Tuesday
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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 13 May 2025

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House of Commons

Tuesday 13 May 2025

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Royal Albert Hall Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday 20 May (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

1. **Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his Israeli counterpart on the entry of aid and food supplies into Gaza. [904071]

3. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [904074]

8. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [904079]

21. **David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): What steps he is taking to support people impacted by the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [904092]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Aid must be restored to Gaza. It should never be used as a political tool, and Israel is bound under international law to allow the unhindered passage of humanitarian aid. The UK has jointly called an urgent session of the UN Security Council this afternoon to address the dire situation in Gaza.

Sarah Smith: The current intentional blockade of food, water and medicine by the Israeli Government is preventing life-sustaining supplies from reaching thousands of children, who the Minister knows are most vulnerable to malnutrition and premature death. Save the Children estimates that over 65,000 children are suffering. What decisive action are the Government taking beyond the E3 statement to make it clear to the Government of Israel that their siege in Gaza must end immediately and that a humanitarian aid system cannot be replaced with a military-controlled one? Will he consider sanctions and the cessation of arms and rule out any trade deal, as children should not pay the price for the inaction of the international community?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right to raise the plight of children in Gaza and, indeed, all those suffering from the lack of aid and the continued conflict. This Government have been clear that the ceasefire must be restored. Since the E3 statement, which she mentions, we have taken the decision jointly with our partners to call an urgent session of the UN Security Council, given the gravity of the situation.

Joe Morris: The looming famine in Gaza is not a natural disaster; it is a direct result of the deterioration of the ceasefire agreement. It is deeply concerning that this is putting the entire population of Gaza at critical risk of food insecurity and potential famine. Can the Minister assure me that this Government are supporting every possible opportunity to get vital resources and humanitarian aid into the region?

Mr Falconer: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are doing everything we can to ensure that aid gets in, that hostages are released, that Hamas are no longer in charge of Gaza, and that we get the ceasefire and path to a two-state solution that we so desperately need.

Paul Waugh: The UN's Philippe Lazzarini is right, isn't he, to say today that Israel is committing a "massive atrocity" by blocking aid to the children of Gaza? As well as the urgent need for aid, the Palestinian people need more trade with countries like the UK. Will the Minister explain how my constituents in Rochdale can buy more Palestinian goods, such as olive oil, herbs and dates, and support tech companies and the many co-operatives that operate in the west bank and in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I know that Rochdale is the home of the co-operative movement in this country and that there are many co-operatives in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well. On 20 April, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Authority. That includes pursuing further co-operation in exactly the areas he describes, including economic development and trade.

David Chadwick: Gaza faces imminent famine due to the Israeli Government's blockade, and over 2 million people face catastrophic hunger levels. What action are the UK Government taking to lift the blockade and secure the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza?

Mr Falconer: This Government have a clear position on the vital importance of aid returning to Gaza. That is why we are calling an urgent session of the UN Security Council this afternoon. It is why the Foreign Secretary has made these points repeatedly and clearly to his Israeli counterparts, as indeed have I.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): How long will the UK walk by on the other side as Palestinian children bleed and starve to death? Is it not time that this Government, and indeed His Majesty's loyal Opposition, show that they are supportive of Israel, but that that

support does not necessarily mean they are supportive of a particular Government—in this case, the racist, brutal regime of Netanyahu?

Mr Falconer: Let us not forget what this Government have done. We restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency after the Conservatives froze it. We suspended arms export licences whereas the Conservatives did not take action. We have provided £129 million in humanitarian assistance to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We are not on the other side of the road. I welcome the right hon. Member's strong views on this; I found his intervention last week very powerful indeed. There is no one on the Labour Benches who does not understand the gravity of the situation. That is why we invited the Palestinian Prime Minister, why we signed the memorandum of understanding, and why we are calling an urgent session of the Security Council. This Government will not be on the other side of the road from Palestinian suffering.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last week the United Nations issued a report describing the situation in Gaza as

"one of the most ostentatious and merciless manifestations of the desecration of human life and dignity".

The Government have always insisted that it is not for them but for the courts to determine what is and what is not a genocide, but the Minister will know that the genocide convention also puts a legal obligation on states to act to prevent a genocide. Does he believe that the UK has fulfilled its legal obligation under that convention to prevent a genocide in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: As I said to the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), we are taking action—not just rhetoric, but action—to try to address the situation in Gaza. That includes calling the Security Council to an urgent session this afternoon, alongside our partners. We will continue to take the action that we think is needed to ensure that the people of Gaza get what they need.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): We hear about the actions that the Government are taking, but unfortunately none of them are leading to the prevention of the starvation and killing of innocent civilians. The latest numbers, which are only an estimate, show that over 60 children have died of starvation according to official records. We do not know how many have died but have not yet been recorded. There is one step that the Government have not taken. I welcome the aid, but when it stands on the other side of a crossing and cannot get to the people who need it, it is useless. Some 10 or 11 months ago, aid was airdropped into Gaza. Why are the Government not airdropping aid or providing it by sea, and will they condemn the bombing on 2 May of the freedom flotilla, which went to provide aid?

