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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 28 October 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing Supply

1. **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of housing. [900867]

7. **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of housing. [900873]

18. **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of housing in towns in the Makerfield constituency. [900884]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): This Government are committed to delivering 1.5 million quality homes over this Parliament. Under the Tories, house building plummeted as they bowed to pressure from their Back Benchers to scrap local housing targets. We are taking bold action to reform our planning system, deliver a new generation of new towns and unblock stalled housing sites.

Mike Tapp: I recently met members of Dover district council, who told me that they are keen to help the Government where they can to deliver our ambitious housing targets. Around the edge of Dover High Street we often see consistently empty units. What can the Government do to help us turn those into the housing that our community so badly needs, and will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can help?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Compulsory purchase orders can be used by local authorities to acquire empty properties where the authority can demonstrate that the acquisition would be in the public interest. I am also aware that there is a problem with homes built under section 106 agreements being left empty. The Government will continue to work with house builders, local authorities and affordable housing providers to tackle the problems. I am sure that the Housing Minister will be happy to meet him.

Mr Dillon: Will the Secretary of State consider allowing councils the ability to buy land for houses based on current use rather than hope value, and commit to reforming the Land Compensation Act 1961?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Member will know that we are looking at a number of measures to help council houses to be built. Further measures will be announced in the Budget, as I have mentioned in a written ministerial statement today. We want councils and social housing providers to be able to build those homes, and we will help them as much as we can.

Josh Simons: We know that the barriers to building more houses in towns such as those I represent in Makerfield are often political, not technical. For years, Conservative Members allowed themselves to become mouthpieces for the blockers and the naysayers, which is why, as co-chair of the Labour Growth Group, I welcome the commitment by the Secretary of State to back builders. What steps is her Department taking to increase the supply of housing in towns such as those I represent in Makerfield?

Angela Rayner: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and the reason he is here—he is absolutely correct on this—is that the previous Government did nothing to help house building, and we did not see growth either. This Government will reform our planning system, deliver a new generation of new towns, unblock stalled housing sites and reform the housing market, as well as delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With so much good agricultural land now covered by solar panels, how will the Government incentivise builders to build on brownfield rather than good agricultural land, thus ensuring regeneration rather than imperilling food security?

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Member will know that we have already set out a number of steps, including the brownfield passport and the national planning policy framework, and the use of local housing targets to ensure that brownfield is used first and we get the houses that we desperately need. For the last 14 years, the Conservatives failed to meet their housing target every single year. This Government are determined to meet our target.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Certainty for councils is vital for housing delivery, but given the uncertainty created by the Government's new top-down targets, which will delay the implementation of local plans and therefore planning decisions, how confident are the Government of meeting their housing targets?

Angela Rayner: Britain is facing the sharpest housing crisis ever because of the failure of Conservative Members. We will ensure, through our mandatory housing targets

and in the announcements that have been made, and that will be made in the Budget, that we get the houses that Britain needs. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to hear a conversation all the way through.

David Simmonds: In the rush for numbers, we must not ignore the need to ensure that new homes are built to appropriate standards. Given that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), has been stripped of responsibility for building safety because of conflicts of interest, can Ministers assure the House that the haste for targets will not undermine building safety?

Angela Rayner: We will ensure that houses are built to decent homes standards, which we have already set out, and that we meet those targets—unlike in the 14 years under the Conservatives.

Local Authority Funding

2. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of shortfalls in council budgets. [900868]

16. **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): What assessment she has made of trends in the costs of delivering statutory local government services in rural areas. [900882]

17. **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): What steps she is taking with local authorities to help ensure that they have adequate resources to fund local services. [900883]

21. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the financial sustainability of local authorities. [900887]

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Councils across the country, of all political stripes, work hard to deliver vital public services in our country. We know that 14 years of mounting pressure is biting hard. We are committed to moving towards a multi-year funding settlement, ending wasteful bidding competitions that essentially set one council against another. Last week, I met political group leaders at the Local Government Association conference to understand what specific demand pressures they are facing, and we are committed to working together on those big issues. Members will know that we cannot pre-empt the Budget statement due later in the week, but we are of course fully engaged in that process. We stand ready to speak to any council experiencing financial difficulties, as I confirmed in my letter to MPs just over a week ago.

Mr Forster: As the Minister knows—I have met him to discuss this subject—my local authority, Woking borough council, effectively went bankrupt last year. It has had to cut services that many consider essential, and it will have to consider cutting others. Does the Minister agree that it is time for Government and Parliament to review which services are classed as statutory and non-statutory?

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Member for meeting me at one of our regular drop-in sessions. His concern is reflected across the country. Local communities recognise that their council is being forced to choose vital neighbourhood services against targets for adult social care, children's services and homelessness services. In the end, we need to rebuild the foundation from scratch, and that is exactly what we are committed to doing.

James MacCleary: My constituency is largely rural and, as in many rural constituencies, parish councils play an important role in local government service delivery. Does the Minister agree about the importance of parish councils to rural communities, and what role does he see for parish councils as part of the Government's devolution agenda?

Jim McMahon: We will of course publish a White Paper on the English devolution Bill. It will set out an ambitious programme for a power shift from this place and Whitehall to combined authorities, to local government and, of course, to communities. We are absolutely committed to that top-to-bottom power shift. We recognise that parish and town councils have a role to play.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Rising demand, rising costs and 14 years of Conservative public sector cuts mean that many local authorities and services are at breaking point. My own borough of Lambeth, a deprived inner-London area with higher demand for social housing and temporary accommodation, and for social, public and youth services, has been particularly affected, which has been quite challenging. Will the Minister commit to an emergency increase in funding to combat the immediate crisis for local authorities, and, in the long term, to a much-needed update of the funding formula to better reflect local need?

Jim McMahon: Like every Member of the House, my hon. Friend will know that those 14 years have taken their toll, and that it will take more than three months to repair that, but we are absolutely committed to repairing the foundations, and our multi-year financial settlements will give security. Of course, we recognise that the demand-led pressures in many places are the back-end of a bigger problem. Temporary accommodation relates to the housing crisis that needs fixing. The same applies to children's services and adult social care.

Alison Bennett: The financial future of West Sussex county council is bleak: it faces a cumulative budget gap of over £200 million for 2029-30. At present, 64% of the council's budget is being spent on adult and children's social services, and that is set to rise. How will the Minister ensure that West Sussex county council and others do not have to close libraries, cut bus routes or reduce road repairs in order to meet the growing demand for the most vulnerable members of our community?

Jim McMahon: We always say that local government is paid for one way or the other: either we pay at the front-end through fair funding being fairly distributed across the country, or we pay at the back-end because eventually the system falls over and we must repair the damage. If we take ourselves back to the coalition years, when austerity first came in, the cruelty was that

we did not reform public services, repairing them from the ground up, to get ahead of those system changes. That was a wasted opportunity.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): This year, Hartlepool borough council is set to overspend on children's social care by some £5 million, due in no small part to the outrageous charges levied by private sector children's homes. What can the Minister do to cap those providers' charges to ensure that local government can continue to deliver its statutory obligations?

Jim McMahon: I recognise that, in large part, children's services are the funding pressures that are driving council budgets. We cannot forget, though, that behind every one of those numbers is a child who often is not getting the outcomes they need. Far too often what we are seeing in the system is that high costs are not just sending councils to the point of bankruptcy, but delivering worse outcomes for young people. We want to see far more resilience built back into the system, and there are examples today of councils that are building that public sector provision back into the marketplace.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The previous Government cut County Durham's budget by 60%, and we have all seen the Royal Tunbridge Wells video in which the Leader of the Opposition boasted about that act. That is having a real impact on my constituents and the ability of Durham county council to deliver vital services, so will the Minister consider a discussion with Cabinet colleagues about revising those funding formulas to take account of social care costs and deprivation?

Jim McMahon: We did see the former Prime Minister taking great credit for essentially shifting money from primarily urban and deprived communities into rural shires in an overtly political way. I want to ensure that in the funding review we are carrying out, whether that is the initial rescue operation that will take place this year or the recovery operation through the multi-year settlement, we do not pit one council against another, but take an approach that genuinely understands the needs, cost demands and cost pressures faced by local authorities. In the end, though, we have to accept that there is no fair funding at all if funding does not reflect the deprivation in an area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): At the last oral questions, the Secretary of State assured me that she had no plans to increase council tax for anyone. However, when pressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), she would not give the same guarantee that the single occupant discount would be retained. Will Ministers take the opportunity to do so now?

Jim McMahon: I can see the shadow Secretary of State making that point repeatedly, because at this stage we are all waiting for the statement and the Budget that will contain that information, but I can say that the right decisions will be made in the interests of working people. We recognise the cost of living crisis that is

being faced across the country. I am sure that she, like all Members of the House, is waiting with interest for Wednesday.

Mrs Badenoch: Local authorities employ 2 million people and commission services such as adult social care. The impact assessment for the Secretary of State's Employment Rights Bill says that the Bill will increase costs. Those costs are likely to be passed on to councils, so has the Secretary of State assessed the impact of the Employment Rights Bill and an increase in employers' national insurance specifically on local authorities? If costs do increase, will local councils be compensated?

Jim McMahon: Any decisions related to the Budget will be taken at the appropriate time, as will any decisions on the local government finance settlement. What I can say, though, is that this is a new partnership from this Government: we are not locking local government out, but standing shoulder to shoulder with it. Only last week at the Local Government Association conference in Harrogate, the Secretary of State launched the leaders' council, a forum where central and local government will reset that relationship.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Rough sleeping is the most visible end of the homelessness crisis, but it is also brutal—the average age of death for rough sleepers in London is just 44. The rough sleeping initiative is literally saving lives—in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, 102 people are kept alive every year through that programme—but it is due to end in March 2025. Removing it has been described by local teams as nothing short of catastrophic, so what assessment has taken place of the impact of that initiative, and what assurance can the Secretary of State give local authorities about the maintenance of the scheme so that they can plan for the long term?

Jim McMahon: Again, I ask hon. Members to wait for the spending review on Wednesday, and for the provisional settlement in December. We are under no illusion about the pressures faced by councils on homelessness. In the end, we need to repair the system, which is about providing safe, secure and affordable housing for people to live in. We will do that, but we also recognise that there is a problem today. Further detail on that will follow.

New Homes Accelerator Programme: Stretton Hall

3. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): What plans her Department has to develop Stretton Hall through the new homes accelerator programme. [900869]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Stretton Hall is one of seven sites that the Government have identified to date that we believe would benefit from support through the new homes accelerator, which is a joint programme between the Department and Homes England aiming to speed up the delivery of large-scale housing developments across England.

Neil O'Brien: Documents from Harborough district council reveal that there are sites with a capacity of up to 16,000 homes around Stretton Hall. The Government's press release in August said that there would be around 4,000 homes on the site that they are involved in. Will the Minister confirm which Minister visited the site before the announcement? Will he agree to publish the methodology that led to our community being selected, and the list of sites that were considered but not selected?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have not had the opportunity to visit the site, but I intend to do so in the future, along with the other new homes accelerator sites. On the point of principle, to meet housing demand and housing need in England, every area of the country must play its part. The site in question is currently being promoted in both the Harborough local plan and the Oadby and Wigston local plan, as it crosses the boundary of both local authorities. Although I appreciate that it does face a number of planning and enabling challenges, the Government believe that it nevertheless has the potential to make a significant contribution to housing supply in Leicestershire.

Broadband Access and Mobile Signal

4. **Mr Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that every property has access to either gigabit broadband or a 4G or 5G mobile signal. [900870]

12. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that every property has access to either gigabit broadband or a 4G or 5G mobile signal. [900878]

15. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that every property has access to either gigabit broadband or a 4G or 5G mobile signal. [900881]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is essential to keep pace with growing demand for internet bandwidth and mobile data from local businesses, residents and those who visit our communities. That is why the Government's ambition is to reach national gigabit and national 5G coverage as soon as possible, by committing to support investment in high-quality, reliable digital connectivity, so that communities can benefit from faster economic growth and greater social inclusion. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology is leading that work and will provide an update in due course.

Mr Amos: In the parishes of Ruishton, West Hatch, Staple Fitzpaine and Castle Neroche, the term "Connecting Devon and Somerset" is clearly understood as exactly what is not happening in the two counties, rather than a description of the so-called delivery agency. Cabinets and trunk cables are in place, but there is still no sign of houses being connected. Will the Minister or the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), meet MPs for the affected areas to understand how those houses can finally be connected?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the question, although I was sorry to hear it. Those are contracts from the previous superfast broadband programme, which has been superseded by Project Gigabit. That means that Connecting Devon and Somerset is responsible for the management and oversight of the contracts, which are jointly funded by central Government and local authorities. The communities in discussion deserve a high-quality service, so I or the Minister for Telecoms will meet the hon. Member.

Richard Foord: The village of Gittisham in Devon is also subject to Connecting Devon and Somerset. Four different companies have attempted to enable broadband access, but the fibre often stops 100 metres short of the houses. Gittisham is also a 4G notspot, so residents are cut off and unable to contribute to the economic growth that the Government say they want to see. According to the Labour manifesto, the Government's target for achieving broadband coverage is 2030, but can the Minister offer a percentage of broadband coverage that will be achieved in rural areas in this Parliament?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman rightly refers to our manifesto commitment, and he has heard a commitment today that we want to see full gigabit and full national 5G roll-out as soon as possible. We are getting on with it, but I am sorry to hear that there are issues. As I am keen to meet the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Mr Amos), I may well meet him too, if he is similarly keen.

Tessa Munt: Third time lucky: it is Somerset here. I know that the Government want services—finding a home, looking for help, paying taxes, working, and even learning during covid—to be accessed online, but in my part of mid and north Somerset, people can only dream of gigabit broadband; they would be really happy if they had superfast. Can the Minister investigate how to inspire a national broadband roll-out programme that is realistic? Is it time for a new national plan, as access to superfast broadband has so many holes and still costs billions?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question, and I think of the challenges in my own constituency, where my constituents ask me questions in a similar vein. To be very clear, the Government know that the market will be able to provide considerable coverage across the country, but that there will always be communities—including her own, I suspect—where that has traditionally been a challenge, and we are committed to making sure that that gap is filled. We have the same aspiration and, as I say, we intend to meet it as soon as we possibly can.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Jermy, you started to bob and then you stopped, so I was not sure you had a question, but please let us hear it.

Terry Jermy: Many rural villages in my constituency have spent hours producing excellent neighbourhood plans, with some areas hoping to go to public referendum and adoption soon. Given that such plans help communities

to shape growth, will the Minister confirm what prominence the Government will afford neighbourhood plans as part of planning reforms?

Alex Norris: Our commitment as a Government is to bring communities into that conversation and to make sure local leadership has that say in the service of a wider national goal.

Property Management Services

5. **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): If she will take steps to regulate property management service providers. [900871]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government are committed to ensuring that those living in the rented and leasehold sectors are protected from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous property agents. The Government will set out our position on the regulation of letting, managing and estate agents in due course.

Max Wilkinson: I thank the Minister for his reply. My constituent Paul faces inflation-busting maintenance cost rises and unexpected in-year fees. His attempts to scrutinise FirstPort's work and his willingness to fight back have resulted in an exchange of letters with solicitors. When my hard-working office team asked FirstPort for an explanation of what is going on, the company took more than six weeks to reply with inadequate answers, and it did so only when I took the step of contacting it personally to say that I was raising its name in the House today. While long-awaited changes are being considered, what would the Minister advise my constituent and others like him to do in the meantime?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, and I am sorry to hear about Paul's experience with that particular property management company—an experience that will, I know, be reflected in the experiences of many others across the country. There are two existing routes to redress in such circumstances, the property redress scheme and the property ombudsman scheme, to which people can submit complaints. I will happily write to the hon. Gentleman to set out in full the various sources of advice and support and the avenues for redress that his constituent might pursue before we bring in more fundamental changes to the regulation of the sector.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I should draw the House's attention to the fact I am a leaseholder subject to service charges, as are hundreds of my constituents. There is very often a real lack of transparency and accountability from service providers. Bills are not very clear, and it takes quite a lot of effort to understand them. The Government could regulate, but will the Minister use his convening powers to encourage service providers to do better, prior to discussing legislation that could take a very long time?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am more than happy to look into what more can be done by convening to get the various interested parties around the table. The Government are committed to implementing the provisions of the Leasehold and

Freehold Reform Act 2024, which includes measures to increase the transparency and standardisation of service charges and empower leaseholders in that way.

Planning Reform

6. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on planning reform. [900872]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government are making rapid progress on reforming our planning system. We launched a consultation on proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework within our first month in office, and my Department is analysing responses with a view to publishing a Government response before the end of the year. As was set out in the King's Speech, we intend to bring forward a planning and infrastructure Bill in this parliamentary Session to accelerate the delivery of high-quality infrastructure and housing.

Alex Ballinger: I thank the Minister for his update. My constituents in Halesowen recognise that homes have been unaffordable to first-time buyers and welcome these planning changes, but they are frustrated by some of the scaremongering from the Opposition. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that protecting the environment will be central to our planning changes as we roll out lots of additional new houses?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I assure him and the House that the Government are committed to securing better environmental outcomes alongside facilitating the development that our country so desperately needs. In our consultation on proposed reforms to the NPPF, we made it clear that land safeguarded by existing environmental designations will maintain its current protections. We are exploring how we might streamline house building and infrastructure delivery by using development to fund nature recovery where both are currently stalled. However, we have made it clear that we will act with legislation only when we have confirmed to Parliament that the steps we are taking will deliver positive environmental outcomes.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Ministers dropped the last Government's plan for the development of Cambridge and connections to nearby towns including Haverhill in my constituency. When will the Government come forward with an integrated plan to develop Cambridge and improve road and rail links to towns like Haverhill?

Matthew Pennycook: I wrote to local leaders in the greater Cambridge area a few weeks ago to make it clear that the Government believe the area is a site where we should take forward nationally significant housing growth. We will set out further details in due course, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Cambridge growth company is taking plans and pulling together an evidence base to set out precisely what the scale of development should be and how it should take place in that area.

Green Belt Protection: Farnham and Bordon

9. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What steps she is taking to protect the green belt in Farnham and Bordon constituency. [900875]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government attach great importance to the green belt, including the more than 20,000 hectares in the borough of Waverley in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. In planning terms, the green belt serves a number of specific purposes, but the fundamental aim of green belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The Government do not intend to change the general purposes of the green belt or its general extent, but we are committed to taking a more strategic approach to green-belt land designation and release so that we can build more homes in the right places.

Gregory Stafford: I thank the Minister for that response, but the Government are proposing to double the housing targets in Waverley and East Hampshire. Over 57% of East Hampshire is in the South Downs national park, so it rightly cannot be built on, but if the target is still based on 100% of the East Hampshire district, that causes massive pressures on the rest of the district, including places such as Whitehill and Bordon, Liphook, Headley and Grayshott. Will the Government commit to looking into this inherent unfairness, which is totally unsustainable for my area, and will he meet me and local councillors to discuss it further?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further. On the principled point he raises, when local authorities are developing local development plans they can put a case forward to the inspectorate to be tested in examination, where they specify hard constraints of the type the hon. Gentleman has identified. When we talk about housing targets, we are talking about an identified housing need for a particular area, but those local plans will be tested by the inspectorate at examination to take into account some of the concerns he has raised.

Social Housing Supply

10. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of social housing. [900876]

23. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to build more affordable homes. [900889]

25. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of social housing. [900891]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): This Government are getting on with fixing the mess the Tories left behind. We will deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, and at the Budget this week the Chancellor will set out the

next steps, including an additional £500 million for the existing affordable homes programme to deliver up to 5,000 new social and affordable homes.

David Smith: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Conservative-run Northumberland county council's own figures show that over 6,000 people in Northumberland are not adequately housed. Despite that, since the Conservatives have led the council, its own housing stock has decreased in number. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need more social homes in the right places to support the thousands of people in North Northumberland in need of a safe and secure place to live?

Angela Rayner: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and he is absolutely right: it is a source of national shame that just over 1.3 million households are on social housing waiting lists. Nearly 14,000 of them are in Northumberland alone. This Government do not accept that it has to be this way; we will deliver a fairer, more sustainable right-to-buy scheme where existing social housing stock is protected to meet housing need. I recognise the particular housing challenges faced by rural communities, and that is why the Government announced that the 2021 to 2026 affordable homes programme will be targeted, so that 5% to 10% of delivery outside London will be homes in rural areas.

Warinder Juss: Our plan to build 1.5 million homes during this Parliament must include the building of affordable homes, which implies that we will build more council housing. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to my constituents in Wolverhampton West that they will have access to good-quality affordable homes, particularly for first-time buyers, and that if they need social housing, they will not have to wait excessive periods of time to get a council house?

Angela Rayner: Again, my hon. Friend makes an important point. We want to support councils to make a greater contribution to affordable housing supply. That is why the Chancellor will set out at the Budget our plans to allow councils to keep 100% of the receipts generated by right-to-buy sales and to increase protections for newly built social homes. We are committed to giving first-time buyers a first chance to buy homes and to introducing a permanent, comprehensive mortgage guarantee scheme.

John Slinger: At Rugby borough council, there are 300 households on the waiting list for social houses. Officers and councillors are working hard to meet the demand. They have knocked down older tower blocks and are replacing them with one to four-bed, energy-efficient, good-quality homes. Last year was the first year for many years that they built or acquired more social homes than were lost through right to buy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while that is good work, my council is ultimately able only to tread water? My constituents who are in need of decent, affordable social homes desperately need a Government who will help councils to reverse this trend. Will she consider visiting Rugby to see the great work being done in difficult circumstances?

Angela Rayner: I once got stranded in Rugby on a train, so I have visited that wonderful area before. I am in complete agreement with my hon. Friend; councils should not be losing homes through right to buy quicker than they can be replaced. It is great to hear that councillors in Rugby are working hard to meet demand. The Chancellor will set out at the Budget the action we are taking to reduce right-to-buy discounts to deliver a more sustainable scheme. We will also increase protections on newly built social housing to allow councils to keep 100% of the receipts generated by right-to-buy sales.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): In Ashfield, we have a big problem with nuisance tenants in social housing, who are creating mayhem and upsetting their neighbours and the neighbourhood with crime, antisocial behaviour, drug dealing and so on. Does the Secretary of State agree that these nuisance tenants should be given one chance, and if they cannot behave themselves, they should be evicted and refused access to social housing in the future?

Angela Rayner: I agree with the hon. Member about nuisance neighbours; we do need to do something about that. That is why there are provisions, so that councils can take action on people who are nuisance neighbours. They should not be terrorising other people who are trying to live nice lives.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I pay tribute to Westbourne community land trust, which, after six long hard years, has finally started delivering affordable homes for its community. That is exciting for the trust, and I was delighted to put a spade in the ground when it started building. Does the Secretary of State agree that communities are best placed to understand the need for housing in their area? Will she make it easier for community land trusts to acquire land and build homes quickly?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Member makes an important point, and I welcome her to her place. We want to see communities being able to build houses, and we want to ensure that those houses are safe and secure and that we work with community housing trusts and others to deliver the 1.5 million homes. I am sure that the Housing Minister will be happy to meet her to discuss the matter.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): There are private developers in my constituency in Bridgwater that have obligations to build social homes and are ready to do so. The difficulty they face is that there is no social landlord available to take those units. What steps will the Deputy Prime Minister take to ensure that those units can be built to house local people?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am aware of those concerns, and the Government will continue to work with house builders, local authorities and affordable housing providers to tackle the problem. We need to make sure that section 106 notices are adhered to and that when we have affordable and social housing on those sites, they are tenanted and people are in there.

NPPF: Fast Food Outlets

11. **Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab):** If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of section 8 of the national planning policy framework on the number of fast food outlets. [900877]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government are committed to improving public health and reducing health inequalities. As part of the consultation on proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework, we sought views on how national planning policy could better support local authorities in promoting healthy communities and specifically in tackling childhood obesity. The framework already expects policies at a local level to aim to achieve healthy places, and we are considering how to ensure that a more consistent approach is taken, for example in relation to controlling hot food takeaways near schools.

Dr Cooper: I thank the Minister for the update. Will he consider working with Cabinet and Health colleagues to empower local authorities to regulate physical junk food adverts around schools and on public transport?

Matthew Pennycook: As I said in my original response, we recently consulted on how the planning system could do more to support the creation of healthy places. I will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care when considering next steps, as well as engaging with local authorities. As I said in answer to a previous question, my Department is analysing responses to the NPPF consultation with a view to issuing a Government response before the end of the year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I always try to be helpful to the Minister, and I thank him for his answer. In Northern Ireland, the steps we have taken on fast food outlets include close liaison with school principals to ensure that pupils do not access carry-out food, and addressing the issue of litter, which is the responsibility of fast food outlets. Perhaps the Minister might want to contact the relevant Northern Ireland Department to gauge what has worked for us.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, which is as helpful as ever. I always look at the experience of other nations on planning reform. I recently met the Housing Minister from the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, and I will happily contact him about this specific point to see what lessons we can learn.

Furniture Poverty

13. **Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on reducing levels of furniture poverty. [900879]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): We regularly discuss a wide range of topics with ministerial colleagues, including the important matter of tackling poverty, and we also have the ministerial child poverty taskforce. The lack of furniture and other goods is an issue for many people in our country and it contributes to poor outcomes. We are absolutely committed to tackling poverty and inequality, and the household support fund for local authorities, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions, provides considerable support towards that.

Danny Beales: I welcome that response. Eight per cent of families in this country are in deep furniture poverty. I have seen at first hand the impact of that: people are unable to have a hot meal without a microwave or a cooker and are unable to have a decent night's sleep without a bed—they sleep on the floor with a mattress or a duvet. Will my hon. Friend meet me and the End Furniture Poverty campaign to discuss what more we can do as a Government locally and nationally to tackle this issue?

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend makes important points about the impact of the lack of these essential items through poverty, and I am happy to meet him and the End Furniture Poverty campaign.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Clearly, people need a home to be able to furnish it in the first place, so what action is being taken across Government to address the barriers that care-experienced young people face in accessing the private rented sector, including through guarantor and deposit schemes?

Rushanara Ali: As the hon. Member will be aware, we have a plan to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and the Deputy Prime Minister is leading the ministerial taskforce on ending homelessness. My colleagues have highlighted the work that we are doing to build 1.5 million homes. This is an absolute priority for us and I look forward to working with hon. Members on this issue.

Leasehold Reform

14. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [900880]

22. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [900888]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government intend to act quickly to provide homeowners with greater rights, powers and protections over their homes by implementing the provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. Over the course of this Parliament, we will further reform the leasehold system to honour the commitments made in our manifesto. To that end, the Government have made it clear that they intend to publish draft legislation on leasehold and commonhold reform in this parliamentary Session.

Kate Osborne: My constituent David has reported that his service charge has tripled in the past few years, even though dangerous cladding has still not been removed, leaving him in a leasehold debt trap with an unsellable property. I thank the Minister for confirming our intention to abolish the whole feudal system of leasehold, but what more can be done in the meantime to help people to challenge unfair service charges?

Matthew Pennycook: One of the most urgent things we need to do—we are working on this at pace—is to bring into force the provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act. As I made clear in response to an earlier question, that will increase transparency and standardisation across service charges, but we want to

go further. We are committed to finally bringing the feudal leasehold system to an end, and across the Parliament that is precisely what we will do.

Jim Dickson: In Dartford, residents in new build estates in Ebbsfleet and elsewhere all too frequently experience opaque and unaccountable charging practices on the part of management companies, who seem far more motivated by making a profit than by providing services. What comfort can the Minister offer my constituents that these management companies will be brought within a fair and accountable legal framework in the near future?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and recognise his constituent's experience. As outlined in the King's Speech, the Government are committed to bringing the injustice of "fleecehold" private estates and unfair costs to an end. We will consult in due course on the best way to achieve that. In the interim, as I said, we need to implement the new protections for homeowners on private estates in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. That will create a new regulatory framework to make estate management companies more accountable to homeowners for how their money is spent.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Against my wishes and advice, the previous Government brought in a planning presumption in favour of applications to add extra floors to apartment blocks, irrespective of the horrible effect of building those extra floors, and attempts by rogue freeholders to sting the leaseholders for the remedial works resulting from errors in building grafted-on extra floors. As a short-term measure, will the Minister consider removing that presumption in favour of planning permission for these ill-considered schemes?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He is absolutely right that the previous Government significantly expanded permitted development rights after 2013. We acknowledge the criticism of those expanded rights, particularly because of the low-quality development that they have brought forward. He raises a specific issue for leaseholders, but the problem goes wider than that. I am more than happy to give consideration to the point he raises.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. The Labour party has proposed several reforms to the private rental sector, including to the leasehold system, which will only punish landlords, more of whom will sell up. At a time when people are struggling to get on the property ladder, why are this Government determined to drive out landlords and reduce the supply of available rental properties for those who rely on them?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, though it is not about leasehold but about the private rental sector. Our Renters' Rights Bill, which is currently in Committee, poses no threat to good landlords. Indeed, it will improve the situation for good landlords by driving out unscrupulous and rogue landlords from the system. As part of that Bill, landlords have robust grounds to take back possession of their properties when it is appropriate to do so. What they cannot do is

arbitrarily evict tenants through section 21. We will finally abolish section 21 no-fault evictions where the previous Government failed to do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [900892] **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): As I have already told the House, this week's Budget will set out our next steps to put us on the path to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation. The Chancellor will set out further details on a number of measures, including a cash injection for the affordable homes programme, confirming funding for new social housing projects and a consultation on a long-term social housing rent settlement. We will provide certainty and stability, and reform right to buy to deliver a fair, sustainable scheme.

Lisa Smart: Hazel Grove's 16 and 17-year-olds are all bright and articulate and never backwards in coming forwards to tell me what we need to do in this place, but they are denied their voice at the ballet box, unlike their Scottish and Welsh peers. When will the Government correct this imbalance, deliver on their manifesto promise and roll out votes at 16 across the United Kingdom?

Angela Rayner: Far be it from me to take on the Hazel Grove 16 and 17 year-olds—the hon. Member knows that I know Hazel Grove very well. This Government are committed to our manifesto commitment to give votes at 16, and we will make sure that we do that before the next general election.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): In 2022, Lubov Chernukhin opened an amusement centre in Hastings town centre known as Owens. The project received more than £400,000 of taxpayer money as part of the Conservatives' levelling up towns fund plans. Ms Chernukhin has also donated more than £200,000 to the Conservative party.¹ Shortly after opening, Owens closed, and earlier this month it was covered in boarding, which now dominates Hastings town centre. Can the Minister advise me how my constituents can get their money back, and how we can ensure that money is never wasted again like that?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I was very disappointed to hear about the closure of Owens and about any money wasted under the previous Government. My officials are working with my hon. Friend's council to maximise the remaining funding available from its town deal. On the general point, we are calling time on the waste from the previous Government, and moving towards multi-year funding settlements and ending competitive bidding for pots of money.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Labour made a big song and dance about tackling rogue landlords. No doubt Labour Members will have been made aware

of revelations reported in *The Londoner* this morning about the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal). Not only is he letting out mouldy homes with infestation, but he is the landlord of an unsafe private care home where children have gone missing and been left at risk of criminal exploitation. Do the Government have plans to tackle the rogue landlord on their own Benches?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her question. As I understand it, the Member for Ilford South says in his statement that there have been no conflicts of interest and that all interests have been declared in line with his council's rules.

Mr Speaker: I presume the shadow Secretary of State let the hon. Member for Ilford South know that she was going to mention him on the Floor of the House.

Mrs Badenoch No, I did not.

Mr Speaker: I say to all Members that mentioning other Members cannot be done without giving notice. I presume the right hon. Lady's second question will be on a different issue.

Mrs Badenoch: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I will check with my office. I cannot say for certain that they did not let the hon. Member know.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that reducing the capacity of councils by 20% by allowing workers an additional paid day off every week—that is what a four-day week actually is—is unacceptable and does not provide good value for money for taxpayers or residents?

Angela Rayner: I am really proud of our Employment Rights Bill and I am really proud to stand here as someone who advocates for flexible working. We do not dictate to councils how they run their services; we work with councils. The right hon. Lady should be able to work out that flexible working is no threat to business and no threat to the economy. In fact, it will boost productivity.

T4. [900896] **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Southampton Itchen has the worst cases of unsafe cladding in Hampshire and fire safety works are taking years to get started, so residents are stuck in properties they cannot move out of or sell. Will the Secretary of State please update the House on what she is doing to ensure that developers and freeholders get on with urgent safety works and protect leaseholders from extortionate costs? Will she meet me and local councillors?

Alex Norris: As a Government, we have been clear that the pace of remediation has been far too slow. The Deputy Prime Minister and I will be meeting developers to review their progress and to agree a joint plan for accelerating remediation in the coming weeks. I am, of course, very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues, and meet with constituents if that is helpful too.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): High streets are the beating hearts of our communities. Those in places such as Broadstone in my constituency

1. [Official Report, 29 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

are really bouncing back and reinventing themselves. The public assume that councils are able to flex business rates and that they own most properties, but we all know that that is not the case. Will the Minister provide a timeline for the reform of business rates, and assure pubs and shops that their existing reliefs will be maintained?

Alex Norris: I am afraid the hon. Lady puts me in quite the pickle. With less than 48 hours before a fiscal event she would not expect me to pre-empt the Chancellor, but we have heard the hon. Lady's calls and those from business. Alongside any rates changes, we will seek to provide the tools, such as high street rental auctions or community right to buy, to give communities control of their high streets again.

T5. [900897] **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I recently met local businesses in my constituency to discuss what can be done to attract more people to visit our high streets. Will the Minister set out what action the Government are taking to help regenerate local high streets, and will he meet me to discuss this issue further?

Alex Norris: We all want to see our high streets thriving. It is the business of government, local councils and local communities to push back on some of the decline that has been seen as inevitable in recent years. As part of that, we will be giving local communities the tools to reshape their high streets, such as high street rental auctions and the community right to buy.

T3. [900895] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has consistently called for the power to impose rent controls across Greater London. He cannot do that unless the Government change the law. Whenever it has been tried around the world it has failed, typically with rental property supply falling and rents perversely rising. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity now to rule out the possibility of imposing rent controls in Greater London?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): As the shadow Minister will know from our exchanges in the Renters' Rights Bill Committee, the Government have absolutely no plans to introduce rent controls in any form.

T9. [900901] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Consett, Blaydon and other towns across the north-east are keen to play their part in growing our local economies, and one of the things that growth comes from is making work pay. In the first 100 days of a Labour Government, the Secretary of State has delivered the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. Can she update the House on her work in supporting the new deal for working people?

Angela Rayner: The new deal for working people is contained in the Employment Rights Bill, which had its Second Reading last week. We will continue to push forward other measures that do not require legislation, but what we hope to see is a new culture between business, trade unions and local communities to ensure that work really does pay.

T6. [900898] **Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Ministers have acknowledged in reply to earlier questions that they recognise the financial pressures being placed on local authorities, especially in connection with children's services and adult social care. Whatever may or may not be in the Budget, can the Minister reassure council tax payers that they will not bear an undue burden as a result of any changes?

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): This Government are acutely aware of the impact of the cost of living crisis on working people, and that is firmly in our sights as we approach the spending review this week, but we will have to repair a fair amount of the system, not just the finances. The early warning audit has been left shattered following 14 years of mismanagement, and single-year settlements have left councils not knowing from one year to the next how much money they have to spend, so we will have to introduce multi-year settlements. There is a great deal of work to do, and we cannot repair 14 years of damage in three months, but we are well on the way to it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me first draw attention to my declared interest as a trustee of Fields in Trust.

In the last Parliament, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee received a large amount of evidence concerning the importance of well-designed open spaces for children and young people, but the national planning policy framework mentions them once and mentions bats twice. Is it not about time we got our priorities right, and did more to improve the design of—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just a minute, please! One of us will have to give way.

The hon. Gentleman is one of the most senior Members of Parliament. He should be looking at me when he is asking a question, not at the Minister. Come on, Clive: I am better-looking.

Mr Betts: I will agree with you on the latter point, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister tell us whether he will change the guidance in future to place more emphasis on the importance to children and young people of properly designed open space?

Mr Speaker: But not in this instance! [*Laughter.*]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): The national planning policy guidance will recognise the importance of high-quality open spaces and opportunities for sports, physical activity, health and wellbeing in our communities. Our proposals to release grey-belt land for development will depend on developers' meeting one of the "golden rules" and ensuring that all new developments have accessible green space.

T7. [900899] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): My constituency, like most others, is seeing a great deal of new housing being built, which means more infrastructure, more business and more opportunities

for growth. Key to that, however, is access to reliable, high-speed broadband. Given the SNP Government's previous failures to deliver gigabit broadband to every home as promised, can the Minister tell us what discussions are taking place and what consideration is being given to supporting its efficient delivery in Scotland?

Alex Norris: Through Project Gigabit we have a commitment to level up all communities in the United Kingdom, and through the welcome work of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister we have a commitment to reset relationships with the devolved Administrations. Hopefully, by putting those two together, we will be able to make significant progress.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for everything that she is doing to tackle Islamophobia. This anti-Muslim discourse is a scourge on our communities in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield. Will she join me in celebrating the work of local volunteers, churches, mosques, Lancashire police and others who organised Burnley's "Diversity Picnic—Bubbles in the Park", and who worked so successfully in averting potential disturbances over the summer?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I cannot wait to join him at Bubbles in the Park on a future date, as Burnley is not that far away from my constituency. He is absolutely right to celebrate the work of volunteers in communities and public servants, who give their time and energy to strengthen our local areas and bring people together.

