These are a scourge on our society and as long as I am in office I will tirelessly call them out and work to eradicate them.

Our community today is increasingly becoming a place of busy food banks and empty mansions. Inequality is writ large, stunting people's health and potential. Many across Finchley and Golders Green are struggling with the spiralling cost of living. This has to change not just in my constituency, but across the whole country. Our NHS is broken, the prisons are full, the police cannot respond when they are called out and our teachers are not supported to deliver. We need to get Britain back on track, and the Bills set out in the King's Speech are exactly what we need to take the brakes off the economy and restore and rebuild our public services.

My constituents are raring to go. Whether it is the Brent Cross Town development, one of the largest regeneration developments in Europe, or our brilliant high street businesses and local entrepreneurs, all we need to get growing is a Government who are on our side. Well, we have that Government now. So, to quote my famous predecessor, let's get straight to the point and let's get on with the change that Britain truly needs.

6.23 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The shift to a green economy represents the most significant transformation for centuries. We must reverse the damaging rhetoric by the failed Conservative Government that the economy will suffer if we are uncompromising in our ambition to get to net zero. This is not an either/or of economic growth or investing in the green economy—the green economy is at the heart of economic growth.

We must end our reliance on oil and gas. Renewables would mean cheaper energy bills across the country, and we would no longer be reliant on dictators such as Vladimir Putin who use natural gas as a weapon. As well as being more affordable, renewables are the best route to energy security. Under the Tory party, renewable projects faced long delays and costs skyrocketed. The new

Government's reversal of the de facto ban on new onshore wind is welcome. We are also glad restrictions on new solar have been reversed.

The Liberal Democrats share the ambitions of the Government's climate agenda, but we will also ensure that these projects have local buy-in. Local authorities must play a leading role in delivering climate action, and the communities that host the new infrastructure must directly benefit from it. For example, there is huge growth potential in community energy. The Liberal Democrats are calling for small-scale renewable energy generators to receive a guaranteed fair price for the electricity they sell back to the grid. Community benefit and individual economic incentives are crucial to securing support and active participation in our energy transition.

In both the Labour and the Liberal Democrat manifestos there was a clear commitment to tightening energy efficiency standards for private landlords. National Energy Action has warned that the statutory fuel poverty target cannot be met without doing so. The King's Speech provided an opportunity for the new Government to set that as a priority in their new renters' rights Bill, but it was missed out. I hope the Government will hear this and ensure that improvements to energy efficiency for renters materialise before the situation worsens.

Under the previous Conservative Government, the cost of living crisis was exacerbated by rises in travel costs, particularly for commuters. It is not clear how Labour's plans for nationalisation will do anything to alleviate the high cost of travelling by rail. We urge the new Government to freeze rail fares and simplify ticketing to ensure that regular users are paying a fair and affordable price. For too long, decisions over local transport have been centralised. Liberal Democrats have long argued for lifting the ban on local authorities franchising buses. It is reassuring to see that the Government recognise the importance of local decision making. However, councils will need adequate resourcing to expand services. We are yet to see a strategy for that. We would also like to see a long-term plan from the Government for further electrification of the rail network. Not providing one would be a dereliction of the duty to reduce emissions and improve air quality.

I look forward to working together constructively with the new Government to turbocharge our energy to get to net zero, and to make sure we really improve our green public transport and grow the huge opportunities of a green economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): I call Andrew Lewin to make his maiden speech.

6.27 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate. It is a privilege to follow the first female Chancellor in history, and to follow two inspiring maiden speeches from the Labour Benches by my hon. Friends the Members for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould) and for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman). It is an honour to sit alongside them on the Government Benches, and their communities are both very lucky to have them.

As hon. Members can imagine, I have given careful thought to my remarks today, but it is safe to say that this is not the most anticipated maiden speech ever associated with Welwyn Hatfield. The reason for that is that, on 20 November 1558, Elizabeth I gave her inaugural address as Queen from Hatfield House in my constituency. Irrespective of how the next few minutes go, I think her place in history is safe.

I am especially grateful to be called in this debate on the economy. My constituency is anchored by two new towns that flourished under a previous Labour Government. Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City were incorporated as new towns together under a single development corporation on 20 May 1948. The growth of Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City played an important role in the rebuilding and reimagining of life in our part of the country after the horrors of the second world war. I believe that if we are to succeed in growing our economy, we have to rediscover the ambition and the vision that was embodied by those who designed and carefully planned our two great towns.

My predecessor as the MP for Welwyn Hatfield was the right hon. Grant Shapps, who served our community for 19 years and will be well known to all Members of this House. In fact, he will probably be familiar to anyone who was watching a morning television news programme at any point over the last five years. Before I talk about Grant's legacy, however, I want to start with a message of reassurance to the Labour Whips and my colleagues: I have no desire to hold quite so many Cabinet positions as he did, and certainly not in such a short period of time.

I want to reflect solemnly on the personal and professional commitment that Grant Shapps made to the people of Ukraine. After the Russian invasion in 2022, he opened his family home to provide sanctuary to three generations of a Ukrainian family, innocent people whose lives were turned upside down by Putin's unprovoked act of aggression. In the last Parliament, more than 200,000 Ukrainians were welcomed to our country under the Ukraine family scheme and the Ukraine sponsorship scheme, an initiative that I believe showed our country at its best, open and welcoming in an hour of grave need.

We serve in this House of Commons at a time when our wider political discourse can often be angry and divisive. Of course we will disagree in the House, and passionately so—our constituents rightly expect us always to stand up for our community and our values, and I will certainly try to do just that—but I think we can too easily forget what unites us. Where we agree, let us have the confidence to say so. My predecessor was right to champion the people of Ukraine, and the cause of freedom and democracy. I commend him for it, and wish him well in whatever comes next.

Welwyn Hatfield is a constituency rich in history. Welwyn village and Woolmer Green were both Roman settlements, and Welwyn is one of the few places in the country believed to have been occupied continuously for 2,000 years. Nearly 400 years after Hatfield was home to Queen Elizabeth I, local people made an important contribution to the defeat of Nazi tyranny. The Royal Air Force's Mosquito fighter-bomber was developed at the de Havilland airfield and aircraft factory in Hatfield. Welwyn Garden City also has a unique place in history as the creation of Ebenezer Howard, the father of the garden city movement. His immaculately planned and tree-lined streets, such as Parkway in Welwyn Garden City, are still true to his vision from nearly 100 years ago.

[Andrew Lewin]

Despite our wonderful history, what has struck me when I have walked around our towns and villages is the impression of too many projects on hold, and potential going unfulfilled. Take the iconic Shredded Wheat silos, designed by Louis de Soissons in 1926 and a defining feature of Welwyn Garden City for decades. The site has lain virtually dormant since the factory closed in 2008. In central Hatfield, it is a similar story. Queensway House consists of 66 units that were once all social housing. In November 2019, after a ballot of residents, a majority decided that it was time to demolish and rebuild, but nearly five years later Queensway House is still standing, and it looms over the centre of Hatfield as a symbol of the inertia that has captured our politics for too long. I am determined that that must change. The centre of Hatfield is one part of our community that most urgently needs investment in good-quality housing and social infrastructure, and I will be a champion for it in this House.

Welwyn Hatfield is a growing and increasingly diverse community. In just the last few months I have attended the world street food festival in Welwyn Garden City, the first ever Diwali celebration in White Lion Square in Hatfield, and the ever popular Welwyn festival on Singlers Marsh. We are home to prominent national businesses, including Tesco and Ocado in Hatfield, and to the thriving University of Hertfordshire. The university will soon be opening its state-of-the-art Spectra building for the study of physics, engineering and computer science—and yes, Mr Vice-Chancellor, as this will appear in *Hansard*, please consider that to be my formal bid for an invitation to its opening!

I believe that a new Parliament is a time for ambition and optimism. Welwyn Hatfield blossomed when Attlee's Labour Government put housing and carefully planned communities at the centre of their agenda for change. Nearly 80 years later, we have another majority Labour Government with a mandate for national renewal. This is a moment of opportunity, and each of us on these Benches has a responsibility to play our part in realising it. For as long as I serve in this House of Commons, I will always do my utmost to champion Welwyn Hatfield, to respect our history, and to be an agent for change.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Siobhain McDonagh): Order. Let me just give the House a reminder—not that the next Member I will call needs this reminder—that for those of us who could be described as veteran Members, it is the custom to praise maiden speeches.

6.34 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin)? He spoke with great eloquence, and also with passion about his constituency. I know what a wonderful moment it is when we give a maiden speech. We all have that honour when we enter the House. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, and look forward to working with him in the years to come. Of course, Hertfordshire is next to the county where my own constituency is located—Essex and Hertfordshire are twin counties, so we are neighbours in some senses—and I also look forward greatly to hearing more from him in the months and years ahead.

I think that one of our colleagues who spoke earlier forgot to welcome the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman). I know that constituency well. I campaigned for Mrs Thatcher in 1983 as a young Conservative, at the age of 17; I know Ballards Lane very well, and I have often been to Margaret Thatcher House. I must commend the hon. Lady on her kindness and the generous words that she spoke about not only Margaret Thatcher but my friend Mike Freer, whom we were sad to lose in the election. I know that she will be a fine champion of Finchley and Golders Green, which is a proud constituency with a great identity, and I look forward to visiting Finchley again while the hon. Lady is in place as the Member of Parliament.

Wera Hobhouse: I do apologise to the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green, and to the whole House, for not recognising my duty to thank the hon. Lady for her wonderful speech. This means that even after seven years in the House one sometimes forgets to do certain things. It is very good to see the hon. Lady in the House, and I particularly enjoyed what she said about the rule of law.

Andrew Rosindell: I am deeply proud to have been elected for the seventh time as the Member of Parliament for Romford. I am now the longest-serving MP for Romford since 1885, when the constituency was created. I am here because I believe in things. I am here not because I seek titles and positions, but because I believe in this country, and I am also passionate about my constituency, because it is where I am from. I think that those of us who come from our constituencies know how important it is to represent a place where we have lived all our lives, and I will always be proud of being the MP for my hometown.

As I have said, I believe in things, and I believe first in this country. Let me say to Ministers, whom I congratulate on their election to power, that things change and Governments come and go, but the one thing that we must never give away is the freedom and liberties of the British people. I say to them, "Whatever you do, please do not reverse the biggest democratic decision that the British people made." We want to have sovereignty; we want to have the right of self-governance; but we also want prosperity, and that means free enterprise, low taxes and smaller government. It does not mean creating a larger centralisation of power. Margaret Thatcher taught us that if we have lower taxes and free enterprise, if we give people the freedom to prosper and make their own decisions in life, in the end we create more prosperity and more opportunities for all. That, I am sure, is what all of us, in all parts of the House, want to see, so let us learn from past mistakes.

I respect the fact that we have different opinions on many issues, and I also understand that all of us here want the best for our country and our constituencies. However, I believe that if we want economic prosperity, we need Governments to stay out of people's lives. We need to allow business to flourish. We need less regulation, and we need to cut unnecessary public expenditure, so that people are not paying high taxes which disincentivise work and put people off from investing in our country. I hope that the Government, having taken office, will pay

heed to that. I also say to them that, yes, we want to protect our environment, but we have to think very carefully about the evangelism of net zero. We do not want to make our country cold and poor, and to give competitive advantage to other countries that do very little about climate change and have not met their targets. I am afraid the policy that the Government have adopted will deliver more power to China, so I warn them about going too far in that direction.

I believe that we should be a Parliament that makes decisions, so I disagree with more and more quangos, committees of experts and bodies that are not democratically accountable having so much say. Why are we effectively giving the Office for Budget Responsibility a veto over the rights of this Parliament to decide economic policy? Surely that is something that the Government should think again about.

Before I have to end, I would like to say that if we are serious about devolution, we should give all parts of the country greater control over their local communities. Boroughs such as Havering would rather be independent. We do not want to be under Greater London; we want power devolved back to our local communities. Historically, we are part of Essex, and we do not like being controlled by City Hall—and certainly not by the current Mayor of London. I represent the people of Romford, and they would agree with what I have said. Let us have free enterprise, true devolution and, above all, prosperity for the British people, but let us also stand up for our country abroad and at home.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Miatta Fahnbulleh to make her maiden speech.

6.41 pm

Miatta Fahnbulleh (Peckham) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by commending my hon. Friends for their impassioned maiden speeches? I am so proud to be sitting on these Benches with them.

I am incredibly honoured to be speaking for the first time in this House as the Member of Parliament for Peckham, a new constituency that spans from the oak trees of Nunhead cemetery to the spires of St Giles' church, the African food shops of Peckham, the bustle of Rye Lane, the market stalls of Faraday's East Street, the vibrant mosques of Old Kent Road and the Latin quarter of North Walworth. Ours is a community of communities that represents the very best of multicultural Britain—people of different colours, cultures, faiths and backgrounds united in our openness and acceptance of each other. We take pride in our diversity and the magic it brings to Peckham, and in our warmth and generosity of spirit.

Whoever you are and wherever you have come from, you will find your place in Peckham. For me, this is what makes representing the constituency so special, because it was among friends and the Sierra Leonean community in Peckham that my family found refuge when we fled from west Africa when I was a child. It was in this community that I learned the values of compassion and solidarity that have shaped my politics, and it was in this community that I first understood just how much the economy is failing people. I learned that you can work hard every day and still live in poverty, that our kids can be talented but still be deprived a shot, and that you can have billionaires living in the same borough as families that cannot feed their kids. It is in Peckham that I found my resolve that this must change. That is why I became an economist, why I have spent the last 15 years developing and campaigning for ideas to bring this change about, and why I am standing here today.

As I begin my journey in this House, I take inspiration from my formidable predecessor Harriet Harman, our inaugural Mother of the House. Harriet set the highest bar possible for what it means to be a great MP, having given 42 incredible years of service in working for the people of Camberwell and Peckham. In knocking on doors across Peckham, I heard story after story about how Harriet helped her constituents and touched countless lives. At a time when trust in our politicians is so frayed, the warmth, love and trust that she commands in our community speaks volumes. But more than that, she combined tireless work in her constituency with making a huge impact on our politics nationally—whether through enduring policies like the minimum wage, the winter fuel payment and the Equality Act 2010, which went to the heart of the inequality she saw in our community, or through the trail she blazed for women in politics by breaking ceilings and carving a path for others to follow. Today, the 190 Labour women MPs in this House are standing on her shoulders. On a personal note, I will always be grateful for her kindness, wisdom and grace, and for showing me what it means to be fearless in defence of your constituents, loyal but independent of mind, and tenacious about the change that is needed.

The need for change has never been so great. Today, as we debate the economy and all the uncertainties it brings, there is one thing I know for certain: people in Peckham are struggling. Their pay packets have flatlined for too long, with their safety net cut to shreds. Over a third of them cannot afford day-to-day essentials, and too many of our children now live in poverty. But it is not just about the money in your pocket; it is the fact that something as basic as a decent and affordable roof over your head is now out of reach for so many. Our schools, youth services, hospitals and care system are at breaking point, and children in my schools tell me that they only feel safe at home or at school—nowhere in between.

People in Peckham need change—not words or the promise of change that never comes, but real, tangible change that they can feel in their communities and see in their lives. They need change that will end the sense of being ground down, end the constant survival mode that so many people find themselves in, and rekindle the hope that has been beaten out. The weight of responsibility to deliver this now sits with me and all my hon. Friends on this side of the House. While the task feels insurmountable, what gives me hope is that those on our side have always grasped for big ideas to change the country when we have needed to do so. The NHS, social housing from the rubble of war, and the minimum wage—we have always been the party of big ideas. We have done it before at moments of crisis, and now we must do it again. As we find solutions to the challenges in front of us, I, as a proud Labour and Co-operative MP, hope that we will draw inspiration from the deep traditions of our movement—the enduring force of co-operation, putting power back in local hands, creating businesses run by local people for local people, trusting communities like Peckham to decide their own future,

[Miatta Fahnbulleh]

and giving them ownership and a stake in their economy—so that we can deliver the change for which my constituents and constituents across the country have given us a mandate.

If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, my final words are to my constituents. To the people lying awake at night and worrying about bills, the traders fighting for the survival of the businesses they have built, the families that cannot afford a home to lay down their roots, the people who cannot get the care they need and the kids who do not feel safe in our community, I want you to know this. I have listened to every conversation we have had. I have heard your worries, your anger, your frustration and your hopes, and I make one promise to you: in everything I do in this House, I will keep you in my mind's eye. I will be your loudest voice, your fiercest defender and your proudest champion. I will fight every day to deliver the change that you deserve. I will serve you.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Bradley Thomas to make his maiden speech.

6.47 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech here in the mother of Parliaments, a global beacon of representative democracy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh) on her election and on making her inaugural contribution in this House.

I am humbled to serve the people of Bromsgrove and the villages in my home county. I have some esteemed and worthy predecessors, most recently Sir Sajid Javid. He was the first ethnic minority Member of Parliament to become a Secretary of State, and went on to hold not one but two of the great offices of state, serving as Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Sir Sajid is a man whose north star is his integrity, and he has devoted much of his time to supporting and championing good and noble causes, including, as many in this House know, suicide prevention.

Bromsgrove constituency is, for the unfamiliar, in Worcestershire. Bromsgrove town, its namesake, is proud of its history and traditions, which include a historic court leet centred around the parade on fair day, held on the closest Saturday to midsummer and in celebration of the 1199 charter granted to the town by King John. This heritage goes further, and Bromsgrove's proud sons and daughters include the poet and scholar A. E. Housman and his sister Clemence, who I could not fail to mention here in this House, given the role that she played in the suffrage movement.

My constituency, however, is much broader than just one town. There are many more villages and hamlets and, being 79% rural, Bromsgrove epitomises the very best of Worcestershire. There are rolling hills and thriving villages where the community spirit is strong, including Clent, Dodford, Stoke Prior, Belbroughton, Romsley, Finstall, Barnt Green, Cofton Hackett, Tardebigge and Alvechurch. There are other communities on the fringe of the constituency whose identities are rooted proudly in Worcestershire, including Hagley, Rubery, Wythall, Major's Green—and there is even a touch of glamour in Hollywood. I commit myself to representing them all. Our villages are home to rural enterprises, and to farmers who we all rely on three times a day and who are guardians of our countryside, often working in isolated or harsh conditions, both physically and in a competitive marketplace.

It would be easy to be lulled into thinking that Bromsgrove is somewhere quiet and without ambition, but hon. Members must not be fooled. *The Sunday Times* recently highlighted how South Bromsgrove high school is a powerhouse of aspiration and entrepreneurship, producing young high achievers who have gone on to found leading companies in their sectors, including Gymshark and AYBL. It is in no small part down to the attractiveness of rural Worcestershire that Bromsgrove is a fertile place for aspiration and ambition to bloom. As a Conservative, I believe in respecting the tradition and heritage that anchor our institutions and values, as society evolves to meet the needs of the present day and into the future.

Prior to my election to Parliament, I spent many years as a councillor in Worcestershire, including as leader of Wychavon district council, where I championed the importance of design codes and the role of beautiful design in delivering quality communities that inspire a sense of pride, nod to our past and catalyse the economic and social investment that allow our towns and villages to flourish. We must do this by shifting our collective focus away from beautiful design being seen as a cost, and towards seeing it as an investment that pays dividends in the form of thriving communities and vibrant places where aspiration can bloom. This is critical across Bromsgrove, a place that is 89% green belt and is the rural buffer between Worcestershire and the urban sprawl of Birmingham, to ensure that we protect our green open spaces and do not build identikit monotony all over the countryside, instead focusing on delivering quality homes, with appropriate landscaping and a mix of textures and colours, with genuine local support first.

Over the coming years, we must never forget that the single biggest driver of our economic success is a thriving free market—an environment where businesses are incentivised to invest, creating the prosperity that will underpin our national success. The Government must exercise restraint as they seek to create new bureaucracies, which increase the size of the state under the veil of public service reform, and they should be cautious as additional spending, funded through taxation or borrowing without serious structural reform of public service delivery, will fail every stakeholder who interacts with public services.

In my constituency, Bromsgrove school, founded in 1553, employs over 600 local people and contributes £43 million to the GDP of the UK. While every Member of this House would surely agree that education is the foundation of prosperity, the Government's proposal to impose VAT on these schools is not only an ill-conceived affront to the children and families who currently exercise choice in education provision but an attack on the wider education system that will undoubtedly do little to enhance the quality of state education and will instead level down education standards across the board. I say that as someone who was proudly educated in excellent state schools.

We must also show determination in delivering vocational skills in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, engineering and trades, which will bolster our prosperity, raising our baseline level of industrial resilience in a world where our adversaries want to blunt our competitive edge. Food and energy security are two of the most significant and interlinked contemporary challenges that we face. The Government must remain pragmatic in their efforts to deliver on both, ensuring that in everything they do, they do not worship at the altar of ideological purity and inadvertently sacrifice our own long-term economic success in the process. In the words of A. E. Housman,

"The house of delusions is cheap to build, but draughty to live in, and ready at any instant to fall."

I look forward to playing an active role in this House, delivering on behalf of my constituents and in the long-term national interest of our country.