Mr Falconer: As I think the House knows, I am familiar with the impediments to getting aid into Gaza—I went to the Gaza-Egypt border to see the restrictions for myself. We have made these points in public and in private, and we will continue to do so. We are talking to our Jordanian partners and others—many in the region understandably have real concerns about the lack of aid getting in. Although we are considering, with Jordan and others, what the alternatives may be, I must be plain with the House: there is no alternative to a land route if aid is to get in at the scale that is required, so we must be clear with the Israeli Government and all partners in the region that opening those crossings is critical.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Mr Lazzarini has said that children in Gaza are more likely to die of starvation than of an act of violence. What does my hon. Friend expect from this afternoon's session at the UN? What specifically will be asked for that would move the situation on? Israel cannot be allowed to continue using food as a weapon of war.

Mr Falconer: I think I was clear about the Government's expectations in my previous answer. Those expectations are grounded in Israel's international legal obligations. Ultimately, this is a week of diplomacy: the President of the United States will be in the region, and we will raise these issues in the Security Council. I hope that diplomacy will be able to make progress towards a ceasefire and the restoration of aid.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Gaza has been starved of humanitarian aid for over 70 days now. Ministers have repeatedly expressed their disappointment, but there is no evidence that the Israeli Government are listening or have any intention of reopening the supply routes. In March, the Foreign Secretary withdrew his assessment that the blockade is a breach of international law. Will the Minister state how many days the blockade must continue before the Government recognise it as a breach of international law? To make clear the UK's support for Palestine's right to self-determination and opposition to the extremist policy of annexation by force, will the Government commit to working with France towards the joint recognition of the state of Palestine at the conference next month?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Secretary has been clear repeatedly, as have all Ministers from the Dispatch Box, that it is the long-standing policy of British Governments that we do not make legal determinations. We made an assessment when we arrived that there was a real risk of serious breaches of international humanitarian law, and that continues to be our finding. Given the events that many in this House have rightly raised, we continue to make those assessments and include all those events in them.

On the French-Saudi conference in June, we continue to talk with all our partners. As I said in my previous answer, this is a period for diplomacy. A ceasefire is desperately needed, and it is diplomacy that will get us through to the next stage.

Kashmir

2. **Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of the situation in Kashmir. [904073]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): The UK welcomes the commitments made by India and Pakistan

to pause any further military action. Given our strong and close relationships with both countries, the UK stands ready to work with both sides to make a lasting ceasefire a reality.

Mr Frith: On Saturday, I met constituents in Bury North with deep family roots in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, including relatives in Mirpur, Kotli, Bhimber, Lahore and Gujrat. There is growing anxiety within this community in Bury about the potential for the conflict to escalate once again. While I praise the efforts of the British Government in securing a ceasefire, given the UK's historic ties to the region, will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the Government will continue their diplomatic efforts and dialogue to ensure lasting peace, including the vital protection of water access under the Indus waters treaty, which must not be weaponised in any escalation?

Mr Lammy: We do recognise and understand that the situation in India and Pakistan is deeply unsettling for over 3 million British nationals who stem from those two countries, with which we have deep relationships. I have spoken to my Indian and Pakistani counterparts four times since this crisis began, and I stay in close touch with Secretary of State Rubio and my counterparts in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular—nations that have relationships with both countries. We will do all we can, and we encourage both India and Pakistan to maintain their commitment to hard-won areas of diplomatic co-operation, such as the Indus waters treaty.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following the terrorist attack on 22 April, India and Pakistan engaged in military activity, and India hit nine terrorist bases. Now that there is a fragile peace, which is still being negotiated today, what efforts is the Foreign Secretary making to ensure that the terrorist bases are removed from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir?