T8. [900900] **James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD):** Talland Parade is an abandoned and dilapidated row of shops in Seaford, in my constituency. It has stood empty for 12 years, despite having planning permission in place for much-needed flats. The council had to take the developer to the High Court just to get some scaffolding removed at the site. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the site, and will the Government consider expanding compulsory purchase powers for councils to allow them to acquire such key sites?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the question. Of course, I would be very happy to have a meeting. I point the hon. Gentleman towards the very helpful innovation of high street rental auctions at the back end of this year, which will give local authorities the tools to bring into use vacant units and to make sure that developers know that they must use them or let somebody else do so.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): The planned increase in housing supply is crucial, as we all know, but my residents in West Lancashire are concerned about access to services. Can the Secretary of State tell us what she is doing to ensure that the increase in housing supply is met with the relevant infrastructure and access to services?

Matthew Pennycook: It is incredibly important that the relevant infrastructure, amenities and services are in place. We have taken a number of steps to better support that in the short period we have been in office, not least through the national planning policy framework, but there is more to be done in that area. I will keep it under very close review.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the merits of reforming the planning system to introduce new measures to help reduce flood risk?

Matthew Pennycook: The national planning policy framework is very clear that inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk, including flood plains. We consulted in the national planning policy framework consultation and sought views on how the planning system can more effectively manage flood risk. As I say, my Department is analysing responses, with a view to publishing a Government response before the end of the year.

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

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know the financial difficulties facing so many of our local authorities. A recent Local Government Association report shows that one in four local authorities will apply for additional funding. It is fair to say that, for a number of them, March will be too late. What discussions have been had with the Chancellor to ensure that our local authorities get emergency support?

Jim McMahon: May I welcome the Chair of the Select Committee to her place? She will do an outstanding job for local government and housing.

The Government absolutely understand how difficult it is for local authorities to make ends meet. We understand that the pressures in adult social care, children's social services and temporary accommodation are biting hard, and we are working through those issues with the sector.

Speaker's Statement

3.33 pm

Mr Speaker: Before the next business, I have a short statement to make. In media interviews last week, the Chancellor announced that she intended to introduce changes to the fiscal rules relating to the funding of day-to-day spending through tax receipts, and to the measurement of public debt. These are major new policy announcements, with significant and wide-ranging implications for the Government's fiscal policy and for the public finances. It is evident to me that they should therefore have been made in this House in the first instance, and not to the world's media. This principle is clearly and unambiguously set out in paragraph 9.1 of the ministerial code. While this can hardly be described as a leak—the Chancellor herself gave interviews on the record, and on camera—the premature disclosure of the contents of the Budget has always been regarded as a supreme discourtesy to the House; indeed, I still regard it as such.

I am very disappointed that the Chancellor expects the House to wait nearly a full week to hear her repeat the announcements in the Budget statement on Wednesday. I have always defended the undoubted right of this House, including the Opposition parties and Back Benchers in all parts of the House, to be the first to hear major Government policy announcements. When such announcements are made, Ministers should expect to face proper, sustained scrutiny from the elected Members of this House, not American news channels. I can assure the Government that that is still my firm view, and that I will use the powers I have to make sure the House is able to hold Ministers to account.

I am glad that there will be a statement later on fiscal rules—perhaps that is no coincidence. Hon. Members may be wondering how they will get a seat on Wednesday, but to be quite honest, the way it is going, they will not need one, as we will have heard it all already. This is not acceptable, and I do not want it to continue. I want this House—Government and Opposition—to be treated with the respect it deserves. It is totally unacceptable to go around the world telling everyone rather than Members of this House. They were elected by the constituents of this country and they deserve to be treated better. When the Conservatives were the Government, it was Labour complaining to me. Get your acts together, on all sides, and treat Members with respect.

China: Human Rights and Sanctions

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the case of Christopher Berry and Christopher Cash is sub judice and no reference should be made to it in the House.

3.35 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on his recent visit to China, on China's reported human rights abuses in Xinjiang, on the case of Jimmy Lai and on sanctions on British parliamentarians.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. On China, this Government are clear that the UK's national interests will always come first. Pragmatic engagement matters, not only to co-operate on shared challenges but to make progress in areas where we disagree. On my visit I made it clear that Chinese companies must stop supplying equipment to Russia that is being used in Ukraine. I also highlighted North Korean recklessness in stepping up its support for Putin—a threat to European security and stability in the Korean peninsula. I was robust on human rights, including in Xinjiang. I raised our serious concerns—which the right hon. Gentleman has also raised on many occasions—about the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong and called for the immediate release of British national Jimmy Lai. I called on Beijing to lift its unwarranted sanctions against parliamentarians, including the right hon. Gentleman. This was a matter that I raised with you, Mr Speaker, before attending. I raised Taiwan, and warned that cyber-activity or interference in our democracy is unacceptable and will always be met by a strong response.

I also covered areas of mutual interest. China is the world's biggest emitter, so we need to co-operate on the global green transition. It is also the world's second-largest economy, and our trade with China is worth almost £100 billion. China has the second-largest number of AI unicorns of any country worldwide. Like the last Government, we will work with China to create rules to keep the public safe. This is grown-up diplomacy. After 14 years of inconsistency under the Conservatives, this Government will set a long-term, consistent and strategic approach to China. With Foreign Minister Wang Yi, I agreed to maintain channels of communication at ministerial level. This brings us up to speed with the United States, whose Secretary of State and Treasury Secretary have both made two visits in the past 18 months, as well as with partners including Australia, France and Germany. This Government are currently carrying out a China audit to improve our response to the challenges and opportunities that China presents to the UK. Once it is completed, I will gladly update the House again.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. China is even now carrying out military exercises threatening Taiwan and threatening to blockade it, which would damage all our economies, yet I see in the Foreign Office's readout after the visit to China that there was absolutely no discussion of that

issue. Why not? On human rights in Xinjiang, the House of Commons, including the Labour party in opposition, voted that genocide was taking place in Xinjiang, yet the Foreign Office readout simply said: “Human rights were discussed”. This is a genocide taking place, with slave labour. Why is there not more robust condemnation from the Government to China?

In Jimmy Lai’s case, he is a British citizen and a prisoner in Hong Kong for committing no crime whatever. Did the Foreign Secretary not only call for his release, as he just said, but demand full consular rights of access? On sanctions on British parliamentarians, the week before last, the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister whether the Foreign Secretary would tell the Chinese Government to lift the sanctions on parliamentarians. The Prime Minister said that he would. However, I see from the Foreign Office read-out that the Foreign Secretary did not even raise that, let alone call on the Chinese Government to lift those sanctions. Given your brave support, Mr Speaker, for those of us who are sanctioned, I simply ask why the Government cannot follow suit and demand that from the Chinese?

I have just heard—this is my final point—that there is a move in the Foreign Office to lift British sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for the brutal genocide in Xinjiang as a deal to lift the sanctions on parliamentarians here. I must tell the Foreign Secretary that I, for one, would never accept such a shameful deal at any price, and I hope that he will stamp on that straightaway. Will he make it clear what our real position is on what is becoming a clear and massive threat to our freedoms?

Mr Lammy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for his interest in my travels, but I have to correct him on a few points. I did, of course, raise Xinjiang in the context of human rights. I absolutely raised, as I assured you, Mr Speaker, that I would, the position of parliamentarians—of course I did—not just with the Foreign Minister but with the foreign affairs spokesperson for the Chinese Communist party. I raised that as a matter of huge concern. I also raised the threats and aggression that we are now seeing in the South China sea. Jimmy Lai, I raised; Members of this House, I raised; Xinjiang, I raised; Hong Kong, I raised. It would be totally unacceptable for any UK Foreign Minister to go to China and not raise those issues of tremendous concern.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that the previous Government bounced around on China. They had a golden era—he was part of the Government who had that golden era and were drinking pints with President Xi. A former Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary were found to be lobbying on behalf of Chinese belt-and-road initiatives, so I am not going to take any lessons from the Opposition on how to handle China.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has rightly outlined the complex nature of our relationship with China. May I add to the long list the tension in the strait of Taiwan and the effect that that is likely to have on international trade if it goes wrong? The fact that the relationship is complicated, however, does not mean that we should

not get clarity. That is important not just for Members of the House but for others, whether they are promoting British exports overseas or are human rights campaigners such as Sebastien Lai, whom I met last week, or are British representatives in Mongolia. We need clarity in our approach to China, so we urgently need to know when the China audit will be completed. Will my right hon. Friend tell us when that is likely to happen, and will he also commit to appearing before my Committee to answer questions about it?

Mr Lammy: Yes, of course, I will appear before my right hon. Friend’s Committee, whenever she commands, to answer questions. She is absolutely right—the issues in the Taiwan strait are very serious. I raised those issues in China, and also in Indonesia and in Korea. We need a consistent approach to China, which is why we are doing the audit. It is my hope that it will be complete early next year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this urgent question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

It is disappointing, but not surprising, that the Foreign Secretary did not see fit to update the House following his visit to China. I want to press him on what the visit achieved because, comparing the read-outs, I would be forgiven for thinking that two very separate visits took place. The Opposition understand the importance of engagement, but not at any cost. All interactions with the Chinese Communist party must be clear-eyed and part of a meaningful strategy, as per the high-level China strategy that the Foreign Secretary inherited from our Government. Yet, as he said, this visit occurred before this Government had concluded their so-called China audit. Would it not have been better to wait until he knew what interests he is seeking to defend and further?

On the Conservative Benches, it looks as if the Foreign Secretary rushed into engagement without a plan. Concerningly, in a fundamental breach of the constitutional principle that Parliament is sovereign, he was willing to pressure parliamentarians into cancelling the visit of former President Tsai of Taiwan the week before his trip. Unlike in an autocratic state, the Government do not tell Members of Parliament who they can or cannot meet. Indeed, the Conservative Government told the CCP on multiple occasions that, no, it could not shut me and other Members up, despite its requests.

We are told that the Foreign Secretary raised British citizen Jimmy Lai’s sham detention. Jimmy is 76 and is being held in solitary confinement, yet the Foreign Secretary still has not met Jimmy’s son, despite his coming to the UK on multiple occasions and asking for a meeting. Will the Foreign Secretary now meet Sebastien to update him on his father’s prospects? And will he share with us the outcomes of his visit?

Will Jimmy Lai now be released? Will the Chinese Communist party now step back from its human rights abuses in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet? Will sanctions on MPs now be lifted? Will the Chinese Communist party now refrain from actions to support Russia’s war

[Alicia Kearns]

machine and the intimidation of Taiwan? Will the transnational oppression of Hongkongers and Uyghurs now end? Which of those objectives did the Foreign Secretary achieve thanks to his visit?

It is easy to say that the visit was a reset in relations but, as we all know, in every relationship there are givers and takers. Has the Foreign Secretary not simply proved that he gave and they took?

Mr Lammy: Really? That was quite bad.

The leader and the Foreign Minister of the United States have had eight engagements with China, France has had six, Germany has had four, Japan has had three, and Canada has had two. The right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) went once. And the hon. Lady asks me what I have achieved! I will go again and again to get outcomes in the UK's national interest. The hon. Lady would expect nothing less.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Given the various global challenges we face, I fully appreciate that strategic dialogue with China is in our national interest. In the light of the persecution and diabolical treatment of Uyghur Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Falun Gong followers and pro-democracy Hongkongers, to name but a few, it is, however, important that human rights concerns are raised. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he raised those human rights concerns forthrightly with his Chinese counterparts?

Mr Lammy: I assure my hon. Friend that I raised those issues robustly. There was disagreement across the table on what the Chinese Government maintain that they are doing, particularly in Xinjiang and in relation to minorities—Mr Wang Yi suggested that I was “confused” in my account of the treatment of minorities. I assure my hon. Friend that we will, however, continue to raise these issues robustly and to hold the Chinese Government to account.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): We remain deeply concerned by Beijing's abuse of human rights and disregard for international law. Too often, the previous Government pursued trade links instead of acting on these concerns. Will this Government now do the right thing and recognise that the crimes perpetrated against the Uyghurs amount to the crime of genocide?

China is not listening to the UK on Hong Kong, Jimmy Lai remains in prison, and the police have offered bounties in relation to pro-democracy activists. Will the Foreign Secretary now put actions on the table, including reviewing our position on Hong Kong's autonomy and whether it should continue to receive preferential customs status? Can he assure the House that Hongkongers who have sought refuge in the UK are receiving proper protection?

Finally, given that Taiwan is a democratic ally, can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that his Department played no part in preventing Parliament from hosting former President Tsai?

Mr Lammy: I do not recognise what was suggested in relation to Taiwan.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that Jimmy Lai's case is a priority for the Government and will remain so. We continue to press for consular access to Jimmy Lai and for his release. Diplomats from our consulate general in Hong Kong attended his court proceedings on a regular basis, to keep abreast of what is taking place.

On Taiwan, our position remains the same. In all our engagements with the Chinese Government, we will continue to challenge them robustly on all these issues. He suggests that the last Government put trade first. We will not be putting trade first, but there are clearly areas where we can and should co-operate with China, as well as areas where we will challenge China, as we must.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I am honoured to have met Sebastien Lai and his legal team, who are fighting for the release of his father, Jimmy Lai. Jimmy is 76 and a diabetic, and there are serious concerns about his ill health in solitary confinement. Jimmy is a man of faith. He is a Roman Catholic who is being denied Holy Communion—how very cruel that is at his stage of life and in his condition. His crime is standing up for freedom and democracy. Sebastien has been doing all he can, but he needs assistance and respectfully requests that senior figures in Government get his father, a British citizen, released. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to meeting Jimmy Lai's family and will he ask the Chancellor to do the same, ahead of her visit to China next year?

Mr Lammy: Of course I will commit to meeting Sebastien and his family. When I raised the issue of Jimmy Lai, I pointed to his age and the fact that it would be an abomination if he died in prison. I assure my hon. Friend that that issue was raised.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Mr Speaker, as one of the parliamentarians who has been sanctioned by the Chinese regime, I thank you for your ongoing advocacy on our behalf. Let us never forget that the Chinese regime were literally spying on us as Members of this House. In Opposition, the Labour party said there was “clear and compelling evidence” of a genocide in Xinjiang. Now that the right hon. Gentleman is the Foreign Secretary, is he prepared to repeat that statement? Does he still believe there is “clear and compelling evidence” of a genocide in Xinjiang or has he changed his mind?

Mr Lammy: I remain hugely concerned about the human rights abuses in Xinjiang, but the hon. Gentleman knows that it must always rightfully be a matter for the International Criminal Court and others to make a determination of “genocide”, not for national government.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Following his recent visit to China, the Foreign Secretary also met with our partners in South Korea. Does he share my concern about reports of North Korean troops taking part in Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and did he raise that?

Mr Lammy: I went up to the demilitarised zone to see for myself some of the harassment that South Korea receives on a daily basis from North Korea, and of course

I raised the issue in China and with the South Korean President himself. There is huge concern about this development, which is escalatory in nature and must command a response in the coming days.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): Given the unprecedented threat that China poses to UK national security, and indeed global security, and the “clear and compelling evidence”, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O’Brien), of genocide in Xinjiang, which the Foreign Secretary is strangely shy about condemning these days, why have the Government delayed the implementation of the foreign influence registration scheme, a vital transparency measure that the Conservative party introduced when in government?

Mr Lammy: That scheme is important. It is hugely important that countries of concern do not have undue influence, in relation to our national security, on business and industry. We will come forward with our plans in due course.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Much like Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong, British-Egyptian writer and pro-democracy activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah remains unlawfully detained in Egypt, and still has not been granted access to British consular officials, despite the British Government raising the case at the highest levels. His mother Laila is now on hunger strike against his continued imprisonment. In November 2022, the Foreign Secretary called on the then British Government to take more direct action to bring Alaa home, recognising the UK Government’s responsibility to protect citizens from arbitrary detention and human rights abuses abroad. Since coming to office, what have the Foreign Secretary and the Government done to follow through on what he once promised and to bring Alaa home?

Mr Speaker: Order. The urgent question was purely about Hong Kong. I know that there is a slight connection.

Zarah Sultana: There is a similarity.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but I judge the similarity, not your good self. If the Foreign Secretary wishes to take it, fine. If he does not, I understand.

Mr Lammy: I assure the hon. Lady that I met with Alaa Abd El-Fattah’s family just a few weeks ago, and I raised the issue once again with the Egyptian Foreign Minister in a subsequent call.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Like every Member, in my constituency I receive hundreds of representations from Hongkongers in this country who are concerned about their own safety—I have experience of it myself: I was filmed by a drone while speaking at a Hong Kong protest in Edinburgh—but they are also concerned about their families at home. What assurances can the Foreign Secretary give us about the safety of Hongkongers in this country, and more importantly about plugging the gaps in the British national overseas scheme?

Mr Lammy: The national security law is of great concern, which is why I raised it with the Foreign Minister. Of course Hong Kong nationals should be assured of their safety in this country. Our police and security services keep these things under close scrutiny.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that on his recent visit to the Indo-Pacific he raised the UK’s continued commitment to AUKUS and to general engagement on security in the region?

Mr Lammy: Absolutely. We are 100% committed to AUKUS, and the development of pillar 2 particularly.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As I believe the Foreign Secretary is an honest man, I am perfectly prepared to accept that he raised these matters of human rights as forcefully as he says he did, so there must be something wrong with the Foreign Office’s reporting, because that forcefulness does not find its way into its account of the visit. Is one reason why his officials are reluctant to relay what really happened the fact that we are overdependent on China, and has he made an assessment of what would happen in terms of our dependence on China were, heaven forbid, a conflict to break out over Taiwan?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise dependency. One thing that the China audit will look at is that very issue, and the assessment that he refers to is being made not just by us, but by our closest allies.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the sanctions imposed on democratically elected Members of this House are wholly unacceptable, and what discussions did he have with Chinese counterparts to that effect?

Mr Lammy: I told Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister, that it was not just unacceptable but counterproductive and that it needed to end. Those were my exact words.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Of course we were all pleased to hear both the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister describe the release of Jimmy Lai as a priority. In the Foreign Secretary’s meeting with his Chinese counterpart, what priority was given to the release of Jimmy Lai, and given its priority status when does the Foreign Secretary expect us to see measurable progress being made on Jimmy Lai’s release, and what will that progress look like?

Mr Lammy: “Progress” is Jimmy Lai’s release; that is the position of the UK Government. I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman when that will be, because we are not holding him; the Chinese are holding him. We continue to say that he should be released—that is our position.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is a travesty that Jimmy Lai remains detained, and that he should be released immediately to return to his family?

Mr Lammy: Yes, 100%.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for actually coming to the House on this occasion, but does that not underline the fact that he should have volunteered a statement, rather than being forced to the Dispatch Box by an urgent question? Having listened to these exchanges, are Members

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

of the House not still entitled to ask what exactly the Government's overall strategic policy is towards China—given, for example, the huge build-up of nuclear weapons that China is funding, developing and building? Will he bring to the House a proper and full statement, or even a White Paper, that sets out that strategy once and for all? Let me just reassure him that I am one of the many Conservative colleagues who were open-mouthed in astonishment when we announced that we were going to have a golden era with that communist dictatorship, and I never had anything to do with it.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right: we must have a consistent, sustained position on China. That is why we are undertaking a China audit, and I will of course update the House when it is complete.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his update, his constructive tone and his defence of human rights in the region. Is the audit Government-wide, and will it only consider the situation now or look into future scenarios as well?

Mr Lammy: It was important, when we came into government, given the bouncing around that we saw in the last Government's policy towards China, that we did a complete audit, right across Whitehall, of our interests and the opportunities, as well as of the challenges and security concerns, so that we could maintain a consistent position. Before that audit is complete, we are being guided, as I have said, by the three Cs: there are areas in which we co-operate, areas in which we compete, and there must be areas, as has come up this afternoon, in which we challenge.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): In the Foreign Secretary's self-declaredly "robust" conversations with the Chinese Government, did he give a time limit for lifting sanctions on British politicians, including Members of this House, and did he outline the consequences if that were not met? Or were his talks just chat, and not robust?

Mr Lammy: I did not give a timeline. I simply said that the sanctions should be lifted, and explained why it was just wrong and counterproductive to sanction Members of a democratic Chamber like this. That was my position, and I defend it; I think that was the right thing to say. I raised the issue with Mr Speaker before leaving, just to be absolutely clear on the current status. Although one cannot be entirely sure that what one is conveying is going in and is properly understood, I did detect that Wang Yi recognised that this was a big issue between our two countries.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I appreciate the Foreign Secretary coming here to make much clearer our views on China, and particularly human rights abuses there. People from Hong Kong living in Milton Keynes are still fearful of intimidation and concerned about China's influence on some of our universities. What assessment has he made of that, and how will he proceed with the Chinese Government to ensure that those influences stop?

Mr Lammy: Coercion and threats are unacceptable; we have made that clear to the Chinese Government, and I made it clear again. My hon. Friend's constituents should be reassured that the police and security services monitor these issues very closely, but I hope that in time, I might be able to meet some of her constituents to fully understand their concerns.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Over the last few weeks, I have met a number of Hong Kong advocacy groups, who have outlined how withholding BNO visa holders' access to mandatory provident fund accounts and the launch of a volunteer recruitment scheme by the Chinese embassy are spreading fear of creeping Chinese influence on our streets. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with the Chinese Government on ending transnational repression of Hongkongers in my constituency and across the country?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, I raised the issue of the national security law and our long-standing concerns about Hong Kong—concerns that will not go away, because of the UK's unique relationship with that part of the world and many businesses and communities there. That was the way in which I raised those issues, and I think our concerns were understood.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's confirmation that he will meet the family of Jimmy Lai, but does he agree that as China is the world's largest emitter, we need to engage with China pragmatically as we work to tackle the climate crisis?

Mr Lammy: Yes. There is no way to reduce global temperatures without working with China to achieve that, so that was a big topic of discussion between our two countries in our meeting. As I said, I will go back, because it is important that we engage with China, just as our allies do. We cannot influence China if we step back and do not go there at all; that makes no sense.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): Another topic that did not seem to make it into the Foreign Office read-out on the Foreign Secretary's meeting is Taiwan, but I think he confirmed in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) that that topic was discussed. Could he specify a little more clearly what he said, and was he clearer about the UK's red lines on Taiwan?

Mr Lammy: I specifically discussed the aggression that we are seeing in the Taiwan straits, and I maintained our long-standing position on Taiwan. We are very concerned about an escalatory pattern of behaviour, and of course I raised those concerns in a robust manner.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): York Outer has a vibrant community of Hongkongers who want to secure Jimmy Lai's release. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that he will raise the issue of Jimmy Lai every single time he meets Chinese officials, until he is safely released?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that that is the case. He can sense the strength of feeling on the issue in the Chamber; so many Members from across the House

have spoken of Jimmy Lai today. That is why every UK Minister who engages with China will raise Jimmy Lai's case.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Foreign Secretary is enthusiastic about giving trillions of pounds of UK taxpayers' money in reparations for slavery that occurred hundreds of years ago. However, when it comes to modern-day slavery in China, despite what he states was said privately, all we get publicly is a mealy-mouthed press release—a read-out from the Foreign Office that does not even mention the issue specifically. Why is that? Is it because the Government realise that we are now dependent on China for many things, including the delivery of the net zero policy? China controls 70% of the rare earth metals that we will need to deliver renewable energy. We have left ourselves open to that kind of blackmail, and now we cannot speak up against human rights abuses.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman has a point. This Government have been in power for three months, and we have a lot to clear up, given the mess that was left to us—he is right about that. That work begins with the China audit.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that when it comes to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, it is vital to co-ordinate rules globally, including with China, to protect British people and our technological infrastructure?

Mr Lammy: Yes, 100%.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The obstruction of the supply of Taiwanese semiconductors poses an existential threat to the UK economy and our whole way of life. Did the Foreign Secretary come away from his visit reassured that our supply chains are likely to be safe for the foreseeable future? If not, what will he do to mitigate that threat by growing our indigenous capacity?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I gently say that Members should look at me when they are asking questions, not at the Foreign Secretary, as tempting as that is? I want questions to be done in the third person, to keep things calm.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. That point is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade is engaged on an industrial policy as we speak, and why the debate must go on about friendshoring and how we work with partners—to make sure that we have access to not just semiconductors, but rare earth minerals, and can work on issues that are critical to our security. We must do far more than was achieved under the last Government.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the Foreign Secretary for making it clear that Jimmy Lai's release is a priority, and I join hon. Members in saying that the issue is urgent, not just because of his failing health, but because once the trial restarts on 20 November, it will be more

difficult to bring the situation to a positive conclusion. The Foreign Secretary mentioned the need for a consistent strategy towards China—consistent not just from him, but from the whole of Government. China reacts to naked economic self-interest, so can he make sure that the matter is raised across Government—by the Business Secretary on issues of trade, by the Net Zero Secretary on issues of green energy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) mentioned, and by the Education Secretary when it comes to education, so that we appeal to that self-interest?

Mr Lammy: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend—there has to be a cross-Government approach. It is not just for the Foreign Secretary to engage; other Ministers have to engage with their counterparts, mindful of the three Cs: there will be many areas in which we will co-operate, but there are areas where we compete and areas where we have to challenge. We can do that only if we go there and engage, which is why the United States, France, Australia, Japan, Italy and Canada have made so many more visits than us.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Foreign Secretary gave a comprehensive list of the matters that he raised, and he hinted at the reaction when he raised them, but he has not told us that anything will change as a result of the discussions. I will give him a chance to do that: what will happen to the plight of the Uyghur Muslims as a result of his visit?

Mr Lammy: The Uyghur Muslims were being horrendously treated, persecuted and pursued during the 14 years of the last Government, so it is crass to suggest that after three months, we could simply achieve a different result. Diplomacy is about constantly engaging to bring about a result, and that is what I will continue to do.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): In May, the director of GCHQ said:

“We want to engage with China where it's mutually beneficial”, but that

“China poses a genuine and increasing”

risk to the UK's cyber-security. Does the Foreign Secretary think that GCHQ has the resources it needs to protect us from Chinese cyber-attacks?

Mr Lammy: One of the most impressive parts of Government that I have seen in my three months in this job is the work of GCHQ. A fiscal event is about to happen, so I hesitate to talk about the finances available to GCHQ, but my hon. Friend can be absolutely sure that I have made the case for it, because it deserves the funds and does a great job to keep us all safe.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Ambiguity can sometimes be helpful in diplomacy, but it is less helpful when answering a direct question about the actions of the Government here at home. The Foreign Secretary has been somewhat evasive in answering some of the questions today, so let me ask just one of them again. Did any of his officials play any part in the decision to stop the visit by President Tsai, the former President of Taiwan—yes or no?

Mr Lammy: I do not recognise the caricature being put about on this at all. I really do not.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I have met many Ukrainian refugees who are being generously housed in my constituency, and they are extremely concerned about countries such as Iran and North Korea providing matériel support to Putin's war machine. Can the Foreign Secretary agree with me that China and Chinese companies should not provide any support to Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I can. This was a very serious issue that I put to the Foreign Minister. We have evidence that Chinese parts with dual use capability are turning up in Russia, and they are taking lives in Ukraine, which is entirely unacceptable. My hon. Friend will not be surprised that the Chinese denied this, but we have the evidence and we put it on the table.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the UK will not seek to resume the economic and financial dialogue that was paused after the imposition of the Hong Kong national security law, given that more than 60% of the components used to prosecute Putin's illegal war in Ukraine come from China?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Member again raises this serious issue in the House. It is entirely unacceptable and we will continue to engage on it.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Foreign Secretary mentioned how he raised with the Government in Beijing the Russian human rights abuses in Ukraine carried out during Russia's aggression. A Chinese delegation was absent from the peace conference in Switzerland, yet President Xi was present in Russia at

the BRICS summit last week. When the Foreign Secretary raised with Chinese counterparts these Russian human rights abuses, what was the response?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Member will not be surprised to hear that the Chinese denied it, but we were able to supply some evidence to back up our claims for them to reflect on, and we will re-engage to see what conclusions they come to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can I emphasise to the Secretary of State how important it is to have the right answers to these questions? As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, I have raised the issue of human rights abuses repeatedly in this House, including at business questions every Thursday, with the former Government, so I welcome this new Government and, with them, a new approach to our international obligations. How will the Secretary of State use any and every weapon in our arsenal to secure help for the Uyghur Muslims, for Jimmy Lai—he is a practising Roman Catholic, and he is being denied the eucharist, but it is his right to have his own religious belief—and for the Christians, Falun Gong and other ethnic groups in China, and when will this begin in earnest?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to combine those issues, and also to encourage me to mention not just our bilateral engagement with China, but our co-ordinated work with our allies to engage with China. It is the case, I think, particularly with our G7 allies, that there is more we can do.

Mr Speaker: That completes the urgent question. In fairness to the Foreign Secretary, I would just say that we did have a meeting—he is absolutely correct—about the situation facing some Members of this House. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that those sanctions are lifted, and that was part of the conversation.

Middle East

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the middle east. After over a year of horrifying violence, civilian suffering has increased, the conflict has widened, the risks of a yet wider regional war have risen. Today, I want to address three elements of this crisis and outline the urgent steps that the Government are taking in response.

I will first consider events over the weekend. Targeted Israeli strikes hit military sites inside Iran, including a missile manufacturer and an air defence base. This was in response to Iran's escalatory ballistic missile attacks on Israel, which have been condemned across the House. These attacks were the latest in a long history of malign Iranian activity, including its nuclear programme, with its total enriched uranium stockpile now reported by the International Atomic Energy Agency to be 30 times the joint comprehensive plan of action limit, and political, financial and military support for militias, including Hezbollah and Hamas.

Let me be clear: the Government unequivocally condemn Iranian attacks on Israel. This Government have imposed three rounds of sanctions on Iranian individuals and organisations responsible for malign activity, most recently on 14 October, and we have consistently supported Israel's right to defend itself against Iranian attacks and attacks by Iranian-backed terrorists, whose goal is the complete eradication of the Israeli state. We do not mourn the deaths of the heads of proscribed terrorist organisations.

The priority now is immediate de-escalation. Iran should not respond. All sides must exercise restraint. We do not wish to see the cycle of violence intensifying, dragging the whole region into a war with severe consequences. Escalation is in no one's interest, as it risks spreading the regional conflict further. We and our partners have been passing this message clearly and consistently. Yesterday, I spoke to Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi and Israeli Foreign Minister Katz and urged both countries to show restraint and avoid further regional escalation.

Let me turn to the devastating situation in northern Gaza, where the United Nations estimates that over 400,000 Palestinian civilians remain. Access to essential services worsens by the day, yet still very little aid is being allowed in. Israel's evacuation order in the north has displaced tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, driven from destruction, disease, and despair to destruction, disease and despair. Nine in 10 Gazans have been displaced since the war began. Some have had to flee more than 10 times in the past year. What must parents say to their children? How can they explain this living nightmare? How can they reassure that it will end?

There is no excuse for the Israeli Government's ongoing restrictions on humanitarian assistance; they must let more aid in now. Aid is backed up at Gaza's borders, in many cases funded by the UK and our partners but now stuck out of reach of those who need it so desperately. These restrictions fly in the face of Israel's public commitments. They risk violating international humanitarian law. They are a rebuke to every friend of Israel, who

month after month have demanded action to address the catastrophic conditions facing Palestinian civilians. So let me be clear once again: this Government condemn these restrictions in the strongest terms.

Since our first day in office, the Government have led efforts to bring this nightmare to an end. We have announced funding for UK-Med's efforts to provide medical treatment in Gaza, for UNICEF's work to support vulnerable families in Gaza, and for Egyptian health facilities treating medically evacuated Palestinians from Gaza. We are matching donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee's middle east humanitarian appeal. Together with France and Algeria, we called an emergency UN Security Council meeting to address the dire situation. We have sanctioned extremist settlers, making it clear that their actions do not serve the real interests of either Israel or the region.

We have moved quickly to restore funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, overturning the position of the last Government. We did that to support UNRWA's indispensable role in assisting Palestinians, and to enable it to implement the recommendations of the independent Colonna report. All over the world, in every war zone, in every refugee camp, the United Nations is a beacon of hope, so it is a matter of profound regret that the Israeli Parliament is considering shutting down UNRWA's operations. The allegations against UNRWA staff earlier this year were fully investigated and offer no jurisdiction for cutting off ties with UNRWA. This weekend, we therefore joined partners in expressing concern at the Knesset's legislation and urging Israel to ensure that UNRWA's lifesaving work continues. We call on UNRWA to continue its path to reform, demonstrating its commitment to the principle of neutrality.

Finally, I will cover the conflict in Lebanon, a country that has endured so much in my lifetime and now sees fighting escalate once again, killing many civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands from their homes, while in northern Israel, communities live in fear of Hezbollah attacks and are unable to return home. Here, too, the Government have led efforts to respond. Our swift call for an immediate ceasefire was taken up by our partners in the United Nations Security Council. The Defence Secretary and I have visited Lebanon, where Britain's ongoing support for the Lebanese armed forces is widely recognised as an investment in a sovereign and effective Lebanese state. At the start of October, I announced £10 million for the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon. Last week, the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), announced further funding for the most vulnerable among those fleeing from Lebanon into Syria, while the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), joined the Lebanon support conference in Paris. Today, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will meet Prime Minister Mikati to reassure him of our support.

Across the region, our priorities are clear: de-escalation, humanitarian assistance, immediate ceasefires, upholding international law, and political solutions. This is how we save lives, how we liberate hostages, such as British national Emily Damari, and how we pull the region back from the brink. The Government have stepped up our diplomatic engagement to that end. The Prime

[*Mr David Lammy*]

Minister has spoken directly to Prime Minister Netanyahu and to President Pezeshkian, while I have made five visits to the region in just four months and held around 50 calls and meetings with Ministers and leaders in the region. I spoke this weekend to US Secretary Blinken, just back from the region.

It is a source of deep frustration that those efforts have not yet succeeded. We have no illusions about the deep-seated divisions in this region—a region scarred by fighting and false dawns in the past—but it is never too late for peace, and never too late for hope. This Government will not give up on the people of the region. We will keep playing our part in achieving a lasting solution, so that one day they might all live side-by-side in peace and security. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.27 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and may I also thank the Foreign Office for its significant help with my visit to Ukraine at the end of last week?

Israel's response to the attack launched by Iran earlier this month has rightly been described as proportionate. Israel has the right to defend itself, and it has done so in a precise and targeted way. The statement by the Israel Defence Forces that it was "mission accomplished" offers hope that the operation might mark the end of the latest trading of hostilities. Whether and how the Iranians respond remains to be seen, but the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said that the "bitter consequences will be unimaginable"

for Israel.

The situation remains dangerously uncertain. We join the Government in urging restraint. The onus must surely now be on Iran to desist from any retaliatory action that will pull the region further up the ladder of escalation. Above all, we must now use Britain's undoubted international connections, experience, responsibility and clout to lift people's eyes to the day after, in the hope that we can build on the Abraham accords and move towards the two-state solution that Palestinians and Israelis deserve. That must be the immutable end of these appalling circumstances and events.

What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with his other counterparts in the region to encourage cool heads to prevail? That also applies to Lebanon. Iran's direct missile attacks on Israel are but one front in its campaign against the Jewish state, which we know it is intent on wiping off the face of the earth. Iran's continuing funding for and support of its Hezbollah proxies in Lebanon and Hamas proxies in Gaza show what a scourge the IRGC is and how far its tentacles have spread. Hezbollah and Hamas are a cancer in the areas where they operate. Israel has every right to defend itself against evil terrorists, who are not interested in compromise or in political solutions and who use the legitimate plight of Palestinians to justify barbarism.

In the face of such murderous assaults as the incessant rocket bombardment of northern Israel by Hezbollah, no country in the world—not a single one—would be

expected to sit quietly. It is for that reason that, in respect of Lebanon, in particular, calls for a ceasefire are most unlikely to be heeded. Not only is Hezbollah violating every international law by lobbing rockets and missiles at Israeli towns and displacing tens of thousands of Israeli civilians; it is doing so in flagrant breach of UN Security Council resolution 1701, which clearly called for the withdrawal of Hezbollah and other forces from Lebanon south of the Litani, and the disarmament of Hezbollah and other armed groups.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the retreat and dismantling of Hezbollah, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1701, must be a necessary precondition to end the war? What discussions has he had with our partners in the UN to achieve that?

Turning to Gaza, some 100 hostages remain in captivity, with the prospect of their release diminishing with every day that passes. The civilians in Gaza continue to pay a heavy price as a result of Hamas's using them as human shields and total disregard for the safety and security of the civilian population. Over the weekend, in Kamal Adwan hospital in Jabalia, northern Gaza, Israel found stashes of weapons and money. A Gazan ambulance driver has confirmed that Hamas operatives embed themselves among civilians and even use ambulances to transport terrorists and weapons. In other words, Hamas use the infrastructure that is supposed to help civilians to advance the group's terrorist agenda, leaving innocent people neglected and dangerously exposed.

We support the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal and hope that shortly we will see a similar appeal launched for Sudan, where people are in desperate danger of starvation this winter.

Surely it is time to face facts. Hamas must lay down their arms. Hamas must release the hostages. Once this happens, the war will end, aid can flood into Gaza unfettered, the Palestinian people can begin the long and difficult path to recovery, and we can start to lift the eyes of Israelis and Palestinians to the possibilities of political horizons, of two states, of peace.

Mr Lammy: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of his remarks and for the cross-party support he gives to the Government in urging restraint and de-escalation in the region. I reassure him that I spoke with Secretary Blinken just two days ago about the context of the day after, as the right hon. Gentleman puts it; about the necessary security guarantees that Israel would rightly expect; and about how we work with Arab partners—Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others—to ensure that this ceasefire can hold and that the security guarantees and the necessary rebuilding of Gaza can properly begin.

The shadow Foreign Secretary rightly talks about the DEC appeal for Gaza, which is now up, and I support what he said about Sudan, which must not be overlooked at this time.