6.54 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I start by congratulating all those who are making their maiden speeches today, and welcoming them to this place. I also thank my Liverpool Riverside constituents who re-elected me. I give my commitment to continue to be their voice in this place. My constituency is now the most deprived in the country, with 47% of children living in poverty. That is nearly one in every two children, and it is communities such as mine that have faced the sharpest edge of 14 years of austerity and the cost of living crisis. Nationally, 16 million people are now living in poverty; 4 million are children, and 1 million are living in destitution. I am sure everybody in this House would agree that those figures are unacceptable.

Child poverty is completely avoidable in the sixth richest country in the world. Not tackling it stores up problems for the future, costing our economy £39 billion per year, according to calculations by the Child Poverty Action Group. It is not a question of whether we can afford to adopt vital policies to alleviate child poverty, such as lifting the two-child cap; it is a question of whether we can afford not to. This is the reason I tabled amendment (f) to the King's Speech, with a focus on debate not division, to push for a clear timetable for scrapping the two-child cap. The End Child Poverty coalition believes this to be the most effective way to immediately lift 300,000 children out of poverty.

There is support for this position from right across the political spectrum, and it is something that the Labour leadership has indicated that it will do as soon as financially viable, but there are pockets of money that can be found if we look hard enough. Gordon Brown has suggested that between £1.3 billion and £3.3 billion can be found by imposing a reserve requirement on banks similar to those that the European Central Bank and the Swiss banks currently have, and that £700 million can be found by simplifying the gift aid system.

Economists believe the recent upturn in the economy means that the new Government could begin to consider bringing forward priority policies such as scrapping this cap. Others would argue that progressive taxation should also be strongly considered. The latest Department for Work and Pensions data shows that two thirds of families impacted by the two-child cap have at least one parent in full-time work. The last Labour Government had a big and bold ambition in 1997 to end child poverty within a generation. As a single working mum of twins, I personally benefited from those transformative policies. Without the availability of after-school and holiday provision, I would not have been able to continue working.

I know we have inherited the worst financial situation since the second world war, and that Labour in government is going to have some very careful choices to make about the path forward. We have a massive mountain to climb, but we were elected with a massive majority. The country has voted for change. Removing the two-child cap would send a powerful message of hope to those who have put their trust in a Labour Government to bring about the change we so desperately need. The one in two children living in poverty in my constituency have known nothing but the tyranny of a Tory Government, hunger and hardship during their short lives. Those children cannot and must not wait any longer to be lifted out of poverty.

As I mentioned earlier, the purpose of my amendment was to debate this very important issue, not to cause divisions, and there has been lots of debate this week but we need action. This punitive policy needs to be consigned to the dustbin of history, where it belongs, and in its place we need policies to lift 4 million children out of poverty. Let us put these children and our country first. I call on the Chancellor to make some immediate changes here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Peter Bedford to make his maiden speech.

6.59 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) and Members on both sides of the House who have given their maiden speeches with such passion today.

I thank my long-standing friends, family and supporters who have worked so hard to enable my election to this place. Although there are far too many to name, I want to put on record my sincere thanks to Richard Milburn, Paul Taylor, Jon Humberstone, Ravinder Taylor and Ross Hills for their herculean efforts over recent months.

It is customary for new Members to pay tribute to their predecessors. However, I am in the unusual position of my three immediate predecessors being sitting Members of this House. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), and my hon. Friends the Members for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), for their assiduous work in the last Parliament for the residents of my constituency. I look forward to working with them collectively for all the residents of Leicestershire.

The new Mid Leicestershire constituency is formed from parts of Charnwood borough, Hinckley and Bosworth borough and Blaby district. The Charnwood villages comprise Anstey, Birstall, Cropston, Thurcaston, Swithland, Rothley, Mountsorrel, Woodhouse Eaves and Old Woodhouse, and the borough is home to the UK's only mainline heritage railway, the great central railway.

At the heart of the constituency is Bradgate Park in Newtown Linford, a place I call the jewel in the crown of rural Leicestershire. No matter your troubles, you will be able to take a peaceful, tranquil walk, admiring the deer and their fawns, while taking in breathtaking

[Mr Peter Bedford]

views of the beautiful green surrounds, before looking up at Old John and quietly reflecting on one's physical fitness; it is a 212-metre climb to the top of that hill.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the ruins of Bradgate House, which is believed to be the birthplace of Lady Jane Grey, who ruled as Queen for a mere nine days; hon. Members can be assured that my maiden speech will not last that long.

The Blaby district areas of Braunstone, Thorpe Astley, Leicester Forest East, Kirby Muxloe and Glenfield also form part of the new constituency. Although they extend from the city, they very much value their unique identities as independent county settlements. Indeed, I put on record my support for the campaign spearheaded by Glenfield resident Steve Walters and local residents to protect Glenfield from the ever-increasing urban sprawl.

The Hinckley and Bosworth villages include Ratby, Groby and Field Head, in addition to Markfield, Stanton under Bardon, Bagworth and Thornton, which for the last seven years I have had the immense honour of serving as a Leicestershire county councillor.

Many of my constituents have legitimate concerns about overdevelopment and the lack of infrastructure to cope with the strains that population growth brings. I think of villages such as Ratby, which has seen its population almost double over the last 10 years, and where, even today, developers are willing to take advantage of the borough council's lack of a local plan. I urge the incoming Government to ensure that local communities, not faceless bureaucrats in Whitehall, always have the final say on development across our green and beautiful countryside.

I turn to the issues that I will champion during my time in this House. The first is social mobility. As the eldest of three children in a single-parent family, I passionately believe that it does not matter who you are or where you were born; it is what you do with your life that matters. Life chances, owning your own home, getting a career and having a family should not be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, but should be opportunities available to all.

I believe that the best path out of poverty is through education and training, and I will work constructively with Members from across the House to ensure that reform and investment in these vital tools is the Government's top priority. The motto of my secondary school is "Aspire, Achieve, Acclaim", a sentiment that I want to see promoted far more widely across society.

Secondly, I came through the ranks as a local councillor, so I cannot give my maiden speech without referring to fairer funding for local authorities; that is another issue that I wish to spearhead. The system is fundamentally broken, with allocations still linked to historical spending levels. The result is a poorly funded system in which need and funding do not match. For example, the core spending power of Leicestershire county council is a mere £900 a head, compared with almost £1,500 a head in the inner London boroughs. Reform in this area, by Governments of all colours, is long overdue, and I shall be a vocal advocate for fairer funding in this place and beyond.

Finally, dignity towards the end of life will continue to climb up the political agenda, particularly given our ever-ageing population. My election to this House is tinged with sadness that my grandparents are not around to see me give my maiden speech. Both were diagnosed with incurable cancer and, like millions across the country, they wanted greater control of their lives in their final days.

I am here to represent all my constituents, and I pledge to be a vocal advocate for those who are often disillusioned with the political process, or feel that their voice is not heard by those with power. It is the highest of honours to be elected to this place, and I intend to do my very best each and every day to repay that trust.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Jonathan Brash to make his maiden speech.

7.4 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I congratulate all Members who have made their maiden speeches today, including the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford), who paid a moving tribute at the end of his speech.

I thank staff across the parliamentary estate for diligently and patiently looking after new Members in these first few days.

It is an honour to be called to make my maiden speech, which I do proudly as the Member of Parliament for my hometown of Hartlepool. To represent the place where I grew up, where I met my wife Pamela and where we are raising our young family holds a special kind of responsibility for me. The challenges that Hartlepool people face are personal, because they are challenges that I share. When one of our local businesses closes due to spiralling costs, there is a good chance that I have visited it in better times. When a local play area is the victim of arson, my children are among those devastated at the loss of a place they enjoyed, and when someone tells me that they are living in pain because they cannot see an NHS dentist in a town that has been described as a dental desert, I know how they feel, because I cannot get one either.

It is these experiences that drove me to serve my hometown, and it is Hartlepool people who have given me that opportunity. It is now my duty to respond in kind by delivering for them the opportunities that they have been denied for far too long. That is why I welcome this King's Speech, which prioritises growth in every part of the country, not just those already blessed with affluence.

Hartlepool's history is one of innovation and industry. Once the bedrock of the British economy as the country's third-largest port, we built ships that shipped the Durham coal that powered the world. At one point in our history, Hartlepool's shipyards, such as William Gray and Company, launched more ships than anywhere else in the world. As a major exporter of steel, we built the bridges, the ships, the railways and the infrastructure that transformed not just our economy but economies across the globe. Such was Hartlepool's strategic importance that, along with only two other places on the north-east coast, it was targeted for bombardment by the German navy during the first world war. In true Hartlepool style, we were the only place to fire back, making the Heugh gun battery the UK's only first world war battlefield.

Our industrial heritage has not left us. The Expanded Metal Company, which I have had the pleasure of visiting, provided metal mesh for buildings such as the

Stephen Lawrence centre in Lewisham, the Young Vic theatre and New York's New Museum, among many others. Our world famous, and award-winning, Camerons brewery was built during Hartlepool's industrial heyday, but it has survived, grown and adapted to a changing economy, and a pint of Strongarm is as good today as it was back then.

In moving the Humble Address, my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) mentioned the famous Antony Gormley statues in his constituency. Although there are no Antony Gormley statues in Hartlepool, we are proud to have built the most famous one. Whenever I travel up the A1 through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) and see the magnificent Angel of the North, I remember three simple words: "Made in Hartlepool."

If our history is one of industry, innovation and growth, I must tell the House in all candour that it must also be our future. Too often, towns such as Hartlepool have been left behind, an afterthought in our national conversation, able only to reminisce about what we once were, not plan for what we can be. This must change, and I believe it will change under this Labour Government.

Right now, we are witnessing a new industrial revolution sweep the world as we shift to a net zero future. Whereas our past was in coal and ships, our future is in new nuclear, wave and tidal. The election of this Labour Government means that revolution is finally coming to our shores, with a national wealth fund investing in jobs in every part of the country, a proper industrial strategy that forges a real partnership with business, and Great British Energy, which will make the UK a clean energy superpower.

I am determined that Hartlepool will play its part in this transformative agenda, once again at the metaphorical coalface of our country's prosperity and economic growth. That is nothing less than Hartlepool people deserve. They are my inspiration, with their defiance, grit and determination to succeed in the face of challenge. Even in the toughest of times, we come together, stronger, more united and standing up for each other.

Everywhere in our town, we see courage, community and compassion. I have been privileged to work with brilliant Hartlepool people every day to improve our town, from those in our voluntary sector organisations and community groups to our faith leaders and those in our schools, colleges and clubs, including Hartlepool United; my children and I are proud season ticket holders. All of them are working together in the service of our town.

Hartlepool has produced many leading lights across a variety of professions, from Iron Maiden guitarist Janick Gers to world boxing champion Savannah Marshall, fashion designer Scott Henshall and television presenter Jeff Stelling, whose repeated and impassioned outbursts defending the north-east, its culture, heritage and people from those who would seek to criticise it display all the formidable characteristics of a person raised in Hartlepool.

The Prime Minister has rightly talked about putting his Government back into the service of working people. My unfaltering belief in public service was instilled in me from a young age. I want to take a moment to pay tribute to my father, Charles Brash, a doctor in Hartlepool for over 30 years. One of my earliest memories is of him coming home from a night on call—GPs did that in those days—having a quick bite to eat, and then heading straight back out for his morning surgery. Some people still call me "the doctor's son", and I wear it like a badge of honour. His career, spent in the service of others, shaped my values, and my belief that only by putting people first can we achieve the change we need.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Jill Mortimer. Since her election in 2021, Jill has forged strong relationships in Hartlepool, particularly with veterans' groups, which I hope to emulate. Public service is never easy, and I thank Jill Mortimer for her service to Hartlepool.

I close by returning to the idea of opportunity. Right now, in 2024, in one of the richest countries in the world, nearly 20% of Hartlepool's children live in absolute poverty. Nothing could better symbolise the spectre of opportunity denied—the opportunity for a safe and secure upbringing, to fulfil their boundless potential, to get a good job and raise their own family in security and prosperity. So I welcome the announcement by my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Education and for Work and Pensions on developing an ambitious child poverty strategy, because as Members know, the record is clear: when Labour is in government, child poverty falls.

I am privileged to stand in this place, but I will never lose sight of the fact that it is a privilege gifted to me by Hartlepool people, far too many of whom have been denied opportunity for far too long. Hartlepool people have a reputation for, on occasion, electing fighters as opposed to quitters, and I am pleased to tell the House that they have done so again. My duty, my service, is to fight for them every day to secure the brighter future that our town deserves.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Nick Timothy to make his maiden speech.

7.13 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate the other new Members on their excellent maiden speeches, in particular the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), where I know his predecessor, Lord Mandelson, recommends the mushy peas.

It is an honour to be called to speak for the first time. I pay tribute to the last MP for West Suffolk, Matt Hancock, who oversaw the delivery of the covid vaccines, a vital achievement for our country. Less well known is that Matt once rode in, and won, the Blue Square Cavalry Charge horserace in Newmarket, a feat that required him not only to be propelled forward by a thoroughbred horse at 30 miles per hour, but to train for three months and lose 2 stone. For all these reasons, not least the dubiousness of the idea that I have 2 stone to lose, I can assure the House that I will not be stepping into my predecessor's stirrups.

Newmarket is the best-known town in my constituency. It is most famous for horseracing, an international success story that brings thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of pounds to the local economy every year. From Charles I to Charles III, racing gives West Suffolk its long connection to royalty, but unfortunately ours is not an unblemished record, for Newmarket was once the home of Oliver Cromwell's new model army.

[Nick Timothy]

Old Ironsides championed free expression yet persecuted his enemies. He attacked aristocratic privilege and patronage, but handed power to his cronies. Censorious, joyless and puritanical—it is like he wrote the Labour manifesto.

Fortunately, we have left those days of self-denial behind, and from the Star in Lidgate to the Queen's Head in Hawkedon, the Affleck Arms in Dalham to the White Horse in Withersfield, and many others, we have some of the best pubs in Britain. And we have plenty more besides: beautiful villages, vibrant towns and farms that feed the country; Anglo-Saxon settlements and ancient churches; rolling countryside and big Suffolk skies; dense forest and the world-famous gallops; businesses doing everything from seed drills to particle engineering; charities such as Reach in Haverhill and the day centres in Brandon and Newmarket; Highpoint prison near Stradishall; the airbases at Lakenheath and Mildenhall; and public servants working for their communities every day.

I look forward to championing them all and addressing our challenges too, including dealing with flooding in Clare, Cavendish and elsewhere, and fighting the appalling decision to approve the Sunnica solar and battery farm, due to be built on high-quality agricultural land. In Brandon, lorry traffic is a problem. We need the Ely and Haughley junctions sorted to get freight on to the railways. In Mildenhall, where 1,300 new homes are coming, we need a relief road. We are not against new house building in West Suffolk—we have had 3,000 new homes built in the last five years—but we need attractive family homes in the right places. We need services and infrastructure to keep pace. We need to get tougher with the developers and reform the construction market. We need to drastically cut immigration, not just for the economic and cultural reasons that should by now be obvious, but to limit new demand for housing.

Our largest town, Haverhill, has doubled in size in only 30 years, to almost 30,000 residents. It has an incredible community spirit, but the town centre is struggling. We need a new start for our high streets, and I will fight for a railway linking Haverhill to Cambridge. The development of Cambridge looms large for us, but I want us to embrace the opportunities, not just fear the risks. If we get it right, we have the chance to get better infrastructure, new investment and more jobs. That is why I wanted to speak in today's debate.

From potholes to public sector pay, the thread that runs through all our challenges is an inconvenient truth. While it is plainly incorrect to claim that the new Government have the worst economic inheritance since the war—*[Interruption.]* It is incorrect, but we are less prosperous than we often tend to assume. This is not a question of party politics, but of the decline and failure of our country's long-established economic model. Put simply: we do not make, do or sell enough of what the world needs.

Our £33 billion trade deficit—1.2% of GDP—means we sell off valuable assets and build up external debt to limit the current account deficit. We end up with less control over our economy, and more exposed to global risks and shocks. From low pay to regional inequality, poor productivity to the funding of public services, all the things we worry about are symptoms of this wider problem.

We need to question economic theory, challenge Treasury orthodoxy and think beyond the intellectual limits of ideological liberalism. Theories like comparative advantage have led us to offshore industry and grow dependent on hostile states, like China. But international trade is neither free nor fair, and net zero cannot mean sacrificing our prosperity and security. Being a services superpower is a great advantage, but alone it is not enough. We need a serious strategy to reindustrialise, narrow the trade deficit and rebalance the economy. We need to change and, in the months and years ahead, I look forward to debating how we do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Alan Strickland to make his maiden speech.

7.18 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) on his maiden speech, and all those who have spoken for the first time in the House today.

It is an honour to make my maiden speech as the first Member of Parliament for the Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor constituency. I pay tribute to those who came before me. The former Sedgefield constituency makes up the majority of the new seat. In addition, we have taken Spennymoor and Tudhoe wards from Bishop Auckland, and Coxhoe ward from City of Durham. I wish to put on record my thanks and pay tribute to Paul Howell and Dehenna Davison for their public service, and to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for her continuing dedication to her constituents.

Unlike some former Members of this House, I am not fluent in Latin, but I am assured that the motto of my hometown translates as "Not the Least, but the Greatest we seek." This has not only served as a powerful statement of intent for the new town of Aycliffe since 1947, but captures the shared spirit of the towns and villages across this new constituency—varied in history, but united in a desire to get on, to do well, to strive for a better future. My own family's story is testament to this spirit of aspiration that has long defined the working people of our country.

Several generations ago, both sides of my family were drawn from mining villages across England to the Durham coalfields because of their reputation for good wages and reliable work. In turn, my grandparents moved from pit villages to Aycliffe new town, home for two years to the late Lord Beveridge, in search of modern housing and better jobs for their children. My parents' generation then worked hard to give us the opportunities that they never had, including higher education, the chance to work across the country and across the world, and personal freedoms to flourish. This ethos—that each generation raises the next, that background be no barrier, and that opportunity be distributed as widely as talent—is the driving force in families in my constituency and a lodestar for this Government.

But making that a reality requires strong economic growth across our country. We must back the industries of the future, such as Hitachi Rail in my constituency, which manufactures world-class, green trains, and employs 700 highly skilled workers and another 1,500 in the supply chain. I thank a former Member of this House,

Phil Wilson, for his tireless campaign, alongside *The Northern Echo,* which led to the plant being located in the area some years ago. I am also grateful for the public commitments made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Transport Secretary to support Hitachi's future. I look forward to working with them to secure those jobs and expand high-tech manufacturing more widely. That includes the innovative work at Sedgefield's NETPark. This Durham University spin-off hub develops innovative products in satellite technology, drug development and biological weapon detection, which are then exported around the globe. The creation of jobs in the industries of the future is particularly important in a constituency with former mining communities, where ongoing economic development is badly needed.

I do not want the House to think that my constituency is all work and no play. We are famous for the Sedgefield ball game—a historic Shrove Tuesday tradition not for the faint-hearted. We are home to excellent football clubs, including Newton Aycliffe, where my parents served on the committee, and Spennymoor Town. Spennymoor itself typifies our rich cultural history, with a heritage trail dedicated to Norman Cornish, one of the pitmen painters, who learned his craft alongside his mining in the Spennymoor settlement.

Some of the best brass bands in the country can also been found in the constituency. They not only keep alive the cultural traditions of our past, but provide excellent, high-quality music education for new generations of young people today. We are also home to incredible local produce, including artisan chocolate made in Coxhoe, and award-winning real ale brewed at the Surtees Arms in Ferryhill—I have personally quality-assured the latter on several occasions. On the topic of ale, my predecessor Tony Blair was noted for hosting world leaders in pubs across the constituency. I have yet to find a pub without a photo of the former Prime Minister and his closest NATO allies, but my diligent search continues.

Finally, I am proud of our thriving community organisations. The Ladder Centre does invaluable work to support residents, and the Cornforth Partnership is a lifeline for those looking to get back into work. Just as Durham coal powered our economy in the past, so constituencies such as mine can power our modern economy, with high-tech, green manufacturing and research.

Let me return to where I began—"Not the Least, but the Greatest we seek." Mr Deputy Speaker, in this House, let us commit ourselves to seek the greatest—the very best—for our constituents, for our communities and for our great nation. I look forward to seeing the economic measures in the King's Speech start to spread wealth, growth and opportunity to every corner of this United Kingdom, including the people of Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Gregory Stafford to make his maiden speech.

7.25 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on his maiden speech. I do not think that we crossed over at university, but mutual friends tell me that he was an excellent president of the Oxford Student Union. We can tell that his debating skills were honed there, and we saw that in evidence this evening.

I want to express my gratitude to the people of the new Farnham and Bordon constituency for placing their trust in me and for allowing me the honour to represent them here in Parliament. I feel that giving a maiden speech is a bit like giving a best man's speech at a wedding, as you are surrounded by disapproving elderly relatives who are going to hang on every word, but I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that none of the jokes that I have made before in any best man's speeches will be given in this House, especially as I know that my mother-in-law is watching on the Parliament channel.

I also wish to thank my family—especially my wife, Caroline, and my daughters, Susannah and Lucy, who have put up with me a lot over the past year—for their patience and support, as well as my parents, James and Theresa.