I spoke to Foreign Minister Katz about the situation in Lebanon yesterday. He sought to reassure me that the targeted operation by the Israelis that is under way would come to an end shortly, as he put it. I confirmed, as I know the right hon. Gentleman would have, that we understand that it is important that Israelis who cannot be in their homes in northern Israel are able to move back. That can be the case only when Hezbollah has

moved back beyond the Litani river, and resolution 1701 is properly implemented. We want to see that happen, and it is for that reason that we continue to support the Lebanese armed forces and the work of UNIFIL. We were very concerned to see UNIFIL workers attacked in the way that they were a few days ago. I also raised that with Foreign Minister Katz.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, but thousands of my constituents in Battersea want an end to this violence and to Israel's siege in northern Gaza, not to mention the violence in the west bank. Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives, no aid is getting in and hospitals are being targeted. Is it not time to move away from condemning and to take stronger action: suspend any trade negotiations with Israel, implement a complete arms sale ban and ensure that goods produced in settlements in the west bank are also banned? Israel is ignoring all the condemnation by this Government. We need strong action.

Mr Lammy: I understand the strength of feeling that my dear friend expresses in relation to this matter, and the way that she has championed these issues on behalf of her constituents. The humanitarian situation is dire. As we head to the winter, the prospect of it getting worse is hard to fathom. But I do not agree with her on a full arms embargo, and the reason was exemplified by the attacks from Iran that Israel suffered on 1 October. It would be quite wrong for us not to be prepared to support Israel in theatres of conflict beyond Gaza, notwithstanding our concerns on international humanitarian law. I am afraid I cannot agree with her on that issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. He has our full support in his efforts to engage with Iran and Israel to urge an end to the cycle of retaliatory violence. We continue to urge him to proscribe the IRGC. Can he confirm whether UK military assets and personnel played any part in Israel's attack on Iran on Friday night?

The relationship between Israel and Palestine remains the key to reducing tensions and creating the conditions for peace. We support the Government's stance on UNRWA, but as the humanitarian situation in northern Gaza continues to deteriorate and the level of violence in the west bank worsens, the Liberal Democrats hope that the Foreign Secretary might go further, offering more than words of condemnation. Following the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion this summer that the occupation is illegal, does he agree that introducing legislation to cease UK trade with illegal Israeli settlements is a practical way of upholding that judgment? Can he update the House on whether the letter to the Israeli Government, co-signed by the Chancellor, has resulted in a commitment to maintain financial correspondence between Israeli and Palestinian banks?

To signal commitment to a two-state solution, will the Government support the Palestine Statehood (Recognition) (No. 3) Bill tabled last week by my hon. Friend the Member

for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran)? Finally, will the Foreign Secretary tell us what recent update he has had from the Israeli Government on the prospect of the return of the hostages? They have been held in captivity by Hamas for more than a year. I know the whole House will agree that their return remains a priority.

Mr Lammy: No UK troops were involved in the action by Israel a few nights ago. The hon. Gentleman raises the IRGC. I reassure him that the Home Secretary is conducting a state threats review at this time and that the IRGC is kept in mind in relation to those concerns.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have sanctioned settlers since coming into office. I was on the west bank. I remain hugely concerned at the loss of life this year, the scale of the violence and the scale of the expansion, of which there has been more in this last year than we have seen in the last 20.

I am not able to support the Bill on recognition, but the hon. Gentleman will know that recognition was in the Labour manifesto and we are committed to it at the right time. I do not think that during the conflict is the right time, but we must work with partners to achieve it. It is not the end in itself. The end we want to see is a two-state solution. That is what we must all hold out for.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Members from across the House condemned and mourned the deaths of more than 1,200 Israelis as a result of the 7 October attacks, and we all demand the immediate release of all—almost 100—hostages still in Gaza. However, over 40,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza. Tragically, that includes well over 10,000 children. Thousands more are feared dead under the rubble, given that more than 60% of Gazan structures have been bombed to rubble. How is that in any way proportionate? I appreciate that the incoming Labour Government have stopped the sale of all offensive weapons that could be used in the Gaza conflict. However, what further tangible steps can my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Government take to publicly condemn and call out the Netanyahu regime, and help bring these horrors to an end?

Mr Lammy: There is a lot that we are doing and trying to do to alleviate the humanitarian suffering. We provided additional funding for UK-Med, which I did within the first weeks in office. We match funded the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal—that is £10 million to date. We are supporting Jordan, which wants to do airdrops, with its planning. We are doing everything we can to alleviate the suffering, but as my hon. Friend knows, the trucks are backed up. There is food sitting on the border that comes from the British taxpayer. It is that that is unacceptable. It is that that I raised again with Foreign Minister Katz and that we will continue to press on. The aid needs to get in now. He reassured me this weekend that it will. That was his reassurance. As we head into winter and the Knesset voting today on UNRWA, the urgency of the debate we are having in this House could not be more necessary.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office share my view that none of this dreadful cycle, which began

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

on 7 October, would have happened but for Iran's determination to derail the prospect of peace and recognition between Saudi Arabia and Israel? What assessment has the Department made of the possibility that one day the Iranian people will be able to free themselves of the terrible regime under which they suffer?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is right: this story began on 7 October, and it is important for us to keep it in mind that Hamas is a proxy funded and supported by Iran, that Hezbollah is a proxy funded and supported by Iran, and that the Houthis, who are currently causing huge disruption in the Red sea, are also funded and supported by Iran. We should also keep it in mind that Iran is a regime that perpetrates all sort of atrocities on its own people. It suppresses freedom of speech, it suppresses women—the list goes on. The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right to place Iran at the centre, as the major threat to the region.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): On Saturday, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator said:

"The entire population of North Gaza is at risk of dying."

She also said:

"What Israeli forces are doing in besieged North Gaza cannot be allowed to continue."

Does the Foreign Secretary agree, and what representations has he made to the Israeli Government to that effect?

Mr Lammy: I reminded the Israeli Government that 42,000 people have now been killed; that more than 90% of the population have been displaced, many of them repeatedly since 2023; that as we head towards winter we have been unable to ensure effective and safe distribution of aid across Gaza; that we need to increase the volumes of the types of goods that are reaching Gaza, and we must stop restricting the aid flows; and that there is a responsibility under international humanitarian law to protect a civilian population, to minimise harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, and to ensure that aid workers can go about their business free and unfettered.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I return the right hon. Gentleman to the specific issue of Iran? We used to agree with each other on this matter a great deal when he was in opposition, so, if he does not mind, I will probe him a bit further.

Back in 2023, the right hon. Gentleman and the Opposition rightly called for Iran not just to be sanctioned but to be ruled out legally when it came to any actions at all, with all actions and involvement with Iran made illegal: proscribed. I supported him at that time, and was not supportive of my own Government. Given all the billions that Iran has spent that could have gone towards health, building and quality of life but instead went towards tunnels, missiles and violence all over the region, is it not time, in the right hon. Gentleman's mind, to follow through and, along with our allies, proscribe Iran completely, and to say that this must never happen again?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a serious issue. This is why the Home Secretary and I are looking far more closely at what it means to bear down on a state that is causing the activity that he has described, rather than a terrorist cell that is causing it. Most often when we are discussing these issues in the Chamber, we are talking about Hamas, Hezbollah or some terrorist cell, but in this instance we are talking about a state, which means that more complex issues come to bear, including, of course, our own presence in that state, and for those reasons we engaging in a more thorough examination.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will no doubt agree that third states, such as the UK, are obliged not to assist Israel in its annihilation of the Gazan people. Israel continues to target the cynically named "safe zones"—schools and hospitals—in its war of extermination. Although the UK has suspended 30 of 90 licences for the export of arms to the Israeli military, our continued participation in the F-35 global supply chain means that devastating 2,000-lb bombs continue to destroy human beings. The Foreign Secretary rightly asks what must parents say to their children, and how do they explain this living nightmare. Are they not right also to ask where were the international community when they needed them and why were all the levers available not used—to ban arms sales, to use the leverage of recognition of Palestine and to impose sanctions to concentrate minds?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will understand that we sell relatively few arms to Israel—I think they represent 1% of the total amount—and that much of what we send is defensive in nature. It is not what we describe routinely as arms, because the licensing regime is about controlled equipment, which is not always arms. However, we have suspended arms that could be used in Israel in contravention of humanitarian law. I made that decision, and I think it was the right decision. As I have said, we continue to do all we can to support the people of Gaza, and I am deeply sad that I and my predecessors have not been able to bring this crisis and war to an end. It saddens me greatly. My hon. Friend evokes my conscience; I believe that I am doing all I can, according to my conscience.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): If, as everybody expects, the Israeli Government ignore the pleadings of the Foreign Secretary and our allies, and proceed with the dismantling of UNRWA, making its job impossible, what will he do next? Will there be any consequence whatsoever for the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: When I raised this issue with Foreign Minister Katz yesterday, he was at pains to explain that, although the Knesset could pass its Bill today, that does not mean that it has to be implemented. We must hope that the Israeli Government do not implement this legislation, because it is not in their interests. It cannot be in their interests to prevent the only aid organisation in the region from working, because UNRWA provides not just healthcare but schools for young people, and it works not just in Gaza but in the occupied territories. It

simply cannot be in the Israeli Government's interests to do that, because they would then have to provide help themselves.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement today, and I strongly support the Government's efforts to achieve a ceasefire, secure the release of the remaining hostages, and restart the negotiations for a two-state solution. I also welcome the Government's decision several weeks ago to suspend a number of arms export licences to Israel where there was a risk that they would be used to violate international law. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the UK is working hard to persuade our allies, particularly the United States, to adopt our position on arms exports to Israel, to ensure that no weapons are being exported from any country where there is a risk that they could be used to commit war crimes in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: We have one of the most robust export licensing regimes in the world. It is our legislation, so it is not the case that I have been proselytising to other countries to do what we have done. I did it because I believed that there was a clear risk that international humanitarian law was being breached in relation to our legislation. That is why I made the decision. It must be for others to reflect on their own laws and rules.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): After a weekend of relentless Israeli attacks on a besieged population in northern Gaza, the United Nations has demanded that

"such blatant disregard for basic humanity and for the laws of war must stop",

adding that the "entire population" of northern Gaza is "at risk of dying". Unless the Foreign Secretary believes that the UN is lying, exaggerating or embellishing the situation in northern Gaza, there can be no basis whatsoever for the UK to continue arms sales to Israel. Is the UN lying, exaggerating or embellishing the truth of what is going on in northern Gaza right now?

Mr Lammy: The UN is absolutely not embellishing what is, very sadly, going on in Gaza right now, and that is why the United Kingdom has suspended arms sales for use in Gaza.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Despite all the pleading, the Israeli Government ignore requests to allow aid into Gaza, ignore requests to stop the destruction of Gaza and ignore requests to stop settler violence in the west bank? I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the sanctions against the settlers and settler organisations engaged in that violence. Will he now extend the sanctions to members of the Israeli Government who have been promoting violence in the west bank? Also, does he agree that, if the Israeli Government carry out their restrictions on UNRWA in a formalised way, members of that Government who agree to that should be sanctioned for it? Otherwise, are we not just issuing empty threats and empty words that the Israelis ignore?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will know that I have condemned in no uncertain terms, both as shadow Foreign Secretary and as Foreign Secretary, some of the vile language that has been used by extremist elements

within the Israeli Government. I heard the former Foreign Secretary on the radio talking about sanctions which could have been implemented that he chose not to implement. I can assure my hon. Friend that I am keeping those sanctions under review.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It has been a held belief across all Governments that a two-state solution is the only way to break the cycle of violence, but of course after Israel withdrew from Gaza, that pretty much led to what happened on 7 October. Can the Foreign Secretary use his office and the UK Government to lead discussions proactively, as a friend to Israel and a key member of the United Nations, on what security can be put in place in a two-state solution, using allies around, to ensure that Israel can have the confidence such a development will not be used as an attack platform to murder so many people once more?

Mr Lammy: We continue to hold out for that two-state solution, and it is definitely the case that Arab partners want to see that two-state solution. Among them, at this stage, Saudi Arabia is very important. I know that Israel would like to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia, but I think the hon. Gentleman knows that that is unlikely unless there is a road map to two states. We continue to work with all partners to keep two states alive, and of course, on the security concerns that Israel would need to be satisfied to bring that about.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The current situation in northern Gaza is dreadful. I welcome the leading role the Government have played in providing essential humanitarian relief to Gaza, including through support packages for UNRWA, UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and others. Following discussions I had last week with the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), does the Foreign Secretary agree that Israeli restrictions on the flow of essential aid are completely unacceptable and should be lifted immediately?

Mr Lammy: Yes, 100%, and I made that point to Foreign Minister Katz yesterday. They are unacceptable and I condemn them.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Over the past year, Israeli occupying forces have destroyed every facet of Palestinian life, targeting lives, homes, schools, universities, hospitals, mosques and even churches—in fact, enacting the exact words of Israel's Defence Secretary's to "eliminate everything". Will the Foreign Secretary now look beyond his conscience and immediately cease the provision of military support to Israel, suspend all export licences and impose a two-way arms embargo so that no more children die?

Mr Lammy: I really accept the heartfelt way in which the hon. Gentleman put his question, but we have suspended arms that could be used in Gaza in the way he described. That is what we have done. I stand by that decision.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The situation in northern Gaza is beyond desperate, with many reports of actions that have every appearance

[Helen Hayes]

of aiming to empty the territory of its entire population. The UN humanitarian chief, Joyce Msuya, has warned that the entire population is at risk of dying. The strategy of the Israeli Government is intolerable, and has failed on its own terms, because the hostages have not been released, as we all want to see. Can the Foreign Secretary say what happens next? What further meaningful action are the Government planning to take to safeguard lives in northern Gaza and secure an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend evokes the hostages, which allows me to put on record our desire to see the UK hostage, Emily Damari, freed. I reassure my hon. Friend that last week at the UN Security Council we convened a meeting on humanitarian access. We issued a statement only yesterday with some colleagues from the G7, including Japan, Germany and South Korea, urging Israel to step back on the UNRWA decision.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is important to acknowledge that Israel is often first on the scene when there is a humanitarian crisis internationally, and is generous, even in countries that do not recognise it. However, it must do more to ensure that aid gets into Gaza. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is not good enough for a country such as ours simply to be generous, which it is? It must also ensure that its generosity is not diverted into the hands of proxies, particularly Hamas and Hezbollah?

Mr Lammy: Yes, the right hon. Gentleman is right about that. We make every effort to ensure that that is not the case. In this circumstance, for a war that has gone on for a year, for the human suffering that is visible in Gaza, for the many children who are out of school and walking around in squalor, it has always been the case that military effort alone would not bring this to an end—only politics can do that. I worry greatly about those young people growing up in the years ahead with vengeance in their heart and, very sadly, a repetition of what we have seen.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): The United Nations acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator has released a statement in which she says:

“Hospitals have been hit and health workers have been detained. Shelters have been emptied and burned down. First responders have been prevented from saving people from under the rubble.”

Tens of thousands of people have been killed. That is a shocking and terrifying statement. Her statement goes on to say:

“The entire population of North Gaza is at risk of dying.”

Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK will use its role as chair of the UN Security Council in November to push for urgent progress on humanitarian access, the protection of civilians, freeing the hostages, and bringing to an end this terrible conflict?

Mr Lammy: I wish it were the case that this war would come to an end and that we would have a ceasefire before we chair the UN Security Council next month, but I fear that that may not be the case. I reassure my hon. Friend that I will go to New York myself to press the issues as she puts them.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Yair Golan is an Israeli politician who, only last month, attended the Labour party conference and had meetings with MPs, including photo opportunities with the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the middle east, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer).

Yair Golan is the same Israeli politician who, late last year, said in the Israeli press that starving people to death is “completely legitimate.” Given that the entire population of northern Gaza is on the brink of dying from famine, as repeatedly described both by Members here today and by the under-secretary-general of the United Nations, will the Foreign Secretary sanction Yair Golan, in addition to his already stated aim of considering sanctions against Bezalel Smotrich for justifying the use of starvation against Palestinians as a weapon of war?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman makes his point effectively, and those issues are being kept under review.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Given that the Government have suspended only 30 of the 350 arms export licences, including for components critical to offensive F-35 fighter jets, without which Israel would be unable to conduct its genocidal assaults in Gaza and Lebanon, can the Foreign Secretary tell me how this exemption of offensive weaponry is consistent with the United Kingdom’s international obligations, including under the arms trade treaty? Have the Government engaged in discussions with the United States Government, Lockheed Martin and other F-35 partner countries on implementing the tracking and tracing of UK-manufactured F-35 components or spare parts that are destined for Israel but licensed for export to third countries?

Mr Lammy: I stand by our carve-out for F-35s, because there are other important theatres of conflict around the world that this House has discussed and will continue to discuss at length. I am not prepared to ground planes that are saving lives in other theatres, which is why we made this decision, and I stand by it. It was the right decision.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Today, as on other recent occasions, we have heard Labour Members suggest that Israel is somehow conducting a war of annihilation, extermination and genocide. Although we all accept that there is obviously much suffering in Gaza, this terminology is completely inappropriate and inaccurate, and it is repeated by the protesters and lawbreakers who are intimidating British Jews, as we saw again this weekend. Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to say that there is not a genocide occurring in the middle east?

Mr Lammy: These are legal terms, and they must be determined by international courts. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that those terms were largely used when millions of people lost their lives in crises such as Rwanda and the Holocaust of the second world war. The way that people are now using those terms undermines their seriousness.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which is very welcome. Given how we expect the Knesset to vote today to make

it very difficult, if not impossible, for UNRWA to operate, with the consequence that humanitarian aid will not get into Gaza, is that not the point at which we have to consider serious sanctions against the proponents of such action?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend asks a very serious question. As I said earlier, Foreign Minister Katz was at pains to tell me that the Knesset enacting this decision does not necessarily mean that it will be implemented by the Israeli Government. Yes, the truth is that UNRWA being brought to its knees would be a very serious event indeed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Emily Damari was shot, abducted and is still in captivity. She is the last British hostage held in Gaza—she is literally on her own. I am sure the Foreign Secretary will join me in commending Mandy and her family for all their efforts to get Emily released. One positive move we could make would be during the visit by the high-level Qatari delegation that is due to arrive in a few weeks' time. When we have such delegations, normally things are arranged in advance, so will the Foreign Secretary prevail on Qatari officials to do all they can to get Hamas to release the last British hostage and all the hostages who are held in captivity in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising Mandy and Emily Damari, who I keep in the front of my mind in everything I do in this arena to bring about a ceasefire. Mandy is an amazing woman. I am meeting with the Qataris again tomorrow, and of course I will raise the issue.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement to the House. We have been calling for a ceasefire for some time, but innocent civilians continue to die and to be maimed in Gaza. The situation has got worse, not better. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that now is the time for us to do more and go further?

Mr Lammy: We continue to do more. The best way to do that is by working with our major allies. That is why we put out a statement just yesterday with our allies on the humanitarian situation, and on UNRWA particularly. When we chair the UN Security Council next month, I will continue to do as much as I can.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): Naturally, the Foreign Secretary says that we need to prevent escalation in the conflict between Israel and Iran but, as he says, that conflict is being driven by Iran, using a network of proxies in the Arab world. I have a genuine question for the Foreign Secretary: does he understand why Israel is increasingly thinking that it needs to go after the head of the octopus, rather than defending itself against the tentacles, or does he think that Israel should never take steps to deter Iran directly?

Mr Lammy: I say, with all seriousness, that I am pleased to have urged restraint on Israel in the last few weeks, and to have seen its measured response to Iran. On the scale of attacks it could have made on Iran, it rightly stuck to stockpiles and military sites, and did not progress to oil, gas and nuclear sites, which I believe would have been escalatory in nature.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): More than 400,000 people, over half of whom are women and children, are estimated by the UN to have been displaced from Lebanon into Syria since September, the majority of those having initially been displaced by the Syrian civil war. In 2013, I witnessed the dignified resilience of civilians fleeing the Syrian conflict in the Domiz refugee camp in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and I recall that they were assisted by aid from the British Government and British NGOs. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the UK is providing additional support to women and girls fleeing the conflict in Lebanon, who are, as ever, paying the price of war?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm that we are supporting those fleeing Lebanon into Syria at this time, and we recognise the fragile position that Syria is in, let alone what is now happening in Lebanon. My hon. Friend can definitely have that reassurance.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Earlier, the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) quoted Joyce Msuya, the humanitarian chief of the UN, who says:

"The entire population of North Gaza is at risk of dying."

This is on top of the 1,000 who died last week, on top of all those living in the most desperate situation in southern Gaza, and on top of the occupation of southern Lebanon, the bombing of southern Beirut, and now the dangers of a hot war between Iran and Israel. Is it not time that, instead of expressing concern about the humanitarian catastrophe in the region, we stop supplying Israel with the weapons that caused the humanitarian catastrophe in the first place, and suspend arms supplies in total to Israel in order to bring about a ceasefire and a cessation of this, frankly, murder of an innocent civilian population?

Mr Lammy: I know the strength of feeling that my neighbour in north London has on these issues, and his long-standing campaigning on them. I assure him that we are not just wringing our hands. The work of UK-Med in hospitals is hugely important, and I was very pleased to make further funds available to UK-Med upon coming into office. The work of the Disasters Emergency Committee in raising further funds, and the way in which the Government have match-funded that to the tune of £10 million, is hugely important. It was great to be in Jordan a few weeks ago, discussing with King Abdullah his airlifts into Jordan and the planning that he is getting from UK armed forces in organising those airlifts, and the air bridge that he has been keen to take forward.

These are actions—real things that we are doing, not just wringing of hands. When the right hon. Member describes the situation in Gaza, he largely describes much that I said in my statement. As I have said before, and will say again, we have suspended arms that could be used in contravention of international humanitarian law, where there is a clear risk according to our export licensing regime. He should be reassured that we have done that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Words are simply not enough to describe the devastation of Gaza, and the words of my right hon. Friend are not enough to open the borders to allow humanitarian aid

[*Rachael Maskell*]

to flow, or enough to stop the Israeli Government acting with impunity across Gaza. We think particularly of the north at this time, and the struggles that we hear about there. What is he doing to expedite the work of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, and ensure that they have all the resources needed to speed up their work to call these criminals, who are exercising such devastation over Gaza, to account?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that I met with the chief prosecutor a few weeks ago. We continue to support the ICC. As she knows, we have been very clear on our support for the rule of law, and international humanitarian law particularly. Both the ICC and the ICJ should be able to go about their work unfettered by political intervention.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and his tone, which should be admired. He rightly stated the precarious situation that the middle east teeters upon. While Iran has seemingly dialled back the rhetoric for now, how will he encourage the Iranians and, importantly, the IRGC to dial back on their actions, not simply against Israel but against their own people, who are on their knees, subject to brutal human rights abuses and persecution? In the face of this horrific regime, how can we help ordinary Iranians, and Israelis, to live a life free from war?

Mr Lammy: I have emphasised my conversation with the Israeli Foreign Minister yesterday, but I should also emphasise my conversation with the Iranian Foreign Minister yesterday. I talked to him about restraint, and our concerns in relation to the support for proxies, and I raised the nuclear question, and the snapback clause that comes into play next year if we are not able to progress, with E3 partners, our further conversations with Iran.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary knows, this is a critical time for the middle east. I think the House speaks as one with a message of ending the violence, releasing the hostages and getting aid in. The humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people will only be made worse if the Israeli Government carry out their threat to effectively shut down UNRWA. Although I welcome the Government's utter condemnation and rejection of those plans, what reassurances can he give my constituents and the House that the Government will not only talk tough in the region but take action to protect lives if the Israeli Government persist with those plans?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise UNRWA. That is why the Government restored funding to UNRWA, it is why we gave it a further £21 million, and it is why £1 million of that funding was used to help it to implement Madame Colonna's reforms. It would be a catastrophe to see the end of UNRWA—and it would be wholly counterproductive for Israel, by the way. The situation in the occupied territories is fragile as it is. To take away UNRWA would be catastrophic. For all

those reasons, I have urged the Israeli Government to step back and not implement what has passed through the Knesset.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): A year ago, despite the undoubted challenges, there were early signs of improved relations between Israel, the Gulf states and others that were pressing Israel to move towards the two-state solution that we in this House would all like to see. The Iranian regime, however, through its own actions and those of its proxies, has succeeded in engulfing the region in chaos and conflict, causing many of the disasters we have heard about this afternoon. What is being done, in partnership with our Gulf state allies, to counter that activity and bring stability and the prospect of regional peace back to the area?

Mr Lammy: I was in Jordan a few weeks ago speaking with King Abdullah and my Jordanian counterpart about their air bridge proposal and the planning we have helped them with to ensure they can at least drop aid into Gaza. On the efforts to bring about a hostage and ceasefire deal, I have been speaking to the Qataris and the Egyptians, particularly given their relations with—or routes into—Hamas. We continue to speak to the Saudis and others in the region to try to bring about that peace. I have no doubt that Arab partners want to play a role in that peace, but they will be able to do so only if there is a proper path towards a two-state solution.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the growing concern, including among organisations such as Medical Aid for Palestinians and Action For Humanity, that Israel may attempt to illegally annex northern Gaza. Have the UK Government raised those concerns with the Israeli Government, and what action will the UK Government take should those concerns become reality?

Mr Lammy: I have raised those concerns. Such action would be illegal and wrong, and the UK Government would view it with the seriousness that it deserves.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I have been contacted by constituents who are increasingly distressed about the scenes in Gaza, and there is growing concern about the rapidly deteriorating and utterly appalling situation in the north of Gaza. I urge the Foreign Secretary to ensure that the Government are using every measure available, including work with our international partners, to get a resolution to the situation and prioritise getting humanitarian aid and medical relief into Gaza, particularly the north?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the work of our international partners, which is so important. That is why a few weeks ago, I joined the Canadian Foreign Minister, Mélanie Joly, in speaking to the Israelis, and it is also why I went to Israel with my French colleague to speak to the Israelis. Time and again, working in a co-ordinated way with allies produces a greater effect.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Iran's monstrous state sponsorship of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis is a fundamental driver of the conflict we see in Gaza,

Lebanon and the Red sea respectively. Can my right hon. Friend confirm what steps the Government are taking to undermine Iran's financial, military and logistical support for those terrorist proxies?

Mr Lammy: I can assure my hon. Friend that since coming into office, we have introduced three batches of sanctions against Iran. Over 450 nationals are now under UK sanctions.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is catastrophic, so can he please update the House on the work that the Government are doing to provide more aid and to ensure that it gets to those who need it?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right: the humanitarian situation is dire. That is why I was at pains to emphasise what we are doing. It was important that we led the way on getting the pause so that children could be vaccinated against polio. I was very distressed to see that pause broken just a few days ago, and we are urging for it to be resumed once more so that those children can get their second vaccination dose. That is why the work of UK-Med is very important; it is why the current DEC appeal is also very important; and it is why we will continue to support people who are sick and injured to be evacuated from the area.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The suffering of the people of Palestine and northern Gaza is truly horrific. Every day, children are not just being bombed: they are being starved. That is not the kind of treatment we would expect for our children, let alone any other country's children, so does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is time Israel ceased using food, hunger and siege as weapons of war—all contrary to international law—and for it to be given that message loud and clear by this House?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will recall that when I suspended sales of arms that could be used in Gaza, the criterion under our regime was a clear risk that there could be a breach of international humanitarian law. When I was looking at the assessments, I kept coming back to humanitarian access as the clear risk, so my hon. Friend is right: we have tremendous concerns about the inability to get aid in, the restrictions that Israel is putting in place, and the man-made starvation that is now coming about as a result.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings that statement to an end. We will take a few moments while the Front Benchers swap over.

I remind Members that if they wish to contribute during a statement or urgent question, they need to be in the Chamber for the opening statement.

Fiscal Rules

5.28 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement to the House about the action the Chancellor will take this week to fix the foundations and rebuild Britain.

Economic growth and modern public services can only be built on strong foundations. That is why this Government have brought political and economic stability back to Britain. After years of chaos from the Conservative party—chaos that cost families, businesses and public services dear—the British people are now rightly looking to this new Labour Government to clear up the mess from the last Government, fix the foundations and rebuild Britain. That is the change that my party promised the country, and it is the change that we will deliver.

To deliver that change, the fiscal rules that the Chancellor will set out this week will establish the basis for stable fiscal policy, meaning careful management of day-to-day spending and responsible long-term plans to invest and grow the economy.

As we committed to in our manifesto, the Government will have two robust fiscal rules that will guide the decisions we take. The first is our stability rule: we will pay for all day-to-day spending on public services from receipts. The current budget was last in surplus under the last Labour Government, and this Labour Government will return the public finances to that position.¹ The second is our investment rule, which will get debt falling as a proportion of our economy. It will ensure that we can secure the investment that our economy needs to grow, and to generate jobs and opportunities for people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, while maintaining a strong fiscal anchor and ensuring that our debt burden falls over time.

The plans that we inherited from the last Government would have seen public sector investment decline to the lowest level in more than 10 years. The path of declining investment is the path of a declining nation, and we refuse to follow it. Instead, we will seize the huge opportunities of the future to support the enterprise and talent that this country creates.

The Government recognise that sustained public investment is a crucial driver of long-term economic growth, giving the private sector the confidence to invest too, but our ambitions for public sector investment must be balanced against the need to maintain debt on a sustainable trajectory and ensure that we invest every pound of taxpayers' money responsibly. That is why I will deliver a 10-year national infrastructure strategy next spring, working with colleagues across Government, the nations and regions, and with our mayors and the private sector, to set out a robust long-term strategy for sound investment. That is also why our new approach to overlapping multi-year spending reviews will improve the way that we allocate and spend capital, and why the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I will lead the new national infrastructure and service transformation authority, which will drive better delivery of major projects and infrastructure across the country. In addition, there will be the work of the new office for value for money and the National Audit Office. Those robust guardrails will ensure that our capital spending is value for money, and that our financial investments deliver a positive return for the Exchequer.

1.[*Official Report*, 13 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 4WC.](Correction)

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Finally, the Chancellor has been listening to the views of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, and to expert economists. As she has set out, that is why the Treasury has been reviewing the right measure of debt to target in the fiscal rules ahead of the upcoming Budget. The details of that policy will be announced to the House in the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday, alongside an economic and fiscal forecast produced by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility. In the usual way, the fiscal rules will be published in a draft charter for budget responsibility, on which Members will vote in due course. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury.

5.32 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I wondered whether the Chancellor's announcement of changes to the fiscal rules would survive the weekend, given the five fictitious freeports that came and went. It was a cautionary tale about the uncertainty and confusion that can be created when policy is not announced in the proper way in Parliament. I welcome the delayed statement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and I am grateful for advance sight of it.

Making a £50-billion announcement at an overseas conference, and not at a fiscal event in this House, has understandably and notably moved markets, creating further uncertainty for an already nervous business community. Although the Chancellor announced change last week, she did not provide any details about what that change would be—a common approach by Labour that is now coming back to bite them as the realities of government set in. The Prime Minister has admitted as much in recent days, speaking of the need to “embrace...fiscal reality” by adopting measures that were never listed in Labour's manifesto. In fact, the Chancellor explicitly said before the election that she would not change the fiscal rules because that would be “to fiddle the figures”. By going ahead with this latest U-turn and broken promise, she has compromised trust and credibility ahead of her first Budget.

That joins the long list of promises already broken by the Labour Government in such a short time: the promise to cut energy bills by £300—broken; the promise that their manifesto was fully costed—broken; the promise to be on the side of pensioners—so obviously broken; and we know that their promise not to raise taxes on working people is about to be broken, too. Try as they might to sell a different story, just like Government bonds right now, people ain't buying it.

We are left in the ludicrous position in which the UK—the sixth-largest economy in the world—does not have an operative definition of public debt. Quite understandably, markets have responded to this latest uncertainty by applying a premium to UK sovereign debt at a time when they have been discounting the sovereign debt of our international peers. The markets are also perplexed as to why these changes were announced without an accompanying OBR report. In the words of the Chancellor,

“Never have a Government borrowed so much and explained so little.”—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 941.]

The Government may think that this will all go unnoticed, and that most people do not know enough about the fiscal rules to know what is really going on here, but let me be very clear: the people will know about this. They will know it and feel it when interest rates stay higher for longer. Treasury advice to us was consistently clear: interest rates would stay higher if the rules were changed. What advice did Treasury officials give the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the impact on interest rates? Does he agree with Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who said that the change will mean

“more debt, more debt interest”,
and that it is “no free lunch”?

Of course, we all want to see investment in our public services and infrastructure. We oversaw the largest ever increase in funding for the NHS, we increased defence spending to the highest levels since the cold war, and we attracted the second-greatest foreign direct investment in the world, but we sought that investment with a view to boosting productivity by investing in technology—that approach has now been scrapped by Labour—and spreading opportunity around this country through freeports and investment zones. This Labour Government are quick to spend but unwilling to explain.

Finally, on behalf of the British people, and the markets, which are watching this statement so very nervously, I ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury: what definition of public debt is the UK offering to lenders today, and how much do the Government plan to borrow under an expanded definition? He will say that we have to wait for the Budget, but the Chancellor did not wait last week, so why should we?

Darren Jones: I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman, but he has some brass neck to stand up in this House and tell this Government how to behave after his party's maladministration over the last 14 years. May I politely point out that he might be getting slightly ahead of himself? The Chancellor has not set out the detail of the fiscal rules in advance of the Budget; she will do it in this House, in the Budget on Wednesday, and I encourage him to wait for that information. He painted a picture of the country performing so well under his party's leadership, but he may want to reflect on why he lost the last election so badly.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As Chair of the Treasury Committee, which has responsibility for scrutinising the Budget, I find the timing of this statement a bit frustrating, as we will have questions that presumably cannot be answered until Wednesday. Will the Chief Secretary explain how the guardrails will work? There is the national infrastructure and service transformation authority, the office for value for money and the National Audit Office. What role will each play in reassuring the markets, so that an autumn “sniffle”—that is PSNFL, or public sector net financial liabilities—does not become a winter cold?

Darren Jones: I know that the Chancellor looks forward to giving evidence to the Treasury Committee following the Budget in the normal way. To answer the question, the national infrastructure strategy will, for the first

time, bring together all the infrastructure and major project asks of Whitehall Departments into one place alongside the economic infrastructure assessments. This will inform the multi-year spending reviews, which will now overlap, so that when an election comes up, we do not again end up with a Government making no spending plans whatsoever, or announcing a load of projects when there is no money to pay for them. We are confident that this better approach to allocating capital will mean that investment under this Government will improve the productivity of our public services and the growth of our economy, and mean a better return for British taxpayers across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Under the Conservatives, the fiscal rules changed five times in seven years, so a change to fiscal rules is not that unusual in and of itself. However, does the Minister agree that what would be completely unforgivable is a repeat of the Conservatives' disastrous mini-Budget, in which they tried to pursue £40 billion of unfunded tax cuts, and which left a long shadow on our public finances? Will he assure us that any additional borrowing that the Government seek will only be for productive investment that will generate growth and fix our crumbling hospitals and schools?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and share her continued anger about the behaviour of the last Conservative Government, because as she and the whole House will know, our constituents are still paying the price of that Government's chaos and failure. That is why the first Act of this Labour Government—the first Act that I took through this House—was the Budget Responsibility Act 2024, which locked in the power of the Office for Budget Responsibility to hold this Government and future Governments to account. If we ever again ended up in a position where Conservative Ministers decided to ignore independent checks and balances, the OBR would be able to report its view to this House independently, so that Parliament could hold that future Government to account. I end by pointing to our first fiscal rule, which is that we will pay for day-to-day spending with receipts. Again, that means that we will not end up in the situation that we were in under the last Government, when month after month, borrowing just paid the bills for which they did not put money aside.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Fiscal rules are a tool for responsibility, and we should all welcome rules that help us to act responsibly and invest responsibly. The rules and the accounting definitions that underlie them are not matters of faith, preordained by the Almighty and passed to us on stone tablets; they are there to help us make responsible decisions. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, and with the former chief economist of the Bank of England, the OECD, the International Monetary Fund and George Osborne's former Treasury Minister, that we should welcome changes to the fiscal rules that promote investment?

Darren Jones: I will avoid the suggestion that we might go back to putting things on stone tablets if I may, but I will accept the invitation in my hon. Friend's

question, and say that after 14 years, we have seen the failure of the approach taken by the last Government. I noted in my statement that public sector investment would now have been at its lowest in 10 years, under the plans of the now Opposition. That has been a failure for the economy and for the British people, and this Government will rectify it.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Before the election, the Chancellor said that she would not change the measure of debt in order to borrow more, but now she is talking about doing exactly that. Before the election, she said that she would not increase national insurance, but now she is talking about doing exactly that. Before the election, Labour steered people away from the idea that the Government would cut the winter fuel payment, but they have already done exactly that. They said, before the election, that they would not increase taxes on working people, but now they are planning to do exactly that. Does the Minister understand why so many of my constituents feel that they were misled?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member's constituents will note at the Budget on Wednesday that this party honours its promises—the promises, set out in its manifesto, to protect working people. He might want to reflect on the way that his party failed his constituents at the last election before trying to lecture this Government.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome measures that allow for more long-term investment to improve our economic performance and public services, but I would like my right hon. Friend to address two issues. Is housing one of the areas where more investment might be allowed, to help us achieve our target of 1.5 million more homes in this Parliament? Secondly, will he ensure that where there is public investment, we try to make that investment produce orders for UK companies, rather than many of the orders going abroad? That is the way to create real growth in our economy.

Darren Jones: We made a commitment to delivering 1.5 million homes, and we will do just that. On the second part of the question, the whole purpose of the national infrastructure strategy and the overlapping multi-year spending reviews is to give investors and suppliers confidence that when the Government say something will be delivered, it will, so they can invest and plan on that basis, to help improve the British economy. Frankly, they are starting from a position of complete dismay because of the failed promises of the last Government; we will rectify that.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): If we could stick with the here and now, what the Chancellor announced caused the bond markets to move almost immediately by almost 0.5%. That means that interest rates will stay higher for longer. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that will cause hardship to today's mortgage payers and tomorrow's generation of taxpayers, because they will have to repay this extra debt?

Darren Jones: What I can confirm is that what affected interest rates and mortgage payments so severely was the chaotic behaviour of the hon. Gentleman's party in government before the last election. That is why we have

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had to legislate to make sure that if they ever returned to Government, they could not behave in similar ways. We are taking a responsible approach to public spending, as I have set out today, and we will never return to the activities of his party in government.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): There appears to be some confusion among those on the Opposition Benches when talking about their track record and about the records they have broken on the relationship between the nominal and the real. On the point about being realistic, does the Minister agree that in our reform of the fiscal rules, we must, unlike the last Government, provide that realism and stability and ensure that wild unfunded commitments, such as the abolition of national insurance, do not occur?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend points rightly to the £22 billion black hole that we are having to clear up after the Tory party. In the Budget on Wednesday, the Chancellor will set out how we are resetting public finances and fixing the foundations, so that we can get on and deliver our manifesto.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): In outline terms, we welcome what the Government are seeking to do. It is important to raise the ability to generate capital infrastructure investment. Scotland invests 42% more than the UK average, and the UK average is 50% lower than the OECD average. That issue is a priority, but the Government's move will fall on stony ground if on Wednesday the Chancellor continues with her priority to not lift people out of poverty and to go by exception after small businesses that take an income from that business by raising the cost of employment. With the four signal capital investment projects all being in England, I am moved to ask: what's in this for Scotland?

Darren Jones: I am delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman tell the House that he welcomes the positive change that this Labour Government in Westminster are delivering to the Scottish people. I agree with him. On early announcements, I can point to GB Energy and the huge commitments we have made on energy infrastructure, which we know will be important to the Scottish people. We absolutely recognise that the Scottish economy has a huge contribution to make to the whole economy of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we look forward to working with the Scottish people to make that a reality.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend on his work on stability and investment. Would he like to say a little more about the challenging inheritance he has received from the previous Government, and just how dreadful that has actually been?

Darren Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. [Interruption.] I know that Opposition Members find it uncomfortable, but it is a matter of fact that we will return to time and time again, because the sheer truth of it is that the last Government made promise after promise to the British people, knowing that they did not have the money to pay the bills. It is shameful, and

the sooner they come to the House and apologise for their behaviour, the better it might be for them in the long run.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): If the Minister is so confident in his fiscal rules, will he take this opportunity to commit to the House that the 10-year gilt yield in this Parliament will not exceed the maximum it was over the past 10 years?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman is trying to be clever, but he is inviting me to speculate on the Budget. He will have to wait until Wednesday.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that sustainable growth cannot come from short-termism and that the falls in public sector investment planned under the last Government would have exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, the economic chaos they got us into?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is right. We have a choice at this Budget either to continue with the failed policies of the previous Government or to change them. The British people will not be surprised that our decision is to change them, reflecting on the fact that the cut in investment under the previous Government has led to poor productivity in public services and a lack of growth in the economy. That serves nobody.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): This statement speaks of giving the private sector the confidence to invest. Can the Minister explain to the small businesses in my constituency how it will give them confidence if the first act of this Government is to soak them with further national insurance increases? Will that not dent confidence, rather than increase it, along with sustained high interest rates? When he speaks about multi-year spending reviews, does that mean that he now expects the devolved Governments to produce multi-year budgets, which is something that the Stormont Government have been reluctant to do?

Darren Jones: I obviously cannot speculate on the Budget, so I invite the hon. Gentleman to come back to the House on Wednesday for the answer to the first part of his question. On the second part, he might know that I lead for the Government on our relationship with the devolved Governments. I have met Finance Ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, most recently in Belfast, where we had a productive meeting. They were all very clear that the reset in the relationship between them and the Westminster Government was positive, given the failed relationships of the past. We made some progress in that meeting, and we will make further such progress in the Budget.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): Is it not clear that the ruling economic orthodoxy has let this country down over many years? How else can we explain the fact that in 24 of the last 30 years, the UK spent less on investment than any other G7 country? In particular, in post-industrial areas like mine, the investment simply did not come. I encourage the Minister to break with the prevailing orthodoxy and ensure that we achieve the appropriate investment levels and direct that investment particularly to the north, the midlands and elsewhere.

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend has invited me to answer the question, “Why wasn’t there investment over the last decade or so?” Quite frankly, it is because of the choices of the Conservative party. This Labour party in government is taking a different set of decisions and we will set out the detail on Wednesday.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): First, I declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital, and I have a family member who is a shareholder in a health company. As Lord Darzi said, the Conservatives have failed to provide proper capital funding for our NHS. I thank the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Secondary Care for their engagement with me and other MPs on the review of the new hospital programme. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury guarantee that the changes to the fiscal rules will mean that my constituents can see new and immediate funding for the Royal Berkshire hospital?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member asks me so politely, but he will know that I cannot guarantee anything in advance of the Budget. However, it sounds as though he has already experienced the positive way in which this Government are approaching how we will repair the NHS and get it back on its feet, both by getting junior doctors off the strike line and back into wards and by investing in hospitals for the future. I know that he will look forward to the announcements in the Budget on Wednesday.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Before I became an MP, I led services for very vulnerable people and, unfortunately, came into close contact with gaslighting. As a new MP, I am afraid that my contact with gaslighting is not diminishing, and I slightly despair at what I am seeing from Opposition Members. While I was out canvassing over the weekend and talking with residents on Ken Road in Southbourne, I met a constituent who said, “We knew it wasn’t going to be pretty and you were going to inherit a mess, and we knew that it would be a long haul to get things right. But we were sick and tired of politicians who weren’t taking the big decisions and investing in the long term.” Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should listen to more of our constituents, like the person I just mentioned, who happened to vote Labour on 4 July for the first time in her life?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, and I thank his constituent for putting her trust in this Labour Government. As the Prime Minister said today, this Government will “run towards” the problems, as opposed to running away from them, as the Conservative party did. That will mean difficult decisions at the Budget on Wednesday to deal with the mess that we inherited, to reset public finances and to be able to start to deliver our manifesto. But this Government will take those decisions and we will announce the detail on Wednesday.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to ask what the legacy of this will be. Will he further outline how the change to the fiscal rules to allow for more efficient borrowing will not simply pass more debt on to, for example, my six lovely grandchildren and everybody else’s grandchildren, who already face a scaled-back welfare system and

increased costs of living before they even earn their first pay cheque? How will the Minister’s so-called guardrails not simply be barriers to future generations owning their own homes and making ends meet? I am thinking of the ones who come after.

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. He and his constituents will know, as much as mine do, that the problem for this country before the election was that the last Government had to borrow each month to pay for bills that they did not have the money to pay for, and that they made a whole list of promises across the country that they knew they could not pay for. That is why we have the £22 billion black hole, and why our first fiscal rule is that day-to-day spending will be paid for from tax receipts by the Exchequer. We will put the public budget back into surplus so that we are not in a doom loop of borrowing and borrowing just to keep ahead of ourselves each month. Where the Government do borrow, we will do so for productive investment to modernise our public services and to get growth back into our economy.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): New research published this month by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that reversing the two-child benefit cap would lift 540,000 children above the absolute poverty line. There are no fiscal rules, only fiscal choices. While taskforces meet, more and more children in Coventry South and across the country are consigned to avoidable poverty. Will the Government acknowledge that, prioritise ending child poverty and finally scrap the pernicious two-child benefit cap?

Darren Jones: I share my hon. Friend’s commitment to wanting to tackle child poverty in this country—this party had a proud record on that when we were in government previously. That is why we have set up the child poverty taskforce, which reported last week, and our ambition is to reduce child poverty over the course of this Parliament. We will set out further measures in the Budget on Wednesday on how we intend to deliver that.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. Residents and businesses in my constituency absolutely share our ambition to get the country back on track, and acknowledge that the mission-led focus of the Government and the fiscal rules are at the core of that. They contrast that with 14 years of drift under the Conservatives, punctuated only by 49 days of utter chaos. However, residents and businesses in my area want to be reassured that they can be confident about our level of ambition, so will the Minister update us on how investors are responding to our focus and the maturity that we bring to the debate around the economy?

Darren Jones: I point my hon. Friend to our very successful international investment summit only a couple of weeks ago, when it was very clear from investors that bringing stability back to our politics and our economy has been long wanted. That is why we were able to commit to £63 billion of investment in the country at the summit, followed by another £10 billion of investment

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announced only a few days after. We intend to raise much more to invest in this country and to bring growth back to the economy.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Constituents in Milton Keynes voted for change because they see the consequences of the Conservative economic policy. They are suffering from the cost of living crisis and have seen this in their crumbling schools, the lack of GP appointments and the use of food banks just to make ends meet. Will the Chief Secretary reassure me and my constituents that we will end the Conservative use of payday loans just to keep the lights on and instead invest in new schools, new hospitals and new infrastructure, alongside making work pay, so that my constituents see their lives improve?

Darren Jones: With my hon. Friend's reference to payday loans, she points to the behaviour of the previous Government. As I have told the House this afternoon, this Government, with their first fiscal rule, will take us to a place where we are not borrowing to pay the bills each month, as had happened for years under the Conservatives. Anyone managing their family finances at home knows that that is the right thing to do, and they will welcome the fact that this Government are bringing that sense of discipline back to the national economy, too.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that as part of their fiscal strategy and within the fiscal rules, the Government will utilise the national wealth fund to lever in private investment, along with public investment from the taxpayer, for key areas of growth in our economy, including, for example, renewables infrastructure, which is of such importance in Scotland?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend knows that the test of a good Government is whether they can secure private sector investment to come alongside them—something that declined under the last Government. That is why the national wealth fund, which the Chancellor has announced, will secure billions of pounds of private sector investment, alongside public sector investment, in the industries of the future.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the previous Government's failure to invest not only damaged economic growth, but led to damage

to our public services, with a broken NHS, special educational needs in crisis and local government on the brink?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend will know, from speaking to his constituents during his campaign to be elected and since, that people's experience of public services across the country shows the fact of the matter: after 14 years of failure from the Conservatives, our public services are on their knees. That is why they need a Government who will bring stability back to our economy, invest in public services and improve outcomes for people who rely on them and work in them.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Following the disastrous mini-Budget, the Bank of England was forced to undertake emergency liquidity operations to reduce volatility in markets. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the investment summit's record £63 billion shows that this Government are creating stable conditions for long-term investment, after years of political chaos from the Conservative party?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question, and I agree that £63 billion invested in this country was a sign of confidence, because investors around the world know that Britain is back after years of chaos.

Torsten Bell (Swansea West) (Lab): It is good to hear about changes to address the big problem with our macroeconomic framework—the bias against new investment spending. May I draw the Chief Secretary's attention to the other problem with the system, which acts as an incentive for Ministers not to manage well the assets that they already hold? I refer him to the 2017 sale of £3.5 billion-worth of student loans for just £1.7 billion. Will he reassure the House that the changes that he is making will ensure that we get value for money for the existing financial assets that we hold?

Darren Jones: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance, and I point to the Office for Value for Money, which will work for us to ensure that we improve on behaviours of the past. I also point more broadly to the way that we manage our current assets. People have only to look at the state of our prisons, hospitals and schools, with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and roofs falling in, to know that after 14 years of cuts to investment, we cannot carry on like that. That is why people voted for change at the last election, and why we will deliver it.

International Engagement

6.1 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): With permission, I will make a statement on the latest action that we are taking to reconnect Britain to the world, for our security and prosperity.

Following official visits that have spanned the globe, from South Sudan to Indonesia and the UN General Assembly in New York, in a speech at Chatham House last week I set out my vision for modernising international development, underlining to our partners at home and around the world that Britain is back, and that we are guided by that same realistic approach to achieving truly progressive ends that inspired both Ernest Bevin and Robin Cook, in today's very different world.

First and foremost, we are committed to working with others in a spirit of genuine partnership and respect. That will include working with others to reform the global multilateral system so that it innovates, works for everyone and is fit for the future. We will also work with others to ensure that the UK's formidable expertise and ideas are at the heart of reliable development partnerships. We will be confident about championing the power of international development so that we make progress wherever we can in everyone's best interests, not least the British people.

I took that approach to Washington DC last week for the annual meetings of the World Bank, where I announced UK support for the bank's umbrella facility for gender equality both at home and internationally, boosting women's economic empowerment and economic growth. At the same time, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor joined the meetings of the International Monetary Fund—the first time that two female governors have represented the UK at the World Bank and the IMF. As I announced that here at home the Government will match up to £10 million of public donations to a new Disasters Emergency Committee middle east humanitarian appeal, my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary engaged in Samoa with Heads of Government and counterparts from across the Commonwealth.

This year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was truly historic, not just because it was the first such meeting since His Majesty the King became head of the Commonwealth, following Her late Majesty the Queen's life of service, but because it was the first such meeting to take place on a Pacific island state. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary set out that we see the Commonwealth as a unique platform: an organisation that connects the global north and the global south; a network that, by 2027, is expected to include six of the world's 10 fastest growing economies, with a combined GDP exceeding \$19 trillion; and a family that brings together 2.5 billion people, 60% of whom are under 30 years old.

Samoa's theme for this year's meeting was "one resilient common future". That aligns with the new Government's own priorities for our engagement with the Commonwealth: boosting economic growth, tackling the climate and nature crisis and creating opportunities for future generations. In support of those priorities, the Prime Minister announced a new UK Trade Centre of Expertise,

which will operate out of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to drive export-led growth across the Commonwealth.

The Foreign Secretary unveiled a plan of action to boost investment opportunities across all members, especially smaller and more vulnerable states that are bearing the brunt of the impacts of the climate crisis. In support of the plan, the Foreign Secretary committed seed funding for a new Commonwealth investment network to identify opportunities across the Commonwealth that public-private partnerships could unlock. In Samoa, he launched two new trade hubs to help female entrepreneurs access global markets, following my announcement at the World Bank. He announced measures to support Commonwealth partners to create a better environment for growth by supporting democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law. That is really important, because without targeted support, we run the risk of some within the Commonwealth missing out on economic development, at a time when we need everyone to be part of global growth.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised the ambition to protect the ocean and sea species. We have increased technical assistance to small states to help them unlock access to climate finance, and we were proud to agree the first Commonwealth ocean declaration. Of the 56 Commonwealth members, 49 have a coastline, and our members are home to around half all global coral reefs. We were delighted that the whole Commonwealth came together to back global efforts to protect at least 30% of the planet's ocean by 2030, urged rapid ratification of the agreement on marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, and called for an ambitious global plastic pollution treaty that addresses the full life cycle of plastics—all that as the Foreign Secretary supported a beach clean-up with young Samoans, as part of a relay right across the Commonwealth that will pick up a million pieces of plastic by the 2026 Commonwealth games in Glasgow.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary confirmed that we will continue funding for Commonwealth and Chevening scholars. These young people are part of the next generation of leaders from across the global south, who have vital roles to play in building the peaceful, prosperous world that people everywhere want to see.

We are taking our message to the world that, in a time of global volatility, the UK is an outward-looking, reliable, respectful partner that is committed to growing our economy, bringing opportunity to people across our country and helping other countries to do similarly. Working together in partnership is part and parcel of how we overcome the forces that are hell bent on setting us against one another. We will make sure that all of us around the globe who care about our shared future are able to work towards it together. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

6.7 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I have had a chance to read the Minister's statement while I have been in the Chamber, and I declare an interest as an executive committee member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly UK.

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

This statement really should have been delivered by the Prime Minister. It was he, along with the Foreign Secretary, who travelled to Samoa and can tell us at first hand about the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and the negotiations for its communiqué. Instead, he has chosen to ignore Parliament today and deliver another of his gloomy speeches talking down our economy.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is an opportunity to reinvigorate the Commonwealth—a partnership of 56 independent and equal sovereign states with a combined population of 2.7 billion. With our King as the new head of the Commonwealth, and a new secretary-general-elect, we have fresh energy to create the thriving, resilient Commonwealth of the future. I thank Samoa for hosting. The meeting shows that a Pacific small island state has equity of membership with all Commonwealth nations. I also thank Baroness Scotland for her indefatigable work for the Commonwealth.

With reinvigoration comes reflection. As the head of the Commonwealth, His Majesty the King said that the UK must acknowledge the painful aspects of Britain's past. At the same time, it must also be accepted that the past cannot be changed. There comes a moment to stop looking back, never forgetting history but using the lessons learned to forge a brighter future path. I congratulate the new secretary-general elect Shirley Botchwey on her unanimous election. She recently asserted that the debate “had moved from financial reparations now to justice in terms of what do we get for climate? What do we get in terms of the development cooperation framework?”

She is right. Let us look at the international work the UK has been doing through the international development budget, co-chairing the green climate fund, and funding countless Commonwealth programmes focusing on health, education and private sector engagement. British international investment alone has created employment for hundreds of thousands of people in Commonwealth nations. The UK also provides expertise in financial services and pandemic research, as well as Commonwealth and Chevening scholarships. Will the Minister confirm that those will continue on the same scale after Wednesday's Budget?

Turning to the communiqué, the wording in paragraph 22 implies that the UK's openness to reparatory justice in relation to the abhorrent slave trade is not as off-limits as the Prime Minister has previously stated. What is the Government's actual red line on reparations, given the Foreign Secretary's well-known past views on the topic? Or is this another example of saying one thing in opposition but another in government? On paragraph 16, what is the Government's position on UN Security Council reform? Will the Minister rule out giving away our permanent seat? On paragraph 43, what steps are the UK Government taking as penholder on Myanmar to bring about the measures outlined in the communiqué?

Turning to the International Monetary Fund meetings in Washington, will the Minister confirm that she has delayed a £707 million disbursement to the World Bank International Development Association budget that benefits numerous Commonwealth countries?

To conclude, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting focused mainly on the future. In the Commonwealth, that means moving on together. It means being honest with our partners about our

intentions, and it means being clear and consistent with our international partners with that message, from the Prime Minister down.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks and, above all, for her work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Indeed, I commend all Members across the House who are engaged with that very important organisation, which brings parliamentarians together.

The Prime Minister's resolution to support the Commonwealth could not be clearer. He is the first sitting UK Prime Minister to visit a Pacific island country. That is something we should all celebrate, rather than criticise. That commitment is very clear indeed. I had the absolute privilege of meeting the Prime Minister of Samoa when I was in New York for the UN General Assembly. I was very excited then to hear her talk about how the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was likely to run. It was a very successful meeting. We commend her and the whole Commonwealth family on it. I know the Prime Minister is very much of the same mind.

I associate myself with the hon. Lady's remarks in thanking Baroness Scotland for her leadership, and in commending the wise words of His Majesty, which are always imbued with wisdom. That approach is the one the new UK Government are taking. We believe it is important to focus on the future. That is why, as I said a few moments ago, we prioritised focusing on economic development, young people's employment, women's economic empowerment, which is so often the key to growth, and action on the climate and nature crisis. That is what our Commonwealth friends are saying that they want to see in the future. We will stand with them on that, because it is to the mutual benefit of us all.

The hon. Lady asked about the Budget. The UK Government's position is very clear: we do not want a return to the kind of turbulence that we saw over the past 14 years. Very sadly, we saw in-donor refugee costs in particular rising in a way that was completely uncontrolled, with programmes cut in half. That is not the current UK Government's approach. We will ensure we have a properly planned approach to international development, because failing to do that is to let down our international partners.

The hon. Lady asked about our position on the UN Security Council. We have been very clear that we need to ensure there is better representation of global south partners, but we will always take our leadership responsibilities on the UNSC very, very seriously indeed. We have been doing that since coming into government.

The hon. Lady asked about Myanmar and abuses of human rights. Again, we have been very clear on the need for action to be taken. We have communicated that many times. We are very concerned about the position of those who have been impacted.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about language in the communiqué that was agreed at the conference about reparative justice. Just to be crystal clear, I am sure everyone in the House would agree that the slave trade was abhorrent. We condemn it, just as previous Labour Governments have done. As the Prime Minister made clear in Samoa, it is important that we start from there, but it is also important that we are just as clear

that there has been no change in our policy on reparations. The UK does not pay reparations—I really could not say that more emphatically—and I know she is aware that that is the position of the UK Government.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about IDA. I will finish on that, Madam Deputy Speaker. The previous Government were not clear about their approach to IDA replenishment. The new Government have been clear. The Prime Minister said at the UN General Assembly that the UK will increase its contribution and we urge other countries to do the same.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. She touched on IDA. IDA needs a minimum of \$27 billion from donor countries to help countries at higher risk of debt distress. Can she further elaborate on the discussions she had with international counterparts on IDA replenishment, ahead of IDA21 in early December this year?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. IDA is a critical part of the World Bank's architecture. It is the fund that is focused on the very poorest countries that are most in need of support, but also those which can grow very quickly when they receive that support economically. It is extremely good value: every \$1 invested in it results in \$3 to \$4 for those in the poorest countries. The UK has been clear, as I mentioned, that we will increase our contribution. We are urging others to do the same. Denmark and Spain said that they would do just that, which I think is a vote of confidence in IDA.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. As I set out during the Second Reading of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill last week, the Commonwealth is a vitally important multilateral organisation and we support work to strengthen it.

The Minister references the new Government's approach on international development. It is on this particular issue that I hope she will set out further detail. We welcomed the reference to the sustainable development goals in her speech at Chatham House last week. Regrettably, the Labour manifesto did not mention the SDGs. Will the Minister affirm that the SDGs are at the heart of the UK's development vision?

On development, it is vital that we honour our international commitments and, to that end, restore the 0.7% of GNI target for international development spending. That cause is championed in particular by those on the Liberal Democrat Benches, as it was the Liberal Democrats who enshrined the 0.7% in law. This is the means to reset Britain's place in the world. We were an international development superpower. We have been missed on the world stage, and into the space we have vacated other foreign actors have moved in who are often at odds with British interests.

The Minister references the Disasters Emergency Committee's middle east appeal. She will be aware that the British public have already raised £20 million and

that the UK Government will match only up to £10 million. That is a direct consequence of the cut to the development budget. The UK Government are no longer able to match the generosity of the British people. We now hear reports that, at a moment when millions of civilians across the world are caught in conflict, UK ODA is to be cut even further, from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI. Such a move would be deeply disappointing and ensure that the UK's hands are further tied when it comes to responding to humanitarian disasters. Will the Minister rule that out?

Anneliese Dodds: I suspect that the hon. Lady has many things to do with her time, and the Labour manifesto for the general election may not be her first priority as bedtime reading, but let me gently encourage her to look at it, because she would see that it does refer to the sustainable development goals. I certainly agree with her that we have not seen the progress that we need to see—I believe we have seen about 17% of the progress that we need to see with the goals to which a target is attached—but the Government are determined to play our part in ensuring that we make faster progress. I have discussed the matter with Amina Mohammed, the deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, on a number of occasions, including last week in Washington. We are determined to work with others to play our part.

The hon. Lady asked about the policy of devoting 0.7% of GNI to overseas development assistance. As she will see, that too is in the Labour manifesto; it is our policy when fiscal circumstances allow, and rightly so. She said that in the past the UK had been viewed as an international development superpower, but perhaps it was not today. I have to say that wherever I have been in the world, British people have been engaged in ensuring that we are playing our part as a nation in supporting others. We need to harness that expertise and provide leadership again, and that is exactly what this new Government have been doing.

As for the DEC, let me say very briefly that according to my understanding, none of the last few appeals have been fully matched—they have always been pegged at a certain level. I think that is commensurate with how previous DEC appeals have worked, but it may be worth checking that out.

I hope that I have covered most of the hon. Lady's points, for which I am grateful.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Next year will mark 20 years since the Gleneagles summit, when G8 leaders agreed to an ambitious debt cancellation deal under the previous Labour Government. At present, however, the unfair debt burden is holding back many developing countries, including some in the Commonwealth. What discussions has the Minister had on this important issue, and what are our plans?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend has considerable expertise in this area, as do many Members among the new intake, as well as those who were here before. It is important for the UK to exercise leadership on these issues, just as we did under past Labour Governments. My hon. Friend should be aware that we are working very hard to make sure that we do all we can to support countries to deal with this issue. Members of the Paris Club and the G20, for instance, are seeking to cement

[Anneliese Dodds]

and accelerate those efforts, because overall the debt levels are having a very negative impact on countries' ability to provide health and education services.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): May I ask the Minister about another of the Foreign Secretary's recent visits, to the Republic of Korea? Does she agree that the agreement to strengthen the defence and security dialogue with South Korea is very welcome, as is the condemnation of the support from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—both with weapons and, now, with troops—for Russia in its illegal invasion of Ukraine? Does she also agree that now is the time when South Korea should step up its support for Ukraine, and drop its previous reluctance to supply it with weapons?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful for that important question, and I am pleased to report that relations between the UK and the Republic of Korea are at their closest ever at the moment. The Downing Street accord between the UK and the Republic of Korea elevates our relationship to a global strategic partnership, placing the UK as second only to the US in terms of the strength of our bilateral partnership. The right hon. Gentleman is right to focus on the need to condemn the DPRK's engagement in Ukraine, and indeed the UK Government have taken the same approach. I should add that decisions about South Korea's activities relating to its military are of course for South Korea itself, but we are determined to work closely with it on this and many other issues.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I declare an interest, in that before being elected to represent the people of Hemel Hempstead I worked for the Fairtrade Foundation. The Minister will be aware, through her own support for fair trade, of the vital role that the foundation plays in supporting smallholder farmers, but of course there are millions of smallholder farmers around the world. I should be grateful if she could update the House on the ways in which the Government, through the World Bank, are supporting smallholder farmers and sustainable agriculture.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He is right: it is an issue of which not only UK farmers and agriculture experts in our universities but the British public are deeply supportive, and the Government are determined to do what we can to support sustainable agriculture. We see, for example, very little climate finance going into that arena. More of it should be going there, which is why the UK is working with the US and, indeed, announced support for joint initiatives last week at the World Bank annual meeting.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When one group of people have done something terrible to another group of people, it is understandable that resentment about it can pass down to the next generation and possibly the generation after that, but does the Minister agree that to suggest that that process can continue over two centuries, and thus require guilt to be expiated in the form of reparations, is to make a nonsense of the concept of individual responsibility?

Anneliese Dodds: The Government's view is that we have to focus on the future, and that is the approach that we took at the CHOGM meeting. We think it is important to listen carefully to our Commonwealth partners, and we have heard their calls for more action to deliver the jobs that are needed, particularly for young people, and for more action on climate and nature, given the crises in both those areas. We will continue to work with our Commonwealth friends on these issues.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's repeated references to tackling both the climate and the nature crises. In the context of the Prime Minister's recent attendance at CHOGM, we know that many Commonwealth countries are among those most exposed to climate change, and that that has a particular impact on small island states such as Samoa. Will the Minister outline in more detail the work that the Government are doing to put climate at the heart of our foreign and development policy?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising such an important issue. There are indeed many small island developing states among the Commonwealth states, and for them the climate crisis is an existential issue. We have seen severe impacts on a number of small island developing states, with extreme weather and erosion having a huge effect on people's security and their livelihoods. Under the new Government, the UK is determined to exercise leadership on this issue, and that has included a range of measures. I will not go through them now, but one critical element is ensuring that there is support for adaptation as well as for mitigation. These small states really need to be helped to adapt to the new weather systems that we are seeing, and the UK Government are doing all that they can to ensure that that happens.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Can the Minister comment further on paragraph 22 of the Commonwealth Heads of Government statement to which the Prime Minister put his name? It states that the Heads of Government,

"noting calls for discussions on reparatory justice...agreed that the time has come for a meaningful, truthful and respectful conversation towards forging a common future based on equity."

"Based on equity" is the language normally used by those seeking compensation. Can the Minister explain what it means in plain English? Does it mean parting with taxpayers' money, and if not, what does this statement mean?

Anneliese Dodds: I did state earlier, but will restate for the hon. Member's benefit, that we have been very clear about the fact that UK does not pay reparations. He referred to a specific element in the communiqué about reparatory justice. It does two things: as he mentioned, it notes calls for discussion, and it agrees that this is the time for conversation. As the Prime Minister has made clear—in Samoa, for instance—none of the UK Government's discussions have been about money. Our position, as I have said, is very clear: we do not pay reparations. I really do not know how many times I have to say that.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon. Does she agree that the best path to global growth and prosperity is one that includes women and girls? Will she set out how the Government and the World Bank intend to achieve that?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important subject. Globally, an enormous amount of growth could be unlocked by increasing women's economic opportunities. The World Bank has estimated that about 20% could be added to global GDP if women were able to work more and their pay was more reflective of men's pay. The UK Government have been working closely on this issue with many partners, including the World Bank. We are very pleased to be seeing progress, particularly around supporting women entrepreneurs and ensuring that women's economic empowerment is viewed as the ticket to progress and prosperity that it so often can be.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I want to raise a couple of points. First, it is only a few years ago that the Foreign Secretary said:

"We don't just want an apology, we want reparations and compensation."

Last week, however, the Prime Minister could not even bring himself to make a formal apology, so I hope the Minister can bring herself to do so today.

Secondly, the Minister said that

"at home and around the world... Britain is back".

There are two reasons for that: first, there was a reduction in ODA spend to 0.5% of GNI; and, secondly, there was the merger of the Department for International Development, which is in East Kilbride in Scotland. Will there be a return to a separate Department, and how soon does she predict that we will return to spending 0.7% of GNI?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions, and I will try to cover them as quickly as I can. The new Government are very clear that the slave trade was abhorrent. We condemn it, just as previous Labour Governments did. It is important that we start from there, but it is also important that we are just as clear that there has been no change in our policy on reparations. The UK does not pay reparations—we have been very clear about that.

The hon. Gentleman talks about other countries' confidence in the UK's leadership on international development. We have to renew that confidence, which is about ensuring that we make a number of changes, as I set out at Chatham House the week before last. That includes ensuring that we work even more closely with Brits who are leading development in different countries around the world, but also that we have genuine partnerships with other countries.

I cannot end my response to the hon. Gentleman without thanking the terrific staff in East Kilbride, who do a wonderful job on international development and on foreign policy more broadly. I take my hat off to them. As a new Minister, I have been very impressed by all those working on these issues for the UK Government.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): The pandemic, rising interest rates, and rising wheat and energy prices after Putin's invasion of Ukraine have led to a debt crisis in low-income nations. Some 32 African nations spend more on servicing their debt than they do on healthcare. I used to work in one of the world's poorest nations, Somaliland. I have seen what grinding poverty can do. The horrors of climate change are leading to drought, hunger and death. Will the Minister consider repeating one of the proudest actions of the last Labour Government by acting to end the debt crisis and, by doing so, help to end extreme poverty once and for all?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and for his passion in doing so. He is absolutely right: many countries have to pay substantial amounts on servicing debt at the same time as having to deal with repeated crises—not least the nature and climate crisis, but also crises deriving from conflict—so we need to show leadership on these issues. That is why we are working with the rest of the G20 on their framework. It needs to be faster and stronger, and it needs to work better. We will play our part in trying to ensure that, and we will work with the Paris Club on this agenda too.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On reparations, will the Minister accept that there is a clear difference between the Prime Minister's commendably robust language before he left for Samoa and the language that he eventually signed up to in paragraph 22 of the communiqué? Will she accept that Heads of Government who are watching this process are perfectly entitled to deduce that the UK is now on a journey that will lead to reparations? Will she further accept that there is a clear difference between providing compensation to people who have been harmed by the state, from tainted-blood victims to sub-postmasters, and paying reparations in respect of events that happened 200 years ago?

Anneliese Dodds: I have to say that I find the right hon. Gentleman's question rather surprising. I do not believe that Heads of Government are in any doubt about the new UK Government's approach to these questions. Indeed, the new Government, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and the ministerial team have had more engagement with Heads of Government and our friends in the Commonwealth than we have seen for a very long time. That engagement is clear, and our message is very clear indeed. As I said, the Prime Minister himself has articulated that, including in Samoa. He made it clear that none of the UK Government discussions had been about money, and our position is very clear: we do not pay reparations. As I explained during my statement, the focus of conversations at CHOGM was the fact that we need to act together on the climate crisis, and to drive growth and prosperity for the whole Commonwealth.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in welcoming Glasgow's role as host of the Commonwealth games 2026? Will she confirm that discussions will take place with the Scottish Government to ensure that the benefits of the games are felt not just in Glasgow, but across the whole of Scotland, including in constituencies such as mine?

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely will confirm that. I am so pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. I think that people up and down the whole country are delighted that we will see the return of the Commonwealth games to Glasgow in 2026. I know that my right hon. Friend the Scotland Secretary is very pleased to be engaging on this matter with the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency. We need to ensure that the games have a lasting, positive legacy on health and on engagement in fitness and sports, and this new UK Government are determined to achieve that.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for the update on the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Next Sunday, volunteers will head to the beach when Sidmouth Plastic Warriors meet to prevent litter from ending up in the oceans. When they do so, they will want to be sure that their Government are encouraging other Governments to take action on ocean plastics. How likely does the Minister think it is that negotiations will be concluded on a UN global plastics treaty by the end of the year?

Anneliese Dodds: When the hon. Gentleman's constituents take part in that activity, they are joining a global movement in which the Foreign Secretary himself was engaged with young people in Samoa. It is about ensuring that we all play our part in removing plastic pollution. The hon. Gentleman asks about the prospects for a global agreement. We all want to see that happen through the UN, but the fact that the Commonwealth came together in Samoa to agree on it is very exciting. It shows that there is a strong prospect of making headway on this very important issue.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement; I can only respect the breadth of it. I am pleased to hear about the focus on using international development to reduce violence against women and girls, which we all fully support. At a reception last week, we heard personal testimony from people who have been persecuted because of their religious beliefs. Does the Minister feel that the overseas development budget can also be used to reduce violence against religious minorities?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that subject, which is of much concern to many Members across the House. Unfortunately, the freedom of religion and belief is a value that is being challenged across the world, and we are seeing too many countries slipping backwards. The new UK Government are determined to do what we can to exercise leadership in international development, which includes supporting those who are subject to persecution and playing our part in ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Will the right hon. Lady update the House, following the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, on whether the Government have considered a Commonwealth free trade deal and if not, why not?

Anneliese Dodds: There are already many strong economic relationships between Commonwealth states. The new Government are very proud of that, and we

want to ensure that even faster progress is made. A number of countries within the Commonwealth are currently subject to trade deals with the UK or have trade deals under discussion. We want to cement those economic ties, and that is a priority for the new Government.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): New International Rescue Committee analysis finds that just 16 climate-vulnerable and conflict-affected countries, including Sudan, Myanmar and Syria, represent 43% of all people living in extreme poverty and 79% of all people in humanitarian need. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that we address the underlying causes of fragility and get aid into those 16 countries with the highest needs?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, in which she has considerable experience. Globally, by 2030, 60% of people in extreme poverty will live in fragile and conflict-affected states. We need to see much more action: less than 5% of climate finance, for example, goes into adaptation, with only a tiny fragment going into fragile and conflict-affected states. The UK is determined to exercise leadership, and the new Government have been pressing multilateral institutions to do more. Last week, at the World Bank, we saw some important moves, which I am pleased to say were pushed by the new Government.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Can the Minister assure us that the Government's commitment to ODA will not be further reduced to 0.3% of GNI? Is there a timeline to restore it to 0.7%?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his important question. I have stated this before, but I will state it again. He may not wish to spend a huge amount of time reading the Labour manifesto from the last general election, but if he did so, he would see that the new Government are committed to returning to 0.7% of GNI being spent on overseas development assistance, as fiscal circumstances allow. That is something we are focused on doing. Under the previous Government, we saw many years of huge turbulence around these issues, but we are determined to have a strategic, planned approach without that turbulence in future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her positive statement to the House today. Will she further outline what engagements she intends to undertake to secure the rights of women throughout the world, beginning with the rights to choose their life partner, to choose education, to choose employment and to choose a future with hope rather than the drudgery faced by too many women throughout this world? How can the House advocate for this change in a reasoned manner that brings about not snappy soundbites but a real change in those countries in which we retain an influence?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his important question and the considered way in which he articulated it. I have been disturbed, as I know the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who speaks for the Opposition, will have been, to see that we are not making as speedy progress on many of these issues as we should be globally. When I was in Jordan, for example, speaking with Syrian

refugees, and when I was in South Sudan, speaking with refugees there, I saw that child marriage was, unfortunately, still very common. It becomes more common when there is severe economic dislocation, when the impact on girls is truly appalling and very disturbing. We are determined to exercise leadership, which we can do in the strongest way by setting out the evidence of the economic impact, which shows clearly that not having those protections is bad for all of society and for whole communities. That is often the most effective way to deal with these issues.

Remembrance and Veterans

6.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): I beg to move,

That this House has considered remembrance and the contribution of veterans.

This is the first time in four years that the House has held a general debate on remembrance. Back then, I responded for the Opposition. It is a huge honour for me to open this debate as Secretary of State for Defence and, in that role, to be the voice of veterans in the Cabinet. I am proud to have my ministerial team here with me, particularly the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who will wind up this debate.

Given the number of colleagues from all parts of the House who have put in to speak in this debate, I wish to keep my remarks brief, so that we can hear from others. It is striking how many colleagues on the call list, of all parties, have served in our UK armed forces; many were elected for the first time in July, and I welcome them all to this debate. That underlines the deep affinity between the House and our nation's armed forces. Whether or not we have served, we in this House have the interests of our armed forces at heart; but we may debate, forcefully at times, the state of our armed forces and how best to use them. That matters to those who put on the uniform and accept a duty to give unlimited service to our nation, ready to do anything, at any time, anywhere, if this House and His Majesty's Government will it.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): During the troubles in Northern Ireland, hundreds of thousands of British servicemen served on Operation Banner. Hundreds were killed and thousands were maimed by both republican and loyalist bombs. I respect the right hon. Gentleman, but how can his Government repeal the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and throw many of those veterans to the wolves in order to pander to Sinn Féin? What is noble about that?