Other hon. Members have noted that they are not the first people in their family to be Members of Parliament. I am not even the first sibling to be a Member of Parliament. I pay tribute to my brother, Alexander, who served the people of the Rother Valley constituency so diligently in the previous Parliament.

Apparently, it is also customary to express gratitude to our predecessors in the seat—a small political obituary, as it were. Fortunately, both my immediate predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), are still, as Members can see, very much in their political prime. None the less, I want to thank them for their generous support and advice since I was selected. They have both achieved amazing things for the constituents whom I have inherited. Campaigning was a sobering affair. On the doorsteps I was told: "Oh, we do like Jeremy", or "Damian did such wonderful stuff for us", or "You have very big shoes to fill". To rub salt into the wound, the week before the election, the local paper ran a story on how much the people of Haslemere would miss the shadow Chancellor—believe me, I know my place.

Speaking of predecessors, the predecessor of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire, Lord Arbuthnot, should be praised for his sterling work on the Horizon scandal and for bringing justice to the sub-postmasters so cruelly affected. I still hope that those who were responsible—by act or omission—are brought to justice.

The newly created Farnham and Bordon constituency crosses the counties of Surrey and Hampshire, making the life of a new Member of Parliament even more complex than it already is. More than that, the name, while referencing the two largest towns in each county, ignores the other towns of Haslemere and Liphook and the many villages that range between the larger population centres. Many argued for, and I supported, a less specific but more all-encompassing name for the constituency, such as the Wey Valley, taking its name from the beautiful River Wey that runs through it. Clearly they are not romantics in the Boundary Commission, so Farnham and Bordon stuck. The only saving grace is that its initials spell FAB, which sums up the area that I represent.

[Gregory Stafford]

This "FAB" constituency ranges from Farnham in the north to Haslemere and Liphook in the south, Whitehill and Bordon in the west, and the western villages of Surrey, such as Tilford, in the east. Bookended by the north and south downs, it is an area of outstanding beauty, with thriving market towns, pleasant villages, and a thriving sports and arts scene, including the prestigious University for the Creative Arts. It also has a significant military connection, most obviously in Bordon, which was home to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers until 2015 and is home to the Longmoor ranges, where Ukrainian troops are being trained. Military history is everywhere, from Amesbury school in Haslemere and Hindhead, where Montgomery lived during the war, to the Canadian war graves and memorial in Liphook, and the site of the first ever two-minute silence in this country on Castle Street in Farnham. The residents of this new constituency are ever thankful for the role that our armed forces have played in keeping us safe.

From Arthur Conan Doyle to Jonny Wilkinson, King John to Flora Thompson, and Graham Thorpe to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), heroes and villains have been born, lived, worked and played in this fabulous constituency, but it is not the beautiful scenery, the historic gems, or the famous people who make this constituency the best in the country. It is not even the fact that my grandparents ran Stafford's sweet shop in Haslemere for many years—what little boy would not want grandparents who ran a sweet shop? It is the current residents, businesses and community spirit that make FAB special, and a joy to represent. Every day there are local events, charitable occasions and community festivities to get involved with. Indeed, I doubt that anywhere else in this country can rival the number of duck races in the area.

Following that Cook's tour of the constituency, one might be forgiven for thinking that there are no issues to solve—a home counties garden of Eden. It of course cannot be denied that there are many areas of significant affluence, but it should not be concealed that there are areas of high deprivation, and I will champion their improvement. The constituency's location is both a benefit and a curse. Within easy commuting distance of London, it provides a rural haven for those who wish to live outside but work in the city. That also makes it rich pickings for housing developers who look for any open space, green or otherwise, to build on. I am not against housing development—we need homes for our children and grandchildren—but we need the right homes in the right places, with the right tenure mix and with the supporting infrastructure.

Conservative-run East Hampshire district council has done everything that it can to persuade the new Government to modify their housing targets to make them more appropriate for our area, including writing to the Deputy Prime Minister. I hope that she will respond positively. Indeed, if there is one issue that unites the whole of the new Farnham and Bordon constituency, it is that infrastructure has not kept pace with development. That is particularly acute in Bordon, where thousands of houses are going up without the supporting infrastructure. The GP surgeries, the NHS dentists, the schools, the roads and the leisure centres all need upgrading and expanding rapidly to meet that housing growth. We must not build more houses until infrastructure catches up. Otherwise we will be left with housing estates devoid of services, security and society. I am deeply concerned about the new Government's plans on house building. Labour's changes to planning, imposing top-down targets and removing the rights of local people to have their say on developments, are a retrograde step that has been met with anger from my constituents and resolute opposition from me.

I mentioned the need for health services in our area. Having spent most of my career in healthcare, latterly working for seven years in the NHS improving clinical services and patient outcomes, I know that both locally and nationally things need to change in the NHS. We need to have a grown-up and honest discussion with the public about how we are going to deliver, provide and fund the NHS and social care going forwards. For an ageing population with increasing healthcare needs and diminishing birth rates—that is, the people who are going to pay for the NHS—we need a cross-party discussion that brings all parties together to make long-term decisions on how we proceed with health and social care in this country. If I achieve nothing else in my time here, starting that conversation, and hopefully progressing it fruitfully, will be something to hope for.

As a traditional, common-sense Conservative, I believe that we cannot pay for health and social care unless we have a strong economy. Despite a global pandemic, a war in the east of Europe and instability in the middle east, and regardless of the picture that the Government are trying to paint in their press releases, the most recent statistics show that the economy is turning around and is on an upward trajectory. I will oppose any measures by this Government, including the misguided nationalisation of industry and the socialist labour rules, that I believe will hamper or reverse that trend.

Equally important is to safeguard ourselves from external threats. The rise of a resurgent Russia, China and North Korea is something that we should all be concerned about. I do not believe that it is hyperbole to say that we are in a pre-war era, and we need to ensure that our borders, skies and infrastructure, both physical and digital, are safe from threats. That is why I absolutely believe that we should move to 2.5% of GDP spent on defence immediately, and increase that to 3% when practical.

In short, we must protect our economy, healthcare and national security to ensure the prosperity and safety of our country, but mindful that maiden speeches are not meant to be controversial, I shall leave it there and return briefly to the subject of my FAB constituency. In 1668, Samuel Pepys recorded that the people of Liphook were "good, honest people". Given his own morals and motivations, I am not sure whether he meant that as a compliment, but I assure the House that it is as true now as it was then for the residents of Farnham, Bordon, Haslemere, Liphook and our surrounding villages, and I pledge to be a good, honest servant of them in this place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Rachel Blake to make her maiden speech.

7.35 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon

(Gregory Stafford) for describing his constituency so passionately. While we may strongly disagree on the need for growth and new development in this country, we may agree more on the future of our NHS, and I look forward to working together on that ambition.

I am a proud Londoner, and like many Londoners I was not actually born here; I am delighted to share with you that I was born in Manchester and my family comes from Lancashire. In fact, for most of my childhood I was aware of only one football team—the Bolton Wanderers—but for the last 42 years London has been my home, and the chance to represent my home city is truly a special honour. I put on record my thanks to the residents of the Cities of London and Westminster for placing their trust in me as their representative.

I start by thanking Nickie Aiken for her service. She is a pioneer, as the first woman to represent the Cities of London and Westminster, and is remembered fondly by many residents. She has shown me kindness and offered her advice, for which I am grateful. I know that here and across the constituency she will be remembered for her tireless work campaigning to regulate pedicabs, and her work to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and deliver the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. I also pay tribute to my good friend Karen Buck, who represented the St John's Wood neighbourhood wards of Abbey Road and Regent's Park, which joined the two Cities constituency in the recent boundary review. When walking through Westminster with Karen, it is hard to find anyone in her constituency who does not know her and has not been helped by her. Through her tireless casework for tens of thousands of constituents, and her Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, Karen has made an outstanding contribution to lives in Westminster and beyond. She is a fearless representative and campaigner and a kind and wise friend. I am so grateful for her advice, and will do my very best to live up to her high standards.

From 1977 to 2001, the two Cities were represented by Peter Brooke, who is remembered for his work as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and later as the Secretary of State for National Heritage. Finally, I also remember J. S. Mill, who represented the City of Westminster from 1865 to 1868, and who in 1866 became the first person in the history of Parliament to call for women to be given the right to vote. I hope that he would be happy to see Nickie, Karen and I delivering on his pioneering work for equality here in the two Cities.

Truly, when a woman is tired of London she is tired of life. The Cities of London and Westminster are home to great cultural institutions: the National Gallery, the Royal Opera House, the commercial centres of Oxford Street and Edgware Road, innovative start-ups alongside major international corporations, the Government here in Westminster and Whitehall, the international financial centre of the City of London, the beautiful Hyde Park, Regent's Park and St James's Park alongside the residential squares of Belgravia and Marylebone, and yes, Buckingham Palace.

Many Members will know the neighbourhoods of Soho, Fitzrovia and Covent Garden as places to spend a night out. In fact, tens of thousands of people live here. We have St Bartholomew's, one of London's oldest churches, Bevis Marks, the oldest practising synagogue in the UK, and London Central Mosque. Just minutes away from Parliament we have the Peabody estates of Westminster, the pioneering and beautifully designed Churchill Gardens and Lillington and Longmoore estates, the architectural delights of the Barbican and Golden Lane, and the historic communities of Petticoat Square and the Guinness estate in Portsoken ward.

All those places are home to diverse communities living side by side, but also to inequality and injustice, and the struggle to find a stable, affordable and decent home is holding people in my constituency back from meeting their potential. That struggle is holding our city and our country back from meeting our potential. Tackling the housing crisis has brought me into politics, and this debate on the King's Speech proposals for economic growth is an important time to highlight the situation that many of my constituents face. Nearly 20 years ago, I worked at the Treasury on the Barker review of planning. It is with sadness that I note that we are still not delivering the homes we need. I am determined that this Government will deliver on our promise to build more affordable homes.

Ending no-fault evictions will bring certainty and security for the approximately 40% of households in the Cities of London and Westminster who are renting privately. Our cross-Government strategy will put Britain back on track to ending homelessness, rough sleeping and temporary accommodation, which have been rising here for years and are harming so many. I am grateful to organisations such as The Passage and The Connection here in the two Cities for doing so much to support vulnerable people. The Cities of London and Westminster has one of the highest proportions of leasehold homes in the country. Residential leasehold is trapping tenants with unaccountable landlords, and I am pleased the Government have pledged to introduce a leasehold and commonhold reform Bill.

It is characteristic of such an international place that global patterns affect our local communities. The rise of short-term letting and the risk of dirty money in property are contributing to a loss of homes for Londoners, and as their representative here I am determined to tackle that. I will be standing up for our local hospital and St Mary's in Paddington, and continuing our campaign to secure funding for the redevelopment of London's major trauma centre.

The story of the two Cities is one that is optimistic, outward-looking, hard-working and driven. I hope to continue to represent this place in that fashion. I am the first Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament to ever represent this historic constituency, and I join colleagues in closing with a pledge to approach this new Parliament with a renewed commitment to respectful debate and disagreement. Elections are a time to make a choice. Now that a decision has been made, it is time to move forward with a relentless focus on public service and delivery.

7.42 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for kindly calling me to contribute to this important debate on the King's Speech, after 11 very good maiden speeches and 11 very promising—even fabulous—starts to parliamentary careers. Those who have been in this House a little longer will know that our great friend the late Sir David Amess, whose plaque now rightfully hangs on the wall, had a

[Mr Mark Francois]

great talent for managing to combine a very large number of topics into one speech. I lack Sir David's skill, so I will seek to confine my remarks this evening to three topics, all development related.

The first topic relates to an expansion in medical capacity for the NHS, and specifically to proposals to expand the Jones family practice in Hockley. I declare an interest: my wife Olivia has worked in the NHS for nearly 20 years. In essence, the plan is to expand the practice, with a first-floor extension to create eight new GP consulting rooms and additional training facilities. Rochford district council recently approved planning permission for the extension, and the senior partner, Professor Dr Mahmud, and his active practice management team are now seeking approval from local NHS bosses to support the scheme.

It is my intention as the recently re-elected local MP—for which I am very grateful to my constituents—to lend weight to these positive proposals. They are designed not just to expand capacity, but hopefully to provide training places for graduates from the new medical school at Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford. For the record, I have also been working for some time to try to expand Riverside medical centre in Hullbridge, and I will be pursuing that with the NHS as well.

Secondly, the town of Wickford has suffered a dearth of supermarket capacity in recent years. My constituents endured something of a perfect storm last year when the Aldi supermarket was closed, while at the same time the old Co-op nearby has effectively stood semi-derelict for three years. During that supermarket vacuum, my constituents were forced to fall back on the small Iceland in the high street and Wickford market.

I was very pleased to reopen the enlarged Aldi last autumn, and it is now doing a brisk trade. However, the Co-op still remains undeveloped and, while boarded up, is occupying valuable spaces in the town's principal car park. It is a long and complicated saga. Suffice it to say that the site was bought several years ago by a development company named Heriot, which originally came up with a plan in conjunction with the supermarket chain Morrisons to redevelop the store, with an underground car park and some flats above. I always had doubts about the commercial viability of those proposals, especially the underground car park, and the scheme collapsed some months ago.

Nevertheless, Heriot is working on what might be called a plan B, and for some months has been in what it describes as "advanced talks" with another major supermarket chain. For commercial reasons Heriot asked me not to name the supermarket in this speech, something I have agreed to respect—although I have to say that the name of the company in question is now effectively an open secret, and was even being reported back to me on doorsteps by my Wickford constituents during the general election.

I spoke to the directors of Heriot in advance of this debate, who assure me they are seeking to bring their commercial negotiations to a conclusion as soon as possible. They are well aware of my frustration at these three years of delay, which I conveyed to them again this morning, and they have asked me to relate that they realise that my Wickford constituents have already waited a long while for a new supermarket. That is an issue I campaigned on heavily at the general election, so I hope Heriot will be able to announce something definitive this summer. My message to Heriot is simple: "You have had more than enough time—get on with it."

Finally, over two decades I have seen examples of both good and bad development in my constituency. Young people cannot live at home with their parents into their 50s and 60s, so it must be possible to build some houses in a sustainable manner to meet the housing need. Crucially, however, the infrastructure required to accompany them has to be built first. To put it another way, from long experience, if development is to be successful—and it can be—as I said earlier, it has to be done with people, rather than to people. The proposals at a place called Dollymans Farm in my constituency, which I was re-elected with a mandate to oppose, are precisely the opposite of that. We all want to find somewhere suitable and appropriate for people to live, but we have to do that in the right way.

7.47 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is an honour to be re-elected for the fourth time to the redrawn seat of Brentford and Isleworth, and to follow such impressive maiden speeches, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), in whose constituency we all work.

After nine years sitting in Opposition it is a pleasure to be on the Government side of the Chamber and to support this Government's legislative programme, which brings hope, opportunity and change for my constituents and for the country at last. I will focus my response to the King's Speech on the Government's ambitious proposals around transport policy—not only because it is an area I have long been involved with, having served on the Transport Committee for five years and chaired five all-party parliamentary groups on transport, but because transport was brought up regularly on the doorsteps in this last election.

The theme of today's debate is economy, welfare and public services. Effective transport policies are essential to the change we need to see in all three areas, as well as in addressing our climate crisis, so I am pleased to see the bold and ambitious plans set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) and her team to do just that. For access to work, education and health services, for supplying our manufacturing and retail sectors and for supporting our wellbeing and family life, decent transport choices are essential, and nowhere are they more needed than in the new communities that will be built, if the traffic on the roads to and around them is not to grind to a halt. Whether in city, town or countryside, we need the full range of transport options—ones that are affordable, accessible, efficient and environmentally sound.

On buses, I am delighted that, through the better buses Bill, the Government will end the ideological and control-freakery policy of banning local authorities from running their own municipal bus companies. Such companies were killed off by the Thatcher Government in a bout of ideological rage, with only London retaining a regulated bus service. The rest of England should have what we have in London: regular day, evening and weekend services, simple fare structures, and high standards of safety, accessibility and passenger information. Those are

being developed by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and I look forward to seeing other local authorities—of all parties, I am sure—following his example.

To be an alternative to driving, and for us to cut road congestion and pollution, rail travel must be reliable. I am therefore delighted to see Bills to create Great British Railways and to bring train operators into public ownership. That is essential for a simplified and unified rail system that focuses on improving passenger services while getting value for the taxpayer. Our constituents, and many Members of this House, have had terrible experiences of cancelled trains, or of sitting on the floor for hours despite booking a seat. We will now see a Government and a Department that do not use transport as a cudgel in our culture wars, or as a crude electoral hammer to override local authorities that want to introduce sensible measures to encourage cycling and walking.

Transport is at the heart of the challenge of national renewal that we have set ourselves: kick-starting economic growth, boosting jobs and living standards, and building sufficient homes in sustainable communities. Of course there are challenges ahead—not least in further growing capacity in our overloaded rail network. I welcome the plan to improve east-west connectivity across the north of England, but funding further increases in rail capacity will unfortunately be financially unsustainable until we see the economic growth that the Chancellor is working on. Aviation expansion is acceptable only if it passes the four tests that we set ourselves in opposition: cutting carbon dioxide emissions, overcoming local environmental impacts, providing regional benefits across the UK, and deliverability. I know that the new Secretary of State and ministerial team will work across our travel and transport sectors to improve transport connections to the benefit of our country as a whole.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Robin Swann to make his maiden speech.

7.52 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): It is with honour and humility, and a sense of trepidation, that I rise to make my maiden speech. I think of those who have spoken here before and the gravity and seriousness of the issues that have been debated and discussed. I hope that this Parliament is no different in how it discharges its duties, and that we in this intake of new Members live up to those standards. I congratulate the many new Members on their maiden speeches, which have set a high bar.

Like everyone else in this House, I wish to thank sincerely those who placed their faith and trust in me by electing me. I am indebted to the electorate of South Antrim for the support that I have received from across the entire community—indeed, entire communities—in my election to this place. I also thank the dedicated campaign team who supported me during what was an honourable campaign.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Paul Girvan, not just for his tenure as a Member of this House, but for his time as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and as a local councillor. South Antrim has moved between Paul's party and my Ulster Unionist party on a number of occasions. With that, I carry the privilege and honour of returning the UUP to this place after a seven-year absence, and the charge and responsibility of bringing a moderate and reasoned Unionist voice from Northern Ireland, in my party's tradition of working positively and constructively with all to achieve the best outcomes for all our people, and of working across this House to strengthen our Union and to deliver a Union for all.

I turn now to my constituency of South Antrim. I want those here this evening to know what a fantastic part of our country it is. Like so many constituencies, it has a mix of main towns—Ballyclare and Antrim—and a range of what were once small villages but are growing into large villages, such as Toome, Doagh, Crumlin, Randalstown, Templepatrick, Ballynure and many more. Much of the constituency is a large and productive rural area, while part of the expanding urban area of Glengormley is merging with north Belfast in Mossley and Mallusk.

South Antrim is home to industry, research and cutting-edge business in large and small employers. Indeed, I look forward to working with the Chancellor and her Government in further supporting those businesses through the Bills in the King's Speech, and especially through the national wealth fund. South Antrim is the base of Belfast international airport, which I believe has a real opportunity if it gets its much-needed rail link and the further expansion of Aldergrove and our Royal Air Force base. That is why I believe that we also need a UK air transportation strategy, which I may raise later in the Adjournment debate—if the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will take an intervention from me!

South Antrim's agricultural sector is another pillar of our community and contributes significantly to our local economy. Our annual Antrim agricultural show celebrates that agricultural heritage by bringing together farmers, producers and visitors from across the country and showcasing the best of rural life and promoting a strong sense of community. It is on this Saturday at Shane's castle, and I would encourage and welcome anyone who wants to attend.

Lough Neagh—the largest freshwater lake in the British isles—is another jewel in South Antrim's crown, but it is currently struggling because of neglect, like many of our waterways. However, the Stormont Executive's new recovery programme is in place, and I hope that—with national support, given the need for action on our waterways—Lough Neagh will once more be a tourism and recreational attraction for visitors from far and wide.

A number of issues debated over the past few days will have a direct impact on the people of South Antrim, Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom—none more so than the future and support that the Government will offer our national health service and those who rely on and work in it. The Government have the opportunity to reverse the past years of neglect. Health may be devolved, but that does not mean that we in this place can abdicate all responsibility for our national health service. We have the excellent Antrim area hospital in my constituency, but it needs resource and support to develop its potential. As a former Health Minister of Northern Ireland, I know that we have plans to deliver better services, but change needs recurrent resources, which have been lacking in recent years. I look forward to working with this Government to rebuild our national health service.

[Robin Swann]

I know that I am speaking to the converted on how great South Antrim is, because I have been overwhelmed by the number of Members from across the House who have approached me to tell me of a relative or friend who lives in my constituency. Indeed, I look forward to representing them and all my South Antrim constituents in this place.

7.59 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate all the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches on their passion and their commitment to their constituency, which has come across so well. Age does not wither, nor custom stale the privilege of being in this place, and I too want to thank my constituents, who have returned me to Parliament to represent them all and the wonderful city we call home.