John Healey: The legacy Act is without supporters in the communities in Northern Ireland, on any side. That is one of the reasons why it should be repealed. In the process of repeal, we will take fully into account the concerns and position of veterans, who have given such service, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, and their families.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for giving way; he is always very courteous. When I was on a previous iteration of the Defence Committee, we produced an in-depth report on the best way forward after the troubles, called "Drawing a line: Protecting veterans by a Statute of Limitations". It recommended ending prosecutions and substituting a truth recovery process. People from, shall we say, some of the Northern Irish parties felt compelled to condemn it on the Floor of the House, but quietly came up to me afterwards and admitted that it was the only way forward. Just because there is this performative condemnation by different communities, he should not

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

be diverted from the fact that what was good enough for Nelson Mandela in South Africa should be good enough for us.

John Healey: For me, one of the great strengths of the House and Parliament is the work of the all-party Select Committees. The right hon. Gentleman's Committee, during that time, did the House and the wider cause of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland a service. We will take those points into account. I do not think that anybody could point their finger at the current Northern Ireland Secretary and say that he is not a serious figure, or that he could remotely be accused of performative politics. He will take very seriously his duty to lead the repeal of the legacy Act and find a way forward that takes everybody with us.

Remembrance Sunday is a moment when the nation comes together to honour those who have served, those who have fought and, above all, those who have made the ultimate sacrifice of their life to defend our country, preserve our freedoms and protect our way of life. To all those who serve and have served, on behalf of the country, I offer a profound thank you.

This will be the first time many new Members have the privilege of representing their constituency at remembrance parades, ceremonies and services. I encourage all to play their fullest part, and to go into their schools to join in the lessons and projects that will take place in the run-up to Remembrance Day, because remembrance is not just an opportunity to show our gratitude and pride; it is an opportunity to learn, and to teach the next generation about the service and sacrifice of those who came before. Given that the number of veterans in this country will fall by a third in this decade, it is clear that we need to do more at all levels to reinforce the country's understanding of and commitment to our armed forces. That has never been more important than in the year in which we mark the 80th anniversary of D-day and many of the major battles that led to the end of the second world war. At the weekend, we marked a decade since the conclusion of UK combat operations in Afghanistan, and during this Remembrance we honour the 457 British service personnel who lost their life, the thousands who were wounded, and their families, who bore such a burden.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his contribution. He is an honest and honourable person. This is on the subject of justice for those who served in uniform. I declare an interest, having served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years and in the Royal Artillery for 11 and a half years; that is 14 and a half years in total. My cousin was murdered on 10 December 1971. No one was ever made accountable for his murder. The IRA men who killed him ran across the border to the Republic of Ireland, to sanctuary and safety. No one was made accountable for the murder of four UDR men at Ballydugan on 9 April 1990. It grieves me greatly on their behalf to know that there are people still walking about who have never been made accountable in this world for what they have done. I want to see justice. Does the Minister want to see justice for those people as well?

John Healey: I had moved on to Afghanistan, but the hon. Gentleman, in his forceful way, makes his point, which is on the record.

I want to move on and use this remembrance period and this debate to pay tribute to the very special service charities that we have in the UK. They work, week in, week out, all year round, to raise funds, promote awareness and provide services to our armed forces and veterans.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) *rose*—

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD) *rose*—

John Healey: I will give way one more time, and then conclude my speech, so that the House can hear from the many Members who wish to speak.

Ian Roome: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for mentioning the good work of charities. My base in North Devon, Royal Marines Base Chivenor, and garrison commander Lieutenant Colonel Simpson are supportive of service charities, including the Royal Marines Association. Will the Secretary of State wish the Royal Marine Corps a happy birthday, as they celebrate their 360th birthday today?

John Healey: I am so glad that I gave way. I was going to leave that to my hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans and People, who I am sure will have something to say about that. To respond to the hon. Gentleman's invitation, on behalf of the whole House, I say: what a remarkable service, and what a remarkable feat—360 years proud today. We honour those in that service, we wish them well in future, and say a big happy birthday.

At this time of year, we see the particular contribution of the Royal British Legion and the importance of its poppy appeal. Let us recognise the commitment of the hundreds of volunteers across the country who recruit the poppy sellers, organise the shifts, check the stock, account for the donations and encourage the public to give, and to wear poppies at this time of year with such pride. On behalf of us all, thank you.

These are serious times—war in Europe, conflict in the middle east, growing Russian aggression and increasing threats elsewhere. As the world becomes more dangerous, we will rely more heavily on the professionalism and courage of our armed forces. It is against that backdrop that the Government are committed to renewing the nation's contract with those who serve. We have already been able to announce the largest pay increase for our forces for over 20 years, and I am the first Defence Secretary who can stand in the House and say that everyone in uniform in the UK armed forces will be paid at least the national living wage. That is why we announced, in our first King's Speech, legislation to introduce an independent armed forces commissioner to improve service life for service personnel and their families.

Tim Farron: Will the Secretary of State give way?

John Healey: I will, because the hon. Gentleman is particularly persistent. Despite his youthful looks, he has been in the House for some time.

Tim Farron: True enough, and I am sure I should know better.

Recruiting and retaining good people who will serve our country is made a little easier if they know that they will be cared for in the years after they leave active service. Will the Secretary of State say something about the importance of investing in mental health support for veterans, and in particular congratulate One Vision, the charity in my constituency that provides counselling support for the armed forces and all those in uniform, and does work to make sure that we value those people in the years after they have actively served us?

John Healey: I will indeed. The hon. Gentleman is right, of course. On support services for veterans who need them, there is not just what the Government can help provide—including, on mental health, through Op Courage—but what is provided by a network of first-class local charities. If One Vision plays a part in that in his area of Cumbria, I certainly pay tribute to it.

There is a more profound reason for our concern to provide support for our veterans. We need to recognise that those on deployment in the armed forces must have the confidence to act decisively on behalf of the nation, and they can be motivated and have their confidence reinforced by how they see the nation supporting veterans back home. That is why we pledged in our manifesto in July to improve access to support for our veterans, including on mental health, employment and housing. It is why we have committed to putting the armed forces covenant fully into law. It is why, within three months of taking office, we have delivered on the commitment to make the veteran's identity card an accepted form of voter ID, and why the Prime Minister, in his first conference speech, announced that veterans would be exempt from rules requiring a connection to the area from those seeking to access housing there.

At the heart of our national security will always be the men and women who serve this country. As we consider this debate, we have an opportunity to reflect on what we mean by remembrance and to recognise the immense contribution made to this country by our veterans, by serving members of the armed forces and by the families who support them.

Hundreds of thousands have answered the nation's call and given their lives in doing so. We honour them, and we will remember them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

7 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in congratulating our brilliant Royal Marines on their 360th anniversary.

This timely and important debate coincides with Mr Speaker's official opening of the constituency garden of remembrance earlier today. It marks the point where, as a House, we pay tribute to all those who serve and have served our country, particularly those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

As we approach Remembrance Day, I thank the Royal British Legion and charities across the UK that ensure that our collective memory of the fallen never fades, while providing invaluable services and support

to today's veterans. I am also proud of the previous Government's record on veterans, which my colleague, the shadow Veterans Minister, will cover in his closing speech. The focus of my speech is primarily on the remembrance part of this debate.

I believe that politicians best honour the fallen by never forgetting the lessons of the wars in which they fought. This means never being complacent about the threats we face and doing everything possible to strengthen our deterrence, so that this country is never again embroiled in the senseless slaughter of existential war. It must be obvious to all of us that the threat of such a war looms larger over our continent than it has for many years. To that end, and I say this with respect to the Secretary of State, it was profoundly ill-judged of him to suggest, at a time when deterrence is of paramount importance, that Britain is not ready to fight a war. I reassure the British public, millions of whom will soon wear their poppies with pride, that our armed forces remain among the best in the world. After all, it would be wholly unrealistic to expect this nation to fight Russia single-handedly. The challenge is to be ready to fight and deter as part of NATO, and no one should be in any doubt of the outsized scale of our contribution to the alliance.

First and foremost, we unambiguously and unflinchingly offer our 24/7 nuclear deterrent for the defence of all European NATO allies, and we are incredibly proud to have delivered a continuous at-sea deterrent every day since 1969. Moreover, during NATO's Steadfast Defender exercise earlier this year—its largest such exercise since the end of the cold war—we led the way with 20,000 service personnel, eight warships and submarines and an aircraft carrier, plus tanks, artillery, helicopters and Poseidon P-8 surveillance aircraft. That is not the contribution of a nation unable to fight.

As we prepare to look back and remember past conflicts, the most important example of our readiness is not an exercise but a real-world war that is happening on our continent today. When it comes to Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the UK, under the previous Government, played a singular leadership role, which started before the Russian tanks rolled in. Since 2014, we have trained thousands of Ukrainians to fight and we provided crucial anti-tank weaponry before the invasion commenced. That helped the Ukrainians to defy expectations and stay in the fight. Surely we can all see that, had Ukraine fallen early, the world would have been an even more dangerous place, with our adversaries emboldened and with NATO's borders potentially threatened.

As the previous Secretary of State, Grant Shapps, revealed, President Zelensky has said that the UK, more than any other nation, has been responsible for helping to ensure that the majority of Ukraine remains free, more than two years after Russia's main attack. Far from talking down our armed forces, we should be extremely proud of the role we have played in supporting Ukraine's fight for freedom.

That said, of course we have our challenges. First and foremost is the need to replenish munitions, not least after gifting so many to Ukraine. That is why, in April, we set out a fully funded plan to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030, paid for by reducing the civil service to its pre-pandemic size and prioritising £10 billion of additional funding for replenishment.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Does the shadow Minister think that the Conservative party is missing the point of this debate by seeking to score political points?

James Cartlidge: With respect, I think the hon. Gentleman misses the point of my speech. As I said at the beginning, I am here to talk about remembrance, and I sincerely believe that the best way to honour the fallen is by learning the lessons of the past. That means always standing up for our country and ensuring that we have the strongest possible deterrent. That is why, with a Budget on Wednesday, it really matters that we talk about defence spending in this debate. This is a matter of supreme national interest.

As we prepare to remember all those lives lost serving in our Navy and merchant fleet, this replenishment would have addressed key emerging threats to our naval ships that have been exposed in the Red sea, such as by funding DragonFire laser procurement to tackle drones and upgrading our Sea Viper system to combat ballistic missiles. People may think that that is not relevant, but after all the tragedy we saw when we lost those ships in the Falklands we should be doing everything possible urgently to procure systems that can help to defend our ships against these emerging threats.

Another key challenge is retention. We know that we need to do everything possible to support those who serve in our armed forces today. Two days from the Budget, I hope that the Secretary of State has read today's warning in *The Times* online that hundreds may leave the armed forces because of the Government's education tax. The article quotes the many service personnel who have emailed me with their concerns, such as the wife of an Army major who writes:

"The extra 20% will make things extremely difficult, and we fear we will have to choose between my husband's career or our daughter's education."

Labour should not be forcing thousands of military families to make so stark a choice when we cannot afford to lose such experienced personnel, and when it costs almost £48,000 a head to train just one much less experienced replacement.

Finally, there is the key issue of accommodation. I am proud of the additional £400 million that the Conservative Government injected to help address damp, mould and the many other problems that routinely affect our military homes. However, as someone with a background in housing before entering Parliament, it was clear to me from day one as the Minister responsible for the defence estate that we had to do something far more radical, given the inherent structural problems with so much of our service accommodation.

That is why I built on my predecessor Jeremy Quin's work to put the wheels in motion so that, subject to negotiation, we could buy back the defence estate from Annington Homes. If we really want homes fit for heroes, as I am sure we all do, I strongly believe that we need a complete rebuild of the defence estate, rather than year-to-year sticking plaster solutions. It could be one of the country's most exciting regeneration projects, but it requires ownership to be fully restored, and that means Annington. Of course, Annington is an area of considerable legal and commercial sensitivity, so I do not expect a direct answer, but I hope the Government will continue to build on my considerable work in that area.

If we are truly to honour the fallen, we must do everything to avoid future conflict by having the strongest possible deterrence. I have huge respect for the Secretary of State, but I believe it was a mistake to say that we are not ready to fight. We now need to see whether he is ready to fight for our armed forces. We need two things in Wednesday's Budget: a VAT exemption on school fees for forces families, and a clear pathway to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence so that we can urgently replenish our munition stocks to war-fighting levels. Those who serve our country deserve no less.

7.8 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I rise today, in common with many other hon. Members, to express my immense gratitude and admiration for all our veterans of today and yesteryear. I also rise to speak from a different angle. I represent Slough, one of the most ethnically diverse constituencies, and I was the first turbaned Sikh to be elected to Parliament. I believe I have a specific duty to speak out for those who have often been relegated to the footnotes of history, but whose sacrifices must not be sidelined. It is more important than ever, particularly having seen our streets recently filled with far-right hatred, that remembrance is not exclusive. The contribution of all those who have sacrificed their lives must be remembered.

In particular, it cannot be ignored that both world wars could not have been won by British-born troops alone, without the contribution of soldiers born beyond our own borders. In world war one, approximately 2 million brave soldiers from Commonwealth countries laid down their lives to protect ours. Some 166 African servicemen were decorated in recognition of their valour. Troops from the British West Indies Regiment were awarded 81 medals and received 51 mentions in dispatches. More than 1.5 million people from what is modern day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh contributed to the war effort, forming a largely voluntary army of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and many other faiths. Indeed, today over 11% of our current forces are from ethnic minorities. If we fail properly to commemorate and celebrate the contribution of our armed forces whose roots lie in countries across the globe, we do our own history a huge disservice.

Coming from a strong military background myself—my great-grandfather lost a leg fighting in the first world war; my grandmother's brother and other family members fought in the second world war—I feel immense pride in that shared history. It is staggering that despite making up just 2% of pre-partition British India, Sikhs formed 20% of the Indian Army. I am immensely proud of those who fought so valiantly and believe that such a contribution should be properly commemorated. That is why I serve as president of the National Sikh War Memorial Trust and have passionately campaigned for several years for a fitting memorial in central London to those Sikh soldiers, so that we may remember the tens of thousands of turbaned Sikhs who sacrificed their lives, and the more than 100,000 who were injured during both world wars. We must ensure that remembrance serves as a reminder to all that the freedoms we enjoy today were hard fought for by forces as diverse as modern-day Britain.

We cannot airbrush the past, despite the efforts of some right-wing commentators to do just that. In 2020, Kevin Maguire from *The Mirror* and I had to educate

Laurence Fox on Sikh sacrifices during world war one, following his bigoted comments that the film “1917” was somehow “woke” or “racist” for its inclusion of Sikh soldiers. To his credit, Laurence Fox later apologised, after he had been hit with some hard facts, but that ignorance has rooted in much of the culture of remembrance and must be challenged.

Even today, forces who stood shoulder to shoulder with British troops struggle to get the recognition they deserve, but I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will rectify that. For example, Gurkha pensions are falling short of the Army standard; it took a fight to get certain visa fees scrapped for non-UK service personnel; and recent errors in the Afghan relocations and assistance policy have left Triples forces out in the cold. Pervasive racism caused a failure to treat 54,000 world war one casualties from India, west Africa, east Africa, Egypt and Somalia equally. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary campaigned effectively on that important matter, but there should not be another battle simply to get parity.

Those who served alongside British troops should be a beacon of hope for a collective pride that goes beyond borders, colour or background. Their commitment to our country meant they were willing to sacrifice everything for it. Those contributions should be celebrated, not sidelined. Their commitment in the darkest of times ensured our safety. Fundamentally, without the sacrifices and contributions of the millions of personnel across the globe, we would simply not have the privilege of sitting here today. They have ensured our collective freedom. We must never take for granted the hard-won freedoms to operate under a democracy, to live in a pluralist society and to be safe. It is simply not enough to be thankful. We must celebrate their service, honour their duty and always remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our nation. We will remember them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

7.15 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Today, we gather to honour the sacrifices and contributions of our veterans—brave men and women who have selflessly put their lives on the line for our country. Each one of them embodies the courage, resilience and dedication that define the spirit of service. We should not just recognise their service on the battlefield, but understand the challenges they continue to face once they return home.

I start with a bit of my own story. I served in the British Army as part of the Royal Military Police. I did not come from a military family. My journey began with a desire to lead, travel and make a difference. I studied languages at university, and was drawn to the British Army’s role in international aid and disaster relief. I thought it would eventually lead me into humanitarian work. Training at Sandhurst was gruelling, especially with equipment that was not designed for women, but I came out of that experience with friendships that have lasted a lifetime with people who saw me through my highest and lowest points.

After Sandhurst, I was deployed to Bosnia, where my platoon was already stationed as part of the stabilisation force—SFOR—a NATO peacekeeping force. Working alongside American, British, Canadian, Czech and Dutch

troops, I witnessed at first hand the disparities in resources and funding. The contrast was stark. Our American counterparts had advanced equipment, with all the bells and whistles, while we operated with much less. That showed me not only the resilience of our troops, but the challenges we face due to limited resources.

Shortly after that, I was sent to Iraq on Operation Telic IV with the 1st Battalion Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment, tasked with retraining the Iraqi police force and supporting policing efforts to train over 1,200 of the Iraqi police service in Maysan province, a volatile and dangerous area. We trained the police outside our camp and in old air bases, with unexploded ordnance next to us, and visit police stations supporting the IPS with their work. We distributed cars, equipment, weapons and money to the IPS, and gathered intelligence on Iranian weapon smuggling.

Just a year before my arrival, six of my RMP colleagues were killed in Majar al-Kabir. I vividly remember the fear of my first night, aged just 26, travelling in a blacked-out bus after landing in Maysan, en route to Camp Abu Naji, really unsure of what lay ahead—a fear I imagine many soldiers face today: the fear of the unknown, the fear of what is to come, especially those on the frontline in places such as Ukraine. Iraq was not easy. We came under fire regularly, and some of my fellow soldiers did not make it home. Tensions escalated when photos were published falsely showing British soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees. For several days, our base was surrounded by angry armed locals. There was a lot of tension but we got through it together.

On the base, there were over 1,000 soldiers, but only three female officers and a handful of female non-commissioned officers. The one positive thing about that was that at least I could get to the toilet and the shower without a queue. Despite the challenges, I was grateful for the brave interpreters, local police and all the other locals who worked with us on camp and out on the ground. We must remember the sacrifices local people on operations make to support our armed forces abroad.

After returning to the UK, we started a family, and I had to make a choice between family and career. With no military support to help balance these responsibilities, I eventually left the Army earlier than I had planned. That is too common a story. As the Haythornthwaite review highlighted, the most common reason service members leave the armed forces is the impact on family and personal life. There were no options for me as a mother. I would have been sent to Afghanistan next, and there were no nurseries on the frontline. There was no flexible career path for me, and I am not alone. Many service members face pressures that extend beyond the battlefield, and we simply need to do more to support them.

I am immensely proud of my constituency’s connection to the armed forces. We have Langley Vale, where more than 8,000 soldiers trained during the first world war. It was where Lord Kitchener famously inspected the troops, and it now serves as a place of reflection, with beautiful sculptures honouring our military past. Our local Royal Engineers, the 135 Geographic Squadron, recently celebrated their 75th anniversary this year, proudly marching with bayonets fixed, exercising their freedom of Epsom and Ewell. These are powerful reminders of the sacrifices made by generations of service members.

[Helen Maguire]

Honouring our veterans goes beyond remembrance: it is about action. There are pressing issues that we must address to ensure that veterans and their families are supported after their service. Housing is one such issue. It is unacceptable that more than 2,000 households with a veteran were assessed as homeless last year. High-quality, affordable accommodation for veterans should be accessible across the country. No one who served our nation should face homelessness. The winter fuel allowance is another concern. Many veterans struggle financially, and recent cuts to the allowance will hit some of them hard. It is a lifeline, especially in colder months, and veterans should be able to rely on this support.

Military compensation also needs reform. The current system often counts military compensation towards means-tested benefits. In 2022, about 150,000 veterans received compensation for injuries sustained during service, but many councils count it as income, penalising veterans who desperately need support. That practice goes against the armed forces covenant, and it is time that we changed those rules.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should give serious thought to excluding military compensation when calculating pension credit?

Helen Maguire: I agree with my hon. Friend.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned, we also need to improve mental health support for veterans. More than half of veterans have faced mental health challenges, yet 60% hesitate to seek support due to stigma. To reduce stigma, and encourage more veterans to seek the support that they need, we need regular mental health check-ups for veterans, along with better tracking of both physical and mental health outcomes.

Female veterans face additional challenges, including higher unemployment rates and a greater risk of harassment. The Atherton report found that nearly two thirds of female veterans experienced bullying or harassment during service. That is unacceptable, and we must implement recommendations to protect and support women who serve. Finally, our LGBT+ veterans deserve justice. Those dismissed because of their sexuality are being offered compensation of £12,500, which is wholly insufficient and fails to reflect the harm that they endured. The Government must reassess the scheme to ensure these veterans receive fair compensation.

We thank all charities who support our armed forces, and we remember those who have fallen, but as we remember the contributions of those who have served, let us honour their sacrifices with action. We need a system that truly supports our service personnel, veterans and their families. That means addressing issues ranging from housing and pay to diversity and equality. Our veterans deserve not just our respect but our commitment to making a real difference in their lives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I will now impose an immediate time limit of three minutes for Back-Bench speeches and six minutes for maiden speeches. I call Jodie Gosling to make her maiden speech.

7.23 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important remembrance and commemoration debate. It is a great privilege to have been chosen by the people of Nuneaton, my home, to represent them in this Chamber. I understand the weight of the responsibility that I now have, and I will work hard to bring about the change that we need to thrive.

My journey to this place was indirect, and many individuals supported and inspired me along the way, from the excellent campaign support so willingly given by local members to the kindness, good will and advice of my constituents. I need to give credit to my family too. As the sixth of seven siblings, I will not try to do so individually, but I need to reflect on my mum's incredible work ethic and compassion and my dad's sense of fun and drive to ensure that education was at the heart of our family. Similarly, my children are my greatest source of inspiration. Our legacy will be their future. I thank them and my partner for joining us here today, and for their enduring understanding, patience and unwavering support.

Nuneaton is a beautiful town, and I am proud to call it home. It is steeped in a rich history that stretches back to the Domesday Book. Originally simply referred to as Eaton, meaning "the town by the river", recognising the significance of our River Anker, with the 12th-century addition of a nunnery it simply became Nuneaton Priory, and there the name was formed. Soon after, Henry II gave us our market charter, and the market town that we know and love today began to develop. It is the largest town in Warwickshire, nestled in beautiful rolling hills and stunning countryside. Our coal industry was the economic bedrock from the 19th century until the closure of Daw Mill in 2013, which called an abrupt end to that era.

Nuneaton's sense of pride and duty is never clearer than in its service record. Nuneaton is home to many members of the armed forces and veterans. This year, we welcomed our first Nepalese councillor, Bhim Saru, to Nuneaton and Bedworth council, and congratulated Om Gurung on being the first Gurkha to become a freeman of our town. His work is truly inspirational. A Gurkha monument in Riversley Park is the first memorial of its kind dedicated to the brave Nepalese and Indian soldiers who lost their lives in the service of the British forces.

Those who visit Riversley Park will also find Louis's playground, where Louis Carter played as a child. Louis, a son of Nuneaton, was a well-respected cadet who, following the completion of his training, joined the Royal Fusiliers and was deployed to Helmand Province where he was known as a friendly, loyal and kind member of his platoon. His platoon leader was caught in an improvised explosive device blast while out on patrol. Fusilier Louis Carter acted to aid his comrade, but fell victim to a secondary device. He was just 18 years of age. His companionship, insurmountable courage and sense of service continue to live on as we remember him.

The people of Nuneaton are proud of Louis and all our fallen sons and daughters. Our local Royal British Legion works tirelessly to support their families and commemorate their lives. Special credit needs to be

given to Laurie Payne, Nuneaton's last surviving Korean war veteran, who will celebrate his 96th birthday on Remembrance Sunday this year, and reportedly still outsells all other members in poppy sales.

I also pay credit and give thanks to my predecessor, Marcus Jones, who represented Nuneaton in this House for 14 years. In common with the residents of treacle town, he believed in common sense and hard work, and was respected on both sides of the House for his civility.

Any account of Nuneaton today needs to recognise the challenges facing a town whose traditional industries can no longer support the large numbers of residents they once did. The willingness of those impacted to retrain, diversify and reinvent themselves as work moves into engineering, digital and scientific areas shows the admirable skills needed to embrace the opportunities of an evolving industrial landscape. Nuneaton's central location and connectivity provide logistical opportunities, just as the canals once did for our textiles. Despite the many challenges that Nuneaton has faced, its resilience shines through. It is a town of opportunity and hope.

I congratulate Nuneaton Signs on its recent King's award for inclusion. Not only is it one of the leading road sign manufacturers in the country but it boasts an inclusion record of over 66% of its staff identifying as having a disability. It is a truly brilliant company that represents our communities. We also celebrate the town's diverse culture, with its thriving art community, the Abbey theatre and its hugely generous spirit, which can be seen in our various charities and dazzling annual carnival.

As the first female MP for Nuneaton, I must give credit to one of the trailblazers who went before me, opening up opportunities. Mary Ann Evans, more commonly known for her writing as George Eliot, was born just down the road from me. She wrote under a male name in an attempt to free herself from the discrimination of readers and publishers. Her books opened up public discussion on areas such as domestic violence, the status of women, poverty, political reform, addiction and education—issues that are still as relevant two centuries later.

7.29 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): For me, remembrance is a deeply humbling time of the year and an opportunity to reflect upon the freedoms and privileges that we often take for granted in this country. Freedom of speech, the rule of law and democracy are values for which our forefathers fought bravely. Each generation must make sacrifices to ensure that their children can live in freedom. We see that most clearly today in eastern Europe, where Ukraine fights to defend itself from the barbaric assault on its democracy by Putin's Russia.

My South Northamptonshire constituency is filled with monuments to the heroes of the past, and I look forward this year to marking their sacrifice by attending the Towcester remembrance service at St Lawrence Church, the Brackley service at Winchester House school and the act of remembrance in Bozeat cemetery. I will also join the local branch of the Royal British Legion to sell poppies.

Since my election to this place, I have joined the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and have had the opportunity to see at first hand how crucial it is that we

support our serving men and women properly. In a world where threats are rising, we should be investing more, not less, in our armed forces. I was proud to stand on a manifesto that committed to raising defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, and I am disappointed that the Labour Government cannot make the same outright commitment. Our veterans are the very best of us and should be given the right support to transition out of active duty and into civilian life.

The previous Government put a Veterans Minister around the Cabinet table for the first time, tackled veteran homelessness through Operation Fortitude, created a dedicated veterans' mental health pathway in Operation Courage, and introduced the veterans' railcard.

If we are to honour the sacrifice of those who came before us, if we are to keep our promise to make the UK the best place to be a veteran, and if we are to ensure that the cause of freedom is defended around the world, we must fund our armed forces properly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dan Tomlinson to make his maiden speech.

7.32 pm

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by praising my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) for her fantastic maiden speech? Like other Labour Members, I have Nuneaton seared into my memory because of its role in the 2015 general election. It is nice now to be able to think of such a fantastic speech when I think of Nuneaton.

I pay tribute to my predecessor as the MP for Chipping Barnet, Theresa Villiers, who served with much hard work and diligence over her 19 years of service. She was a hard-working Member of Parliament, and I hope to follow in her footsteps in that regard.

Just yesterday, I was with members of the East Barnet branch of the Royal British Legion, and I thought then, as we think now, of all those who have given their lives and livelihoods to service to keep our country safe.

Chipping Barnet is not, as some may assume, in the Cotswolds, which is home to Chipping Norton and Jeremy Clarkson's farm—although we do have 14 farms in the constituency. We are, in fact, a suburb of London—part of the London borough of Barnet—and it is the suburbs that I would like to speak about today, for it is my contention that when a political party understands the suburbs, it is able then, and only then, to speak on behalf of, and govern for, the country as a whole.

Let me give the House a little history of Chipping Barnet. Back in the 1700s, a weary traveller trying to make their way northwards out of London, on the great north road, would find that the natural resting point for their first night's stay would be Chipping Barnet, where no fewer than 25 public houses could put them up for the night. I will ensure that I continue supporting and patronising the pubs in Chipping Barnet during my time in office.

If we roll forward 200 years, we get to the extension of the Northern line to the constituency, joining us up with the city of London proper. With a relatively liberal planning system pre-1947, that connectivity enabled a surge of housebuilding, which Labour Members will

[Dan Tomlinson]

think about, I am sure, when we seek to build and invest for the future. Chipping Barnet is home, as I said, to wonderful farms and green spaces, and many of us moved to Barnet because we value a house with a garden, room to raise the kids, and maybe even space to park the car out front—the aspirations of suburban life.

Let me say to people of faith in my constituency just how grateful I am for the warmth with which I have been received in churches, synagogues and mosques. In particular, I say to Jewish and Muslim residents that I will always stand with them against the antisemitism and Islamophobia that I know has been on the rise in recent months and over the past year.

It is important to do good work locally as a Member of Parliament, but it is my firm belief that we must raise our game in this House and nationally if we are to truly make a difference for our constituents. The need for change is great. Gone are the days when a child could grow up in a low-income family and on free school meals, just as I did, but with the security of a social security system that was there for them and genuinely affordable social housing. Representing the suburbs is just as much about standing up for the people who cannot afford to or do not commute into town as it is about representing those who do.

People's aspiration for a better life for their families and communities is still there, but it is not being met. I am talking about the deal of suburban life: people who put in so much—spending their time stuck in traffic or on the Northern line, raising their kids to know right from wrong, and serving in their communities and working hard—expect in return that the Government will just get some things right by providing public services that are there when needed and ensuring that the economy is strong and growing. I saw that deal fall apart somewhat during my time as an economist before entering this House. I worked at the Treasury for a time, and then at the Resolution Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. I saw that deal fall apart in charts and in numbers on spreadsheets, but since becoming a parliamentary candidate and then a Member of Parliament, I have heard at first hand from constituents in the suburbs about how that deal has fallen apart. I think of young people who cannot afford to move out of their parents' homes and own or rent in the suburbs. I think of many residents who want to buy a new car but are scared that if they do, it will be stolen and the police will not follow up. Those everyday aspirations are not being met any more.

My work in this place—our work on the Labour Benches—will be to rebuild that deal of suburbia and ensure that those who put in so much get it back again. I say to residents of Chipping Barnet, whether they live in Brunswick Park, Whetstone, Totteridge, Mill Hill East, Arkley, Edgwarebury, Underhill or one of the many Barnets—High Barnet, East Barnet, New Barnet or Barnet Vale—that it is the honour of my life to serve and represent them. I will do all I can for our communities during my time in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Rebecca Paul to make her maiden speech.

7.38 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech in this important debate about remembering the valiant actions of those who have fought to keep this country safe.

It is a privilege to rise as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Reigate, a constituency that I am proud to represent and serve. I am deeply grateful to the people of Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and our villages for placing their trust in me.

Before I turn to an issue of great importance to my constituents, I must acknowledge my predecessor, Crispin Blunt, who is himself a veteran. I have not rushed to deliver my maiden speech, not least out of a desire to give careful thought to the words I choose. Ironically, it seems that Crispin faced a similar conundrum in 1997. In fact, I do not think I can do better than to quote from his own maiden speech:

“It must be admitted that Sir George Gardiner did not end his Conservative party career in a blaze of glory...Sir George was a resolute battler for the causes he believed in, and although many of us questioned his judgment at the end, no one could question the resolve with which he steered his chosen course.”—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 857.]

My sincere hope is that when my successor rises to deliver their maiden speech, they are not inclined to give those words a third airing in this House.

That said, I would like to recognise Crispin Blunt's 27 years of public service, and also pay tribute to his team. No MP achieves anything without a great team supporting them, and Crispin's team served our communities with diligence and grace during many challenging times. I take this opportunity to thank them, especially Teresa Craig, who has gone above and beyond in the past 15 years to help many thousands of constituents. I also pay tribute to Lord Grayling, the former MP for Epsom and Ewell: thanks to recent boundary changes, I have welcomed the wards of Nork and Tattenham Corner and Preston into the Reigate constituency. Chris was an exceptional local MP, and I thank him for all his support.

Let me now turn to a subject close to my heart: my wonderful home. Reigate is a constituency that encapsulates the very best of both town and country—a trinity of towns in the most beautiful part of Surrey, each with its own unique character and identity. We have the historic town of Reigate, with its winding streets, independent shops and proud heritage. It is a place of immense charm and community spirit, and notably is the location of the first road tunnel built in England; it is the birthplace of Margot Fonteyn, one of the greatest classical ballerinas of all time, and is also the place where both our current Prime Minister and Fatboy Slim were educated. Just north of the town stands Reigate fort, a Victorian structure intended to serve as a last line of defence in the event that the south had fallen and defeat seemed certain—a role not unlike that which Reigate played in the recent general election.

Then there is Redhill, a railway town that pulses with energy and ambition—a transport hub and a centre for business, commerce and the arts. It is home to an inspirational Lioness and some Lobsters. As the place where the existence of solar flares was first confirmed, Redhill shines bright as a vivacious younger sister to

Reigate. Finally, we have Banstead, which offers a quieter appeal with its village feel and beautiful commons. Its bustling high street is adorned with gorgeous flowers that are lovingly tended by local residents. It is a community whose respectful patriotism is keenly felt, especially at this time of year. I must take this opportunity to recognise and thank the Banstead and District Royal British Legion branch, whose members do an outstanding job paying tribute to, and raising money for, our armed forces and veterans.

Beyond our towns, we are blessed with many picturesque villages, each with its own charm. Disappointingly, Madam Deputy Speaker, there is not enough time for me to tell you about all of them, so I will tell you about just one: Walton-on-the-Hill. With its serene pond, world-class golf and history of feisty suffragettes, it is the place I chose to settle and raise my family. Like a thief, Walton stole my heart, and I must thank the Prime Minister for giving it early release.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it will not surprise you to hear that the green belt is one of the reasons why the towns and villages of my constituency are so unique. We are incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by beautiful countryside, from the rolling hills of the north downs to the open green spaces of Banstead commons. This country needs more homes, so there now comes pressure to build on the green belt because it is easy, but that is the lazy solution. The new Government talk about developing brownfield first, which I very much support, but just saying the words is not enough. For building on those sites to become a reality, we need tangible action to make brownfield development economically viable. We also need to have an honest conversation about the impact of reducing housing targets in London while nearly doubling them in Reigate and Banstead. Even if by some miracle my local council could deliver on those targets, they would simply be building homes for people from London to move into, not meeting the local need and certainly not bringing down house prices. If we are to break the cycle, we must densify in cities, where essential infrastructure is already in place.

I hope this Labour Government will consider tackling the issue of housing with the same spirit shown by the Labour Government elected in the final months of the second world war. Then as now, the country was in desperate need of more homes; Clement Attlee delivered 1 million of them, while insisting both on densification and ensuring that development was concentrated in cities and towns. Mr Attlee set out to build his new Jerusalem primarily as a fitting tribute to a generation of servicemen who fought, endured and suffered to keep this country safe from fascist tyranny. That heroic generation included Flight Lieutenant Douglas Adcock from Redhill, who flew ultra-high-risk missions for the Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron at RAF Benson. Tragically, though, Douglas never came home: on 11 August 1944, his aircraft failed to return from one of those missions. Some days later, his body washed up on the shore in Belgium, where he is buried today.

A generation earlier, Lieutenant Rupert Hallows, another Redhill man, answered the call to serve his country. He would go on to earn the Victoria Cross in the first world war; he died fighting at Hooge in 1915. Those are accounts of just two men, but memorials across my constituency bear the names of many hundreds more who left home to fight for their country and did

not return. Ultimately, the debt we owe to the fallen can never be repaid, but we honour them, keeping the promise to never forget.

I will end on that note, but just before I do, I want to thank my parents, Bev and Steve, without whom I would not be here today. Today is a proud day for our family—one that we will remember.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Amanda Hack to make her maiden speech.

7.45 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate on remembrance and veterans. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) and for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), and the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), on their excellent contributions.

It was an honour to attend the festival of remembrance organised just over a week ago by the Leicestershire and Rutland Royal British Legion at De Montfort hall. That festival was an outstanding tribute to those who have served in the military and those who are currently serving. It paid thanks to our armed forces with some outstanding performances from local musicians and contemporary dancers. However, it is the harrowing accounts of those who experienced the D-day landings that will stay with me. It will be a privilege to be involved in the many remembrance events across the constituency.

It is the honour of my life to have been elected to serve as the MP for North West Leicestershire. In that role, I am following Andrew Bridgen, who served the community proudly for 14 years. While we do not share much in terms of our politics, I know that he worked hard for his constituents. While I am referencing former MPs, I have to go back further to our former Labour MP, the late David Taylor, who sadly died in office in 2009. It will be no surprise to those who knew David that he is fondly remembered today in the constituency.

North West Leicestershire is in the heart of the national forest. It is a fast-growing area, with the highest housing growth in Leicestershire and an equally impressive growth in employment opportunities. None of this is surprising, considering our transport links: we have an international airport, East Midlands airport, which includes one of the largest freight operations in the country. However, like so many other areas that have seen massive growth, we have been lagging behind in terms of infrastructure. Local people need to see delivery of our commitment to expand public services, rather than the scaling-back we saw for the past 14 years under the Conservatives.

I am proud to be the first female MP in the history of North West Leicestershire. Recently, I had the pleasure of attending the unveiling of the newly refurbished mother and child statue in Coalville. Stuart Warburton, a local historian, has kindly checked for me, and we think that it is the first statue of a lone woman to be installed in the whole of Leicestershire. That award-winning statue, first installed in 1963, depicts a woman proudly striding forward with her son while holding a shopping bag containing many items linked to the constituency, including a lump of coal, an oil tanker, a yarn bobbin

[Amanda Hack]

and a dolly. It occurred to me that there is no better way of showcasing our constituency than by considering some of the items in her bag.

North West Leicestershire has a rich mining heritage. The coalmining industry has been so important to the development of North West Leicestershire that it literally gives its name to the main urban centre, Coalville. The coalfields powered Britain, and Kegworth—also in my constituency—is just a stone's throw away from the last coal-fired power station in the UK, which closed just a few weeks ago. As is customary in a maiden speech, I will briefly adopt the role of travel agent: I highly recommend that everyone does a tour arranged by the Snibston Heritage Trust in Coalville. Snibston has one of the last remaining examples of above-ground working of the coalmines. We also have many pit wheels dotted across the constituency, reminding us of what previously lay beneath our feet. While in Coalville, visitors can pop into the Belvoir centre to sample the famous Birds Bakery jam tarts. My constituency is home to another character who enjoys sweet things: just a few miles up the road, in the wonderful town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, we recently had installed a Paddington Bear on a bench. For the thrill seekers, we have Donington Park, home to MotoGP and motorbike racing, and for the heavy metal fans among us, it is also home to Download festival every June.

I turn to the oil tanker in the bag. As with our coal heritage, North West Leicestershire's fingerprints are all over the rail industry. The oil tanker represents William Stableford's wagon works, which delivered a large contract for English and foreign railways. It is perhaps ironic that my constituency has no passenger rail service at all, even though the manufacturer Siemens completed the signalling work for the Elizabeth line from its base in the constituency. One of my major goals in this House is to get the Ivanhoe line back running for passengers. This trainline was originally created in the 1830s by the great industrialist and father of the railways, George Stephenson. Reopening it has the potential to create a beautiful trainline travelling through the greenery of the national forest. The national forest line—now that sounds nice!

North West Leicestershire had other industries, too. It is no secret that Leicestershire has a long history with the British textile industry, hence the yarn bobbin in the bag. H Seal Elastics has been knitting in the constituency since 1898 and currently provides textiles for use in military personal protective equipment—key equipment for our service personnel today. North West Leicestershire was also the home of Palitoy, which produced the dolly in the bag and the action man figurine—a character that seized the day and got stuff done.

The contents of a North West Leicestershire shopping bag today would be similar to the contents of everyone's shopping bags at home, as the constituency is now home to a selection of food and drink manufacturers. In that shopping bag, there would be a selection of key produce from local farmers, KP Nuts, McVitie's biscuits, a Mars bar, Jacob's cream crackers, Quality Street, and some of the Mr Freeze ice pops that I enjoyed with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade a few months ago after a tour of the Refresco beverages factory.

During my time in this House, I hope to be an action woman—someone who adds to our North West Leicestershire bag with cleaner waterways, better public services for all and, most importantly, an anytime day return ticket on the Ivanhoe line.

7.51 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In Huntingdon, one in nine households has a veteran in it. That astonishing figure illustrates the historical link between our armed forces and a constituency that still has RAF Wyton and two United States air force bases, RAF Alconbury and RAF Molesworth—legacy bases that can trace their history back to the second world war. I am hugely proud to represent such a vibrant veterans community.

My own service was as an infantry officer in the Royal Yorkshire Regiment. I served in the British Army during the most kinetic period of operations since the Korean war. Operation Herrick 11 in Afghanistan was a difficult tour. In Sangin, our battlegroup lost 30 soldiers; a further 170 were wounded. I remember being in the operations room when two new battle casualty replacements arrived on a resupply helicopter. I did not stop to have a brew, or help them settle in; my interaction with them both was fleeting—transactional. It was an everyday occurrence, and I thought little more about it.

A fortnight later, on Tuesday 15 December 2009, I was manning the operations room, and over the radio came an all-too-familiar message: "Contact IED. Wait. Out." There follows a pause that lasts an eternity. You know somebody is now fighting for their life; they might already be dead. You know that you can do little other than stand up the quick reaction force and wait to find out how grave the situation is. A suicide bomber had ridden his motorbike into the checkpoint and detonated the bomb, instantly killing the two Afghan soldiers manning the checkpoint and fatally wounding two of our soldiers providing cover. I pressed our commander on the ground for an update. To my eternal regret, I was quite short with him, and continued to harry him for a sitrep. I did not know at the time that he was trying to give lifesaving first aid to one of those soldiers while under fire.

The medic that day tried valiantly to save both soldiers. Ignoring the bullets cutting the air around her, she calmly moved between each casualty, determined to do all she could to care for them. The weight of enemy fire increased. With flagrant disregard for her own safety, Bushbye nevertheless continued to move between the casualties, personally administering CPR to one of the soldiers. For her actions, Lance Corporal Sarah Bushbye was awarded the Military Cross.

Rifleman James Brown was 18 years old. He had arrived on that helicopter. He had been in Sangin for less than two weeks. Age shall not weary him, nor the years condemn. I have always promised to remember him, and to give him the opportunity to live on that he sadly never had. We have a duty in this House to consider the ramifications of committing our soldiers to operations. I do not recount this story to dissuade, but to put a human face on the price it costs. They were the best of us, and the very least we can do is remember them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Tom Rutland to make his maiden speech.

7.54 pm

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate. I congratulate my colleagues on some brilliant maiden speeches today.

It is often said that it is a privilege to be in this place, and it is one that we owe to the bravery of those who fought for our country and for freedom in the two world wars. In my constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham, British troops rallied in advance of D-day on Broadwater Green and embarked from Shoreham port to land in Normandy, paving the way for the allied victory over the Nazis. With freedom in Europe again under threat, I am sure it is not just my shoulders that feel the weight of responsibility as I rise to meet this moment and honour those brave sacrifices, which transcend our time in this place.

Like so many other new Members nervously preparing their first contribution in this awe-inspiring place, I had a good flick through my predecessors' initial contributions, and enjoyed seeing how some things had remained the same and others had changed. The constituency is still nestled between the south downs and the sea, is still the most beautiful in the country, and still has the same name, much to the disappointment of my neighbours in Lancing, who feel that the name does not properly recognise the largest village in the country. But much has changed, and my sitting here as the first Labour Member of Parliament for East Worthing and Shoreham is perhaps one clear indicator of that.

In 1997, my immediate predecessor spoke of Worthing having the oldest population in the country. Today, it is very different, with many young people coming to start a family in our vibrant coastal community. While the political sea change in the splendid seaside settlements that I represent has been stark, my constituents do not have to get used to a wildly different name for their MP; it has gone from Tim to Tom. I hope that my predecessor Tim Loughton knows of the regard in which many residents hold him after his 27 years of public service. I also hope that, in time, fewer residents call me Tim, but after 32 years of my parents' friends' making the same mistake in their Christmas cards, that is perhaps wishful thinking.

Speaking of family, I thank mine for their love and support on my journey here, particularly my mum and dad. I think everyone in this place had that moment when they switched on to politics and realised the difference that it could make. For me, it was realising as a teenager that I was gay, and feeling as though I would not achieve everything I could or should because of who I was. It was the worst feeling in the world; I have never forgotten it. Life is thankfully very different now, in no small part thanks to the transformative work of the last Labour Government, and of brave, trailblazing MPs. I am very lucky to be able to thank my partner, my boyfriend Jack, for his support—words that I never thought I would have the courage to say when I was growing up, but can say with great pride today. That feeling I had is why I care about politics. I do not want any child to feel that way, whether because of the colour of their skin or their religion; because they are a boy, or a girl, or have a disability; or because of who they love or how much their parents earn. That drive is what has

led me to spend my career campaigning, from standing up for consumers to fighting for working people as a trade union official.

It is an honour to serve as part of this new Labour Government, because there is so much that needs fixing. My constituents know all too well the struggle to get an appointment with their GP, to find a school place for their child, to swim in the sea without sewage, to afford a safe and secure home of their own, and to get a good job that does not just pay the bills but allows them to thrive. Fixing the foundations of this country will take time, but I have no doubt that the mission of this Government, driven by the aspirations and determination of my constituents, will succeed.

There is so much to be proud of locally. We do not sit in the shadow of Brighton and Hove next door. Shoreham port is not just a thriving commercial hub for cargo, leisure boats and fishing trawlers, but an eco-port generating renewable energy and enhancing marine biodiversity. Further inland, Ricardo builds on more than a century of engineering excellence and innovation. Having been home to great penicillin fermentation tanks in the '60s, Worthing today remains a life sciences hub, with GSK continuing to manufacture lifesaving antibiotics locally. Or take Flare, which has evolved from building world-leading loudspeakers in Lancing business park to shipping earphones and products that defend against irritating noises—I dare say that hon. Members might find them useful in this Chamber from time to time. Thanks to Fitz in Worthing, we are able to toast these successes with local fizz.

We have the most incredible community organisations, led by ordinary people giving up extraordinary amounts of their time for the betterment of others. Whether it is Wendy organising litter picks and beach cleans to Keep Lancing Lovely, Dai providing food to those in need through the Shoreham and Adur community food bank, or David, Sara and Simon running 20 youth football teams at Southwick Rangers FC, ours is a community where we look after each other and love where we live.

When I think about the good hearts of those in my constituency who inspire me, I hope that we can bring about the change that people voted for at the election in a more gentle way, because politicians are humans too, and have all the strengths and flaws of those who send us here. That is why it can be a dangerous thing to have political idols—nobody is perfect. Many years ago I had the pleasure of working for, and more importantly learning from, two giants—Lord Adonis and the late, great Tessa Jowell. If I can summon half of Andrew's intellect and just an ounce of the extraordinary compassion that Tessa exuded, I hope I shall do them and my constituents proud.

While we all have our own story and we have all walked our own path that has brought us here today, I think my ultimate aim for my time here is the same as everyone else's: to leave things better than we found them. I know from personal experience that politics can improve people's lives, and it must. So I say thank you to the people of East Worthing and Shoreham for sending me here. I know that true thanks comes not in the words of this speech today, but in the hard work I will put in for as long as they see fit to send me here and give me the great privilege of serving as their Member of Parliament.

8.1 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a real honour to follow five cracking maiden speeches from the new hon. Members for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling), for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland), who all did their constituents proud.

For so many of us in this Chamber this debate is personal. We have been lucky to hear from several Members about their own service. My connection to our armed forces is a family one: both my grandad and my uncle served in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, and their shared experiences remind me that behind every veteran is a story of sacrifice, resilience and courage, as well as the family and friends who support them and miss them while they are away. The loved ones of servicemen and women often bear the weight of anxiety and uncertainty, worrying for their safety and wellbeing. It is crucial that we honour their contributions, for they too endure hardships that are often overlooked.

I want to spend a moment to think about those whose names may not be etched into the stone of our war memorials, but whose legacies deserve to be remembered. One such figure is Romiley's own Gertrude Powick. During the first world war, she dedicated herself to the war effort by volunteering with the Friends War Victims Relief Committee, working as a nurse on the frontlines in both France and Poland. Having travelled to Warsaw to treat a typhus outbreak, she contracted it herself and died in 1919. Gertrude was not just a care giver and a suffragist, but a trailblazer for women during wartime, and she is the only woman to be named on a war memorial in Stockport, on a plaque on the Heaton Moor memorial. Her work reminds us that heroism comes in many forms, and it is our duty to remember those like her who played a pivotal role in shaping our country's history.

In my constituency of Hazel Grove, our community is taking many proactive steps to address the challenges faced by veterans. Nearly 3,000 veterans are estimated to be homeless in the UK at any given time, and a report from the Royal British Legion indicates that 42% of veterans are experiencing issues with their mental health—with depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. We have brilliant groups in Hazel Grove such as the Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club, obviously the Hazel Grove branch of the Royal British Legion, and Project Recce, which trains veterans in construction skills. We are also looking to turn Woodbank hall, a 200-year-old building that is falling into disrepair in Woodbank Memorial park, into a veterans centre, and I welcome any and all support from Ministers on the Front Bench to that end.

As we remember those who have served, let us commit ourselves not only to honouring their past sacrifices, but actively to improving their present circumstances, because a brighter future for our veterans and their families is possible—one that ensures they receive the respect, care and support they so richly deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Leigh Ingham to make her maiden speech.

8.4 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank those who have made their maiden speeches today: my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) and for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) and my hon. Friends the Members for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland). I heard moving stories not only about their constituencies, but about their own lives.

It is an honour to speak in this debate today. With family who have served or are serving in the merchant navy, the Army and the RAF, I am thankful for the incredible sacrifice members of the armed forces and their families make for this country. My constituency has strong armed forces connections, including the accommodation at MOD Stafford—known as Beacon barracks—the training camp at Swynnerton and a veteran community of more than 4,300. I will fully support them and their families to fight to ensure they have access to quality accommodation and local services.

I grew up in a working-class household, the daughter of a factory worker and a bricklayer, who I am so pleased are here today. I never imagined that I would be standing here today making my maiden speech as an MP. To be honest, Westminster can be a little intimidating, so I would like to give particular thanks to the wonderful House of Commons Doorkeepers and the Speaker's team for making me feel so welcome, particularly Jamie, Joe, Lee and Andy; I do not know if I am allowed to say their names. *[Laughter.]*

I also want to pay tribute to my predecessors, Theo Clarke and Sir Bill Cash. Theo, the former MP for Stafford, campaigned passionately on women's health, a cause I will continue to champion. Sir Bill Cash was the previous MP for Stone and a 40-year political veteran, having won 10 general elections. I cannot promise to share his politics, but I do promise to serve my constituents with as much vigour as he did. I would also like to thank Jeremy Lefroy and David Kidney, both still regarded as brilliant constituency MPs. For constituents to praise a Conservative MP and a Labour MP in the same breath shows how important it is that constituents feel seen, heard and represented in this place by the person, not just the party. The people of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages want a visible MP, who listens, who fights for them and who prioritises their collective interests over personal agendas—a politics that prioritises “we”, not “me”. That is the kind of politics that I wholeheartedly support.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, my constituency is both urban and rural, featuring over 50 towns and villages, which I will not be listing today. *[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”]* I have only three minutes left. As the county town, Stafford is proud to be the largest town. Stafford town centre is quintessentially British, featuring—to name just a few—the Ancient High House, Victoria park, the famous Soup Kitchen which all hon. Members should visit, the beautiful churches of St Chad's and St Mary's, and of course the Gatehouse theatre, known for its Shakespeare festival. The historic castle just outside the town is a key feature of Stafford. We are also fortunate to have an outstanding-rated college in Stafford, which is shared with my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), and we are soon to be opening a state-of-the-art institute of technology.

Eccleshall, another lovely town in my constituency, boasts a brilliant high street with seven pubs, and it has its own castle, bringing the constituency total to two. The 2024 boundary changes added rural areas including Loggerheads, Maer and Whitmore, and Gnosall to the Stafford constituency, enhancing our farming areas, and introducing new residents and lovely village pubs. Supporting our rural communities will be a key focus for me in the coming years.

One thing that always strikes me about my constituency is the caring nature and the strength of our community. Local libraries, charities and faith groups have stepped up during the past 14 years of Conservative austerity. A stand-out example is William Morris's House of Bread, a brilliant charity that provides meals and support to those in need. One of my favourite stories about William is that, in the week he earned the Queen's award for voluntary service, he was given an ASBO for the same work. It is a rare combination, but it demonstrates how far the people of Stafford will go to stand up for and support each other.

The change of Government means there is so much to celebrate. This Parliament's cohort has a record proportion of state-educated and women MPs. Our Cabinet breaks records on the number of state-educated Ministers and Secretaries of State, and we have our first female Chancellor. While there is still work to be done on social mobility and equality, we are moving in the right direction. Thirty years ago when I was growing up I would not have thought someone like me could be in a place like this. So for the next five years I will continue to work closely with the people of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages to address their issues and get our public services working again, and to celebrate the positivity and joy that is in our area.

Finally, I hope the next bricklayer's daughter in Highfields or the factory worker's son in Doxey knows that when they grow up they are just as entitled to end up in the House of Commons as anyone else.

8.10 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): May I start by joining others in wishing the Royal Marines a very happy 360th birthday today? It is a superb unit with a proud and distinguished history, albeit slightly shorter than my own regiment's. They call us "Pongos" and we call them "Bootnecks" and it is an honour to share this House with so many distinguished Royal Marines—my hon. Friend the Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) and the Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) among their number.

When I was 14 my English master, Mr Smale, gave us a poem to read and it annoyed me very much. It was written by Philip Larkin, and it ends like this:

"Crowds, colourless and careworn
Had made my taxi late,
Yet not till I was airborne
Did I recall the date—
The day when Queen and Minister
And Band of Guards and all
Still act their solemn-sinister
Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall.
It used to make me throw up,

These mawkish, nursery games:
O When will England grow up?
—But I out soar the Thames,
And dwindle off down Auster
To greet Professor Lal
(He once met Morgan Forster),
My contact and my pal."

I think what got to me then was the soaring, sneering cynicism of the persona that the poet had created of the travelling academic looking down both metaphorically and literally on the Cenotaph service here in Westminster. I think it offended my sense of fairness. Soldiers by and large have little choice in what they are called to do. Equally, they have little choice in the way in which the nation subsequently remembers them. They just do what they are called to do.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This year marks 80 years since D-day and one of my constituents, Don Sheppard, who died aged 104 this year, was a veteran of both D-day and Arnhem. On the point my hon. Friend is making, Don's quote was, "The lads that didn't make it back, those are the other ones we need to remember." Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree on that point?

Lincoln Jopp: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point and places on the record distinguished veterans and their contributions to national life, and I thank him for it.

As a former soldier who has lost men, let me get one thing straight: these men and women died for us all to be free—free to do whatever the laws of the land permit us to do; to wear a poppy; not to wear a poppy; to remember; not to remember. It is our freedom. It is our choice, and on days like Remembrance Sunday there is not a soldier, sailor, airman or Royal Marine for whom that question could matter less. They are in another place: they are seeing the faces of lost friends; they are feeling guilty for having survived when their friends have not; they are trying to hold it together long enough for opening time to come at the pub. If I may say, on their behalf: "Thank you. Thank you for being here in this debate today and at the constituency gardens of remembrance earlier. Thank you for the respect. Thank you for your thank you."

The act of remembrance is a little like going to church: some people go to church once a year, some once a week. For remembrance, it could be two minutes' silence once a year for some, or just finding two minutes' peace in a day from the awfulness of the loss of a son or a daughter for another. Regardless, here today we will remember them and we will honour our fallen.

8.14 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I am a veteran, and it is great to be a veteran. I learned so much from my service in the military: I had so many great experiences, was proud to play my own small part in Afghanistan, and worked with some fantastic people. It is great to be a veteran. Serving is not all sunshine and roses, but I can recommend no better career for someone in their 20s than to join our military.

But with the joy of service can come sadness. My constituency has many diverse towns and villages—the ex-pit town of Clay Cross, Dronfield with its bustling

[*Louise Jones*]

heart, or Killamarsh with its proud Derbyshire spirit. But they all have one thing in common: at the heart of each of them is a war memorial with the names of those lost in conflicts over the previous 100 years. These names were all once living, breathing members of their community—much-loved brothers, sons, fathers, other relatives and friends—and it is them I think of when I wear the poppy.

There can be a lot of very clever discourse about the poppy, which is such a simple and humble flower. The fact is that the poppy appeal is a truly successful grassroots movement. The first poppy appeal saw over 9 million sold in its first year, all worn by ordinary men and women who came together because they had lost a loved one and wanted to remember them. Grainy black and white photographs from the 1920s show people standing in remembrance ceremonies in the cold and silent November air, their grief clear to see on their faces even in those more stoic times. The poppy truly spontaneously united millions of people in hope. Some may not bear to see that unity but it is something that still unites millions of people today.

I would like briefly to address a few points that have been raised. It is very important that we learn the lessons of the past 14 years, and that we understand who made the decisions regarding our armed forces and why those decisions were made. Who sold off our valuable military housing stock so cheaply to Annington? I believe it was the Conservatives. Who pulled our forces back from important bases in Germany even as Russia became active in Ukraine? Again, it was the Conservatives. Who wasted billions of pounds on procurement, and reduced the offer to serving personnel, leading to a haemorrhage in the numbers serving in our military? It was the Conservatives. Who oversaw the reduction of our military size to barely being able to field a brigade minus? It was the Conservatives. So, yes let us have accountability, but it starts with an iota of shame from the party opposite before they are allowed anywhere near our defence again. At least, however, some of them are here; I note that not every party has a representative present.

I would also like to add briefly in response that one tenet very close to my heart as a veteran is that the rule of law is of the highest importance—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Liz Saville Roberts.

8.18 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): In the time that I have I would like to raise a couple of matters particularly relevant to Wales and also say what a delight it is to hear all the maiden speeches this evening.

The post of Veterans' Commissioner for Wales was established two years ago and is held by Colonel James Phillips but his appointment is due to come to an end on 31 December. Please will the Minister in his closing remarks update the House on approval to extend this role? Colonel Phillips' second annual report was published last month and it makes clear why a commissioner is crucial for veterans in Wales so they are not failed by

the jagged edge of devolved and reserved powers. Core state funding from both the Welsh and UK Governments is necessary to make sure veterans receive proper care in health and housing, which are devolved, as well as reserved matters such as welfare and justice.

Some 50% of the veteran population in Wales is over 65 years old and 20% is over 85. Alongside health, the cost of living is a significant challenge for older veterans, and of course military compensation should not be treated as income for the purposes of benefits and pensions. An income disregard should be introduced for the war pensions and armed forces compensation scheme. This is about not just the veterans themselves, but the third sector providers on which veteran support relies so heavily in Wales. Those providers have seen a steep increase in operational costs and reduced funding. Organisations such as Woody's Lodge and VC Gallery have been particularly hard-hit. That is important. While initiatives such as Op Courage, Op Restore and Op Nova have received new money in England, in Wales they do not exist and we have not seen equivalent funding either, leaving many critical services funded hand to mouth from year to year through grants.

This evening, I am also proud to support the campaign for an official memorial to remember and honour the pilots and navigators of the RAF's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. That is being organised as we speak by the Spitfire AA810 project. The PRU flew highly dangerous, clandestine missions to take intelligence photos. Its stripped-down planes were unarmed, so as to carry as much fuel as possible. For that reason, the PRU included conscientious objectors among its crews. The death rate was horrific, with around 48% losing their lives. One PRU survivor was Edward Bacon of Y Felinheli near Caernarfon in my constituency. The project is keen to reach out to families to collect their stories, so that their loved ones will once again be more than just another name carved on a war memorial.

Talking of memorials, the project is also campaigning for a UK memorial here in Westminster. When that comes to fruition—and it will—wreckage from a PRU aircraft will be its centrepiece. That poignant reminder of the courage and horrendous risks faced by PRU airmen was retrieved just last month from a Mosquito aircraft that crashed on Aran Fawddwy in Meirionnydd 80 years ago—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Sarah Hall.

8.21 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): As a nation, we are rightly proud of our armed forces personnel and veterans, and theirs is the ultimate public service. We owe them a debt of gratitude. All here today, as we have heard already, have been touched by stories of heroism and heartbreaking sacrifice in defence of our nation. I take this opportunity to honour those who have served and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our freedoms and protect our way of life.

Today, I want to focus on three brave soldiers from Warrington who lost their lives: Marine Steven Birdsall of 40 Commando Royal Marines, who died in 2010; Private Thomas Sephton of 1st Battalion the Mercian

Regiment, who died in 2010; and Private Daniel Wade from 3rd Battalion the Yorkshire Regiment, who died in 2012. We will never forget the sacrifices they made.

We are all here today because we owe so much to those who came before. We are deeply proud of our veterans, serving personnel and the families who support them for the contribution they make to our country. I also pay tribute to the mother of Private Daniel Wade, Lisa Billing. In memory of her son, Lisa worked tirelessly alongside Warrington borough council and others to revitalise Marshall gardens in Warrington town centre. Marshall gardens, which sits opposite the town cenotaph on Bridgefoot, has been transformed into a haven of peace, reflection and remembrance. Lisa was instrumental in making that happen, pouring her heart and soul into the project.

In Warrington, the scale of support for our serving personnel, veterans and families is clear to see with the popularity of the annual Warrington Armed Forces Day festival. It is held each year at Crosfields rugby league club to raise money for armed forces charities in memory of Tom Sephton. It is here that the community has taken the opportunity to come together to enjoy a day of rugby league entertainment, with thousands of people showing their continuing and unwavering support to all our armed forces. They raise tens of thousands of pounds for armed forces, rugby league and local charities.

I also pay tribute to Warrington's veterans hub. While based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), the support offered by the hub reaches far and wide. It is fair to say that while we are two constituencies, we are one town—one town with a shared sense of pride, respect and admiration for all serving and veteran military personnel, and a shared drive and passion to ensure they receive the help and support they need. While we have heard many warm words about the contribution of our armed forces over the years, too often that has not translated into action. However, I am proud that this Labour Government have committed to act—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Jim Allister.

8.24 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I join in the tributes to our gallant security forces who, through their sacrifice, have brought us all the liberty that we enjoy. When our soldiers fall in foreign fields, we feel it very deeply. When they fall on home ground, there is an added poignancy to it. As a Member for Northern Ireland, representing the constituency of North Antrim, tonight I want to place on record the appreciation of so many people in Northern Ireland for the willing sacrifice of our gallant security forces from across this United Kingdom who paid with their lives in defending Northern Ireland from the ravages of terrorism. That debt is much appreciated by many of us.

In thinking of that debt, and of our affirmation that “We will remember them”, I wanted just to give an illustration. Today is 28 October, so let me share with the House the number and names of the soldiers who died on 28 October in various years on home soil in the United Kingdom.

On 28 October 1972, Lance Sergeant Thomas McKay from Edinburgh, a married man with two children, was shot from behind in Londonderry. On 28 October 1973, Private Stephen Hall, 1st Light Infantry, from Bristol, was shot in Crossmaglen. In 1974, Private Michael Swanick and Private Alan Coughlan were both murdered by a bomb attack on the Sandes home where they stayed at Ballykinler camp. On 28 October 1976, off-duty Ulster Defence Regiment soldier—this reminds us that so many local soldiers also paid the price—Stanley Desmond Adams was shot doing his rounds as a postman. On 28 October 1979, Warrant Officer David Bellamy was shot in a Land Rover as he left a police station.

Those are reminders of names we have all forgotten, but names of those to whom we in Northern Ireland and elsewhere owe so much. I place on record our appreciation tonight. I say one final thing to the Government: we have a veterans commissioner in Northern Ireland, but it has never been put on a statutory basis. That needs to be done to give it lasting effect.

8.27 pm

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Leeds South West and Morley has a proud tradition of standing side-by-side with veterans in our community and remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice. In Morley, our serving mayor Simon Brown served with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. In 2006, Simon was shot by a sniper in Iraq while on a rescue mission to help his stranded vehicle's six-person crew. He lost one eye completely, and he has only partial sight in the other. That has never held him back from serving the veterans in our community in Morley, and we are proud to have him as our mayor.

Simon's deputy mayor, Carol Edwards, is also a veteran. Carol supports the organisation, Veterans in Need Together. VINT aims to help veterans to regain their sense of purpose following their service. The lead facilitator, Adi Heptinstall, provides a space at Morley fire station every Wednesday at 7 pm for veterans to come together to talk and share. I also pay tribute to Christine Hirst, who runs the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association luncheon club in Morley on the first Sunday of every month. The meals are excellent, as is the entertainment.

Like every corner of the UK, we have also lost servicepeople in the line of duty. I want to pay tribute to Morley's Lance Corporal David Kirkness, who lost his life in 2009 to a suicide bomber in Afghanistan, along with Rifleman James Brown. Senior officers in the military at the time said that they gave their lives to prevent a larger tragedy in a nearby marketplace, where casualties would have been much higher. We thank David for his service.

It is so important that we remember the sacrifice that our veterans have made for us. Every year, the Royal British Legion branches in Morley and East and West Ardsley do their part for the poppy appeal. I place on record my thanks to Gail Wood, our honorary poppy appeal organiser in Morley, and Paul Wood, her deputy, for their tireless efforts, along with every volunteer who supports the Royal British Legion.

Every part of my constituency will pay tribute on Remembrance Sunday. The people of Morley will show up in huge numbers, as we always do, at the service in

[*Mr Mark Sowards*]

Scatcherd Park. Terry Grayshon, the chairman of the Morley remembrance committee, does an outstanding job of helping to organise that. Rev. Chris Balding will lead services in Wortley and at Farnley cenotaph. There will be services in Drighlington, Gildersome, and Churwell—in every part of my constituency. In Tingley, there will be a service near the site where a RAF bomber crashed in 1944, where we will honour the seven servicemen who tragically lost their lives as a result.

Every corner of Leeds South West and Morley takes pride in paying their respects to those who have served. Our veterans have done their part for our country and we should never stop trying to do our part for them.

8.30 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): As we approach remembrance, we often think of one person—perhaps a friend who has died in conflict, or if we have served, perhaps comrades, or perhaps a great-grandparent we never met but whose memory looms large in our family lore. We often remember one person, and this year as we remember, I will be thinking of Luke Tooke, a royal artilleryman from the 16th Regiment Royal Artillery.

Luke was the last Tunbridge Wellian to die in conflict. In 2018 in Kabul, Afghanistan, a suicide bomber, in a truck packed full of explosives, rammed the gates of a compound, following which, in a secondary attack, a bunch of insurgents stormed the compound, and Luke died in the resulting firefight. I never knew Luke but I had the honour of marching alongside his dad, Anthony, in the remembrance parade in Tunbridge Wells. After we had marched, Anthony and I spoke about Luke and about Jacqueline, who was Luke's mum. I was struck by the quiet dignity and pride that they showed in their son in the face of what must be heart-searing pain. We have heard it said today that if, every day, they can find two minutes to escape that heart-searing pain, it must be a blessed release.

I am often asked whether deaths in conflict—British deaths in conflict, specifically—are worth it, and as a veteran of Afghanistan, I often think about that. There are two answers. One is the personal: each death is a tragedy. Luke died defending his comrades and his mates and it is a tragedy, but it has meaning because he died in service to his comrades and his friends. For the second answer, we have to look to ourselves—to Members of this House—for it is us who send them there, and we do that for our country. The greatest honour that we can pay to our veterans is to consider incredibly carefully the questions that come before us, because we will have to make decisions about peace and war in this Parliament. We will remember Luke.

8.33 pm

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I join the House in thanking our armed forces, including people from Central Ayrshire who have served our country and who continue to put their lives on the line in the defence of our country, and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. I also thank the Royal British Legion Irvine and Troon branches, as well as the Ayr and Prestwick branch of the Royal Air Forces Association

and the Prestwick community council for the remembrance services they help to arrange in the towns of Irvine, Prestwick and Troon, and their important work year-round to support veterans and their families.

I also thank Veterans First Point in Irvine, which is staffed by veterans and is a one-stop shop for veterans and their families. I hope the House extends its congratulations to the Ayr and Prestwick branch of the Royal Air Forces Association, which received the President's cup at this year's national conference. It was recognised as the top branch in the RAFA for its excellent work with veterans and service personnel in the community, as well as facilitating remembrance services for Polish colleagues at the Polish war memorial. It happens to have the oldest veteran in the constituency, Flight Lieutenant (retired) Harry Richardson DFC, a 106-year-old world war two hero pilot.

I also recognise the work of the colleagues who help us remember around the world, particularly the Commonwealth war graves staff and the colleagues I used to work with in embassies and the British Council on remembrance events. My former colleague Dr Debanjan Chakrabarti visited a number of Commonwealth war graves in north-east India with me, including the cemetery in Kohima. As those of us who attended Mr Speaker's remembrance event this morning will know, this year marks the 80th anniversary of the battle of Kohima in April 1944, which was a turning point in the war in Asia. Many believe that the assistance that the Naga people gave British and Indian troops as guides, porters and combatants was critical in our success of that campaign.

I well remember being welcomed to Kohima by the Naga people, visiting the Kohima cemetery high in the Naga hills and walking along row upon row of British and Indian graves. There, I read the Kohima epitaph:

“When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today.”

8.36 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which is timely as we are approaching Remembrance Day, but it is always time to remember with gratitude those who have laid down their lives to protect the things that we hold dear—democracy and the right to live our lives and raise our children.

When I think of remembrance, I think of Winston Donnell, murdered on 9 August 1971. The IRA murdered him, but no one was ever made accountable for his murder. Today in the remembrance garden I took the opportunity to remember four Ulster Defence Regiment men murdered at Ballydugan on 9 April 1990: Lance Corporal Bradley, John Birch, who I grew up with at Ballywalter, Michael Adams and Steven Smart. I also took the opportunity to lay a cross in the remembrance garden to remember my cousin Kenneth Smyth, murdered by the IRA on 10 December 1971. Again, no one was ever made accountable. You can understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, why I seek justice for all those people who were murdered. No one was ever made accountable.

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, in which I served for three years. I also served in the Royal Artillery for eleven and a half

years as a part-time soldier. As a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, I am proud of that institution that I served in.

I am thankful for the service of the Royal Ulster Constabulary—those men and women served in their communities knowing that they were a target. I am thankful for the spouses and children who went for days without seeing or hearing from their loved ones as they entered dangerous situations and tried to uphold the law and justice against those who terrorised them and threatened their families and their very lives. I am thankful for their sacrifice of family time and peace at home. I remember their sacrifice and the toll that their service had on their mental health—a price that too many honourable RUC officers still pay to this day—while also having that service distorted and torn apart to pacify a republican rewrite of history, to take a force synonymous with justice, duty and diligence and smear it with accusations of dishonour. I will not allow that to happen in this House. I remember the RUC with great honour, which they earned through blood, sweat and continued tears.

Today, I unapologetically stand on my feet to thank those who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment with the green berets—I still have mine—and the Greenfinches, who were the bravest of women. I stand on my feet to refute those accusations that would make the service of that force anything other than admirable. I thank those Greenfinch women, who worked all night to keep their children safe, and came home and sent their children to school. The lived a dual life for fear that their children would be put at risk if it were known that they were part of the British state. All of us who lived through the terrorism by evil people in both communities have much to be thankful for to those who served. To those veterans of the RUC, the British Army and the Ulster Defence Regiment, and their families, who paid the price of service, I say a big thank you. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them all.

8.39 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Remembrance in Portsmouth is not just one day a year; it is all year round. The Royal Navy, and those who serve, run through our city's DNA. I, like so many in Portsmouth, am a very proud cousin, great niece, granddaughter and now mum of service personnel.

Since my election in July and before, it has been a pleasure to meet so many veterans and serving personnel, and those who support our troops at home and at sea, and to witness this year-round remembrance at first-hand. Recently, I attended the 100 years of the Commonwealth memorial on Southsea Common and met my constituent Clive, a standard bearer and Royal Navy veteran who, along with others, come rain or shine, is at every remembrance event in Portsmouth.

I had the privilege of spending the night on His Majesty's Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier to see her in operation and to listen to current service personnel. It has been brilliant to join the Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club for a cracking fry-up at one of their regular breakfast catch-ups, and to meet MOD housing to assess the situation facing our current service personnel.

It was an honour to host Royal Naval Association veterans in Parliament a few weeks ago to talk about life post-service, and an honour for my city to host D-Day 80.

Being in the armed forces is like being in a large family, so it was great to visit the Whale Island nursery to see the work it is doing in keeping families together even when, in reality, they are miles apart.

I am proud to be taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I am also proud to be part of a Government who recognise the service of all our veterans, the importance of quality housing and the need for more and better post service, and who respect the contributions of our veterans. The Government have listened and acted on policies that veterans charities have been calling for, for years: approving veteran cards as voter ID; committing to enacting the armed forces covenant law; and recognising the priority of housing. I look forward to selling poppies again this year with Terry and Denise, and the army of volunteers in my city.

Ahead of all the commemorations this weekend, and ahead of the official remembrance in Portsmouth Guildhall on Remembrance Sunday, I want to put on record my deepest gratitude to those who keep us safe every day and to those who have lost their lives defending our country, in particular those lost at sea. As the "Last Post" rings out across our country, I ask that we hold proudly those who have served and are serving, and their families, close in our hearts.

8.42 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My constituent and resident of Burgess Hill, Able Seaman George Chandler, was due to lead the blind veterans at the remembrance parade on Remembrance Sunday the weekend after next. Sadly, George died earlier this month. He was 99 years old. I never had the privilege of meeting George, but I have been able to speak to his son Paul, who gave me a wonderful insight into his father. He was full of character and, in Paul's words, an old rogue.

George was born to a working-class family off the Old Kent Road. When war was declared, aged 14 George stayed in London—he was not evacuated—and experienced the blitz in all its horror. His father, Will, had been a soldier at the Somme, and George was determined that he would not be what he called one of the "poor bloody infantry". He was not going to go into the Army. When he was still 17, he pestered and pestered the recruiters at the naval office to sign him up. Eventually, they took him on, even though he had not yet reached his 18th birthday.

George saw active service in the channel as a gunner on a boat, with close combat with the Germans occurring very frequently. On D-day, he provided cover for American troops landing on Omaha beach, watching the slaughter before his eyes. He returned from the D-day landings to Newhaven in East Sussex, and saw rows and rows of empty coffins waiting for the dead.

This year, George was one of a handful of remaining veterans who took part in the 80th anniversary commemorations. He went to No. 10 Downing Street, HMS Belfast and the trooping of the colour. This caused George's family a certain amount of consternation, for George was not a Conservative. His family were terribly worried about what George might say when he met Government Ministers. They had a plan that if George let rip, they would whisk him away in his wheelchair before any embarrassment could be caused. I am pleased to say to Conservative Members that he met Gillian Keegan, Grant Shapps and the former Prime Minister's wife, and no event occurred.

[Alison Bennett]

I asked Paul what George's messages to the House would be, and the answer—what Paul thought his dad would have said—was characteristically robust. He was passionate about remembering his shipmates, those who gave their tomorrow for our today. He stayed in contact throughout his life with the daughter—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

Alison Bennett: I will draw my comments to a close, Madam Deputy Speaker. George's messages would be: "Don't be stupid like my generation. Don't do it again. Don't listen to the stupid politicians. Most of all, we must have more compassion for each other."

8.45 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and I am delighted that a fellow Scot has taken the role of Minister for Veterans and People. Scottish communities have played a vital role in the history of our military, and in my constituency more than 4,000 people have served in our armed forces.