I spent 14 years on the Opposition Benches, standing up for my constituents against a Government who were bearing down on them. It is absolutely fantastic to speak from the Government Benches in support of a Government who will help and empower them. Some Conservative Members have been painting a rosy picture of our economic inheritance, but the message of working people in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West was clear and consistent: "We need change." It is not hard to see why. People are worse off; over a third of children in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West live in poverty; and over 2,000 households in Newcastle are homeless. Those are just a few of the issues that my constituents face, so please, let us not pretend that we should be grateful to the last Government.

But everything changed on 4 July. Indeed, as I was buying my fish supper last Friday at one of the excellent fishmongers in Grainger market—locally smoked cod, since you ask—they told me that on 5 July, sales of halibut soared. That is an expensive fish, so they took that as a sign of celebration, but also of optimism, hope, and confidence in a better future. There is nothing fishy there, because the Bills set out in the King's Speech will give Newcastle our future back. Our destiny will be in our own hands, with the English devolution Bill and the better buses Bill giving local leaders such as our fantastic Mayor Kim McGuinness the powers needed to drive growth and prosperity locally. Our region's immense potential in the green industries of the future will finally be unlocked through the national wealth fund and Great British Energy; planning reform will take the handbrake off building new homes and spaces for business, making us an even greater city with an economy that provides great jobs and good homes for all Geordies; and by expanding the rights of workers, tenants and minoritised groups, the Government will make sure that work pays and everyone in Newcastle enjoys their fair share of our national prosperity.

Having worked around the world as an engineer, I have been proud to champion science and innovation in Newcastle and across the UK. I am now privileged to have both of Newcastle's fantastic universities in my constituency, and our city is looking forward to building a proper industrial strategy once again—one that can boost our universities as drivers of inclusive economic growth. Unlocking private investment through measures such as the national wealth fund and the recently announced pensions review will super-charge spin-outs and start-ups in the north-east, and I believe that sites such as Helix—home to innovative businesses and entrepreneurs in cutting-edge industries—are a tantalising glimpse of the future of Newcastle.

Technology has the power to make our constituents' lives so much better, and measures such as planning reform will make that a reality. As an ex-shadow science Minister, I have spoken to Lord Vallance, as he begins his ministerial role, to offer my support, and to make the case for investment in regional research and development. I know that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology team are already committed to opening up careers in science to everyone, getting money outside the golden triangle and connecting science to industrial strategy, healthcare and economic growth.

As I have said, this Government inspire hope that has been lacking in Newcastle— that is, apart from on match days. That is why, as the MP for St James' Park, I welcome the football governance Bill. From Mike Ashley to the Saudi Public Investment Fund takeover, football governance has been a thorn in our side, and Geordies around the world will welcome the safeguarding of our precious football club.

My constituents sent me to this place because our party promised change. With this King's Speech, with this Government back at the service—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): Order. I call Olly Glover to make his maiden speech.

8.4 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to give my maiden speech today. I aspire to match the eloquence of the previous speakers in this debate, including the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), who gave the most recent maiden speech; his passion for his constituency is very clear.

I start by paying tribute to my immediate predecessor, David Johnston. I admire the fact that Mr Johnston entered politics because of his passion for social mobility. I have met constituents who have been personally helped by him, and I aspire to follow his lead. I was pleased that the first email in my parliamentary mailbox came from Lord Ed Vaizey of Didcot, Member for the predecessor seat of Wantage between 2005 and 2019, offering his congratulations. That was a warm and encouraging gesture. I arrive in Parliament following a career on the railway, serving the public, and I hope to apply my knowledge and experience to working with others to advance both rail infrastructure and public services in my seat.

The name of the new Didcot and Wantage constituency is an improvement on the previous name, Wantage, but remains imperfect. While Wantage and Didcot are the larger towns of the three in the seat, residents from Wallingford are aggrieved by their omission. Mr Deputy Speaker, I can assure you and this House that all three towns will have my attention and care. The same applies to the dozens of villages in the seat; I am fortunate enough to live in one of them, Milton. All our villages have a unique character and set of attractions. Pendon museum in Long Wittenham includes an homage in model railway form to the 1930s Vale of White Horse

landscape, and there is also the ancient Uffington white horse and the beautiful chalk streams of the Letcombes. The constituency's economy is diverse: we have the technology and science centres of Milton Park, Harwell campus and Culham near to farms that have been passed down through generations. Didcot hosts many industrial and business units, and residents benefit from the great western main line for fast commuting to and from London. Organisations such as Didcot TRAIN, the DAMASCUS youth project and Sustainable Wantage illustrate the strong culture of public service and volunteering.

My constituents rightly have high expectations. During the election campaign, one of them highlighted the lack of biographical detail in a leaflet about me, and asked me whether I was a doctor, a surveyor, a banker, a teacher, or an alien from outer space. Despite my love of the voyages of the crew of the USS Enterprise, Mr Deputy Speaker, I can reassure you and everyone in this House that I am not an alien. Of course, my constituency contains many non-humans, albeit perhaps not aliens. Many a local party volunteer has come to tire of my frequent canvassing of cats as well as humans. On occasion, this has helped my cause: while I was in conversation with one voter, his cat, Matthew, intervened. Matthew took a strong liking to me, with a great deal of leg-rubbing, even sitting on my lap on the pavement. The voter, astonished, told me that Matthew hates nearly everyone, and that his favourable verdict on me would be taken into account.

Turning to the subject of today's debate, my constituency shares many of the same challenges as the wider country. Access to GP appointments is often difficult, particularly in Didcot, which continues to yearn for a new GP surgery in Great Western Park. NHS dentistry barely exists, and sewage dumping in our waterways is a great concern, as are proposals for a large reservoir near Steventon and the Hanneys. Many residents desire to walk and cycle more, but need pleasant and safe routes and paths in order to do so, and while the constituency benefits from fast railway connections, the reliability and capacity of the service provided can be somewhat patchy, and we continue to lack a railway station serving Grove and Wantage.

Perhaps the greatest issue on constituents' minds is the cost of housing and recent, very substantial increases in the numbers of houses. I commend the Government on their commitment to genuinely affordable housing, but ask them to bear in mind that residents would be more supportive of housing growth were the health, education, and transport facilities needed to support it delivered in parallel. I promise to work tirelessly for my constituents in the pursuit of progress on these issues, and thank them again for the opportunity to serve. It is a genuine honour to be stood here, and I look forward to working with Members from across the House to achieve those aims.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Josh MacAlister to make his maiden speech.

8.8 pm

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the fantastic maiden speeches that we have heard from across the House this evening, including that of the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover); I am sure that the whole House is reassured to know that he is not an alien.

The first and only time I entered this Chamber before being sworn in as a Member of Parliament was as a secondary school citizenship teacher, bringing dozens of teenagers here to see their Parliament. On that occasion, I was required to use my teacher voice a number of times, but that is not something I plan to make a habit of in this House.

I begin by putting on record my thanks to my predecessor for the now abolished Copeland constituency, Trudy Harrison. We may disagree on matters of policy, but she has been unfailingly gracious to me and generous with her time, demonstrating the "country before party" approach that we can all learn so much from.

I may be new to this House, but I am not new to pushing Governments to get things done, as Opposition Members will know only too well, and I have worked with a number of Education Secretaries over the years. I founded and led a national charity to get more people into fulfilling careers on the frontline of children's social work to ensure that every vulnerable child has a champion fighting their corner. From that, I was asked by the last Government to chair a landmark independent review of the children's social care system. That review found that the disadvantage faced by the care-experienced community in our country should be the civil rights issue of our time. Evidence of that disadvantage is found in worse education outcomes, worse health outcomes and shorter lives, but that disadvantage is fuelled by something that politicians often find too hard to discuss, and that MPs certainly find too hard to mention in this Chamber: the absence of love. I believe every child has the right to be loved, and we have the ability to build a care system that can provide that for them. I hope this Parliament will take up the challenge of addressing this moral outrage. The problem is huge, but the solutions are known, and with enough will, tens of thousands of lives can be transformed.

It is a great honour and privilege to stand here as the first Member of Parliament for the new Whitehaven and Workington constituency. Whether it is the people of Whitehaven or the good people of Workington who are the jam eaters continues to be a source of fierce debate. Of course, I will remain neutral on that question, as I will on all rugby league-related matters.

Nowhere is more blessed than my constituency, home to the highest peak and the deepest lake in England, with miles of beautiful coastline and the stunning western part of the Lake district, which has inspired millions. Let me here pay special tribute to our amazing mountain rescue volunteers, our Royal National Lifeboat Institution volunteers—just this week, it will be celebrating its 200th anniversary—and all those who give up their time to volunteer in search and rescue services. I have an interest to declare as a serving mountain rescue volunteer, and I will champion volunteer search and rescue services at every opportunity.

Behind the doors of the towns and villages across my constituency, you will find the warmest and friendliest marras in the country, people forged by the drama and confidence of the surrounding landscape and people with humility, respect and determination at their core. These are people such as Gary McKee, who ran a marathon every day for a year to raise over £1 million

[Josh MacAlister]

for cancer support; those in the growing network of Andy's man clubs in our community, tackling the crisis of male suicide that my area faces; and community leaders, such as Rachel Holliday of Calderwood House, giving people a route out of homelessness.

Our area has also forged those who were not born West Cumbrian, but who made our corner of the world their home, including pioneers and entrepreneurs such as Frank Schon, later Baron Schon of Whitehaven. Frank was an Austrian refugee who fled the Nazis, was bombed out of London and was taken in by a kind Cumbrian farmer. He went on to set up and lead a global chemicals company based in Whitehaven, before later chairing Harold Wilson's development corporation and going on to serve in the other place. Today, my community is home to dozens of Ukrainian families that could well have the next Frank Schon in them. I hope we can offer those who wish to stay a permanent home here in this country.

Lord Schon is one famous example, but there are thousands of men and women like him—from Whitehaven to Workington, Gosforth to Egremont, Cleator Moor to Seascale and Flimby to Seaton in the north of the constituency—pioneers, entrepreneurs and grafters who have helped west Cumbria to lead the world. It is because of this graft that my constituency is home to the UK New Balance trainer factory—I am not wearing them right now—and the Iggesund paper mill, which has been experimenting with leading carbon capture technology. It is home to Forth Engineering and React Engineering, and hundreds of other businesses represented by Britain's Energy Coast Business Cluster, from the coal and iron mines to the steelworks.

Of course, there is the world's first civil nuclear power station at the site now famously known as Sellafield, home to a world-leading decommissioning mission, which is stimulating innovation in robotics and AI. We led the world, and we can again. We have the people, the will, the determination and now, thankfully, the Government to do it. Our nuclear heritage and our skilled workforce mean we have what it takes to be the ideal location for the next generation of nuclear power. The Government are determined to make the most of new jobs in the energy transition, to reform our broken planning system and to decarbonise the grid, and these three things offer the opportunity for the people of Whitehaven and Workington to fly.

A Labour Government with a proper industrial strategy and the right targeted investment could completely transform the economic geography of my community. These are decisions that need to be made to create the growth we have promised and to tackle the climate crisis our planet faces. I am determined to play my part to deliver this Labour Government's mission and to ensure that west Cumbria feels the maximum possible benefit of the change we want to bring about for our country.

8.16 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches today, particularly the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who gave an excellent speech. As with many of the maiden speeches, now I really want to visit his constituency. It just sounds like an absolutely amazing place. I particularly congratulate all the new Members who have come from a council background. Being a local councillor sets them up fantastically for coming here. It means they are under no illusions about the hard work that is required to be put in for their constituents and the people who live in their area. Congratulations to all of them.

I also congratulate the Chancellor on being the first female Chancellor. As the first woman in this place ever to lead on the economy, although I have been followed by a number since, I am incredibly glad to see one on the Government Benches. I hope that, as she said, her tenure lasts significantly longer than those of some of the Chancellors we have seen in recent times.

Today's debate is taglined "Economy, welfare and public services". Apart from the maiden speeches, speeches focusing on anything other than economic growth have been fairly few and far between. I will not for one second deny that economic growth is important, but the whole point of it is what we then do with it. It is about what we do with the extra tax take generated from the growth we have created. There is no point in having growth for growth's sake. There is no point in having economic growth, and no point in the Conservatives saying how fast the UK is growing compared with other countries in the G7, if the same handful of people are getting richer and richer and the vast majority of our constituents are struggling harder than they ever have before.

We need to ensure that the economic growth and the increase in the tax take that the Labour party is hoping to deliver involves a benefit for all those who live in these islands and in our constituencies. It is massively disappointing to hear that the five pledges and priorities for the Labour party in government do not have eradicating child poverty at the heart of them. I am really glad the Government are bringing together a discussion taskforce to reduce child poverty, but today they could bring 300,000 children out of poverty and move 700,000 children into less deep poverty simply by scrapping the two-child cap.

One of my previous colleagues in this place, Alison Thewliss, campaigned incredibly hard on the rape clause—everybody will know of the work she did on that. There are 3,000 women across these islands who are eligible for an exemption from the cap because they have applied under the rape clause. They have had to tell the Government they were raped in order to get an uplift in their benefits. That is horrific, and even if the Government are unwilling to move on the two-child cap they should be doing something about the rape clause and what people are having to prove in order to get the exemption.

It would be very easy to increase growth, again overnight, by increasing migration. Migration to these islands increases the amount of growth. The economy would immediately have grown if the Prime Minister had gone to the summit with the EU leaders this week and said "Yes, free movement benefits us: it benefits our economy, benefits our society, benefits our young people, benefits our musicians, and benefits so many different groups and individuals. It benefits our culture; it makes this place a better place to live. Therefore we are signing up again to free movement."

We need only look at some of the past Budgets, such as a Budget George Osborne gave from the Dispatch Box, when it has said in the Red Book that increasing

migration will increase the tax take because of the economic growth it will bring. My constituents and people across Scotland recognise that, and we will always argue for a better migration policy—and if the Government are not willing to do it for all of these islands, we will argue for one tailored specifically to Scotland so that we can make our own decisions that suit the needs of our communities and encourage that economic growth.

8.21 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the King's Speech under a Government committed to putting country before party to improve lives in this country. That is what I pledged to the people of Bedford and Kempston, whom I thank for putting their faith in me again to work hard for them and to restore their faith in politics as a force for positive change.

The last Government reduced our public services to a shadow of their former selves. In 2019 a study jointly funded by Bedford borough council and the NHS found that Bedford borough was 40% under-provided for in the primary care estate, despite a rapid growth in population since 2011. HMP Bedford has been in and out of special measures, so I am pleased that the Government have already taken action to improve the crisis in prisons.

I am also pleased to see early priority given to strengthening community policing by increase numbers of officers and giving them greater power to deal with the antisocial behaviour that blights our communities. I hope this Government succeed where the last Government failed in implementing a fairer funding formula for Bedfordshire police. Wrongly funded as a rural force, it is one of the lowest-funded forces in the UK despite a £10 million year-on-year increase to £156 million for 2024-25.

The housing crisis is causing untold misery to many of my constituents, so I am pleased that building houses will be a priority for our Government. It is indefensible that I know of parents who are beginning the summer holidays living in hotel rooms without access even to a fridge or a microwave to prepare food for their children because no suitable social housing properties are available. Even food bank vouchers are not helping when basic staples such as UHT milk cannot be kept fresh once opened.

More than 15,000 children and 17,000 adults are on waiting lists for mental health treatment in the area covered by the NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes integrated care board. For years the NHS provider has had the capital funds to bring in desperately needed in-patient mental health facilities, but the previous Government consistently refused to provide the capital expenditure cover so that we could have those facilities in Bedford. I hope the new Government's plan to get the NHS back on its feet includes an overhaul of how new projects are funded, because the existing capital departmental expenditure limits are not working.

Many of my constituents will be very happy to see planned legislation to bring rail back into public ownership and to reform bus services and franchises, including by allowing local control and supporting public ownership, but one of the most significant transport issues in my constituency is East West Rail. Bedford is uniquely adversely impacted by the East West Rail project, because the preferred six-track route requires the demolition and blighting of homes. Residents have been in limbo for more than five years in unsellable homes. The proposed planning and infrastructure Bill will speed up planning decisions for major infrastructure and house building and seek to reform compulsory purchase compensation rules to ensure that the compensation paid to landowners is fair. The statutory consultation stage is imminent, and I hope the Government will listen to the concerns expressed by my constituents and will not leave people in limbo while decisions are made without their knowledge, as has happened before. If we want to restore faith in politics, we have to ensure that our communities come with us on plans to affect their lives.

The Universal Studios plan to build a park near Kempston is exciting, and I look forward to working with the Government to make sure we get this potentially huge investment opportunity for Bedford and Britain over the line.

8.27 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I start by wishing His Majesty the very best of health on behalf of myself and my constituents. As we welcome many new Members to the House, His Majesty sets a clear standard for public service that we can all hope to emulate. I have had the privilege of listening to a number of maiden speeches from across the House—all fantastic, all unique. I am sure all new Members will have received countless pieces of advice, so I will just say this: none of us, new or returning Members, should ever forget what a privilege it is to serve in this House and in this Parliament, the mother of all Parliaments.

We on the Conservative Benches have much to be proud of in the legacy of the last 14 years. Just last week we have seen inflation remain at the Bank of England target rate of 2%. We created more than 800 jobs a day for the last 14 years. It was under the Conservative Government that, in 2023, the UK became the third most valuable tech economy in the world, worth $1 trillion. We also boast more billion-pound companies than France, Germany and Sweden combined. As has been repeatedly mentioned, we have the fastest-growing economy in the G7.

I want to address the notion that the Government are trying to push, where they talk down the economy, paving the way for tax rises. It clearly does not stack up. If the Chancellor insists on pushing this alternative narrative, as we have heard today, some questions need answering, because surely all those promises made during the election cannot have been made by the Chancellor, or the shadow Chancellor as she was then, flying blind, especially when the OBR provides the transparency that she now denies she had.

Throughout the campaign, we heard about how the Government's policies were fully funded. If the Chancellor did not use the OBR forecasts, what was she using to make those promises in the first place? I do not think anyone is fooled by this narrative or these tactics. Most importantly, if they are going to raise taxes, which will they raise? They need to come clean about that, because the British people deserve the truth, not whatever the Government are trying to peddle to justify their tax and spend policies. The Government can be assured that the Opposition will do our duty and hold this Government to account.

[Saqib Bhatti]

I want to address a number of things in the King's Speech. I have to say I was astonished by the lack of respect in the King's Speech to rural communities. A lot of my communities in my rural area felt incredibly disrespected, and it was incredibly disappointing. I am also disappointed and deeply concerned by the Government's focus on building on the green belt. We have some of the most precious green belt land in Meriden and Solihull East, not least the Meriden gap, which is a hugely important throughway for migrating wildlife. It is not clear how the Government will protect the Meriden gap.

In fact, the only thing that has been clear in the early days of this Government is that they are willing to set aside local community opinions, and anyone who challenges that will be accused of being a nimby. My villages in Balsall Common, Hampton in Arden, Marston Green, Knowle, Dorridge, Chadwick End and Hockley Heath have already made huge sacrifices when it comes to green-belt land, not least because of HS2. These top-down targets and vague references to grey-belt land are already causing huge anxiety. This matters because when it comes to setting aside community opinion and disenfranchising whole communities, the tactics that the Government are already employing are the best way to do it. I am deeply concerned by that. We on the Opposition Benches will ensure that we hold this Government to account.

The title of this debate includes public services, and one of my key campaign pledges was to restore A&E services to the borough of Solihull. My argument on that is simple: we have about 220,000 people in the borough, and if there is an emergency, my constituents have to go all the way to Heartlands hospital or Warwick hospital, which are way too far away. It is clear to me that the case is strong. One thing I will be campaigning for in this Parliament, whether it takes five or 10 or 15 years, if I am lucky enough to be returned repeatedly—I make no assumptions on that, of course—will be to get that A&E service. I will be working with the integrated care board to achieve that.

I will finish on this: my constituents and the British people have been clear. As we discharge our duties as His Majesty's official Opposition, their expectations are that we do so with integrity and humility, but always with courage and boldness in what we stand for and who we are. I assure my constituents that for the sake of our country we shall not falter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Kate Dearden to make her maiden speech.

8.31 pm

Kate Dearden (Halifax) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me to make my first contribution to this House. I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for his contribution to the debate.

Today's debate is a crucial one for how we rebuild our economy in a way that works for all. I am delighted to be joining my many, many excellent new Labour colleagues in making their brilliant maiden speeches. I am also delighted to follow the incredible Holly Lynch. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] Holly dedicated her talent and energy to supporting her constituents. She was a casework champion who still found time to push for protections for our emergency service workers and for global causes, such as Fairtrade. Holly's commitment was second to none, and I will do my best to follow in her footsteps.

In succeeding Holly, I am proud to take my place in one of Parliament's great traditions: the Labour women of Halifax. Since the election of Shirley Summerskill in 1964, there have only been four years where Halifax has not been represented by a Labour woman. I am lucky to have the support of brilliant women, from the Labour Women's Network to trade union colleagues and my late teacher Elaine Barker who set me on the road to this House. I am standing on the shoulders of my sisters, and I will not let them down.