The ceremonies of remembrance that we take part in are important for us all, but for thousands of people in my constituency and their families, they speak to their personal experience of service. One of the greatest privileges that I have had in my career was to work for a veterans charity, Sight Scotland Veterans. Among the veterans we supported, too many had experienced isolation and loneliness. One of the veterans I worked with was William Montgomerie, known to everyone as Monty, who had served in Germany, Cyprus and Northern Ireland before leaving the Army in 1977. While serving in the Territorial Army, Monty suffered a head injury that meant that he could not work. That in turn affected his mental health. He said:

"I had gone from working and having the camaraderie and companionship of the Territorial Army to being on my own... The reality is that you might only speak to your Alexa device for days at a time—wishing her a Merry Christmas and no-one else. It can make you feel suicidal."

Monty is now an eloquent and effective campaigner on the need to provide better support for our veterans. That support is the debt that we owe them as a society, but as we have heard throughout this evening's debate, too often we fall short. That is why this Government's commitment to putting the armed forces covenant fully into law, and to creating an armed forces commissioner, are so important. In Scotland, the role of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner has been vital to the assessment of progress in Scotland on securing the aims of the covenant. In her most recent report as commissioner, Susie Hamilton found progress in a number of areas, but also noted:

"Disappointingly, progress towards the delivery of both the Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathway and the Veterans Homelessness Prevention Pathway remains notably slow".

I hope that the Scottish Government will take careful note of those points.

Too many veterans still face poor mental health, and do not have the housing support that they need. That is why the Prime Minister's commitment that we will repay all those who served us and house all veterans

who are in housing need is so important. Our armed forces champion in Fife, Councillor Derek Noble, served in the 105th Regiment Royal Artillery himself. The aims of the covenant are being taken forward through the council, and we are proud that it has achieved the covenant gold standard.

Our veterans have given so much for their country. We must not only mark that with gratitude and respect on Remembrance Day, but ensure that our nation meets all its responsibilities to all our veterans.

8.48 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to pay tribute to our armed forces community this evening, and it is particularly special to be able to pay tribute to my late great-grandfather, Flight Lieutenant Thomas Gittins. He was a tool salesman who joined the RAF Reserves in the hopes of becoming a pilot. He was pretty small in stature, so he was never allowed to get near the cockpit. He fell at the first hurdle, despite being almost small enough to walk under it. He did, however, join 196 Squadron as a rear gunner in Wellington and Lancaster bombers, and between 1940 and 1945 he completed 51 missions, including towing gliders to transport soldiers to Normandy on D-Day. For his service he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, which was pretty rare for folk serving in his position.

Like so many war heroes, my great-grandfather was intensely humble about his grand achievements. He was too humble to say that his bravery contributed to the preservation of our democracy, and to accept that his service meant that Members of Parliament, including his great-grandson down the line, could stand up here for our country. As with many war heroes, the atrocity of war took its toll on his mental health as he transitioned back to civilian life. Today, we recognise those challenges as combat stress.

Thanks to so many volunteers across my wonderful constituency of Eastbourne—the sunniest in the UK—local veterans have access to more support than ever, including through our Royal British Legion branch, chaired by Alan Leith, who I recruited as my driving instructor. He is supported in chairing the RBL in Eastbourne by his fab secretary, Daphne Geninazza. I have also had the chance to meet inspirational veterans such as Eric Deach and Brian Perry, who is known as the formidable poppy salesman at the Tesco in the Admiral Way retail park in St Anthony's. There is also local support in the form of the brilliant Eastbourne and District Veterans Association; I was proud to lead on its incorporation as a community interest company.

I pay tribute to the wonderful Barry and Petra Coase and their dog Bella, who are involved with the charity Combat Stress, which supports veterans locally, and to the Blue Van drop-in group. We all need to go even further to support our armed forces, and I am delighted to speak up for them today.

8.51 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating everyone who has made their maiden speech this afternoon and evening? They did so under time pressure, which adds a layer of complexity that I am glad I did not have.

As I mentioned in my maiden speech, I grew up on an RAF base in Berlin. As Members might expect, remembrance is a huge part of my early memories. The services always included veterans of the world wars, but also of Korea, where my grandfather served, the Falklands, and the violence in Northern Ireland.

During the election campaign, I was not surprised by the scale of the veteran community in my constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar. The area has a strong naval tradition, and the rest of Fife has a strong presence throughout the RAF, the Army and other units. It struck me, however, how spread out veterans were. Many were unaware of the size of the veteran community in the area. We must do more locally to bring those communities together. It is clear that the level of support across Scotland and, I am sure, the rest of the UK is mixed, but I fear that in some areas, Scotland is falling behind on these priorities. It is sad that there are no Members from the Scottish National party in the Chamber this evening. We must do better to co-ordinate together.

I want to share the stories of a couple of veterans from my community and constituency. This weekend, I took my two daughters to the Carnegie library, which has a fantastic local history museum. It tells the story of Alexander Malcolm McNeill, who died on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The second story that I want to share is that of Norman Bonnar, who lived in the Garvock area of Dunfermline and served throughout the early part of the war as a Spitfire pilot with the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. On 4 July 1944, he was killed when the Wellington aircraft he was in crashed. He was buried in Dunfermline cemetery and posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Recently, I was pleased to meet some of the team behind the restoration of Spitfire AA810, which has been referred to. It was flown by Norman Bonnar. I hope that we can recognise such efforts by having a memorial to the sacrifices of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

I echo what hon. Members have said about making sure that we recognise those veterans who are not always immediately in our thoughts. I am reading “The Lion Above the Door” by Onjali Rauf with my 10-year-old daughter Hannah. I am only halfway through the book, but it is focused on remembering those in India and the far east who served in world war two, and I would recommend it to anyone in this House. Telling the story of people such as Alexander and Norman is just a small sample of what we must do to remember. To return to the main point, we must always ensure that remembrance is translated into support for those currently serving, and those who will serve in the future.

8.54 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): My constituency has a deep historic connection with the UK armed forces. Today it is home to Army Training Centre Pirbright and a substantial part of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. This evening, though, I want to draw attention to two veterans I have had the privilege of meeting and getting to know in Surrey Heath over the past few years. Their stories speak of the unevenness of veterans’ experiences, and of those in communities in the wider armed forces family whose courage and sacrifice may be equal to others’, but who have had to fight for justice and recognition.

Carol Morgan wanted to be in the Army since she was a little girl. It was a commitment, a conviction and a vocation, yet when she was only 24, she was unceremoniously discharged from the Women’s Royal Army Corps solely because of who she loved. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967, those who were gay in the UK armed forces prior to the year 2000 had to keep their identity and feelings hidden. After being reported on by a colleague, Carol recalls relentless interrogations about the most intimate details of her life, and countless humiliations that left her feeling like a criminal. For LGBT veterans, being found to be gay meant being discharged and the loss of their career, livelihood, medals and pension. In some cases, it meant imprisonment. Tragically, the trauma of those experiences led many to take their own life, and thousands of LGBT veterans suffered long-term harm under this atrocious policy.

While I acknowledge that progress has undoubtedly been made—there has been an apology from the former Prime Minister, an LGBT veterans independent review and a £50-million compensation fund—true justice remains elusive. For the approximately 4,000 veterans whose lives were irreparably altered, £12,500 is a meagre offering. I hope that the Government will use this Budget and remembrance season to reconsider the scale of that scheme, and to give those veterans the recognition that they truly deserve. I also note the furore around the Royal British Legion’s poppy badge that has the LGBT flag alongside it. The outrage might be reserved to fringe television stations in the UK, but it is a reminder that the injustices endured by many LGBT veterans are still far from resolved or reconciled, even now in 2024.

I pay tribute to the Gurkha community, whose regimental headquarters are in Surrey Heath. For over two centuries, soldiers from Nepal have fought bravely for the British Army in the UK’s most pivotal conflicts, from both world wars to the Falklands, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their loyalty, their courage and their sacrifice. I particularly want to honour Kaji Sherpa, who I met just a few months ago, a former Gurkha officer and the first serving Gurkha to be granted UK citizenship. As we approach another Remembrance Day, we should commit ourselves to remembering that, for some, the fight for justice continues.

8.57 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): The armed forces covenant is a critical document that has the capability to positively impact the lives of service personnel and veterans, and I am pleased that the Labour Government have committed to enshrining it in law and making it a legally binding commitment, so that nobody from the armed forces family is disadvantaged in any way by their military service to our nation. I am proud that West Notts college in my constituency of Mansfield was recently awarded a defence employer recognition scheme silver award for supporting the armed forces covenant. I congratulate the college, and look forward to seeing many other organisations in my constituency take this important step.

As the employer of a veteran in my parliamentary office, I can see the skills that are invested in service personnel in their training—skills that continue to be useful in my office. Speaking as a former CEO, it is clear to me that the armed forces ethos and work ethic

[Steve Yemm]

provides advantages to business. The Minister for Veterans and People recounts an operation that he conducted in Afghanistan, and speaks of the commitment that those whom he commanded were able to give to their mission because of their certainty about the wraparound support they would receive, should they require it, on the frontline. It is time for society and the Government to deliver that in a post-service support package, in return for the commitment shown by our armed forces.

Finally, I recently hosted a parliamentary reception for Care after Combat, a charity that mentors veterans in the justice system. I thank the more than 100 parliamentarians who took the time to visit and understand the issues further. Veterans are the largest occupational group represented in the justice system, which is an uncomfortable statistic. Listening to accounts of the charity's work and the veterans' stories, it was clear that veterans have a lot to contribute to society, including those with experience of the justice system.

9 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I would like to talk about an issue that affects a small number of British families and veterans: the nuclear test issue in relation to Christmas Island.

For Stephen Greenwood, a constituent of mine from Cullompton, the issue affects him personally. His late father served in the Royal Air Force and was one of many servicemen sent to Christmas Island in the late 1950s under Operation Grapple. Those tests, designed to develop the UK's nuclear weapons capabilities, subjected military personnel to dangerous levels of radiation, with little recognition of, or concern for, the long-term consequences. Stephen's father shared with him an abiding, vivid memory of seeing the bones of his fingers as he shielded his eyes from the nuclear detonations—the disbelief as the flash from the detonations illuminated those bones. Like so many, he later suffered from cancer.

The impact did not stop there. The children of deceased servicemen experienced stark health disparities. Stephen's siblings who were born before their father was exposed to the detonation experienced good health, but those who were born afterwards experienced poor health. This is a pattern that Stephen has seen not just in his own family, but in the families of veterans he has since encountered.

In the run-up to the election, the previous Government went so far as to make sure that a medal was cast to recognise the servicepeople who were involved in Operation Grapple. In opposition, Labour suggested that they could go further. The veterans I have talked to—for example, those in the Sidmouth branch of the Royal British Legion—feel that the Government need to go further. They would like an annual remembrance event, such as the one I attended in Sidmouth on 31 August, to honour the service of the dwindling number of veterans who saw the nuclear detonations in the Pacific in the 1950s. Additionally, they are advocating for compensation for veterans who have suffered health issues due to exposure to radiation. The families of veterans such as Stephen's late father have endured the legacy of Christmas Island and cannot afford to wait another decade. They are demanding action in this Parliament.

9.2 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I want to share my deep gratitude for the people who make up the armed forces community in my constituency, including serving troops and service families, the cadets and reservists at the army reserve centre on Oxford Road and, of course, our veterans, of whom we have almost 3,000. Each and every one of them makes an immense contribution to our country.

In Aylesbury and the villages, remembrance is embedded in the community. In the heart of our town, the war memorial in Market Square commemorates 264 soldiers who died in the first world war and 106 soldiers who died in the second world war, as well as Simon J. Cockton, one of the crew of four in an Army helicopter that was shot down by friendly fire over the Falkland Islands in June 1982. Inscribed on the memorial are the prescient words, "Their memory lives for evermore". Successive generations have lived up to those words and we will, too: we will never forget.

Helping to preserve the memory is the Aylesbury branch of the Royal British Legion. I thank everyone for their work, including Philip Turner, Lorna Muir and Brian Morris, who serve as president, chairman and vice-chairman respectively. I attended the Aylesbury branch's launch of the poppy appeal at Friars Square shopping centre. We watched a moving performance by Aylesbury School of Dance and there was a powerful two-minute silence. It was great to see the poppy selling get under way so quickly.

I want to take a moment to recognise the contributions of Commonwealth and other personnel from across the world who have often been overlooked in commemorations, as others have said tonight, but who have played a vital role in protecting and defending the UK and deserve their rightful place in our national story. I welcome the fact that among the wreaths to be laid in Aylesbury on Remembrance Sunday will be a marigold wreath to remember the Indian troops who fought and died in the world wars.

Finally, we must remember not just through words, but through deeds. I am proud that our Government are backing our armed forces communities by putting the armed forces covenant fully into law and establishing an independent armed forces commissioner to improve service life. I am also proud of the measures this Government are taking to ensure that veterans have access to the employment, housing and mental health support that they so desperately need. We are forever indebted to those who serve—those who serve now, those who served in the past and those who lost their lives in doing so. Through our work to strengthen support for our armed forces communities and our veterans, we will honour them.

9.5 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I also had the opportunity a few weeks ago to meet representatives of Spitfire AA810, to which the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) have already paid fine tribute.

It is appropriate to reiterate the incredible contribution of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, which took more than 26 million images of enemy operations and

installations throughout the war. These images were used in the Cabinet war rooms—now the Churchill war rooms—located underneath the Treasury, and were instrumental in the planning of major operations throughout the war. Despite this incredible contribution, and with one of the lowest survival rates of the war—life expectancy in the PRU was around two and a half months—there is no national memorial to the unit. That troubling oversight is why the Spitfire AA810 project is leading the campaign to establish such a memorial to the pilots and navigators.

I take this opportunity to mark the contribution of four veteran pilots from my Sutton and Cheam constituency, three of whom gave their lives and all of whom would be commemorated by this memorial. Cyril Harley Sergeant Kirkus joined 241 Squadron and flew armed reconnaissance missions in Hurricane aircraft. He was killed on reconnaissance operations in Tunisia on 23 April 1943, aged just 27.

Donald Nevill Gallai-Hatchard, who lived with his wife Joyce in Cheam before the war, was a trained photographer. His experience in the PRU saw him posted to work with the American 97th Bomber Squadron operating in Tunisia. In April 1943, he was put on an American Boston aircraft to photograph the results of a raid on Tunis, but he was killed at the age of 31 when the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire. He is buried in Tunisia.

Desmond Laurence Matthewman started the war in Bomber Command, flying with 51 Squadron. In February 1941, he brought home a bomber from a mission over Bremen whose tail flying controls had been damaged, making the aircraft almost impossible to control. Once over the UK, he and his crew jumped by parachute, an act which earned him his first Distinguished Flying Cross. On 8 August 1944, he and navigator William Stopford took off on a photographic mission to Munich but were met by the new German Me 262 jet fighter. Matthewman and Stopford were shot down over Ohlstadt in what has been recognised as the first jet aircraft combat kill in history.

Ronald Henry Smyth DFC lived in North Cheam and attended Sutton high school. He joined up in May 1939 and flew Bristol Blenheims with 25 Squadron.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting these names on the record, because it is essential that we have a memorial for these men who lost their lives so bravely.

Luke Taylor: I completely agree that the importance of this memorial cannot be overstated.

With the battle over, Smyth spent a short time flying Hurricane fighters, and in December 1943 he joined 541 Squadron, a photographic reconnaissance squadron, commanding reconnaissance operations from Gibraltar. He was awarded the DFC in July 1945 for his work in reconnaissance and ended his time in the RAF in October 1945. Following his incredible wartime service, he returned to his pre-war job at the Stationery Office, retiring in 1980 and passing away in 2017 at the age of 96.

It is only right that we take this opportunity to commemorate the contributions of Cyril, Donald, Desmond and Ronald. Will the Minister meet the Spitfire AA810 campaigners and help their campaign to honour

the brave contributions of the PRU by delivering the first memorial to its work, outside the Churchill war rooms, where its work made such a profound difference to the course of the war?

9.9 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Our message from across the House today is thank you: thank you to those who served, to those who died in combat and to the families who supported our armed forces. In Milton Keynes, the city council is proud of its armed forces covenant. As city council cabinet member for housing, I ensured we fulfilled that covenant by giving the highest level of housing to our armed forces, and I am proud that that is now Government policy. I want to give a shout-out to the Milton Keynes armed forces and veterans breakfast club, which provides a lifeline to those currently serving, as well as to veterans.

I will focus my comments on the 7,500 women—six out of 10 of whom were in uniform—who served at Bletchley Park. They are often forgotten. They were in the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Wrens; the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the WAAF; and the Auxiliary Territorial Service. They worked around the clock for the war effort to keep the Colossus and Bombe machines running, so that we could break the Nazi code. Their efforts shortened the war by nearly two years, saving countless lives. Their recruitment was a challenge to MI6, as it had never recruited women before. It started recruiting linguists, mathematicians and engineers, and even used a 12-minute cryptic crossword competition to identify talent. However, the women did not have it easy. When Winston Churchill visited, he said:

"I know I told you to leave no stone unturned to get staff, but I didn't expect you to take me literally."

Many famous women worked tirelessly during those years, but it was not until the 1970s that anybody, including some of their own, had an idea of the impact they had had on our war effort. The women were not allowed to be classified as code-breakers, and were not allowed the title or the pay, but today, in this House, we can call them veterans and give them the respect they deserve.

One of them wrote this poem:

"In the years yet to come, when grandchildren are many,
I want you to know what I did before you were a granny,
You'll say to the children, as proud as can be,
'In the last war, my darling, a WAAF at BP.'"

9.12 pm

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for the home of the British Army, it is my honour to speak in this debate on remembrance and veterans. I will use my time to share a story from a veteran of the Royal Marines, who celebrates his birthday today. My constituent has given me permission to share his story in the debate, although I have changed his name to protect his privacy.

John served our country with honour. He was discharged from the Royal Marines after three years of service, but life outside the military was hard. His mental health spiralled. He ended up homeless, sleeping rough on the streets, so he went to the local authority for help. This is the part of his story that shocked me, because John was

[Alex Baker]

told that before the local authority could help him, it had first to confirm that he really was homeless. Rather than taking John at his word, he was told that he would have to continue to sleep rough in a named location for two weeks and wait for an outreach worker to visit him to verify that he was homeless.

John did as he was ordered, following what he had been taught by his service, but he found staying in the same place meant he was targeted with verbal and physical abuse, so he moved and kept moving—the cycle went on for years. Eventually, he was diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder and referred to Op Courage. Even then, it took several more years in temporary accommodation, and him witnessing a violent incident, before Op Courage and Help for Heroes were able to get John the specialist accommodation in my constituency that has allowed him to start to move forward with his life. I know just how great a step it was for John to share his story with me.

I take three things from John's story. The first is that we owe our veterans much more than our silence and respect on Armistice Day; it is our duty to speak up whenever the systems that come from this place fall short. Secondly, safe and accessible housing is vital. That is why I was so proud to hear just a few weeks ago the Prime Minister announce the Government's commitment to house all veterans. Thirdly, John's experience tells me that our commitment to respecting every veteran must reach through every Government Department and every level of staff if we are to succeed—from the Secretary of State down to every member of frontline staff. That is the culture change needed to deliver for people such as John who have served our country.

The spirit of remembrance is defined by what we do for one another, and the contribution that every one of us can make. With shared effort, we can build a greater legacy for those who served us—now and in the future.

9.15 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): It is appropriate that I follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker), as I intend to speak on mental health support for veterans. Ahead of today's debate, I had a conversation with a very good friend of mine who proudly serves in the Guards. What I am about to say reflects comments that he has given to me, both from his experience and from consultation with his comrades about their personal experiences.

Mental health is at the forefront of concerns for those leaving the armed forces. Serving personnel receive excellent mental health care from specialist clinicians, which is available for up to six months from discharge, but civilian services often do not appreciate the toll that military life takes on the mental and physical health of veterans, so they rely on charities such as Military Veteran Football Club to fill that gap. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State recognise the support of veterans charities. Veterans also tell me that the pressure of cuts in the armed forces impacts their mental health. As politicians, we must be sure not to ask individual servicemen and women to take up that strain, but instead ask how we can support our troops, and ensure

that service personnel know that they are appreciated, they will be properly paid, and there will be time for a family life.

We must also normalise discussion of emotions and feelings to tackle the tragically high level of suicide among veterans. This is a silent killer, affecting people of all ages and ranks. It does not discriminate, and is the tip of an iceberg of depression, anxiety and stress. It can be treated by an early intervention. Young people and our veterans are losing their lives from not only a lack of support, but an ignorance of the support that is available. As a signatory to the armed forces covenant, I welcome the Government's commitment to put it on a statutory footing. Veterans need to hear from us that they are not just a number, there is no stigma attached to their service, and once they have left the forces we will care for them, in the same way that they took care of us.

9.17 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate ahead of Remembrance Day as we pay tribute to all those who have served our country, and remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Each year, we gather to recognise the bravery of our veterans, but true gratitude goes beyond these moments. It means showing up for them when it counts in real and meaningful ways. As the MP for Burton and Uttoxeter, I am proud to represent a community with a long-standing tradition of service.

Many families across Burton, Uttoxeter and our surrounding villages have stories of loved ones who have served and sacrificed. I see veterans every day who continue to give back, contributing to our communities long after they have hung up their uniforms—people such as Carlton Wilkin, a veteran of the Mercian Regiment, who leads the poppy appeal in Burton every year, helping us to remember the values that our veterans live by. They volunteer, mentor and inspire, quietly setting an example of resilience and dedication for us all.

We are also fortunate to have the National Memorial Arboretum on our doorstep—a powerful place of reflection and a tribute to our armed forces. I would welcome all right hon. and hon. Members coming to visit the arboretum to fully appreciate the courage and sacrifices that are represented there.

Let us be clear that our gratitude must be matched with support. Charities such as Care after Combat offer a lifeline for veterans as they transition into civilian life by providing mental health support and giving veterans renewed purpose. Such organisations show us what it means to truly honour service with action.

I am committed, as are the Government, to ensuring that veterans in Burton, Uttoxeter and across the country have access to the services that they need, from mental health support and housing to employment opportunities. We owe them nothing less. Our responsibility is to ensure that they can thrive, and to meet their sacrifices with practical lasting action. As we come together in this remembrance season, let us promise that our gratitude will be lived, not just spoken. Let us commit to being there for veterans, as they were there for us, by building a country and community in which they are fully supported every step of the way.

9.20 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): As we approach this time of remembrance, is it fitting that the national Parliament of the UK reflects on the sacrifice made by so many men and women to ensure that we have the right to be here, in this place, and that our democratic values prevail. Indeed, I understand that the first world war claimed 19 of our predecessors, while the second world war claimed 23.

While we think of the contribution of our veterans, it is wise to take a moment to think about non-combatants, who are also often the victims of war. On 13 March 1941, Bankhead primary school in my constituency was hit by a Luftwaffe bomb. Fortunately, the school had been evacuated, but it was serving as a civil defence station, and 40 people were killed. The reason for the strike was never fully explained; it could have been a remnant of the Clydebank blitz, with one of the Luftwaffe pilots dropping bombs to lighten the load for the way home, or it could have been because of the nearby railway marshalling yards in Yoker. We will never know, but the fact is that 40 civilians died.

Some years ago, Terrence McCourt, a local Knightswood man, began a campaign for a war memorial to be erected in his area. Terrence's campaign was successful, and a small but very beautiful garden of remembrance was established in my Glasgow West constituency. Regular events take place there to remember important dates such as Armistice Day, VJ Day and VE Day. On Remembrance Sunday, many of us will stand in Glasgow's George Square to watch the march of veterans and current servicemen and women, as well as of representatives of the emergency and uniformed services.

Sadly but inevitably, the number of veterans diminishes every year, so it is more important than ever that their memory is not allowed to fade. Unfortunately, neither world war was the war to end all wars—the events of the past century are sadly testament to that. As parliamentarians, we must be dedicated to the eradication of conflict through peaceful and democratic means. That is a worthy objective to which I hope we all subscribe, but it is one that remains in peril in this increasingly dangerous conflict-torn world. For the sake of this generation, and generations yet unborn, we must redouble our efforts to support diplomatic and peaceful means of resolving even the most seemingly intractable situations. After all, we cannot make peace by talking only to our friends. As Gandhi put it, an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.

9.23 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): At the heart of my constituency lies Carlisle castle, home to the museum of the Border Regiment, the excellent Cumbria Museum of Military Life. The Border Regiment has a long and proud record of service and was the first British unit to join a major engagement by glider, during the invasion of Sicily in the second world war. The regiment went on to serve throughout the Italian campaign, and I wish to pay particular tribute to those who served in that campaign.

My dad was just 20 when he set sail for the Italian mainland, but the liberation of Italy had begun some months earlier with the invasion of Sicily. That invasion cost the lives of 6,000 allied troops, including men from Carlisle's Border Regiment who were killed when their

gliders failed to make land. The invasion of the mainland followed, but the allies encountered increasingly difficult terrain. In particular, Monte Cassino became the scene of some of the most hellish encounters of the second world war. Finally, in the early hours of 18 May, the British and Polish troops surrounded the town of Cassino and forced a German retreat. A couple of weeks later, Rome fell, marking a significant milestone in the Italian campaign.

Sadly for those who served, their recognition was overshadowed by the events on the Normandy beaches. To add further insult to injury, a perception grew that those serving in Italy were sitting out the real fighting of the second world war, and the myth of the D-day dodgers was born. Nothing could have been further from the truth: infantry losses on both sides made Italy the most costly campaign of the second world war in terms of casualties suffered by infantry forces. That is why I believe that in this, the 80th year since Monte Cassino, it is right that that battle is commemorated as other key battles of the second world war have rightly been.

9.25 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is an honour to be given an opportunity to speak this evening as we look ahead to this year's remembrance events across the country, and as we recognise the service and courage of the exceptional men and women who helped safeguard our values and freedom. My contribution seeks to commemorate some of the local effort from my constituency.

Perhaps the biggest contribution of Alloa to the D-day landings took place at the now gone McLeod and Sons shipyard. The workers there laboured day and night to refit ships for war, including around 130 of the tank landing craft for Operation Neptune. Indeed, a message from their lordships at the Admiralty was sent to McLeod and Sons after the war, congratulating the entire workforce on their "magnificent effort during hostilities".

Over in Grangemouth, what was planned to be the country's largest commercial airfield became a fighter base to defend against bombing raids. Once the fear of airstrikes had subsided, it was designated as a training centre for daring young pilots to learn to fly the iconic Spitfire. More than 60 young men from all over Britain and the Commonwealth, as well as from Poland, Holland and what was then Czechoslovakia, died as student pilots, along with some 20 ground crew who also paid the ultimate price while serving there. Today, a replica Spitfire on Bo'ness Road reminds us of their sacrifice, with thanks to the members of the 1333 Grangemouth air cadet squadron for their efforts in pushing for that memorial more than a decade ago.

Veterans of our armed forces deserve not just our respect and gratitude, but our practical and meaningful help as they seek to find a place in civilian life. I commend organisations such as the Falkirk Veterans and the Wee County Veterans from Clackmannanshire. The bond among our military personnel extends well beyond service, and veterans' groups such as those in my constituency play a phenomenal role in so many ways.

There is currently a difference in opinion between the Royal British Legion and many in the veterans community as to the consequences of cutting the Armed Services

[Brian Leishman]

Advice Project. Personally, I feel that the veterans have legitimate concerns about the removal of ASAP: some have told me that an in-person interaction with an ASAP adviser was the difference between life and death. On the face of it, I share the same reservations as many veterans, as replacing ASAP with a call centre could be a potentially fatal reduction in service provision, and I urge the RBL to reconsider. Over the last 14 years, this country has seen what happens when austerity takes hold and vital services are sacrificed. Everyone deserves better, especially our veterans.

9.28 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): As a newly elected Member of this House, it was my great privilege and honour to attend the opening of the House of Commons garden of remembrance today, and to place my cross of remembrance there on behalf of my constituents. Across West Dunbartonshire, just as we do across the nation, we will gather to honour those who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our freedoms and protect our way of life.

One of the memorials that I will attend on Remembrance Sunday is at Clydebank town hall in my home town. Our town hall memorial contains the names of those fallen in all wars, and includes the names of five brothers, Andrew, Walter, James, John and Daniel Munn, who all perished in the first world war—five brothers, all lost. It is symbolic of the scale of suffering and the sacrifice of our nation.

Clydebank also suffered dreadfully during the second world war across the nights of 13 and 14 March 1941, the blitz. It suffered the worst destruction and civilian loss of life in all of Scotland. At least 1,200 people lost their lives, and of the 12,000 homes in Clydebank, only eight remained undamaged.

In West Dunbartonshire, we are deeply proud of our armed forces personnel, veterans and the families who support them. Theirs is the ultimate public service. As a Government, therefore, we must ensure that our veterans have access to the support they need. We must commit to supporting those who serve and have served us.

The Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland's manifesto includes recommendations that the Government can take to improve the lives of our armed forces community, such as "Ask the question", which seeks to ensure that all public bodies ask individuals whether they or an immediate family member have served in the armed forces. That would be recorded and published to understand needs and to provide appropriate support.

On both sides of the House, hon. Members can truly remember by ensuring that a better deal for our armed forces community remains high on our parliamentary agenda.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have heard many powerful and moving contributions, the last of which will be from Dave Robertson.

9.31 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I closely associate myself with all the remarks that have been made in the debate about the work of the Royal British Legion, and

all it does to support remembrance, particularly in November. When November rolls around, I make sure to clear time to remember Charles Leslie Whitehead and William Arnold Robertson, my taid and my grandpa, who saw service in the second world war and in the Pacific in Korea respectively.

We owe our veterans much more than two minutes a year, and remembrance should go further than Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. It should be something that anybody, anywhere in the country can take part in at any time by taking the time to remember somebody—on their birthday, an anniversary or just a Tuesday.

That is why I am proud to host the National Memorial Arboretum in my Lichfield constituency. It is a wonderful venue and a fantastic place for people to carry out that remembrance if they so choose. There are now more than 400 memorials at the arboretum, and I strongly advise any right hon. or hon. Member who has not had the opportunity to visit yet to do so, so that they can take the opportunity to remember the people who are pertinent to them, or even the strangers who they have never met and will never meet, but who gave their time and themselves, and in some cases paid the ultimate sacrifice, to protect our way of life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Front Benchers. I call the shadow Minister.

9.33 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a great privilege to rise to respond on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition in this debate. I congratulate all hon. Members who made a maiden speech, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on her excellent speech. Although it was not a maiden speech, I also thank the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) for mentioning those who were lost at sea. It is far too often overlooked that those who were lost at sea in various conflicts have no grave that families can visit, but their sacrifice was no less important and should be no less remembered at this time.

It is rare to sit in the Chamber and enjoy a debate where there is so much common cause on both sides of the House. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot on its 360th anniversary—I do not believe the vicious rumour doing the rounds in Parliament that that was the name borne by the Royal Marines when the Minister joined up all those years ago. It is as it should be that we join together as a nation and look towards remembrance as one. Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day are when we pause, reflect, remember and pay thanks to all those who have given the ultimate sacrifice that allows us to live in the peace and freedom we enjoy in our country today.

Remembrance means different things to different people. When the "Last Post" sounds in Ballater in two weeks' time, I will be thinking of my great-uncle Samuel Coyle, who fell at Gallipoli in 1915, one week short of his 21st birthday, and lies buried at Pink Farm cemetery in Turkey. I will think of my great-grandfather, who endured and survived the Somme battlefield; my paternal grandfather, who fought with the 8th Army at El-Alamein, Sicily, Italy, France and Germany, and survived to tell

the tale; my maternal grandfather, who for over two decades served in the Royal Navy; and my godfather, a Royal Marine, who served from the Falklands to Northern Ireland.

I will also think of my friends who served and are still serving in far more recent conflicts and operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the various but less reported naval operations of the last 20 years—our continued presence in the south Atlantic, our oilfield patrols off Iraq and the anti-piracy operations in Somalia to name but a few. As we have heard this afternoon, we all remember individuals, family and close friends who chose to serve our country and were prepared to—and, in some cases, did—pay the ultimate sacrifice, and we do remember them.

When we collectively think of remembrance as a nation and when we think of veterans, for many the image conjured up is of the old soldier who landed at D-day proudly marching with his oppos past the Cenotaph, a survivor of a long-distant conflict. They remain rightly at the forefront of our thoughts this year as we commemorate 80 years since D-day, Monte Cassino and other hugely significant operations in that world conflict, which was fought to defend freedom and democracy. It was our victory in that conflict that remains the reason why we can stand in this place today. We remain forever in the debt of that greatest generation.

We must also remember, however, the veterans from much more recent conflicts—the much smaller group of men and women who fought far from our shores in the name of Queen and country, but who, unlike previous generations, did not return to a country with a shared experience of war and conflict. In many cases, they returned to a country that did not really want to know. Being a veteran of a late 20th-century or early 21st-century conflict is, in 2024, far removed from the experiences of those who fought between 1914 and 1918 and between 1939 and 1945. Supporting this new generation is far harder for those charities and organisations that do so much unseen work all year round, not just during this time of remembrance.

It was for this new generation of former servicemen and women that the former Veterans Minister Johnny Mercer, to whom I pay tribute, was determined to fight. That is why he was determined to make this country the best in the world in which to be a veteran. It is also why we as a Government established the Office for Veterans' Affairs, put the armed forces covenant into law and set up Defence Transition Services, providing tailored support to help service people with their transition to civilian life. We launched Operation Fortitude to end homelessness, Operation Prosper to support veterans into work after they leave the armed forces, Operation Restore to support the physical needs of veterans and Operation Courage to support veterans' mental health. We invested £400 million to modernise thousands of military homes, provided funding for armed forces charities to carry out their vital work, and introduced a new veterans railcard to help veterans reconnect both with loved ones and with new training and work opportunities. We supported veterans through the provisions in our Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021 and the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. I know the Minister is aware that the repeal

and replacement of that Act is rightly causing concern in the community of veterans who fought during the troubles.

We are near unique as a nation in honouring the memory of all those who have fallen, those who have served and those who serve in the way we do. It is to our credit as a country. There are still groups that feel forgotten. For example, as has been mentioned, there are the veterans of our nuclear tests, with many still fighting for recognition of what they were asked to do and for what they endured many years on for their country. There is the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit of the RAF, which has also been mentioned. The unit had one of the highest attrition rates in world war two, but it still has no national memorial, and its members must also be remembered in the coming days.

This year when the "Last Post" sounds, it will be some 16 years since, as a very young sub-lieutenant, I had the privilege of meeting the three remaining veterans of world war one—Harry Patch, Henry Allingham and Bill Stone—at the Cenotaph as we marked 90 years since the end of that war, the war supposedly to end all wars. This year, let us pause and think of those unseen veterans who walk among us today: those who did not return, and their friends and their family still living with the loss. Let us also remember those who, as we sit here tonight, remain prepared to give everything for our nation. Let us recommit to do for them what a grateful nation should, and let us redouble our efforts to truly make this country the best in the world in which to be a veteran.

9.39 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): It is indeed 360 years since the formation of the Royal Marines and they are still going strong. I will refuse to take advice from the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on face cream but it was a privilege to take the salute just the other day from both the Commandant General Royal Marines and the Commandant of the US Marine Corps, which demonstrates the strong ties across the pond with the US between those Marine units.

I am grateful to Members for their thoughtful reflections on remembrance and the contributions of veterans to this country. We have heard moving contributions from Members reflecting on their personal experience of service, and as I am sure they would testify there is an unspoken oath of allegiance between service personnel. Indeed, it knows no bounds; it is the glue that holds the forces together, and that oath has always extended to the fallen on the battlefield and beyond. For serving personnel and veterans, remembrance is an enduring reflection of that oath, and on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day I will remember the individuals who have gone before us but also those I have stood next to who have been killed or wounded—after five tours of Afghanistan, one of Northern Ireland, and multiple of the Arabian gulf, eastern Europe and Africa, there have been many.

Importantly, we must remember those who will never see that smile again or see them laugh or hold them close once more. It is a time for them, and those that did not come home to see their children, their partners, or indeed their loved ones or their friends. It is our duty to remember them all.

[*Al Carns*]

But remembrance is not only about fallen comrades and veterans; it is a rare moment when the nation comes together, from Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. And it is a reminder to everyone in every generation across the whole country that the freedoms we all enjoy—the freedoms of speech, of equality, of quality of life—were all hard fought for and hard-won. Freedom is not free, and it is something in the fractious world we live in today that individually or collectively we should not take for granted.

Those freedoms are forged from the sacrifice of the young men and women of the Army, Navy and our Air Force who stepped forward when the country needed them: the sacrifices of the few who are still owed so much by the many; the sacrifices on the high seas, in the air, on the beaches and the landing grounds and in the fields, and in the streets from world war one to Operation Overlord, where they secured a beachhead in Normandy that would free a continent from Nazi tyranny and usher in the rules-based international system; and the sacrifices of 80,000 British service personnel who fought in the forgotten war on the Korean peninsula to uphold the rights and freedoms enshrined in that rules-based international system. All are memorialised in stones outside the MOD, of which one says,

“A distant obligation honourably discharged.”

There were the sacrifices in the south Atlantic, on the open water, in the skies and on the windswept heaths, for the right of the Falkland Islanders to choose their own sovereign future. And the sacrifices of service personnel in desert fatigues who liberated Kuwait and fought in Iraq, and those in the operational areas whom I served alongside in the long troubles of Northern Ireland, the middle east, Africa, Afghanistan and eastern Europe who sacrificed so much to uphold the right to self-determination and give freedom and democracy a chance to take root. And the sacrifices we cannot talk about because we do not comment on certain issues.