Halifax is a town bursting with history. It was a centre of the wool trade and textile manufacturing, with the Piece Hall the most beautiful and well-known testament to our heritage, but there is far more to the history of Halifax than that. We have a magnificent minster, the imposing Wainhouse Tower, and Shibden Hall, home of lesbian diarist Anne Lister. Halifax's industrial heritage has meant a close connection to socialist movements. It was a stronghold for Chartists, a centre of trade union activism and the birthplace of Halifax building society, and it has a legacy of co-operative movements. As a trade unionist and now a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament, it is a history I am proud to celebrate, and celebrating our history has become a big part of Halifax's future.

The Piece Hall is now one of the UK's best music venues. This summer it is hosting Idles, Tom Jones and the Ministry of Sound, and I will leave it to hon. Members to guess who I would prefer to see. We have reimagined the beating industrial heart of Halifax at Dean Clough mill as a centre for arts, culture, food and shopping. That, combined with the beautiful nature of the Calder valley, has seen Halifax transforming into Haliwood. Many in this Chamber will have seen "Happy Valley", but there is also "Gentleman Jack" and "Last Tango in Halifax", and we even hosted Marvel for its "Secret Invasion". As a Member of Parliament for Halifax, I will lobby for any future editions of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" to come and celebrate the home of toffee, Rolos and Quality Street.

There are so many other things that make Halifax a unique and special town, from our fabulous independent department store Harveys—where I bought today's lovely dress—to Eureka! the museum where I and every other former schoolkid in the north of England went on school trips, and, of course, the famous Shay, home to Halifax Town and Halifax Panthers.

I must also mention some of the challenges that my town still faces. Like most of the ex-industrial UK, we have faced decades of neglect and under-investment. Halifax endures significant deprivation, with above-average levels of unemployment and child poverty. Access to housing is a problem, especially for young people, and the availability of GPs came up time and time again on the doorstep. The people of Halifax have struggled for too long with the cost of living crisis, low wages and poor public services. That has been the story of my town and of our country.

As anyone who knows Yorkshire will guess, the people of Halifax have done much to help each other. Halifax is the home of Andy's Man Club, which many Members will know from its essential work to support men's

mental health. I met its volunteers as well as those of Healthy Minds, which is another great charity helping tackle mental illness. Noah's Ark debt centre offers crucial financial support, and the Holy Nativity church in Mixenden is one of several organisations running a food bank and a pay-what-you-can café. Daisy Chain café provides a haven for the elderly to meet and socialise, and St Augustine's Centre gives much needed support to refugees.

Those brilliant community initiatives have done their best to help those who have been struggling in recent years, and they have achieved much. However, we know that the buck stops with us and that we must address the issues facing our nation and prove that things can get better. These issues, when not addressed, lead to suffering, despair and anger. We on the Labour Benches can celebrate our success at the election, but a victory for our party is only ever a means to an end. Our goal now is to bring about the change that we promised.

I am proud to be delivering my maiden speech in this debate, where we set the agenda for what we will do to improve the lives of everyone across the country. Part of this is close to my own heart: the new deal for working people. In my previous role at the brilliant Community trade union, I was proud to be part of drafting those aims alongside trade union colleagues. The agenda on extending workers' rights, including for those who are self-employed or part of the gig economy, is one that I want to champion over the next five years.

I would like to end with a few thank yous. First, I thank all the people I have mentioned so far, who make Halifax the wonderful town that it is, for everything they do. Secondly, to the incredible activists of Halifax—the Labour team in our town should be the envy of constituency Labour parties nationwide—I could not be more grateful. As every Member in this House knows, we are here because of those around us—the family, friends and colleagues who support us—so I want to thank my wonderful friends, my mum, my dad, my sister, and my partner Brad. Finally, I thank the people of Halifax for trusting me. I will fight every day to achieve everything that I can for them and reward the faith that they have shown in me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Ben Obese-Jecty to make his maiden speech.

8.39 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you for calling me to make my maiden speech during this King's Speech debate on the economy, welfare and public services. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden) on her maiden speech. As a former officer in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, I note that her constituency has deep links with my former regiment, and indeed its antecedent regiments, the 33rd and 76th of Foot.

It is fantastic to hear new Members on both sides of the House speak so passionately and eloquently about their constituencies. I speak as the first new Member of Parliament for Huntingdon since 2001, but I am only the third Member in my lifetime, and the fourth Member since the second world war. It is therefore an enormous privilege to have been elected to represent the constituency, and I am honoured to have been voted for by my constituents to follow such a long-serving Member of Parliament. My predecessor Jonathan Djanogly served the House and his constituents for some 23 years. In Parliament he served on the Trade and Industry Committee, as shadow Solicitor General and as a shadow Business Minister. In government, he was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice.

My predecessor's proudest achievements came from the work that he delivered locally. His work on tackling flooding from the River Great Ouse saw significant flood alleviation projects delivered in St Ives and the Hemingfords, and further upstream in Godmanchester. That work has saved thousands from the crippling impact of flood damage on homes and businesses. I intend to build on that, delivering further flooding solutions across the constituency for villages such as Alconbury, Abbots Ripton, Wistow, Kimbolton, Broughton and Earith.

My predecessor is also rightly proud of his work in facilitating the delivery of both the A14 and the A428—road infrastructure projects that have transformed travel across Cambridgeshire, and stand to greatly enhance the region in its position at the tip of the UK innovation corridor. The development has set the conditions for Huntingdon's future growth, offering the opportunity for better jobs and taking advantage of the Cambridge cluster and expansion across the region, meaning that Huntingdon can be a business hub in its own right, not just a dormitory town for London and Cambridge.

Despite the growth that Huntingdon has seen over the past 60 years, first via the post-war London overspill and now via expansive development, the constituency is still characterised by its thriving towns and vibrant villages. From the market towns of Huntingdon and St Ives to our rural villages, from Sawtry to Somersham, Houghton to Hamerton, Covington to Colne and Pidley to Perry—and three dozen others that will not stretch to my tortured alliteration—each has their own character and identity. Huntingdonshire is a region with a rich history, and one that it will be a privilege to steward.

That history extends to some of my other predecessors. Many Members will be aware that Huntingdon is the seat of a former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, who is still held in the highest regard across the constituency. It was an honour to receive his endorsement during the recent election campaign. Famously, it is also the former seat of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell was the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon in 1628 for just over a year until Charles I dissolved Parliament. Records show that he made just one speech in that time—so far, so equal.

It is clear that Huntingdon expects a certain level of stature from its Members of Parliament. Notable as Sir John Major and Oliver Cromwell surely are, arguably they are not Huntingdon's most famous product. It is not even the celebrated diarist Samuel Pepys, who attended Huntingdon grammar school. In fact, that accolade should be awarded to a lunch-time staple that everyone is familiar with; one that everyone has a favourite version of; and one that some Members may well have had for lunch this very day.

John Montagu, three times First Lord of the Admiralty, Postmaster General and Secretary of State, is not notable for his political career or his colourful social life. John Montagu, whose family home was Hinchingbrooke House in Huntingdon, is best known today—somewhat arcanely—by his title and the moniker bestowed upon

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

his favourite snack to consume during long sessions at the card table. Such was the popularity of said snack that other card players also wished to order it. They would cry, "I'll have the same as Sandwich." It is obvious where this is going. John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich, was not prepared to break from the card table to eat, so would ask his servants to bring him slices of salted beef between two pieces of toasted bread. Yes, among its formidable political alumni, Huntingdon can also lay claim to a genuine global culinary revolution, described by *The Wall Street Journal* no less as Britain's "biggest contribution to gastronomy". Huntingdon is the birthplace of the modern sandwich—every day is a school day.

I digress. Huntingdon's rich history is also characterised by an inextricable link to service via its long relationship with military aviation, initially through the Royal Flying Corps and subsequently during the second world war through RAF Bomber Command's Pathfinder force and the United States army air force's 303rd bombardment group. On 4 July 1942, the US eighth air force flew the first American mission over Nazi-occupied Europe from RAF Molesworth.

Latterly, during the cold war, RAF Alconbury saw the US air force provide covert high-altitude reconnaissance along the East German border in a new variant of its famed U-2 spy plane, in addition to providing battlefield damage assessment in the event of a nuclear strike. Most of that base is now Huntingdon's newest housing estate, Alconbury Weald—surely the only housing development in the country with fully functional nuclear decontamination and washdown facilities. RAF Warboys, RAF Upwood and RAF Brampton have all since disappeared, but the constituency still retains those links. RAF Alconbury and RAF Molesworth are still operated by the United States air force, and RAF Wyton is on the cutting edge of our defence intelligence capability. Those links carry through into the constituency itself and it is striking just how many veterans have made their home within its boundaries. One in nine households within Huntingdon are home to a veteran, a staggering number when compared with other constituencies and a community that, as a British Army veteran myself, I am proud to represent as their Member of Parliament—even if to many of those RAF veterans I am just a Pongo.

I know well how important it is to support our veterans' community and to commit to improving veterans' welfare. Having undergone the process myself, I know that the transition from service to civilian life has its challenges, and there are many stories of both success and failure. I served on a veterans advisory and pensions committee and know well how important it is to ensure that veterans are able to access the services they need. Veterans' identity cards have helped to open those pathways for many who would otherwise struggle to evidence their service, but I hope the Government will look closely at how support itself is provided. Restructuring Veterans UK and creating a more comprehensive holistic offering, easing access via an overhauled veterans gateway, could streamline access to the welfare services that our veterans need.

While the cohort of veterans in this House is smaller than in the previous Parliament, it is now younger and sports Members on both sides who have more recent operational experience and, crucially, more recent experience of the often difficult post-military transition to a civilian life. Parliament is well-placed to champion veterans' welfare and, given the debt our democracy owes to those who have served so proudly, I hope we can collectively ensure that the finest armed forces in the world are treated here as the finest veterans in the world. I know Huntingdon's veterans will expect me to challenge the Government to meet that standard.

I am hugely proud of having been given this opportunity to serve Huntingdon, to be its champion both in Parliament and in the constituency. I look forward to meeting the challenges ahead.

8.46 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on a fantastic maiden speech and in particular the passion with which he talks about veterans and the need for more support for veterans.

I start by thanking the people of Nottingham East for electing me once again to represent them in Parliament. It remains the honour of my life to represent my home city. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who is a formidable champion for our city. She will be missed by the residents of Castle ward, which is now in my constituency following the boundary review.

What a contrast between this King's Speech and the last. For the first time in 14 years we have a set of policies that prioritise people's rights and wellbeing: policies that draw on the rich history of the Labour movement; policies to help protect the right to strike, to enhance the right to flexible working, and to end fire and rehire. We also have policies that echo some of the great achievements of previous Labour Governments, which recognise the value of owning and running services and infrastructure for the common good.

The failure of previous Conservative Governments to combat the climate crisis should terrify us all. We have so much catching up to do if we are to avert the chaos it threatens, so I welcome our Government's plans to speed up the transition to renewables through a publicly owned clean energy company. And with a Bill to bring rail services back into public ownership, I hope to see far less regularly those chilling words: "rail replacement bus service".

I am also relieved to see the return of some policies that successive Conservative Governments promised but never delivered: a Bill that will end no-fault evictions and improve renters' rights; and another that will ban so-called conversion "therapy" once and for all. I have heard from survivors the horrific impact these hate-fuelled conversion practices have had on their lives. To finally end them, it is right that such a Bill is trans-inclusive and it must be loophole-free. It is time to challenge the confected moral panic that is harming LGBTQ+ people, in particular the trans community. This is not the 1980s and we are not going back there. Instead of pitting trans rights against women's rights, our Government have an opportunity to demonstrate what improving women's safety actually looks like through delivering on our promise to halve violence against women and girls. The constant harassment on our streets and the hidden abuse in our homes is what we need to prevent, not trans people using the bathroom they feel most comfortable in.

The Conservative party has made our society poorer, more unequal and more authoritarian. From the 4.3 million children forced to live in poverty—more than one in three in Nottingham East—to the destruction of our public services and the damage to our democratic system, our country is in crisis. The laws that allowed these things to happen in the first place belong in the dustbin of history. We should start by scrapping the two-child benefit cap, which would immediately lift 300,000 children out of poverty.

This election delivered a historic victory for our party. Our regular meetings of east midlands Labour MPs used to be quite lonely affairs; well, they are not any more! I welcome my new hon. Friends to their places—their victories are justly deserved—but this was also a historic election for other reasons that we cannot afford to overlook. Disillusionment with politics is providing fertile ground for those who wish to divide us, and if we are to keep the far right from gaining further ground, status quo politics will not be enough. Tweaks to a failed neoliberal economic system will not deliver the improvements in living standards that people need, nor will they prepare us for the challenges of the future. With a historic victory, we have a historic responsibility to redistribute wealth and power into people's hands so that they feel the difference a Labour Government can make. The measures in the King's Speech are important first steps in that direction, but let us turn them into bold strides in the coming months and years.

I could not finish my first speech in the new Parliament without highlighting the unbearable situation in Gaza. Palestinians need a ceasefire now; indeed, they needed one nine months ago. I welcome the shift in my party's position over recent months, and I welcome the restoration of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, but when British weapons are continuing to be used in contravention of international law—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. The hon. Lady's time is up.

8.51 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is an honour to return to the House and to represent residents of this new constituency.

Constituents tell me that the issues that matter to them most are health and social care, rural affairs, housing and local services. About 2.5 million people are out of work with long-term sickness, so the challenge for this Government is to fix the health and care crisis, because a healthy economy requires a healthy NHS. This new Parliament presents an opportunity to work collaboratively to fix many of the issues plaguing my constituents.

There is a dental provision cavity in Somerset. There are no dentists in Glastonbury and Somerton taking on new NHS patients. One practice in Street has not had an NHS dentist in post for 18 months, although the job has been advertised continuously. I am sure that all Members have heard many heartbreaking stories from people suffering in dental agony. I recently spoke to Ian from Langport, who told me that he was unable to access the crucial NHS healthcare that he needs. His only option is private dental treatment, which will cost him more than £3,000. For Ian and for so many others, this is simply unaffordable. It is no wonder that residents are left open-mouthed when they hear that £8 million was underspent on NHS dentistry in Somerset last year alone. NHS dental contacts need reform urgently, and the recruitment crisis must be unblocked.

People are also waiting longer to see a GP. Last year the number of four-week waits rose by 49% in Somerset. The number of GPs must increase in order to guarantee patients the right to see a GP within a week, or within 24 hours if the situation is urgent. By improving local frontline services, we will reduce pressure on our hospitals. I was delighted to visit a rural health hub during the last Parliament, and I call on the Government to maintain support for such hubs because they have proved that they offer flexible and accessible healthcare provision for our rural and farming communities.

This week is Farm Safety Week, and it marks the 10th anniversary of the Farm Safety Foundation, an organisation that I am proud to work alongside to highlight the key challenges faced by farmers and farm workers every day. People working in agriculture are 21 times more likely to be injured at work compared with the national average, while 95% of farmers under 40 agreed that poor mental health was the biggest problem facing the industry today. The agricultural sector is crucial to the rural economy, and farming is vital to UK food security, but inflationary pressures continue to damage farm businesses, and the mismanaged transition from the basic payment scheme to environmental land management schemes is forcing many farmers out of business.

Food security also requires fair access to international markets, but the last Government's botched trade deals damaged that. Those deals undermine our nation's health and our environmental and animal welfare standards, and they must urgently be renegotiated. To protect the rural economy, there needs to be fairness in the food chain, and the Groceries Code Adjudicator needs more teeth. That would support our farmers and protect consumers from unfair price rises.

Glastonbury and Somerton is home to some of the lowest-lying land in the country, so a serious commitment to food security requires a robust approach to flood management. Of course, agricultural land will always play a vital role in preventing flood damage to urban areas, but this cannot be at the expense of agricultural businesses, which need to be properly compensated for the sacrifices they make. Ensuring that water is managed correctly also means managing the nutrient load of rivers and lakes. We require legislation to ensure that nutrients enrich and improve our soils, rather than being leached away into our rivers, which adds to the pollution crisis.

Making such reforms would unlock the 18,000 homes in Somerset that already have planning permission and are currently waiting to be built. The new Government have pledged to make that possible, and I welcome the new Secretary of State for Housing's recent commitments on this issue. I eagerly wait to hear the Government's plans, because there is a serious shortage of homes and a solution is desperately needed. However, I am clear that homes must be built in the right places and to the best possible environmental standards, and they must be delivered with the infrastructure that communities so desperately need. After years of an out-of-touch Conservative Government taking us all for granted, I am looking forward to having the opportunity to work together to deliver the ambitious changes we desperately need.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Lizzi Collinge to make her maiden speech.

8.56 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been preceded by many wonderful first speeches, particularly from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) and my fellow Cumbrian representative, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), to whom I say, "Areet, marra?"

I would like to start my first speech by paying tribute to my predecessor, David Morris. I know he knocked on a lot of Ministers' doors to get funding for Eden Project Morecambe, and I thank him for it. I made a solemn promise to him that I would deliver Eden Project Morecambe and make it work for local people.

Thanks to boundary changes, I have two other predecessors. Morecambe and Lunesdale has gained a tract of beautiful Westmorland that was formerly represented by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I know from speaking to his former constituents that the hon. Member is highly regarded and leaves some big boots to fill.

I also gained Lower Lune Valley ward from my good friend and mentor, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith). When I joined the Labour party in 2014 after the birth of my first child, my hon. Friend invited me for a brew. I thought this was a very kind gesture. Little did I know what she had in store for me. I hope she now feels that the aching arms she got from my particularly enormous newborn were well worth it. I would also like to pay tribute to the Labour Women's Network and the 50:50 Parliament campaign for their tireless work and collective efforts to see more women Members elected.

I would be remiss if I did not mention my predecessor, Geraldine Smith, who is extremely well regarded in the constituency. And what a constituency it is. Morecambe and Lunesdale is definitely the most beautiful constituency in the country. From the golden sands of Middleton, through the beautiful art deco buildings and stunning sunsets of Morecambe, up the lush Lune valley, across the Arnside and Silverdale national landscape, and into the wild beauty of Westmorland, you would be hard pushed to find a better place to live or work. My constituency has a diverse set of towns and villages, all with their own needs and fantastically strong communities. Their differences should be respected and celebrated. Where their needs overlap, often the solutions need to be tailored to their specific circumstances. In constituencies such as Morecambe and Lunesdale, one size does not fit all, so as our new Government deliver their ambitious programme of national renewal, I will ensure that the voices of all my communities are heard.

My aim is to be a good constituency MP. For me, there is no more honourable ambition, and I am extremely grateful to all the people who supported me and enabled me to have that honour. In His Majesty's most Gracious Speech, we heard about the Government's plan to reform our bus system, and as a proud member of the Lancaster District Bus Users Group, I welcome that warmly. I also warmly welcome the new Government's dedication to farming and rural communities. In his contribution in this place last week, the Secretary of State set out a new deal for farmers, action on water pollution and plans to tackle the nature emergency. Speaking of nature, in Morecambe the shrimps are not only part of the local fauna, and a local delicacy that comes highly recommended, but the local football team, and I look forward to delivering on my promise to them of a new independent football regulator.

Before joining this Chamber, I served as a Lancashire county councillor for eight years, and in that time I have specialised in health and social care and served on our health scrutiny committee. I am sure that Members across the Chamber will agree that we expect the highest standards of care for our constituents, so I pay tribute to the many patients and health campaigners who have worked so hard to ensure safe, equitable care for all. Many a health and care leader in Lancashire and South Cumbria has met me across a committee table. I hope that they found me a fair, if sometimes firm, scrutineer.

I am a humanist. Humanists are people who shape our lives in the here and now, because we believe it is the only life we have, and what is politics if not shaping lives in the here and now? Humanists try to treat everyone we come across with warmth, understanding and respect. We believe that we humans have everything we need: logic, reason, evidence, and empathy to make good, ethical decisions. It is these values that I hope to bring to my role in decision making in this place, so I welcome our Government's focus on service, integrity and honesty. If we are to rebuild trust in politics, we must adhere to those principles rigorously, and I am sure that Members across the Chamber will do so.

Finally, I dedicate this speech to my family: my mum and dad, who brought me and my sister Hannah up with good morals and lots of love; my husband Miles for always having my back and taking on an unfair share of the family duties, alongside a full-time role with the NHS; my kids for putting up with mummy being away so often; and my grandma and grandad, who we lost in 2022. Grandma, remembering her parents' hard upbringing—they experienced sometimes abject poverty—always voted Labour, much to the annoyance of my working-class Tory grandad. When I was first elected to the county council, grandad told me, "Ey Liz, I'm reyt proud of you. It's a pity you're on the wrong side!" My grandad might not have been a Labour supporter, but he did believe in service, and I look forward to working with Members across the House to serve our country and my people in Morecambe and Lunesdale.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): A maiden speech: I call Alex Easton.

9.3 pm

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to say well done to the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for her maiden speech. Congratulations! I rise today to express my heartfelt gratitude to the electorate of North Down for the tremendous privilege of electing me to represent them in the House of Commons. I am so humbled and privileged, and I pledge before God to serve them to the best of my ability. I will always put you first. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the work of my predecessor, Dr Stephen Farry. I wish him every success in his future endeavours.

I am a proud Ulsterman, and anyone who knows Ulstermen and Ulsterwomen will know that we are very generous and love to meet new people, so I would like to take this opportunity to invite everyone to visit North Down. It is the best part of the United Kingdom to live, work and invest in. Our stunning coastline features the beautiful city of Bangor and Crawfordsburn country park, alongside historical sites such as Bangor abbey and Grey Point fort. North Down is also home to exceptional golf courses, including the Holywood golf club, where the brilliant Rory McIlroy honed his skills from the age of seven. With excellent road and rail access to Belfast, North Down offers a perfect blend of natural beauty and modern amenities. Please come and visit; you will be welcome. Maybe not all at once, though.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the distinguished right hon. Member for Leeds South (Hilary Benn) in his new role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I wish him every success.

I fully support the plans laid out in the King's Speech that aim to deliver economic prosperity and kick-start growth. The partnership approach with the Northern Ireland Assembly is particularly welcome, and I am encouraged by the figures from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs showing that Northern Ireland has recorded the fastest year-on-year job growth for the second consecutive month, significantly outperforming other parts of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, I am encouraged to note that median monthly wage growth in Northern Ireland is outpacing that in other parts of the United Kingdom, positioning us fifth among the 12 UK regions. It is imperative that we build on this economic success and translate it into improved quality of life and regeneration in North Down.

We must also be mindful of the fact that most of Northern Ireland's trade is across the vital east-west axis with Great Britain, alongside the important, albeit lesser, north-south corridor with the Republic of Ireland. According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, sales and exports along the east-west corridor between Great Britain and Northern Ireland were valued at £12.8 billion in 2021. In comparison, sales and exports between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland totalled just £5.2 billion. This highlights why the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is invaluable and should be cherished, as it enhances economic quality of life for all our people and communities across Northern Ireland.

We can look to our Ulster Scots heritage in Donaghadee and Millisle as prime examples of outstanding development, spearheaded in the early 17th century by two distinguished figures: Sir James Hamilton, first Viscount Claneboye, and Sir Hugh Montgomery, first Viscount Montgomery. Their legacy should serve as inspiration for the ongoing economic development of Donaghadee and North Down, particularly in areas of industry and infrastructure.

However, not all is well in my constituency. The Queen's Parade project in Bangor has seen Queen's Parade lying derelict for decades. Our minor injuries unit has been closed, and we have no open police station inquiry offices—I bet no one else in this Chamber has no open police station inquiry offices in their constituency.

People in my constituency cannot see their GP, the roads are full of potholes and there is a lack of social housing and new starter homes for young families who want to start on the housing ladder. I really hope that this Government will help to improve my constituents' lives.

It is essential to note that the Northern Ireland protocol is fundamentally flawed. It creates a de facto border in the Irish sea, undermining the integrity of the UK by separating Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. This arrangement has led to increased bureaucracy, hurdles and trade barriers, disrupting economic stability and supply chains. Furthermore, it has caused political and social tensions in Northern Ireland, raising legitimate concerns among Unionists about their place in the United Kingdom. I contend that by prioritising the EU's regulatory framework over the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland to be a full part of the UK, the protocol disregards democratic principles and subjects us to foreign laws. It needs to be changed. It needs to go.

Finally, I want to mention my parents. My mum and dad were killed in a fire at their home in Bangor last year, and it caused a lot of heartache for me. I want to say that my dad believed in me. After four attempts to get to Westminster, I finally succeeded. Dad, I hope I made you proud.

When you have everything taken away from you like that, it makes you realise just how important your family are. It makes you see everything that you have taken for granted throughout your life, such as the health service, which has always been there for us. I appreciate the people in the health service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland who tried to help my mum and dad—I so much appreciate you. I also pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, who did everything in their power to help my mum and dad. I just want to let you know that I appreciate everything you have done for my family. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. It is my intention to start the wind-ups at around 9.30 pm.

9.9 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I speak for the whole House when I say to the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) that I know his father would definitely be proud of him today, and of the work that he will go on to do in the House. He should take that with him in every step in this place. His parents would be, and are, proud of him. I congratulate him on his maiden speech.

I thank my constituents in Blackpool South for re-electing me as their Member of Parliament for the second time in as many months. It feels a lot nicer speaking from the Government Benches than from the Opposition Benches. Hopefully I will do my constituents proud. The legislation announced last week is important to my constituents, who, after 14 years of Tory rule, live in the second most deprived constituency in the UK. They have been deprived of opportunities, decent healthcare, quality housing and safety. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about some of those issues on their behalf today.

Many colleagues in this House will have visited my constituency at some point in their life, perhaps for a party conference, a childhood holiday or a cheeky weekend away. Blackpool is not a place people pass through, and the chaos of the railways under the last Government

[Chris Webb]

has left us abandoned at the end of the line. I am relieved that this Government plan to bring our railways back into public ownership. A reliable and affordable service will allow my constituents to access better opportunities.

The King's Speech gives the rest of the House the opportunity to recognise Lancashire's potential for growth. Like our Greater Manchester, Merseyside and West Yorkshire neighbours, Lancashire would benefit greatly from a devolution deal, and an elected metro mayor who has powers over transport, roads, urban regeneration, skills and housing. I will work alongside my fellow Lancashire Members in this House and council leaders to secure the best devolution possible for our county.

This morning, the Environment Agency issued a pollution warning across my constituency's coastline and advised against entering our waters. This is the fifth day since my re-election that such a warning has been issued. That is unacceptable. It not only threatens tourism but my constituents' health, wellbeing and sense of local pride. Local campaign group Fylde Coast Against Sewage deserves recognition for its hard work testing the waters of our shores. The water special measures Bill will strengthen the powers of the regulator, so that Blackpool residents can hope to once again reap the benefits of our greatest natural asset.

Though the town has served the working classes with entertainment, work in Blackpool is precarious, and often poorly paid, insecure and seasonal. The employment rights Bill, which will ban exploitative practices and enhance employment rights, will transform the lives of working people in Blackpool, just as the former Labour Government did for my family. As a fellow working-class northerner, the Deputy Prime Minister knows that she has my full support for her pioneering new deal for working people. Thousands of my constituents are set to receive a pay rise that will help lift them out of poverty.

I am pleased that legislation will be brought forward to strengthen community policing and give the police greater powers to deal with antisocial behaviour, as well as strengthen support for victims. Reclaim Blackpool Map is a grassroots project run by women in the town, highlighting the prevalence of public sexual harassment. As a white ribbon ambassador for over five years, I have been working to educate men, young people and boys in my community. I know that the new Minister for safeguarding will work tirelessly to tackle violence against women and girls, and she has my full support.

Blackpool is a place of great resilience, where people muster to fight against the odds. That was tangible in March 2019 when I joined thousands of fans returning to Bloomfield Road after the successful boycott campaign to remove the corrupt owners of Blackpool FC. Huge credit goes to Blackpool Supporters Trust, whose campaign restored integrity, pride and professionalism to the club. The football governance Bill is a step in the right direction towards returning the game to the fans who make it what it is. I cannot talk about football fans without acknowledging the 97 who will finally get justice under this Government's Hillsborough law.

In conclusion, there will be many measures of success for this Government, but one important symbolic one will be the success of Blackpool. As a Member of Parliament, I will be fighting to ensure that the people of Blackpool South are no longer at the back of the queue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Victoria Collins to make her maiden speech.

9.15 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) for his passionate speech and join him in his comments about the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton), to whom I pass on my massive congratulations and say that I am sure that his father would be extremely proud of his position here and of the public service that he will give.

I stand here exactly 50 years since my mum came to the UK from Malaysia. She came here for an education and stayed to build a business and raise a family. As I helped in my mum's shop, my parents instilled in me values of community, tolerance and perseverance—something that I hope will guide me during my time as an MP. One of my predecessors, Bim Afolami, also proudly shared his story as a child of immigrants in search of a good education. He brought the values that he learned to his role as MP for Hitchin and Harpenden.

It is a real honour to be the first MP for the brand new seat of Harpenden and Berkhamsted. More than just two towns, the constituency is a rich tapestry that fills the north-west corner of Hertfordshire with history, natural beauty, culture and innovation. We are a collection of proud and vibrant communities with four beautiful chalk streams and the Grand Union canal tying us together like silver threads. The River Bulbourne runs through Berkhamsted, where the Crown of England was surrendered to William the Conqueror in 1066, and its river course would go on to fill the three moats of Berkhamsted castle. The River Gade starts near Little Gaddesden, which neighbours the Ashridge estate—somewhere Members may have seen in films and dramas such as "Robin Hood", "The Crown" and, of course, "Bridget Jones's Diary".

Members of the House are most welcome to join me locally at the Rex cinema or peruse one of the largest film collections in the world at the British Film Institute's national archive.

As we swoop across the constituency, the River Ver exits above ground near the village of Markyate, traversed by the Roman Watling Street, and continues through Flamstead and Redbourn. Our final chalk stream, the River Lea, flows through Harpenden and Wheathampstead, a Domesday village that has been home to two Prime Ministers.

Not only have these precious chalk streams witnessed historic events and the lives, hopes and dreams of countless local people, but, with only around 200 of them in the world, they are of rare ecological importance; they are known as England's rainforests. Sadly, however, we have seen their decline, as sewage has been pumped into the waterways, with the River Ver, having finally recovered its flow, seeing more than 2,500 hours of sewage discharge this year alone.

The same fate goes for the Grand Union canal, where people can jump out at Tring. Although they may not be able to see zebras or cassowaries in Tring park any more, they can visit them in our natural history museum. People in our part of Hertfordshire are proud of their natural landscapes, and I join them in campaigning to protect our environment and tackle the climate crisis.

The other side of our local communities blossomed from the industrial revolution, which brought another type of silver track—the train lines. Rumour has it that some of the original commuters are still waiting for that rail replacement bus service. Britain initially led the world in railways, but the decline of our public transport feels as if it gathers pace year on year. Bus services that are vital to our towns and rural communities have been cut by more than half in Hertfordshire in recent years, and that is not to mention the cuts to local authorities that have impacted other vital services.

We are not immune to the health and social care crisis, either, as local people struggle to get the care they need, wait weeks to see a GP or cannot find an NHS dentist. Indeed, one of my other predecessors, Mike Penning, who served Hemel Hempstead for 19 years, campaigned tirelessly on healthcare for the area. I aim to continue as a champion of ensuring that local people get the healthcare they need, and closer to home.

Local people have continued the enterprising spirit of the area, which still thrives today, from building e-bikes to distilling gin, creating start-ups and innovating in agriculture at Rothamsted Research, with its thriving agritech hub. Indeed, our greatest assets are our local people—open-minded, tolerant, hard-working and compassionate. It is for them, and thanks to them, that I am here, and I will always put them first.

Given the picture often painted of our corner of Hertfordshire, Members might think that we are solely an affluent commuter area, but that is far from the reality for everyone. So many families, individuals and local businesses are struggling to make ends meet as bills continue to rise. I remember the struggles that my family faced when the economy turned and business got tough. That is why I am passionate about supporting local families, tackling inequality, and not just the vital local businesses that we value today but the entrepreneurs and enterprises of tomorrow.

Standing here, in the most diverse Parliament that we have ever seen, we see that we have a real opportunity for change. We must act now to rebuild the trust in politicians and politics that has sadly been eroded in recent years. For me, that means putting local people first—the people of Harpenden, Berkhamsted, Tring and our villages, from Long Marston to Jersey Farm, and from Ringshall to Sandridge. Thinking back to where my story began, it is a privilege to be in this place, representing a story that so many others in our country have some share in. My mother came to this country in search of opportunity, and through her own hard work she found it. Through everything that I do here, I want to ensure that the same opportunity is available for all who seek it out, and I will continue to be guided by those values of community, tolerance and perseverance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Luke Akehurst to make his maiden speech.

9.21 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) on a fine speech, and a very impressive description of her constituency and her motivations for coming to this place.

It has taken me some time to get elected to the House. I first stood in a general election back in 2001, so no one can accuse me of being a young man in a rush. I am humbled to finally be here, having done some other things in party politics along the way. I pay tribute to my late mum and dad, who inspired me to get involved in politics. They gave me my Labour values, and I am sorry that they just missed out on the chance to see me get here. I also thank my family for their huge support, including lots of campaigning and lots of patience, as my speech has come rather late in this debate.

I thank the electors of North Durham for voting for me to represent them in this House. I promise that I will always fight for their interests, and I could not want to represent a finer constituency. I follow into the House the right hon. Kevan Jones. He is an extremely tough act to follow, and I wish him well both in overcoming his health troubles and in his new role, having been elevated to the other place. Kevan was elected MP for North Durham in 2001, and served the constituency and this House with distinction for 23 years. He was utterly committed to the defence and security of our country, serving as a Defence Minister, with multiple stints on the Defence Committee. He was the longest-serving member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, a vice-president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and a commissioner of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. That is highly appropriate, given the number of veterans in the North Durham constituency—particularly people associated with the Durham Light Infantry.

I am sure that in the other place Kevan will continue to work on defence and other issues, such as the sub-postmasters' campaign for justice. His continued work on the Horizon redress advisory board will give reassurance to victims. Kevan will continue to pursue an outcome for sub-postmasters who used the Capture software in the 1990s, which is currently the subject of an independent investigation that was commissioned by the Government earlier this year. Many hon. Members will know that Kevan is a keen photographer, often capturing and sharing the beauty of North Durham. Countless voters and local organisations have told me how much they have been helped by Kevan. He is held in high regard not just across this House but across North Durham.

I have been elected in a long line of Labour Members, all, as far as I can discern, from the same moderate tradition in the party that I stand in, and including distinguished Front Benchers such as Giles Radice and Jack Lawson, who served as Attlee's Secretary of State for War in the closing days of world war two. The Chester-le-Street part of my constituency has a unique distinction in the history of the Labour party, having returned a Labour Member to the House continuously since 1906—so no pressure on me to keep winning at all. However, that long Labour history does not mean that North Durham is a safe seat. In every characteristic other than never having been lost, it is a red wall seat

[Luke Akehurst]

and has been electorally competitive in the last two contests. Indeed, this most recent election campaign was rather livelier than I would have preferred.

Chester-le-Street is only one part of North Durham under its current boundaries, however, with the other major town being Stanley. The constituency is rural—surprisingly so. Aside from the two main towns, there are numerous villages. I may get into trouble for not listing some of them, but I will try to list the major ones: Sacriston, Tantobie, Tanfield, Beamish, Bournmoor, Lumley, Pelton, Pelton Fell, Craghead, Ouston, Lanchester, Burnhope, Castleside and Annfield Plain are just some of them. I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), who previously represented Lanchester, Burnhope and Castleside in the North West Durham constituency in the last Parliament, and who has been most courteous and helpful in handing over responsibility for those fine communities.

I urge hon. Members to visit North Durham. As well as fine towns and villages, it has stunning countryside and attractions including Beamish, the world-famous open-air museum that brings the history of north-east England to life, and Durham county cricket club's Riverside ground.

Kevan always described North Durham as a rural constituency with urban problems, and that remains the case. Mining is at the heart of the history and previous economy of North Durham. Almost every village has a pit wheel memorial; many also have memorials to terrible mining disasters, and many have lodge banners that are paraded at the Durham gala. The decline of the industry over many decades and its eventual destruction in the 1980s, along with the closure of other major local employers, left terrible economic and social scars and a sense that some communities in the constituency have been left behind. Levelling up, if it reached anywhere, did not reach the proud communities that elected me.

That brings me to the local importance of the topic of today's debate: economy, welfare and public services. North Durham needs economic stability and growth. It is a travesty that there are so many families dependent on food banks. It needs new skilled and well-paid jobs in the industries of the future. It needs investment and procurement decisions by the Government to be targeted at creating jobs where they are most needed.

North Durham needs a fairer distribution of public spending. Changes to the local government funding formula over the last 14 years have been unfair and removed resources from authorities such as Durham county council that are dealing with the highest levels of deprivation, and hampered their ability to deliver effective local services. That urgently needs to be changed in the next local government funding settlement.

Capital spending on public services is also urgently needed. On Friday, I visited Sacriston academy, a primary school, and was horrified to find excellent teachers delivering high-quality education, but in a setting that was literally falling down, with ceilings held up by scaffolding joists and whole classrooms, built in 1910—indeed, famous former pupils include Bobby Robson—now unusable due to water penetration through the ceilings and walls. Local children deserve so much better.

Public transport in the constituency is not fit for purpose. We need more frequent and reliable buses and more trains stopping at Chester-le-Street. We also need the economic regeneration of local town centres. The once thriving Front Streets of Chester-le-Street and Stanley are run down and need new life.

I thank the House for listening to me today. I look forward to contributing to debates here and to fighting tenaciously for the cause of North Durham and its people and the wider north-east.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. I apologise to any Back Benchers who have not been able to get in, but I am afraid we now have to move to the wind-ups, and I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

9.29 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) on an excellent maiden speech that highlighted the values of equality and fairness—principles that many of us can agree on—and on demonstrating his stamina by being the last Member to be called. With that level of stamina, I am sure that he will give the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) a run for his money.

It is an honour to sum up for the Liberal Democrats. Once again, I extend a warm welcome to new Ministers and to our country's first female Chancellor. I also congratulate new Members from all parties who gave their maiden speeches today. Their speeches did not disappoint; they were poignant, funny and bursting with passion. When I gave my maiden speech in 2019, I was very proud to say that St Albans has more pubs per square mile than anywhere else in Britain, and today's maiden speeches have given us enough historical nuggets for a maiden speech pub quiz—maybe I will write it on the train journey home.

I am pleased that the topics of economy, welfare and public services have been brought together. Why? Well, during the general election, the Liberal Democrats put health and care front and centre of our campaign, and we did so for two reasons. First, it was the No. 1 issue that constituents raised with us on the doorstep. Every single person is impacted by the crisis in health and social care. Secondly, we know that health creation and wealth creation are two sides of the same coin. We cannot have a thriving economy if our population is sick.

We Liberal Democrats set out an ambitious agenda during the general election, and we are pleased about some of the pledges in the King's Speech. We are pleased that there will be reform of the Mental Health Act 1983, which is incredibly long overdue, and a number of other public health measures—especially on the protection of children's health. However, we in this House all know that it is equally important to tackle the social and commercial determinants of health, and tackling child poverty is just as important as tackling the aggressive marketing of vapes and energy drinks. That is why scrapping the two-child benefit limit is in our Liberal Democrat amendment.

It is also important that we focus on access to health and social care services. People must be able to access the care that they need when they need it. That is where the Liberal Democrats want to see more ambition. We need to fix our crumbling hospitals, we need mental

health hubs in communities, we need to boost our GP numbers, we need to guarantee that people have a legal right to see their GP within seven days, and we need to put an end to dental deserts.

We all know someone who has had cancer and died, or someone who has had cancer and survived, but in every single year from 2015, the Conservative Government missed their cancer treatment target. We cannot allow that to continue. That is why we Liberal Democrats wanted there to be a legal right—through a statutory duty on Ministers—for this House and the public to hold Ministers to account on ensuring that people can see a GP and get their cancer treatment when they need it.

We Liberal Democrats will also be unapologetic and unrelenting in our focus on social care. We have campaigned for free personal care, and we will continue to do so. Free personal care is good for people's independence and dignity, and for the NHS. It would also enable the many millions of unpaid carers, who currently pick up the pieces of a broken social care system, to up their hours, do more work, return to work and boost our economy. Health creation and wealth creation are two sides of the same coin.

We look forward to seeing the Government's employment rights Bill with interest. We Liberal Democrats have campaigned for improved pay for care workers, including by proposing a higher minimum wage starting at £2 more, but that has to come with improved investment so that local government no longer has to rob Peter to pay Paul. We can no longer suppress the pay of experienced care workers to fund improved pay for new starters. We must stop ripping the heart out of a retention strategy just to tackle recruitment. We have to do both.

The King's Speech was also an opportunity to go further on care. It was an opportunity to introduce paid carer's leave, make care a protected characteristic, create a royal college of care workers, introduce measures to tackle the scandal of carer's allowance overpayments, and put in place a framework for cross-party talks that would finally put social care on a firm financial footing for the future. I recognise that the King's Speech is an opportunity for the Government to set out their priorities, but I hope very much that many of these ideas—particularly for fixing social care—may be announced in due course. As our party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), has said, the Liberal Democrats will continue to be the voice of carers in this Parliament.

If we want to boost the economy, we have to recognise that there are now several stages to people's lives and careers. There has to be lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling from cradle to grave, but we still have to make sure that every child has the best start in life. Under the current system, many children—particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities—are put at a big disadvantage from the get-go, and a huge part of that is SEND funding. As one quick example, my area of Hertfordshire is one of the poorest funded education authorities for SEND. Under the Conservatives' funding formula, it would take 15 years for children in Hertfordshire to catch up with those in neighbouring Buckinghamshire, itself one of the poorest funded education authorities. That is an entire generation of lost young children and lost education because of a Government spreadsheet formula. It is just another unforgivable legacy of the Conservative Government, and I implore the Labour Government to look at this issue with fresh eyes and real urgency.