It is thanks to all those who have served and sacrificed and whom we honour on Remembrance Day that we can sit here, as democratically elected MPs, and debate the future of this wonderful country. Few, if any, outside the armed forces sign a contract that puts their life on the line and those who have served or continue to serve often pay the price for that service, through the long-term mental or physical scars, the impact on families and on their children, or through the painful memories or indeed the longing for the camaraderie and service they left behind. It is my opinion that those who serve through one way or another serve until the day they die. That is why this Government of service are committed to standing with members of our armed forces and their families long after they leave the services.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Syd Little was part of the team which delivered life-saving supplies to Mount Sinjar on 9 August 2014, in the operation now known as Operation Shader. Flight Sergeant Little lost his life this weekend to cancer. Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that service people face some of their greatest challenges on their exit from service and that the veterans strategy is essential to ensuring that those challenges are not equal to those they faced while serving?

Al Carns: There are few fights as valiant as that against the barbaric regime of ISIS. My thoughts go to my hon. Friend's constituent, and his family and loved ones who were left behind. This Government are committed to supporting the welfare of veterans and those who are serving, and there will be more details to follow. As a veteran, as the Minister responsible for veterans, people and personnel, I do not take these commitments lightly.

This Government have already ensured that those who defend democracy will have the right to exercise that democracy at the polling station. In just over 100 days, we have made the veterans ID card a form of voter ID. The Prime Minister has also confirmed that veterans will rightly be prioritised in accessing housing. Furthermore, we are determined to deliver on our manifesto commitments to fully incorporate the armed forces covenant in law, get rid of the postcode lottery, and give veterans the support that they need on mental health, employment and housing. We will also scrap visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served for four or more years, and for their families.

I congratulate those who gave their maiden speech today. There were some fantastic speeches, particularly from my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling), and for Stafford (Leigh Ingham). They outlined so many veterans' issues, but also talked about the comprehensive military presence in their constituencies. I also pay tribute to the multiple individuals with military experience in the House. The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) served in 2010. I probably dropped into the area he was in. I was very well hosted by his regiment or brigade. I was often met on the ground with a fiery reception, but also some good banter. It is a great tribute to the House that we have so many people with military experience, and like all Members, I look forward to their contributions in this great place.

Several issues were raised today. The hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) paid tribute to the brave pilots of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, who did so much intelligence gathering during the second world war. Without their work on operations, none of those operations would have taken place. Given that the unit had one of the highest casualties rates of all those in the skies—I think it was 40% plus—it is right to pay tribute to it by moving forward with a memorial; I fully support that.

I say in response to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd that I met the Welsh Veterans' Commissioner, Colonel Phillips, last Thursday. I spoke to him about his role, responsibilities and potential changes for a good hour and a half. Several Members have brought up the issues of Northern Ireland. Our Government recognise the important service of veterans and the sacrifices they made to keep people safe in Northern Ireland during the troubles. I am a Northern Ireland veteran. I give the House my word that any veteran will get the legal and welfare support that they need to ensure that the stresses of any action that we move forward with are minimised.

Members brought up various charities. Across the veterans sector and the armed forces community, there are more than 1,000 charities. They are primarily led by individuals who give up their spare time to support

the armed forces and veterans. As we move towards Remembrance Day, it is worth remembering not just those who have served or are serving, but those who support those in the armed forces, primarily in the UK's amazing charitable sector, which has such an important role.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) brought up mental health. Op Courage has had 30,000 referrals. It is doing a fantastic job. I have visited multiple NHS trusts that are delivering fantastic partnership working to ensure that veterans get the mental health support that they require.

The treatment of the LGBT community from 1967 to 2000 was completely and utterly abhorrent. Some of the stories that I have heard have been absolutely harrowing. I had the pleasure of attending the LGBT awards last week. We have delivered 32 of the 49 recommendations from the Lord Etherton review, and we are working hard to deliver an appropriate financial redress scheme, so that we can close out that review in a timely and effective manner.

I had the great pleasure of meeting the nuclear test veterans; that has been absolutely superb. We have built up a relationship through a cadence of meetings to ensure that there is communication and education, and to look into some of their issues relating to files. We are working collaboratively on that.

It would be unfitting of me to finish without saying that I have heard some harrowing stories today of the sacrifices paid by so many, including so many stories of the loss of loved ones. I think especially of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who lost some of his loved ones in the troubles. I have also heard amazing stories about some of our longest-serving veterans, including Flight Lieutenant Harry Richardson, who is now over 100 years old, which is truly remarkable. The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) also outlined the amazing world war two story of George.

As I conclude, it is worth noting the broader message that is wrapped into remembrance. Yes, this is a time to remember—to remember that freedom is not free, and that every decision we make in this House, or in this Government, has an impact. That does not mean that we should shy away from difficult decisions on whether to deploy our armed forces. We should, rather, acknowledge and champion the fact that our armed forces are there for a reason: to protect us at home and abroad, to protect our way of life, and to ensure that the freedom we enjoy today is passed down to our children, and their children.

Our armed forces are the guarantors of everything we hold dear. To risk life and limb for one's nation is, I think, the noblest of all traditions, but if service is anything, it is above politics. That is why I stand ready to work with all hon. and right hon. Members so that veterans and those serving can live a life, in and outside the armed forces, worthy of the incredible contribution they made to this nation. Today, in advance of Remembrance Day, we come together, united, to say thank you to those who have served, and to honour all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Remembrance and the contribution of veterans.

Business without Debate

STANDARDS

Ordered,

That Paula Barker, Mark Ferguson, Melanie Onn, Anna Sabine, Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst and Gareth Snell be members of the Committee on Standards.—(*Jeff Smith, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Paula Barker, Alberto Costa, Mark Ferguson, Melanie Onn, Anna Sabine, Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst and Gareth Snell be members of the Committee of Privileges.—(*Jeff Smith, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Mr Alex Barros-Curtis, Gill Furniss, Mary Glindon, Carolyn Harris, Navendu Mishra, Joe Morris, Tessa Munt, Nick Smith and Max Wilkinson be members of the Administration Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Ordered,

That Jack Abbott, Mary Glindon, Alison Hume, Will Stone and Chris Vince be members of the Backbench Business Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Ordered,

That Charlie Maynard and Mr Joshua Reynolds be members of the Business and Trade Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ordered,

That Zöe Franklin and Liz Jarvis be members of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

DEFENCE

Ordered,

That Mike Martin and Ian Roome be members of the Defence Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

EDUCATION

Ordered,

That Manuela Perteghella and Caroline Voaden be members of the Education Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Ordered,

That Wera Hobhouse and Claire Young be members of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

Ordered,

That Olivia Blake, Julia Buckley, Ellie Chowns, Barry Gardiner, Anna Gelderd, Sarah Gibson, Chris Hinchliff, Martin Rhodes, Blake Stephenson, Alison Taylor, Cameron Thomas and John Whitby be members of the Environmental Audit Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Helena Dollimore, Sarah Dyke, Jayne Kirkham, Josh Newbury, Andrew Pakes, Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, Tim Roca and Henry Tufnell be members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

FINANCE

Ordered,

That Clive Jones and James MacCleary be members of the Finance Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Richard Foord and Edward Morello be members of the Foreign Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Ordered,

That Andrew George be a member of the Health and Social Care Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Paul Kohler and Ben Maguire be members of the Home Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ordered,

That Mr Lee Dillon and Mr Will Forster be members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ordered,

That Monica Harding and Brian Mathew be members of the International Development Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Josh Babarinde and Tessa Munt be members of the Justice Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Daniel Aldridge, Chris Bloore, Sorcha Eastwood, Claire Hanna, Leigh Ingham, Adam Jogee, Katrina Murray, Dr Al Pinkerton and David Smith be members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That Lewis Atkinson, Kevin Bonavia, Irene Campbell, Ben Goldsborough, Robbie Moore, Dave Robertson, Dr Roz Savage and Tony Vaughan be members of the Petitions Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Mr Lee Dillon, Mr Richard Holden, Tom Morrison and Joy Morrissey be members of the Procedure Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Nesil Caliskan, Mr Luke Charters, Anna Dixon, Sarah Green, Rachel Gilmour, Sarah Hall, Lloyd Hatton, Chris Kane, James Murray, Sarah Olney, Michael Payne and Oliver Ryan be members of the Committee of Public Accounts.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Richard Baker, Markus Campbell-Savours, Charlotte Cane, Lauren Edwards, John Grady, Peter Lamb, Mr Richard Quigley, Luke Taylor and Michelle Welsh be members of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Ordered,

That Tom Gordon and Martin Wrigley be members of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Maureen Burke, Lillian Jones, Mr Angus MacDonald, Douglas McAllister, Susan Murray, Elaine Stewart and Kirsteen Sullivan be members of the Scottish Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

TRANSPORT

Ordered,

That Steff Aquarone, Dr Scott Arthur, Catherine Atkinson, Mrs Elsie Blundell, Olly Glover, Alex Mayer, Baggy Shanker and Laurence Turner be members of the Transport Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

TREASURY

Ordered,

That Chris Coghlan and Bobby Dean be members of the Treasury Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WELSH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That David Chadwick, Ann Davies, Chris Evans, Claire Hughes, Llinos Medi, Andrew Ranger, Henry Tufnell and Steve Witherden be members of the Welsh Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Ordered,

That Alex Brewer, David Burton-Sampson, Kirith Entwistle, Natalie Fleet, Catherine Fookes, Christine Jardine, Samantha Niblett and Rachel Taylor be members of the Women and Equalities Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WORK AND PENSIONS

Ordered,

That Mr Peter Bedford, Steve Darling and John Milne be members of the Work and Pensions Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Derriford Emergency Care Centre Plymouth

9.59 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Derriford hospital needs an emergency care centre. Further to a similar online petition approaching 1,000 signatures, I am presenting this petition on behalf of my constituents and those who rely on Derriford hospital in Plymouth.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that following the announcement of the New Hospital Programme Review, patients across South West Devon and across the South West are deeply concerned as to the future of University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust's new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility at Derriford; further declares that the new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility is essential for the NHS to be able to accommodate for the region's above-average population growth; further that the new facility will treat the sickest patients more quickly, avoid unnecessary admissions, facilitate early discharge and improve outcomes; and notes that UHP's former Member of Parliament had secured £180 million of government funding for the project.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs of University Hospital Plymouth's new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility whilst undertaking the New Hospital Programme Review and retain the funding previously committed to this project.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003015]

Dolphin Inn Grampound

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to take a moment to echo the calls from across the House this evening for the remembrance and appreciation of our veterans.

I am glad to have this opportunity to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Grampound relating to the last remaining pub in the village.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Grampound,

Declares that the Dolphin Inn is an Asset of Community Value.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lend support the Dolphin Inn Grampound, acknowledging that it furthers the social wellbeing and cultural, recreational and sporting interests of the local community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003013]

Wealth tax in the Autumn Budget

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): I rise to present a petition on wealth taxes in the autumn Budget, further to a corresponding online petition signed by over 50,000 people.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom.

Declares that a 2% Wealth Tax on assets over £10 million, a measure to equalise Capital Gains Tax with Income Tax rates, and measures to end state subsidies to fossil fuel giants and to close loopholes in the oil and gas windfall tax should be brought; and further notes that these measures would generate an additional £45 billion per year, providing vast resources to rebuild our public services, boost people's incomes and invest in a higher-wage economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the requests of the petitions and consider the resource benefits of Wealth Taxes when allocating funds in the budget.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003016]

Agricultural Land: Protection

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

10.3 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I am so pleased to have the opportunity tonight to share my pride in the rural areas of my constituency of Aylesbury, to share my admiration for those who work on the land and care for it, and to set out how we can enable both our urban and rural communities, and our natural environment to thrive. I am grateful to the Minister for being present.

I bring forward this debate in part to reassure my constituents of my own and my Government's commitment to protecting our natural environment and safeguarding our agricultural land. This is a subject of debate in my constituency, as this new Government take forward the planning reforms that are so necessary for our future growth. After 14 years of deep turbulence and decline, with damaging consequences for nature and for our communities, I will suggest a better way forward, rooted in clear principles, more predictability and a dose of pragmatism.

First, let me turn to how we protect and enhance our natural environment, and give some context relating to my constituency. We are in a beautiful part of the country, which includes the Chiltern hills and historic woodlands and waterways, where 14% of the constituency is designated as green-belt land, but under the previous Government we were subject to extensive house building—more than 13,000 new homes in the past 10 years, and counting—which has led to great pressures on services and infrastructure and also on our natural environment.

My constituents understand the urgency of addressing our national housing crisis. The statistics speak for themselves: nearly 1.3 million households are on social housing waiting lists, including 6,000 in Buckinghamshire, and young people under 30 today are less than half as likely to own a home as young adults in the 1990s. Equally, many of my constituents understand the need for investment in renewable energy, whether it is onshore wind or solar panels, to get us on track for clean, secure and more affordable power by 2030, but they and I are conscious of the tension between the need for planning reform, whether for the purpose of building houses, energy or other infrastructure, and the need to protect our natural environment. How do we navigate that tension? Let me make three points based on Aylesbury's experience.

First, we need to ensure that clear environmental safeguards are embedded in planning policy, and to that end the proposed changes in the national planning policy framework are strong: for example, the emphasis on a "brownfield first" approach using previously developed land for new housing and therefore protecting green spaces; the introduction of grey-belt land, which of course needs tight definition but should ultimately enable a more strategic approach to building on certain types of green space; and the "golden rules" in the NPPF, which ensure that any green-belt building will bring benefits for nature and for community access to green space. That will be a welcome contrast to the haphazard raids on green-belt and greenfield sites that took place under the last Government. In Buckinghamshire as a whole, for example, between 2019 and 2022 11% of new

residential addresses were built in designated areas of outstanding natural beauty, compared to a 4% national average. This building has been happening, and my constituents tell me that the rationale for it has not always been clear.

Secondly, we need to learn from the pockets of good practice. I can point to one example in Aylesbury: the Kingsbrook development, on the edge of town, where housing and nature co-exist well. Kingsbrook was built with the help of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and includes 250 acres of wildlife-rich open space, with hedgehog highways and community allotments. I invite members of the Government to visit it, and to learn from such examples. Where it is not possible for developments to include so much green space, we need to ensure that there is ready access to nature nearby—as a member of Aylesbury Ramblers reminded me recently, while describing his battle with the council to keep footpaths in and out of Aylesbury clear.

Thirdly, of course, it is vital that where nature must be protected we do that, and that we do not just protect but strengthen and enhance it. I have seen wonderful examples of that in my constituency. I have observed the work that the Chiltern Society does with its 700 volunteers—for example, sowing wildflowers, or clearing more than 30,000 metres of footpaths and 2,000 miles of cycle paths and bridle paths in the last year alone. In recent years, however, it has seemed as if they are working against, not with, successive Governments who have shown little regard for nature. That is perhaps best exemplified in my constituency by the release of sewage into the rivers for 3,000 hours last year alone, with devastating consequences for nature. I am pleased by the early work of our Government to review the environmental improvement plan, paving the way, we hope, for the ambitious global goal of safeguarding 30% of our land and sea by 2030, but this is just the start, and the test will be whether these safeguards are indeed in place in constituencies such as Aylesbury across the country.

Of course, the NPPF rightly contains protections for the best and most versatile agricultural land as well, but, ultimately, protecting and strengthening agricultural land means supporting the farmers who steward and manage it. I have spoken to many farmers in my constituency, for instance during a brilliant visit to Ledburn farm on the Ascott estate, a producer of the wheat for my kids' Weetabix. I know that farmers have been under great pressure in recent years, from weather events, disease, economic volatility, Brexit, rising energy costs, rising rural crime—you name it—but I also know that they work incredibly hard to keep putting food on our tables.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this matter? She is absolutely right to highlight the issues affecting farmers. She may not be aware that my constituency is one of the few areas of rich agricultural land that can produce three potato crops a year. It is essential that we ensure that farmers can and do make the most of the possibilities—not simply in lush Strangford, but in Aylesbury and across this great United Kingdom.

Does the hon. Lady agree that we need the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to engage with grassroots farming and to support farmers, thereby

ensuring that we increase food security in the United Kingdom while protecting our agricultural land? The Minister is in his place, and there is no better person to do just that.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I agree that supporting smallholder farmers is absolutely essential.

There is too much to say in the time we have available tonight, but I will pull out three particularly important ways to help set up our farmers for success. First and foremost, we have to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of British farming. The environment land management schemes have been unclear, difficult to navigate and poorly tailored to different contexts—in the case of Ledburn farm, to the heavy clay land. As a result, the uptake has been low, but farmers remain in need of that support and we have to find a way to make it easier to access. Equally, farmers are forging ahead and finding ways to diversify their income, but there is much more we can do to support that—for example, by making it much easier to change the use of existing farm buildings, or to develop lower-grade agricultural land, if it creates renewable energy sources or affordable housing for farm workers.

Secondly, we have to promote and support farmers to roll out sustainable farming practices that address challenges such as soil erosion and low land productivity—for example, by supporting the farmer clusters that have become increasingly prevalent across Buckinghamshire, which bring together farmers to help explore best practice and to share ideas for enhancing natural habitats on their land.

Thirdly, we need to invest in the next generation of British farmers. This means ensuring that we give the profession the status that it deserves in the first place, and that we start educating children about it at a very young age. That means creating pathways into the farming sector—for example, through investing in specialist technical education and expanding agriculture apprenticeships. It means making it not just attractive but affordable to live in rural communities and to pursue a career in farming, particularly in places such as Buckinghamshire, where there is far too little affordable rural housing and services. As a result, the pull to towns is too strong. In short, we can put all the necessary protections in place for quality agricultural land, and I am confident that we will, but without a thriving farming sector to safeguard that land, they will have little impact.

My constituency has suffered from the absence of a coherent strategy for our land—where and how we protect it, where and how we use it, and where and how we develop it. Recent Governments have left nature depleted, farmers deeply uncertain at best and out of business at worst, and communities frustrated by haphazard house building without access to green spaces, infrastructure or services. Under this Government, the future has to look different, and we have to start with clear principles. Alongside the NPPF, the new land use framework will surely help to ensure that we get the right balance between food production, nature and economic growth.

We need more predictability. Of course external shocks will happen, but the role of the Government is to be a steadying force. It is great that we have got to work quickly on the first steps—whether planning reform or setting up Great British Energy—and I think we can look forward to a steady, focused roll-out.

Finally, we need a good deal of pragmatism and an acceptance that getting the right balance between development and environmental protection is not easy, and there will be compromises, but it is necessary. We have to find a way both to build the homes and infrastructure of the future, and to protect and regenerate our agricultural and nature-rich lands, because ultimately one cannot exist without the other.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is highly unusual for other Members to contribute to an Adjournment debate, because it is a conversation between the lead Member and the Minister. I believe that you have sought permission, but it is still highly unusual, so I assume that the contribution will be short before the Minister responds.

10.13 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Thank you very much for your permission to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to support the representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), because some of the things that she raises are also relevant to my constituency and those across the country.

As my hon. Friend said, the case for more genuinely affordable homes is clear. That is accepted in my community as much as in hers, if not more so, as so many people struggle in the private sector and house prices spiral due to the pressure of unregulated short-term holiday lets, driven by many people's huge and understandable desire to enjoy the delights of Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate.

We need new homes. I have spoken to far too many people in their 30s and beyond who live in their childhood bedrooms, sometimes with a partner. They are desperate to be able to start their lives in a home of their own, but they are priced out of their own community. We also desperately need the infrastructure to support the families who will live in those homes, and we need to protect and enhance not only the nature that we love but the nature that is essential to our own economy, wellbeing and future.

I came here to change the rules, Madam Deputy Speaker, although of course I observe the ones that you enforce in this House. It is clear that the current rules do not serve our need for homes or our need to protect and enhance nature. They do not enable the right infrastructure to be built, nor do they effectively help us identify and protect our vital farmland. Those who protect the status quo in this argument are condemning our country to failure. Those who think that any of these four elements—homes, farming, nature or infrastructure, including energy—should drop off the list of our priorities do not understand the importance of shaping our communities to benefit our residents, now and for the long term.

Nature is not just a “nice to have”. It is fundamental to us in achieving our economic, health and climate goals. In Thanet, people come to see and enjoy our natural world. Damaging nature, where it is a vital part of the economy, is short-sighted and dangerous. We also have some of the most productive farmland in the whole of the UK, yet the existing planning rules do not protect it from speculation and development. Access to

[Ms Polly Billington]

nature is proven to enhance health and wellbeing, and the successes of previous Labour Governments in creating access to nature for everyone are some of our proudest achievements. Furthermore, responsible custodianship of our natural environment, especially precious ecosystems, is vital to capturing, sequestering and reducing carbon emissions. The sixth carbon budget predicts that, by 2050, we will need to remove 39 megatonnes of CO₂ a year via nature-based solutions, which is more than double what we do today. That includes wetlands, woodlands and peatlands, which are both beautiful and useful.

This Labour Government were elected on a mandate to transform us into a clean energy superpower by 2030 and to restore and protect 30% of nature by 2030. We cannot achieve those goals under the current rules. That is why I look forward to us publishing a land use framework that will help us to decide what we use land for, and help us to shape our communities and our country to meet our ambition to be somewhere with affordable homes to rent or own and run, affordable sustainable food, affordable secure home-grown clean energy, decent public services, and our beloved countryside providing us with the peace and climate security we all need.

10.17 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): My thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) for securing today's debate, delivering such an excellent and thoughtful speech and speaking so eloquently about her lovely constituency, and also—like my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington)—for teasing out some of the challenges, particularly around housing and the importance of nature.

Nature underpins everything from our personal wellbeing to our economy, but the truth is that nature is in crisis. That is why the Government are committed to charting a new course and ensuring that nature is truly on the road to recovery. Ensuring nature's recovery is one of my Department's five key priorities, alongside cleaning up our rivers, lakes and seas; moving to a zero-waste economy; supporting farmers to boost our food security; and protecting communities from flooding. It is nature's recovery that will support and complement those other priorities and contribute to the Government's central mission for economic growth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury raised the important issue of planning reforms. The Government are determined to transform the planning system to ensure a win-win for house building and for nature. Nature recovery is a top priority, alongside the need to overhaul the planning system, grow the economy and reach net zero. It is not a matter of choosing one of these priorities over another. Sustained economic growth depends on a healthy natural environment.

The Secretary of State has already confirmed that the Government are undertaking a rapid review of the environmental improvement plan. Our review will ensure that it is fit for purpose to deliver on our legally binding Environment Act 2021 targets and our international

commitment to protect 30% of England's land and sea by 2030. So this debate is extremely timely, and I will seek to address and respond to the points raised.

To restore nature, we need to create, restore and connect wildlife-rich habitat at scale, reduce pressure on species, including from pollution and climate change, and take targeted action to recover specific species. The Government will deliver for nature, working in partnership with civil society, communities and businesses to restore and protect our natural world. Working with farmers and landowners to deliver nature recovery will be crucial, which is why we are fully committed to the environmental land management schemes.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Would the Minister be keen to meet some of my constituents, who are threatened by the actions of EDF and Hinkley Point C, which wish to create salt marsh on land that is currently farmed in north Somerset? That is causing a huge amount of distress to people locally, including young Sophie Cole, whom I met this weekend and who has just started on her path as a young farmer. She is 28, and she and all the villagers in Kingston Seymour are very keen to make sure that the Minister understands the tensions between the creation of salt marsh at the behest of Hinkley and their natural desire to carry on farming that has taken place for hundreds of years.

Daniel Zeichner: I would be happy to learn more about the issues that the hon. Lady has raised.

The Government will optimise ELMS so that they produce the right outcomes for all farmers while delivering food security and nature recovery in a just and equitable way. We will confirm plans for the roll-out of schemes and our wider approach as soon as possible. ELMS, including the sustainable farming incentive, countryside stewardship and landscape recovery, will contribute to the biodiversity targets at scale by supporting nature-friendly farming and creating and restoring wildlife-rich habitats. They will also help to restore and improve the condition of protected sites, including sites of special scientific interest. From this year, ELM agreements are expected to bring or maintain up to 480,000 hectares of eligible SSSI habitat in England under favourable management, and to create or restore up to 300,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat, in addition to up to 200,000 hectares of peat and woodland by 2042.

In addition to the action that we will take to recover nature by creating and restoring habitat, we will take action to effectively protect wildlife-rich habitats and species. That protection is crucial, as species are in decline. That includes important farmland species such as farmland birds, including the turtle dove, which has declined in the UK by 97% since 1994. However, where nature-friendly farmers and major partners such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the wildlife trusts and the National Trust, have put the right ELM measures in the right places, we have seen increases in scarce farmland bird species such as chough, curlew, and stone curlew.

Our work to protect nature will include action to restore our protected sites, which are vital wildlife havens facing increasing pressures from climate change, pollution, and invasive non-native species. Natural England is working to get protected sites into favourable condition. That includes piloting new powers to put in place

protected sites strategies to deliver improvements in partnership with others and working with the SSSI major landowners group to develop landscape-scale approaches. Natural England is also working with farmers through the catchment-sensitive farming programme to improve water and air quality on farms around protected sites. That includes helping farmers to secure funding to make management changes to improve their condition.

We will also protect our most beautiful landscapes and help our national parks and national landscapes to become wilder, greener and more accessible to all as we deliver our commitment to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Minister talks about partnerships, and among the key partners in restoring nature are, of course, small family farms. I have heard speculation that Wednesday's Budget might remove agricultural property relief on inheritance tax. Of course, the Minister will not be able to comment on the Budget—I will have to wait until Wednesday for that—but if somebody were to float such an idea, would he combat it?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is not going to tempt me. He will have to wait until Wednesday, I am afraid.

One of the key criteria for land to contribute to our 30by30 commitment is protection, as areas counting towards the target should be protected from loss or damage to important biodiversity. Land contributing to 30by30 should be secured for long enough to secure good biodiversity outcomes, generally for at least 20 years. Some areas, including those under intensive farming, are not suitable for 30by30, but our approach recognises that nature-friendly land uses may be able to play a role in supporting our goal.

Jim Shannon: It is disappointing that the good work done by wildfowling clubs across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is not often mentioned. They rent and own salt marshes—they own land as well—and they manage them so that wildlife

and plant life can blossom. It is done in partnership with landowners, Natural England and many others. Will the Minister recognise the good work that wildfowling clubs do and their contribution to a better life?

Daniel Zeichner: Of course, I join the hon. Gentleman in recognising the role of wildfowling clubs and many others who play an important role in the countryside.

The Government also place great importance on our agricultural land and food production. The national planning policy framework sets out how the best and most versatile agricultural land should be reflected in planning policies and decisions. The framework is clear that, where significant development of agricultural land is necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality.

Meeting our ambitious targets on nature restoration, alongside our priorities on food security and accelerating to net zero, will require careful thought about how we use our land, which is why the forthcoming land use framework for England will consider cross-governmental issues such as energy and food security, and how we can expand nature-rich habitats such as wetlands, peat bogs and forests.

The 16th UN biodiversity summit is currently under way in Colombia, where the importance of biodiversity and ensuring that we achieve our national targets and international commitments will once again be in the spotlight. The Government have also recently appointed Ruth Davis as the UK's first envoy for nature, and she will champion our ambition to put nature at the heart of our foreign policy and help us to deliver our commitments for nature recovery.

I finish by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury for securing today's debate. I look forward to working closely with her and others to ensure that we begin to make real progress on the Government's priorities of nature recovery and boosting our food security.

Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 28 October 2024

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Contracts for Difference

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I would like to advise the House that today I am laying draft regulations to implement two amendments to the Contract for Difference (CfD) scheme in time for the next allocation round, supporting the Government's clean energy superpower mission to deliver clean power by 2030 and accelerate to net zero.

The CfD scheme is the Government's main mechanism for supporting new low-carbon electricity generation projects in Great Britain. Awarded through regular, competitive allocation rounds, it guarantees a set price per megawatt-hour of electricity for 15 years, indexed to inflation. The income stabilisation that it provides for the generator makes projects that have high up-front costs but long lifetimes and low running costs attractive to investors and lenders, reducing the cost of capital and overall project cost. It also protects consumers when electricity prices are high.

The latest allocation round, AR6, was a great success, securing a record-breaking 131 projects and 9.6 GW of renewable electricity capacity. But we must continually evolve the CfD scheme to drive progress towards the 2030 clean power target and ensure that it reflects the global challenges and opportunities faced by the renewables sector.

These amendments to legislation will extend the option to phase projects under the CfD to floating offshore wind and enable repowered onshore wind projects to apply for a CfD, provided they meet certain criteria.

This Government have committed to radically increasing the UK's offshore wind capacity. Floating offshore wind is an emerging technology that allows us to access wind resource in deeper waters, which tend to be further from shore and have higher, more consistent wind speeds. CfD phasing policy allows offshore wind projects with a maximum capacity of 1,500 MW to be built in up to three stages. Previously this only applied to fixed-bottom offshore wind. The extension of phasing to floating offshore wind will benefit this emerging sector, de-risking the construction process and helping developers and the supply chain to work with more certainty. This, in turn, will reduce investment risk and enable the construction of larger floating windfarms, as investors gain confidence in successful project completion.

The other amendment concerns onshore wind. From the late 2020s onwards, it is likely that a significant proportion of current onshore wind sites will reach the end of their operational life. When a project comes to the end of its operating life, the generator can choose to decommission permanently, extend its life, or repower. Repowering would require decommissioning and recommissioning of the existing site, incurring similarly high up-front capital costs to that of a new build. Allowing

projects to apply for a CfD to repower, in contrast to retiring, could make a significant contribution to the 2030 clean power goal. This amendment offers revenue certainty for onshore wind projects that may otherwise struggle to repower. Without it, we may lose the opportunity to retain and increase this renewable capacity and the societal and economic benefits this confers.

This draft legislation laid today is another important step forward in delivering clean power, shielding families from volatile gas prices and establishing the UK as a clean energy superpower.

[HCWS168]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Sea Level Rise: Maritime Zones

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): The UN convention on the law of the sea sets out the legal framework for all activities in the ocean and seas. Upholding UNCLOS is central to the UK Government's approach to ocean issues as an essential enabler of global security, growth and a healthy planet.

UNCLOS sets out the legal basis on which states can establish the baselines along their coasts, or joining points on their coasts, from which they are entitled to generate maritime zones, including their territorial sea and exclusive economic zone.

When UNCLOS was drafted, significant sea level rise and changes in coastlines as a result of the climate crisis were not contemplated by the drafters, and no provision was made for this. However, with sea level rise, coastlines are likely to regress, and some features may be completely inundated and lost.

The International Law Commission is the UN body of international law experts responsible for studying and making recommendations to encourage the progressive development and codification of international law. ILC work on the topic of sea level rise in international law has been ongoing since 2019, and the UK has responded to ILC requests for information on state practice. On 6 August 2021, the Pacific Islands Forum made a declaration to the effect that having, in accordance with UNCLOS, established and notified their maritime zones to the UN Secretary-General, Pacific Islands Forum members intend to maintain these zones without reduction, notwithstanding climate change-related sea level rise, and will not review or update the baselines or outer limits of their maritime zones as a consequence of climate change-related sea level rise. The Alliance of Small Island States made a similar statement in their leaders' declaration in September 2021.

Having considered the work of the ILC to date on the issue of maritime boundaries, and the views of our partners, I can confirm that the UK Government take the view that UNCLOS imposes no express or affirmative obligation on states to keep their baselines or the outer limits of maritime zones derived from them under review, or to update them once they have been established in accordance with UNCLOS. UNCLOS provides that baselines and outer limits of the maritime zones are as shown on the relevant chart or specified by co-ordinates.

It does not expressly require coastal states to update those charts or co-ordinates. This position is consistent with the object and purpose of UNCLOS as a regime for securing a stable division of maritime space. Once a state has established its maritime zones in accordance with UNCLOS, it is permitted to maintain those maritime zones, and the rights and entitlements that flow from them, notwithstanding changes to coastlines and physical features that result from sea level rise caused by the climate crisis. This does not prejudice the UK Government's position on other international law questions raised by sea level rise that the ILC is also considering.

The UK Government's position is that this analysis can only apply to baselines or outer limits which are initially established in accordance with UNCLOS. It remains the UK Government's position that UNCLOS provides the complete and definitive rules on the drawing of baselines from which maritime zones are measured.

While the UK Government recognise that UNCLOS does not require states to update the relevant charts or co-ordinates designated by states as depicting the baselines and outer limits of their maritime zones, the UK Government consider it important that necessary hydrographic surveying takes place and navigational charts and other information continue to be updated as frequently as necessary for the purposes of navigational safety.

[HCWS171]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Supply of Radioisotopes

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am today updating the House on the severe shortage of radioisotopes that the UK is facing. The affected radioisotopes are mainly used for diagnosing cancers, including prostate and breast cancer. It is also used for imaging of organ function in scans, including for the heart. Despite efforts by my Department and NHS England to limit the negative impacts of this shortage, there will be delays to patient access to services relying on the impacted radioisotopes, including cancellations.

This shortage is due to a temporary reduction in the production of molybdenum-99 which is used to generate technetium-99m. The radioisotope technetium-99m is used safely for diagnostics in the NHS. This issue is impacting not only the UK, but countries across Europe, and worldwide.

The shortage of molybdenum-99 is caused by a sudden global disruption of manufacturing capacity, with a number of the nuclear reactors used to produce these elements being out of service. There are six trusted research reactors globally for the supply of molybdenum-99, none of which are in the UK. Some of these reactors are currently out of service to allow for critical repair work; this is essential work necessary for the safe running of the research reactors. Two of the impacted reactors are expected to restart production during the second week of November, with deliveries from these reactors expected to resume in mid-November. My Department, together with relevant experts, is working closely with suppliers to support the process to restart the affected reactors as soon as possible.

There will remain a significantly constrained supply of these radioisotopes to the UK from the remaining reactors. Radioisotopes give off radiation and undergo a process of decay, which means they cannot be stored or kept in reserve. Our priority is to minimise the impact on patients as much as possible. Therefore, my Department is working closely with suppliers, clinical experts, NHS England and devolved Governments to support the allocation of deliveries and ensure there is equitable and fair access across the UK to the constrained supply of stock that is available. NHS England is supporting trusts and hospitals to share available supply and ensure that critical patients are given priority. Guidance is being issued to ensure that patients with the most critical need are prioritised. If any patient is concerned about their treatment, they should discuss this with their clinician at the earliest opportunity.

I know how difficult this will be for affected patients while we face this supply issue. This issue is different in nature to normal supply chain problems due to the unique challenges radioisotope shortages present. My Department is working closely with suppliers and relevant experts to resolve the supply issue as soon as possible. I will continue to keep Parliament updated on our progress to resolve this severe shortage.

[HCWS170]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Social and Affordable Housing

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): This week's Budget will set out how the Government will deliver more affordable housing and ensure that social housing is available for those who need it most.

This will include an immediate one-year cash injection of £500 million to top up the existing affordable homes programme, which will deliver up to 5,000 new social and affordable homes, bringing total investment in housing supply in 2025-26 to over £5 billion. This comes ahead of the multi-year spending review next spring, where the Government will set out details of new investment to succeed the 2021-26 affordable homes programme. This new investment will deliver a mix of homes for sub-market rent and home ownership, with a particular focus on delivering homes for social rent.

The Government will also consult on a new five-year social housing rent settlement, which caps the rents that social housing providers can charge their tenants, to provide the sector with the certainty it needs to invest in new social housing. The intention would be for this to increase with consumer prices index inflation figures and an additional 1%. The consultation will also seek views on other potential options to give greater certainty, such as providing a 10-year settlement.

These measures to increase affordable housing come alongside changes to the right-to-buy scheme. England's existing social housing supply is depleted every year by the scheme while also disincentivising councils to build new social housing. To address this, the Chancellor will

confirm at the Budget that councils will be able to retain 100% of the receipts generated by right-to-buy sales. This will enable councils to scale up delivery of much needed social homes while still enabling long-standing tenants to buy their own homes. The Chancellor will also set out how right-to-buy discounts will be reduced to protect existing social housing stock to meet housing need, while ensuring that long-term tenants can still benefit. This will deliver a fairer and more sustainable scheme that also presents better value for money for councils.

The Chancellor will also confirm at the Budget £128 million of funding to support the delivery of new housing projects, comprising of:

Confirmation of a £56 million investment at Liverpool Central Docks, which is expected to deliver 2,000 homes in north Liverpool, along with office, retail, leisure and hotel facilities. This will transform Liverpool's former dockland into a thriving waterfront neighbourhood.

A £25 million investment in a joint venture to establish a new fund with Muse Places Ltd and Pension Insurance Corporation to deliver 3,000 energy-efficient new homes across the country, with a target of 100% of these being affordable.

The confirmation of £47 million to local authorities to support the delivery of up to 28,000 homes that would otherwise be stalled due to "nutrient neutrality" requirements. This funding will not only unlock much needed new housing, but clean up our rivers in the process.

[HCWS169]

Written Correction

Monday 28 October 2024

Ministerial Correction

CABINET OFFICE

Strengthening National Resilience

The following extract is from Cabinet Office questions on 24 October 2024.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I turn to another area of national resilience. National security experts have been warning about the Chinese Communist party's use of genomics companies to harvest DNA data globally and dominate the genomics industry supply chain. Given

the increasing importance of genomics for public healthcare, and the potential dual-use application of the technology, will the Minister confirm whether her Department is conducting a risk assessment on the data privacy, national security and ethical risks posed by genomic companies linked to systemic competitors?

Ms Oppong-Asare: The right hon. Member is right to raise that question. We will ban China's economic engagement, and make sure we strengthen our national security.

[*Official Report*, 24 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 393.]

Written correction submitted by the Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare):

Ms Oppong-Asare: The right hon. Member is right to raise that question. We will **balance China in terms of economic engagement** and making sure we strengthen our national security.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Statement—(Darren Jones)

International Engagement [Col. 573]

Statement—(Anneliese Dodds)

Remembrance and Veterans [Col. 586]

Motion—(John Healey)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 641]

Agricultural Land: Protection [Col. 643]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]

Written Correction [Col. 7WC]

Ministerial Correction