Another engine of our economy is small businesses and high streets. Many speakers this afternoon, including many people giving their maiden speech, have talked about the high streets and local businesses that are the glue that hold our communities together. I would like to push the Government to go further, particularly on reforming business rates. Some people may remember that in the aftermath of the mini-Budget, the ex-Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), had spent the summer campaigning for a complete overhaul of the business rates system. On his first day in the job, I challenged him on whether he would in fact review that system. He gave me a wry smile from across the Chamber and said that he regretted campaigning so hard for it from the Back Benches. That review was left in the "too hard" basket; it is part of a long list of challenges facing the Labour Government, unfortunately with a similar refrain, but I implore Labour Ministers not to do the same. Sitting in their in-tray will be the results of the high streets taskforce, which I am sure will confirm what we already know: that the business rates system is broken, crippling high streets—particularly heritage pubs—while Amazon warehouses are being given a tax break. That system is not the foundation of a fair economy.

To conclude, there are measures in the King's Speech that we welcome, but we want to see far greater ambition for our high streets, our children and our public services, particularly health and social care. We believe that our amendment to the Address goes some way towards addressing those things, and we urge Members to support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

9.37 pm

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I congratulate everybody who has made their maiden speech in this debate. It is a big moment in one's parliamentary career, but you are out the other side and nothing will be quite as traumatic as what you have experienced today. To go through them very briefly, I thank the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould), who told us that her great-grandfather—I think—came from Lithuania to set up a store in the middle of her constituency, which is her connection with it. The hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman) paid a very generous tribute to Mike Freer and spoke of the dangers and intimidation that he faced. She was also generous to Mrs Thatcher—she is clearly a very generous lady.

The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) paid tribute to Grant Shapps and his numerous and frequent Cabinet positions, as well as his commitment to Ukraine. The hon. Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh) paid tribute to the 190 Labour women MPs who are now in the House, as well as to Harriet Harman. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) managed to weave King John and A. E. Housman into his speech, and informed us that Hollywood is not a city on the west coast of the United States, but is actually within his constituency. If you want to see film stars, ladies and gentlemen, go to Bromsgrove.

[Mel Stride]

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) has the peculiarity of having three forebears who are still Members of this House. He was generous to each of them, which shows that he is a wise man and will go far. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) stressed the industrial and shipping heritage of his constituency, and how it was indeed bombarded by the Germans in world war one, but it gave as good as it got. My hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) praised his predecessor, Matt Hancock, of course focusing on racing and horses—although not, I noticed, on horseplay as such.

The hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) focused, with great pride, on the Hitachi Rail company in his constituency—shortly, I am afraid to tell him, to be seized by the Labour party and nationalised as part of its Government programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) stressed defence spending, the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake) leasehold reform and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) the importance of agriculture.

I was out of the Chamber for the speech of the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), and the Whip's note simply says, "He said that there was a cat rubbing his legs", or something to that effect. *[Laughter.]* Representing a highly rural constituency as I do, I know that strange things do occur, particularly late on those dull winter evenings.

The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) stressed the importance of children in care. The hon. Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden) referred to her constituency as the new "Haliwood", so another Hollywood reference there. I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) gave a very witty speech, and stressed the association with the RAF in his commitment to veterans. The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) paid tribute to David Morris and his support for the Eden project, and I was particularly pleased to see her do that.

The hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) made I think one of the most moving maiden speeches that we have heard in this House for a very long time. He spoke very movingly about his parents, and we all know what pride his dad would have had in the fact that he has been successful in his fourth attempt to join us here in the House of Commons. The hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) referenced the fact that a Roman road—Watling Street—runs through her constituency and spoke passionately about the importance of community and tolerance.

Finally, the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) spoke warmly of Kevan Jones, whom all of us who have been in this House for a while remember with great fondness, and the importance of skilled and well-paid jobs in his constituency. I hope that I have pretty much covered everybody and said the main things that needed saying.

Let us now turn to the debate itself, and it seems to me that the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), while I congratulate her warmly on being the first female Chancellor—I think that is a huge achievement and is to be very warmly welcomed—is, I am afraid, suffering from some level of amnesia. She appears to have forgotten the legacy that we have bequeathed to her. Inflation, which was up at over 10% last autumn, is now back to target. Mortgage rates are softening, real wages have been growing in each of the last 11 months and taxes have been coming down more recently under the previous Government. When it comes to debt, we were on target, as we handed over to the right hon. Lady, to see debt falling in line with her own fiscal target at the end of the fifth year, and we of course have the fastest growing economy in the G7.

One wonders where this amnesia is coming from, and it is of course nothing more than smoke and mirrors. It is to cover up the fact that the Chancellor is rolling the pitch to raise taxes. Against all the commitments she made during the general election, she will be raising those taxes in the autumn. It will not be because we have bequeathed her something of which she was not aware in advance. The IFS has made it very clear that the books were "open", as Paul Johnson said, for all to see.

When it comes to public services, we have a proud record. On education, we have the best readers in the western world. We have been going up the PISA scales for mathematics and sciences, something that did not happen under the last Labour Government. Crime has been halved, broadly speaking, across the period from 2010 to the present day. When it comes to work and welfare, we have a near-record level of employment, and we have a low level of unemployment. And economic inactivity is lower than in every single year under the last Labour Government. What was Labour's record? When they left office, unemployment was double the level that it is today. Under every single Labour Government in history, unemployment has been higher when they left office than when they came in. Most disgraceful of all is that youth unemployment was up 43% under the last Labour Government; under the last Conservative Government it was down by over 40%.

As for welfare, under Labour there were 1.4 million people languishing on long-term benefits for almost a decade. On pensions, we saw the 75p pension increase and the Gordon Brown raid on private pensions of £180 billion—from which the pension system never fully recovered. It is, therefore, no surprise that, under Labour, we ended up with the fourth highest level of pensioner poverty across Europe. Under Labour there were 1 million more people in absolute poverty after housing costs. There were 200,000 more pensioners in poverty and 100,000 more children in poverty under the last Labour Government than there are today.

We will be a responsible Opposition: we welcome the commitment to growth in the King's Speech; we welcome the commitment to building houses, as long as that is with sufficient local consent; we welcome the Budget responsibility Bill in principle; and we welcome the announcements that the Chancellor has made regarding pensions: consolidating pensions and ensuring that we get better returns for pensioners and that we invest in long-term pension capital.

But there are too many echoes in this King's Speech of the Labour of old. The nationalisation of the railways. The consolidation of GB Energy. The long hand of Government reaching—[Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] Labour Members cheer now but they won't be cheering in a few years' time. They have short memories; I remember

when the railways were nationalised and it was not a pretty situation. They are bringing forward French-style employment laws that will lead to less efficient businesses and to tribunals. They will be increasing the freedoms of trade unions, who are their paymasters. And they will be dispensing with minimum service levels; that will lead to more strikes and the inconvenience of the public, but certainly not greater growth.

What have we heard in the King's Speech on welfare, one of the biggest challenges of the modern age? Zip, nada, diddly squat—absolutely nothing from the Labour party. They talk about moving the National Careers Service from the Department for Education to the Department for Work and Pensions; well, I hardly think that will move the dial. Their back to work plan is named exactly as our back to work plan was that my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt) the shadow Chancellor and I launched last autumn, but it has nothing standing behind it—not the billions of pounds of support we put in place to encourage people to go into work and to transform lives.

All we have heard from those on the Government Benches is a denigration of our jobcentres; these are described as places of fear by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and by the Minister for employment the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern) as places that do not offer real help. What an insult to the tens of thousands of hard-working people up and down our country who go into those offices to help people improve their prospects and improve their lives. They are against what they call punitive sanctions; it will cost hundreds of millions of pounds to remove those and it will result in less engagement with the help that is available and diminish people's life chances. There have been no comments whatsoever from the Government Benches on our work capability assessment reforms, that according to the Office for Budget Responsibility will see 400,000 fewer people on long-term sickness benefits.

Labour opposed in poetry; they have to govern in prose. They have not even picked up the pen, but let me be clear: we made mistakes in government and we have paid the price at the ballot box, and it is right that my party now faces a period of reflection and does so with humility. The electorate has spoken, and we must listen. But that is not the same as saying that the vision that is Conservatism has died, even if of late it has been too often obscured. That vision still burns bright. It burns bright as a beacon of freedom, enterprise, opportunity and, yes, stability and hope in the face of—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. Will the shadow Secretary of State please curtail his remarks now?

Mel Stride: I commend our amendment to the House.

9.49 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): I have never seen the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) do a comic turn quite like that. Opposition clearly suits him, but if he wants to lead his party out of its catastrophic defeat, he will have to do a lot better.

I am honoured to close today's debate, not only as I am speaking from this side of the Dispatch Box for the first time, but after so many truly wonderful maiden speeches. Members from all parts of the House talked about the social, cultural and economic heritage of their constituencies and about the real challenges that their constituents face, but also their talents and potential for a brighter future, given that they have a Government who are on their side. There are too many Members to go through individually, especially on the Government Benches, but let me just say this: your constituents will be very proud of you, as will your friends and family. I say that especially to the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton). Members have spoken with passion and conviction, especially on the Government Benches, about the need for change and to make true on our manifesto promises, and that is what this Government will deliver.

This King's Speech turns the page on the last 14 years of chaos and decline, and it takes the first steps towards national renewal, delivering growth in every part of the country, tearing down the barriers to opportunity and repairing our public services through investment and reform. Growth is this Government's No. 1 priority, because it is the only way that we will improve prosperity, put more money into people's pockets and transform our public services. Our plan starts with economic stability through the fiscal lock and our Budget responsibility Bill, so that we never again repeat the mistakes of the last Conservative Government, who crashed the economy, leaving working people to pay a heavy price.

Our planning and infrastructure Bill will get Britain building again to deliver the homes and other infrastructure that our country needs. Our national wealth fund will unlock billions of pounds of private investment to support good jobs in clean energy and other growth industries of the future. The Department I am now privileged to lead is central to our growth and opportunity missions, through unlocking the potential of our pension system, getting people into work and on in their work and driving down poverty in every part of the country.

First, on pensions, people who have worked hard and saved all their lives deserve a decent income in retirement. Although the previous Government talked about the need for pension reform, in reality there was little action. In contrast, we have acted immediately. Our new pensions Bill will bring together all the different pension savings that people build up across their working lives and drive better value for money in pension schemes. These measures could help improve incomes in retirement and boost pension pots by more than £11,000. Our landmark pensions review, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, and led by the Minister for Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds) will go even further in unlocking investment in British businesses and improving outcomes for British pensioners.

The second way we will boost growth and unleash opportunity is by getting Britain working again. Last week's labour market statistics underline the truly dire inheritance we face. Britain is the only G7 country whose employment rate has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Some 9.4 million people are now economically inactive—either not in work, or not looking for work. That is one in five of the entire working age population.

Of those people, 2.8 million are locked out of the workplace due to poor health. That includes over-50s, often women with bad hips, knees and joints—I know about that only too well—and young people with mental

[Liz Kendall]

health problems, often lacking basic qualifications. One in eight of all our young people are not in education, employment or training. What a damning indictment of the last Government. But behind those statistics are real people, with real hopes and dreams, who were written off by the Tories, denied opportunities and support, and then blamed for the position they are in. Let me tell the House now that, under the new Labour Government, that will change.

Our plan to get Britain working will be a cross-Government effort to drive change and unleash opportunity in every corner of the country. We will create more good jobs in clean energy and through our modern industrial strategy. We will make work pay and improve the quality of work through our new deal for working people. We will cut NHS waiting times, improve mental health support and transform skills and childcare to tackle the root causes of the problem, and fix the foundations for work, not just paper over the cracks.

We will deliver fundamental change in the Department for Work and Pensions, too. First, we will overhaul jobcentres, bringing together Jobcentre Plus with the National Careers Service to create a new jobs and careers service to help more people get to work and get on in their work. Secondly, we will drive down economic inactivity through new local work, health and skills plans led by mayors and local areas, devolving responsibility and resources to provide the right support in one place, because the man—or even the woman—in Whitehall will never know what is best in Leicester, Lowestoft or Leeds.

We will also deliver our youth guarantee to ensure that every young person is earning or learning, because unlike Conservative Members we will never accept almost a million young people being written off before they have even begun. Under this Government, there will be obligations to engage with support, look for work and take jobs when they are offered, as there always have been since the original Beveridge report, but there will be no more divisive, derogatory rhetoric or claiming that people just think that they are too bluesy to work. I am in politics to solve problems, not to score cheap points and grab empty headlines that do nothing to tackle the problems in people's lives.

Alongside our plan to get Britain working again, we have taken immediate action to deliver our manifesto commitment for an ambitious strategy to tackle child poverty. I am proud that the last Labour Government lifted more than half a million children out of poverty. The contrast with the Conservatives could not be greater, with 700,000 more children growing up poor during their time in office. The fact that 4 million children are now living in poverty is a stain on our society. That is why, within a week of taking office, I called in child poverty experts and campaigners to help start work on our plans. It is why the Prime Minister announced our new ministerial taskforce to drive action across Government, underpinned by a new child poverty unit in the Cabinet Office. I will lead that work with our Education Secretary. As the Prime Minister announced, we will look at how to use all the levers at our disposal, including household income, employment, housing, children's health, education and childcare so that we drive up opportunity, drive down poverty and give all children the best start in life.

The Government were elected on a mandate for change, to change our economy so that it works for working people, to get our public services back on their feet and to transform opportunity by tearing down the barriers to success in every corner of this great nation. The King's Speech takes the first steps to rebuild Britain and make every part of our country better off, delivering real change to people's lives, giving them the chances and choices they deserve and to begin—finally—the task of restoring faith that politics can once again be a force for good.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 111, Noes 390.

Division No. 1] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Sir David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Gregory
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt

Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Joy Morrissey and Mike Wood

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Cummins, Judith
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Khan, Naushabah
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew

Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mr Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Anna Turley

Question accordingly negatived.

10.18 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER AND CONFERENCE RECESSES)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Tuesday 30 July 2024, do adjourn until Monday 2 September 2024; and at its rising on Thursday 12 September 2024, do adjourn until Monday 7 October 2024.—*(Lucy Powell.)*

Question agreed to.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS

Ordered,

That,

(1) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 14(10)—

(a) the ballot for private Members' bills shall be held on Thursday 5 September,

(b) ballot bills shall be presented on Wednesday 16 October; and

(2) the provisions of Standing Order No 14(11) shall apply as if the words "Thursday 17 October" were substituted for the words "after the fifth Wednesday on which the House shall sit during the session".—*(Lucy Powell.)*

PETITION

Water Bills in Lancaster and Wyre

10.19 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Lancaster and Wyre who are concerned about Ofwat's proposal to see water bills increasing by an average £19 a year between 2025 and 2030.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Lancaster and Wyre,

Declares that residents in Lancaster and Wyre have been significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis; notes that Ofwat has proposed that bills should increase by an average of £19 per year between 2025 and 2030; and further declares that households are paying for the mistakes of the privatised UK water industry whilst company bosses are handed bonus payments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to look into all appropriate measures to mitigate the impact of increases to water bills on households.

And the petitioners remain (etc.)

[P003003]

Aerospace Industry: Northern Ireland

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

10.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak on Government support for the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland. It is not unique, but it is quite unusual for me to be leading an Adjournment debate instead of intervening in it. I hope that plenty of Members will take the opportunity to intervene on me.

Northern Ireland is an aerospace hub. We have worked long and hard to make it so, and for good reason: we are an anchor for the aerospace industry. It is something that we have built on over the last number of decades, and from suppliers to highly skilled labour Northern Ireland is a global force for aerospace. Invest NI has highlighted this, saying:

"Northern Ireland Aerospace & Defence offers a true turnkey supply solution with design, manufacture, certification and testing in one hub. The level of proximity and cohesion is unique—120 firms within 1 hour drive of each other, a high density of suppliers across all elements of the aerospace supply chain, from design and manufacture (world leading capabilities in machining, composites, polymers), to coatings, assembly, certification & testing. Our high performing and consistently reliable supply chain can meet customers' needs at pace and with industry leading quality performance. These companies are engaged at the leading edge of advanced aerospace design and manufacturing. Every major commercial aircraft programme depends on structures, components and expert services from Northern Ireland…World-class universities and an extensive network of further education colleges provide excellent academic and vocational training."

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Is my hon. Friend pleased that Northern Ireland has tens of thousands of jobs in the industry? We are a major exporter as a result of the aerospace industry, and when people fly around the world, a third of the seats on aircraft are made in Northern Ireland. That is an amazing figure, showing how important the industry is not only to Northern Ireland but to Great Britain and the UK.

Jim Shannon: I am always happy when my right hon. Friend intervenes, and that exactly underlines why Northern Ireland is so important. It plays above its status, with its population and the skills force that I have referred to.

I should have said, and I apologise for not doing so, how pleased I am to see the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), in her place. I very much look forward to engaging with her over the next period of time. I am also pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), in her place. She was in my constituency approximately six or seven weeks ago. She came as a shadow Minister and I told her that the next time she came, instead of asking the questions, she would have to answer them, so I look forward to the next time she comes to Northern Ireland. I am really pleased to see both ladies in their place, and to see the shadow Minister here as well.

To reinforce what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said, there is an existing talent pool, with more than 34% of Northern Ireland's workforce having a third-level qualification, and costs are significantly lower than EU, US and UK averages. Operating costs are up to 30% lower than on the UK mainland or in the EU. I say with great respect and humbleness that Northern Ireland candidates consistently outperform those from other UK regions at GCSE and A-level examinations, and with a strong partnership between academia, industry and Government driving skills development in the region, it is little wonder that we are thriving. I want to say how pleased I am at that.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): In a segue from Northern Ireland to Somerset, Leonardo is an aerospace manufacturer located just outside my constituency. Last month it held its AeroWomen event to highlight the diversity of careers for women in the sector. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government can play a role in encouraging more girls and women to study science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM subjects—and to work in this field, which would help to close up the skills shortages that the industry faces?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I agree. I am glad to say that, in Northern Ireland, Spirit AeroSystems and the aerospace sector are already trying to achieve some of those goals by giving introductions to ladies in engineering. I am very encouraged by that, and the hon. Lady is right. We have heard a woman Chancellor speak in the House today, which is an example of what we all wish to see. It is wonderful to have ladies elevated to different positions, and we have that in engineering, at Spirit and across the aviation sector.

This has undoubtedly been a holistic effort, with Invest NI involvement and Government support. It is clear that this has paid dividends, with the Northern Ireland aerospace, defence, security and space sectors on track to achieve revenue of £2 billion a year by 2024. The sectors had a turnover of £1.9 billion and contributed almost £1 billion in value added to Northern Ireland's economy in 2022.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The hon. Gentleman mentions the military side of aviation in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that we are underutilising the Royal Air Force base at Aldergrove? The Government could look at that, as well as enhancing Belfast International airport in my constituency.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman spoke in his maiden speech today about what could be done at Aldergrove and Belfast International airport. I see that, as we probably all do, as a way of advancing aerospace across Northern Ireland for everybody's advantage.

Support for the sector has resulted in an employment dividend, with 7,000 people believed to be directly employed. There are also the skills and the varied subsidiary companies whose bread and butter is supplying this industry. Strangford has hundreds of people employed in this sector, so I have much to be proud of.

However, it is clear why I have called this debate. One of the major employers under Spirit has a factory in my constituency and employs hundreds at its east Belfast site, and it has taken the decision to sell its operations here. I am privileged to have secured the debate for that reason. I told the press in the run-up to the election that I would make this an issue, and I am glad to have been able to speak to the Minister to highlight it last week.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman rightly speaks about the potential changes. He will recall that a trade union-led campaign saved Harland & Wolff in 2019. I am sure that, like me, he was down at the yard many times to support the campaign. It was the unions that had the tenacity to keep it open and the vision to see potential green jobs down the line. Does he agree it is important that the trade unions are kept involved in any discussions about the future of the site?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady makes a pertinent point, and I absolutely agree about the importance of unions. The last sentence of my speech will underline the important role played by the unions.

The operations are being sold as a going concern, which is encouraging. However, my going concern is to ensure that it does not result in jobs being lost, but results in an even stronger aerospace industry in Northern Ireland. That is why I am pressing for Government involvement and support to ensure that happens.

Spirit announced on 1 July that it had signed a definitive merger agreement under which Boeing will acquire Spirit. Spirit has also entered into a binding term sheet with Airbus, under which Airbus will assume ownership of certain Airbus programmes carried out by Spirit. That includes the A220 programme at our Belfast site.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My hon. Friend makes an important point not only about trade unions but about job retention. It will be important in the days and weeks to come that the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland impress upon Airbus that, in assuming responsibility for the wings facility, it is taking on grandfathered obligations that arise from Northern Ireland Executive and national Government commitments that led to the construction of that facility. Airbus should be in no doubt that, if it takes on the wings facility, those obligations sustain, and that its commitment to the workforce in Belfast should sustain. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) agrees with me, but I am also keen to hear that the Minister is prepared to advance that issue with Airbus in the coming days.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. In my discussions with the Minister last week, I took the opportunity to give her my contribution and my final asks. We are looking for positive answers, and I think my right hon. Friend will not be disappointed when the Minister responds; certainly, I hope that will be the case.

I am aware that Spirit is in the process of securing a responsible owner for the remaining activities in its Northern Ireland operations, hopefully including the facility in Newtownards, which is severely underutilised. I wish to underline something that the company has been at pains to highlight: the decision to offer the non-Airbus part of the Belfast site for sale is not a reflection on the operation's performance or capabilities. Spirit is one of Northern Ireland's largest investors and biggest employers, with over 3,500 employees. It has a highly skilled, adaptable workforce and an extensive, integrated Northern Ireland and GB supply chain. That must remain the case because it is clearly a key part of the local aerospace ecosystem and its operations have a major impact on the Northern Ireland economy. I cannot underline enough the importance of its impact on the Northern Ireland economy.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for giving way. As somebody who has spent many years watching his interventions on other people, it is a pleasure to be able to intervene on him. The hon. Gentleman will know how important Northern Ireland is to me and my family, and to many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Will he take the opportunity to place on the record his welcome of this Government's commitment to upskilling young people right across our United Kingdom?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman and I have been friends for many years. I am pleased that he has been able to participate in the debate; he said he would if the opportunity arose. I agree with what he says, and I think the Minister will underline it in her response.

Sammy Wilson: Given the difficulties with the apprenticeship levy and the way in which firms in Northern Ireland have lost out, does my hon. Friend wish, like me, that the Government will remedy that situation, so that when firms in Northern Ireland pay into the apprenticeship levy, they can benefit from that in training young people?

Jim Shannon: That is another issue for the Minister. I wholeheartedly agree with what my right hon. Friend says, and others do as well. An anomaly needs to be addressed; hopefully the Minister can do that. I want to stand by workers who have come to me seeking assurances, so I look to the Minister to provide those assurances.

I seek an assurance that the Government understand the nature of aerospace in Northern Ireland, and how essential the Spirit operations are to our economy and employment. The Belfast site is a global leader in aerostructures, with unique end-to-end capabilities through design and development, testing and manufacture, to after-market support. The operation has engineering and technology leadership in advanced materials and ultra-light structures, in particular unique advanced composites capabilities, which it is further developing for commercial, defence and space applications.

Spirit does so much, and it can do so much more for Northern Ireland. Its extensive expertise has led to significant investment in R&D and engineering skills and capabilities over many years. The investment can and must continue to support the key role that Northern Ireland plays in the UK-wide sector. I always say what a pleasure it is to be an MP in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I think we are better together wherever we are. We can exchange ideas and advance things; that cannot be overstated enough and must be made crystal clear.

It is clear the site is ready for a buyer and that a Government standing by the industry, ready to continue investment in R&D and site improvements, will make this even more attractive for purchase. The Government are aware of the crisis looming over Northern Ireland

manufacturing, with the difficulties in Harland & Wolff. Indeed, the Government released a written statement about that today. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has been at the fore of trying to address that issue. Whatever the reasons may be, we look forward to the hopeful possibilities of something that has the potential to get us beyond the problems we have today.

However, the outworking of these issues at this time is that the workers at Spirit cannot help but fear that there is trouble, not simply in the water with the shipping industry, but in the air with factories in Morocco and Mexico seeking to undercut costs but not quality. Now is the time for this Labour Government—my Government, my Minister, here in this House, for me and for my constituents in Strangford—to make it clear that they will deliver for my constituents. It is no secret that my politics lie to the left of centre; I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place and to see the things I hope to see over the next period of time.

It is important that we make clear our commitment to the Northern Ireland economy, which is anchored in manufacturing, and send a very clear message to prospective buyers that there is an unflinching commitment to aerospace and defence in Northern Ireland that will be outworked in development grants and tax aid to secure the future of this facility and, indeed, its expansion in the future.

In conclusion, I look to the Minister now to outline how her Government—as I have said, this is my Government as well—can and will send the right message today. I am very glad—this is a personal opinion, not necessarily a party one—to see a party, the Labour party, come to power, as it speaks for the workers, understands the rights of the workers, and understands the importance of an industry that is at the centre of the future economic plan of Northern Ireland. I now look to that Government to put action to all the words and secure the future of this sector, which is far from being on its last legs, and, indeed, is longing and equipped to soar even higher than it is now.

10.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Sarah Jones): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for introducing this debate tonight. I had wondered who was going to intervene on him as he could not intervene on himself. I am grateful that several hon. Members did the job for him. I also want to thank him for his dedicated support for Northern Ireland's remarkable aerospace industry, which is founded on strong engineering heritage and is rich in knowledge, skills, experience and technology. Indeed, as this is my first time at the Dispatch Box since I was given this ministerial appointment, I am delighted that it is to discuss and highlight the Government support for the Northern Ireland aerospace sector.

I can absolutely assure the hon. Member and the whole House that this Government will work tirelessly to deliver economic growth in Northern Ireland and across all corners of the United Kingdom, so that we can drive inward investment, enable British industry and businesses of all sizes to grow and prosper, and give working people more secure employment.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I congratulate her on her appointment and wish her incredibly well.

May I encourage the Minister to access the Royal United Services Institute report into defence spending in Northern Ireland? When she reads it, she will recognise that Northern Ireland to date has received one fifth of the UK average spend on defence per region around the United Kingdom. There is a huge opportunity for her to increase support and investment for Northern Ireland and for the industry at the heart of this debate.

Sarah Jones: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention and for adding to my reading list, which is already quite substantial, as I am sure he can imagine. Our wonderful civil servants are keeping us very busy with all the things that we need to read, but, indeed, I will look at that report, as he suggests, and am happy to do so.

Delivering an industrial strategy is at the centre of the Government's growth mission alongside our goal of becoming a clean energy superpower. We want to create the right conditions for the green industries of the future to flourish, enabling those key sectors not only to transform the UK economy, but to become world leaders in their own right.

Aerospace is crucial to this growth mission, with investment in research and development key to delivering the next generation aircraft for sustainable flight. That is why I am very much looking forward to attending the Farnborough international airshow tomorrow for the first time as a Minister. I will be meeting UK aerospace companies and see for myself the vast array of pioneering products and services being sold across the globe. I am hoping to see all the partners involved in the Spirit discussions tomorrow and to talk to them about this topic.

Jim Shannon: I understand that there is a tent at the Farnborough show that has a Northern Ireland section. I am sure that the Minister will attend that show, and have a chance to interact with the companies there. Sometimes people say that if Ministers go there, they get them for about 15 minutes. I suggest that she spends a wee bit longer there.

Sarah Jones: I am delighted that the hon. Member has intervened in his own Adjournment debate. I will be there at the UK stand tomorrow, and we will see what Northern Ireland has on display. I will spend as much time there as I can. I am there for the whole day, so I hope that I will spend some good time there.

As Members will be well aware, Northern Ireland has a long and impressive history in the aerospace industry. This Government are in lockstep with the sector's ambitions to grow, compete on the world stage, and ease the transition to net zero flight. Today, the aerospace sector supports nearly 240,000 jobs, with almost half of those employees directly employed by aerospace companies. Some 5,000 of them are in Northern Ireland. The sector as a whole is worth some £30 billion. Despite all the achievements, we recognise that the past years have been challenging for the sector, with the chaos and uncertainty of the previous Government, and the global shocks of covid, the war in Ukraine and the disruption in the Red sea. We know that the impact of those issues persists.

Adam Jogee: I know that in a previous life the Minister spent a lot of time working in and on Northern Ireland, so we are listening very carefully indeed. Labour Members are rightly very proud of devolution, and what it has meant for all parts of our United Kingdom. What engagement has she had, and will she have in the months ahead, with the Northern Ireland Executive on this and associated issues?

Sarah Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place in this House. A really important aspect of the way that the Prime Minister has set about government is his telling us all that we must work together much more closely on issues that affect the United Kingdom as a whole. That means working across Government Departments and across the nations and regions. We are setting up structures to do that. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is already talking at length to colleagues, and we have had conversations across Government on these issues already.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Thousands of people in my constituency of North Down work in the industry. Will she consider a visit to my constituency to visit those factories? It would be a great honour for us, and she would see at first hand what is going on. It would be greatly appreciated by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) as well.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I am of course happy to visit whatever I can. One of the best ways of understanding the issues is to go and see things for myself, and I would certainly like to do that. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has been in Northern Ireland frequently, and we went there a few weeks before the general election was called. It was incredibly powerful to see the ambition in the business community in Northern Ireland to get things moving and growing.

The industry faces resourcing constraints, and shortages of materials and capacity. That situation is forcing some major manufacturers to slow down their planned production rates. Given all those challenges, it is only right that we support aerospace manufacturers in Northern Ireland and across the UK, and the industrial strategy will be the cornerstone of that work. We believe that the strategy will grow our share of the global aerospace manufacturing market, unlock huge investment opportunities that will fuel research and development, and create new high-skilled, high-paid jobs across the economy, including in aerospace. The Government will work in close partnership with the aerospace sector, support clean growth and continue to develop joint Government and industry strategy through the aerospace growth partnership sector council—a partnership that reaches businesses and the research base in every part of the United Kingdom.

I am aware that the hon. Member for Strangford's debate is focused on Northern Ireland, so let me turn to Northern Ireland in greater detail. First, I recognise his reference to Harland & Wolff. As he will be aware, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary gave an update to the House this morning via a written statement, stressing the fact that we are working with Members, the Northern Ireland Executive, trade unions and other partners to support a positive outcome for all affected sites across the UK and for its workers.

Moving back to aerospace, as the hon. Gentleman said, there are at least 120 companies in Northern Ireland supplying to every major commercial aircraft programme, boasting expertise in everything from composite design and manufacturing to precision machining and more. As he also said, one third of global aircraft seats are made in Northern Ireland, as of course are the advanced composite wings of the Airbus A220 aircraft.

It is the week of the Farnborough international airshow, and a week in which we have announced over £100 million for cutting-edge new green aerospace technologies, so the hon. Gentleman's debate has touched down with excellent timing, particularly as I recognise—we need to cover this—that there is of course concern about the expected change in ownership of the region's largest advanced manufacturer, Spirit AeroSystems' Short Brothers. Short Brothers is best known for its award-winning advanced composites technology, developed and deployed on the A220 wing. The innovative design and manufacturing technique received recognition in 2019 from the Royal Academy of Engineering, the highest honour awarded to an engineering project.

Shorts employs 1,500 people on the A220 programme, supported by £113 million through a repayable funding partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive and the previous Labour Government in 2009. The ability to manufacture a complete wing in one facility is a credit to those who work there. That builds on the legacy of more than 100 years of Northern Ireland aerospace. Airbus is now working on ramping up production, and announced in April this year that it would be increasing the production rate per month to 14 aircraft by 2026. With more than 550 orders to deliver, and the likelihood of further orders to follow, this provides great certainty for the company, its employees and the Northern Ireland economy.

On the acquisition of Spirit and Shorts, Boeing and Airbus announced on 1 July that they will acquire parts of the Spirit AeroSystems global business. Boeing plans to take nearly all of Spirit's Boeing-facing business, mostly those parts located in the United States. That sale is, however, subject to the sale of certain other Spirit operations to Airbus. Airbus and Spirit have agreed, subject to final terms, that Airbus will acquire the A220 wing and mid-fuselage. These are built by Short Brothers at its A220 wing production facility and its other Northern Ireland sites.

Spirit plans to sell its remaining Belfast operations—the non-Airbus programmes—alongside its facility in Prestwick, to another company. These advanced manufacturing sites offer engineering centres of excellence with engineering-backed capabilities, which Spirit assures us will prove to be an attractive proposition for potential buyers. Commercial negotiations are continuing as the parties work through the details of the acquisition and work towards finalising terms, with an expectation that the transaction will close in mid-2025.

The Government are working with the Northern Ireland Executive to help to ensure the best outcome for Short Brothers and all its highly skilled and hard-working staff. We have a keen interest in seeing that any acquisition includes a commitment to develop Short Brothers and its supply chain and provides the best possible opportunity for growth in Northern Ireland. That is because the Government have a clear vision for the future of aerospace across the whole UK.

We are providing support for technology development for the next generation of aircraft and engines through the Aerospace Technology Institute programme, which provides collaborative funding to companies based in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. That includes the isothermal variable-volume infusion, or IVI, project that we announced earlier today at Farnborough international airshow—a £10 million project led by Short Brothers to produce lighter, more structurally efficient aerostructures, enabling the transition to new sustainable aircraft. The Government will also continue to work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive on opportunities for growth and investment.

In summary, the UK has a vibrant and hugely pioneering aerospace sector. It is a central cog in our manufacturing economy and will play a hugely important global role in decarbonisation and net zero, nurturing some of the highest-skilled jobs and most advanced technologies in the world. UK aerospace companies and their supply chains will be at the heart of our transformative industrial strategy, and I know the Northern Ireland aerospace sector will play a pivotal role in the success of the UK sector as a whole, and in the growth and success of UK manufacturing and industry.

Question put and agreed to.

10.49 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 July 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Harland and Wolff

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): In recent weeks there has been media speculation over the status of Harland and Wolff and the nature of its ongoing discussions with the Government, upon which we have been unable to comment due to the commercially sensitive nature of those discussions. I am now pleased to be able to address the subject and update members of the House. My officials have been working with all parties extensively for a number of weeks to ensure an outcome for Harland and Wolff that delivers shipbuilding and fabrication across the UK and protects jobs.

After a detailed review of an application by Harland and Wolff for a UK Export Finance export development guarantee, His Majesty's Government have decided not to proceed with the provision of a guarantee. This decision was based on a comprehensive assessment of the company's financial profile and the criteria set out in our risk policies. We have also decided not to provide any form of emergency liquidity funding. While such a decision is not easy, it is my assessment, following extensive engagement by my officials with market players, that HM Government funding would not necessarily secure our objectives and there is a very substantial risk that taxpayer money would be lost. The Government believe, in this instance, that the market is best placed to resolve the commercial matters faced by Harland and Wolff.

A statement was published on 19 July by Harland and Wolff indicating that the company has commenced discussions with its existing creditors, Riverstone Credit Management LLC, to secure the additional funding it needs. This should allow the business to continue pursuing its short and longer-term objectives, in which the Government continue to take an interest. In all our engagements with them, Riverstone Credit Management LLC has recognised the importance of the assets at Harland and Wolff as well as the people who work there, showing a desire to find pragmatic solutions that support HM Government objectives.

Harland and Wolff indicates that these discussions on new financing should conclude in the next few days. This will involve the current CEO taking an immediate leave of absence and the onboarding of new management with a focus on recapitalisation and ensuring sustainable finances.

I know the recent media reports will have been of concern to workers across Harland and Wolff's sites, as well as the wider supply chain. I am working closely with my colleagues the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and Scotland, and Ministers are also engaging with the leaders of the Northern Ireland Executive and Scottish Government, alongside the local Members of Parliament, to support a positive outcome for all affected sites across the UK. My ministerial team have also reached out to the trade unions represented across the four sites to reassure them that the steps set out by the company appear to me to hold by far the best prospects of ensuring business continuity, job security and the delivery of important existing contracts.

My officials will continue to work closely with those in the Ministry of Defence and the National Shipbuilding Office on the fleet solid support contract, for which Harland and Wolff remains a key subcontractor. Officials in the Ministry of Defence are also well engaged with the prime contractor, Navantia UK, to monitor delivery of this important contract.

I welcome potential new financing for Harland and Wolff and the appointment of new management and wish them all the best in their continued efforts to build up this business.

Shipbuilding supports 42,600 jobs nationwide, adds £2.4 billion to the economy every single year, and is an important pillar of our civil and defence industrial base. We are committed to supporting vibrant and successful shipbuilding and fabrication industries, and our skilled workforces who deliver them, in all parts of the UK, in which Harland and Wolff has its role to play.

[HCWS15]

EDUCATION

Skills Reform

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I am today announcing the creation of Skills England in shadow form, before it is established as an arm's length body within the next 12 months.

The first mission of our new Government is to grow the economy, and for that we need a skills system that breaks down barriers to opportunity and delivers for our businesses.

Skills England will build stronger, more coherent connections between skills partners including employers, education and training providers, unions and combined authorities. We need a stronger, more widespread, and more data-driven understanding of the skills needed to deliver regional and national industrial priorities. Where skills gaps are identified, we need the system to support more rapid development and delivery of high-quality training opportunities which employers and learners understand and can access.

Skills England will help ensure we have the highly trained workforce needed to deliver the national, regional and local skills needs of the next decade, aligned with the Government's forthcoming industrial strategy. This effort will be central to enabling delivery of the Government's growth mission, filling skills gaps in key industries.

Skills England will convene employers, education and training providers, unions, experts, combined authorities and national Government to:

> develop a single picture of national skills needs, working with industry, other Government Departments, the Migration Advisory Committee, unions and the Industrial Strategy Council to build and maintain a comprehensive assessment of current and future skills needs;

identify the priority areas for skills training, including the training for which the new growth and skills levy will be accessible—in doing so, it will ensure that businesses are able to use their skills funding more flexibly and effectively, for which so many have been calling;

play a crucial role in ensuring that the national and regional skills systems are aligned in meeting skills needs, in constituencies the length and breadth of England.

Skills England will support employers across the country to shape skills training, and it will identify levers to encourage them to invest in upskilling their workforces. In doing so, it will build on the contribution that thousands of businesses already make to grow the pool of talent from which they can draw.

The functions which currently sit with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will transfer to Skills England, as part of the new organisation's broader remit. If ATE will continue its important work in the interim as the transition of functions to Skills England is finalised. A permanent board, Chair and CEO will be appointed in due course, to provide Skills England with the best possible leadership.

For us to deliver on the forthcoming industrial strategy and the Government's missions, we will need to boost skills and unlock economic growth in all parts of the United Kingdom, so Skills England will also engage and work closely with the devolved Administrations.

[HCWS14]

TRANSPORT

Sustainable Aviation

The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh): Sustainable aviation fuel is an important part of the strategy to decarbonise air travel. It can be used in existing aircraft, and it emits on average 70% fewer greenhouse gas emissions than using fossil jet fuel on a life cycle basis.

Developing, using and producing SAF will help drive our missions to kick-start economic growth and make Britain a clean energy superpower, delivering the Government's manifesto commitment to secure the UK aviation industry's long-term future, including through promoting sustainable aviation fuels.

Today, in addition to the announcement we have already made in the King's Speech on 17 July that a Bill will be introduced to support sustainable aviation fuel production, we are taking a further important step in confirming that, subject to parliamentary approval, we will introduce a SAF mandate to start from 1 January 2025. We will be one of the first countries in the world to legislate in this way. We are also today confirming the full policy detail of the mandate.

Today's announcement is good for aviation, the environment and for the UK overall: sustainable aviation fuel production is estimated to add over £1.8 billion to the economy and over 10,000 jobs across the country while supporting decarbonisation. The SAF mandate will drive demand for SAF in the UK, deliver emission reductions up to 2.7 MtCO2e in 2030 and up to 6.3 MtCO2e in 2040 and provide investor confidence that the UK will be a place to produce, use and supply SAF.

SAF mandate

The SAF mandate will start in 2025 at 2% of total UK jet fuel demand, increase on a linear basis to 10% in 2030 and to 22% in 2040. From 2040, the obligation will remain at 22% until there is greater certainty regarding SAF supply.

The mandate will encourage the innovation of advanced fuels that can generate greater emission reductions and the diversification of feedstocks to reduce dependencies on scarce resources, by including in the mandate:

a cap on the feedstocks used in the hydroprocessed esters and fatty acids process, but not until other types of SAF are also commercially viable to recognise the important part that HEFA SAF will play in the 2020s. HEFA supply will not be limited under the mandate for the first two years, fall to 71% in 2030 and still contribute 35% in 2040;

a separate obligation on power to liquid fuels from 2028 that reaches 3.5% of total jet fuel demand in 2040.

The mandate will include a buy-out mechanism for both the main and power to liquid obligations to incentivise supply while protecting consumers where suppliers are unable to secure a supply of SAF. These will be set at £4.70 and £5.00 per litre of fuel, respectively. These provide a significant incentive for fuel suppliers to supply SAF into the market rather than pay the buy-out. They also set a maximum price for the scheme, and therefore deliver emission reductions at an acceptable cost. The plan includes a review mechanism to help minimise the impact on ticket fares for passengers.

We will also work closely across Government on feedstock availability to ensure that feedstocks are used in a sustainable and productive way.

SAF revenue certainty mechanism

The Bill announced on 17 July will introduce a revenue certainty mechanism for SAF producers who are looking to invest in new plants in the UK. This builds on the SAF mandate, which will create demand for SAF by setting targets on fuel suppliers to use a proportion of SAF. This new sector will create jobs and growth opportunities in the UK, help secure a supply of SAF for UK airlines, and enhance energy security.

There are a number of SAF projects being developed across the UK. Bringing in a revenue certainty mechanism will help to reduce risk, giving investors the confidence they need to invest in UK SAF plants. It will increase the likelihood SAF plants will be built in the UK, thereby securing a supply of SAF for the UK aviation sector and supporting the delivery of the SAF mandate.

These two SAF initiatives will drive the Government's mission-driven plan to kick start economic growth and make Britain a clean energy superpower.

[HCWS16]

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