Mr Lammy: Let me be clear that the horrendous terrorism we saw—26 nationals stripped and shot—was horrific, and we condemn it. We will continue to work with close partners to deal with this terrorist threat. The hon. Gentleman is right: all of us have to lean in and ensure that we are supporting efforts on both sides to deal with horrendous terrorism. That is what, in the end, will maintain an enduring peace.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality remains that the international community has failed to act on the plight of the Kashmiris for over seven decades. From the revocation of articles 370 and 35A, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special status, to the mass arrests and political repression in one of the most militarised zones in the world, the attacks on Kashmiri human rights and civil liberties are intolerable. If we are serious about human rights and long-term peace and stability in the region, the central issue of Kashmir cannot be ignored any longer and must now get the attention it deserves. Will the Secretary of State today reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the birthright to self-determination of the sons and daughters of Kashmir?

Mr Lammy: Let me once again condemn the terrorism we saw that began this crisis and remind the House that since 1947 there have been six conflicts and three wars between these two great countries. The long-standing position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account of course, as my hon. Friend suggests, the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): My constituents in Woking, particularly those of Indian and Pakistani descent, welcome the ceasefire. Will the Foreign Secretary urge both countries to accept that the solution to the Kashmir question is self-determination, not further violence?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, it is absolutely for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, and of course it must in the end take into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. But all of us have a responsibility to condemn terrorism wherever it occurs: 26 innocent people being stripped and shot is intolerable and of course we condemn it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): We all welcome the easing of tensions between India and Pakistan over the weekend, and our thoughts continue to be with those affected by this shocking terrorist atrocity. The House will be aware of the ongoing presence of terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan, and that should be a concern for all of us. Last week at the Dispatch Box, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), commented that he had held discussions with his Pakistani counterpart on this very issue. What further discussions have taken place to secure commitments from the Pakistani Government that they will dismantle terrorist infrastructure, and what role will Britain play in supporting the removal of terrorist threats within Pakistan, because that is what will improve stability and security in the region?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and may I share my reflections over the last few days? We do need proper communication between India and Pakistan, and that must happen not just on military channels but on political channels. She will recognise that on this occasion, those communications are poor. We do need confidence-building measures and to ensure that we are dealing with terrorism where it acts, and of course the United Kingdom will lean in to that. Above all, we need dialogue. The international community can play a role, particularly where countries have relations with both countries. That is why we have been talking to the United States, that is why we have been talking to Saudi, and that is why we are working with the UAE.

US Policy on Iran

4. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the policy of the US Administration on Iran.

[904075]

10. **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the policy of the US Administration on Iran. [904081]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): The UK is supportive of US efforts to reach a nuclear deal with Iran. We have encouraged Iran to engage with President Trump's efforts in good faith and to find a diplomatic solution. Since the beginning of May, I have raised Iran with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the special envoy to the middle east, Steve Witkoff. We have discussed the range of threats that Iran poses to the UK and our partners.

John Cooper: The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is the terrorism export wing of the despotic regime in Tehran. Why are we not joining the Americans in proscribing this organisation when we did proscribe the Wagner organisation in Russia? Is it possibly because the Americans are pressuring us to continue our tenuous diplomatic links with Tehran?

Mr Lammy: I remind the hon. Gentleman that on 4 March the UK specified Iran under the foreign influence registration scheme, which targets those who undertake malign activity in the UK. Of course we keep proscription under review. We are looking closely at the area of state threats; that is traditionally very different from the sorts of cells and terrorist communities that we do proscribe. That is why the Government continue to look at this area very carefully.

David Reed: Our United Kingdom and the United States are aligned in the view that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a serious threat to global stability. With nuclear negotiations currently under way between the US and Iran, can the Secretary of State inform the House what outcome his Department would consider to be a success from a British perspective? Crucially, does he have a contingency plan if those talks fail to produce an acceptable result?

Mr Lammy: Iran is now producing roughly one significant quantity of highly enriched uranium every six weeks. That is 40 times above the limit in the joint comprehensive plan of action—the deal that we struck with Iran, which I have in front of me.[1] I am really crystal clear about this. Iran must never develop a nuclear weapon; it must reverse its escalations—we have seen that in its enrichment programme; it must not carry out any critical weaponisation work; and these terms have to be fully verifiable. Unless we get that, we will see a snapback of the sanctions regime that we struck with it 10 years ago.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The regime in Tehran is responsible for so much of the appalling bloodshed and conflict in the middle east. It poses a direct threat to Britain and on British soil, as we have seen from the recent arrests of Iranian nationals in counter-terrorism operations. Has the Foreign Secretary summoned the Iranian ambassador to express concerns and to explain what has been going on on British soil? What discussions have taken place with our allies in addition to the nuclear talks that he has just referred to? What is the position of our partners in the region on the very specific threats that Iran is posing and demonstrating with its dissidents on UK soil? When will the Government come forward with a comprehensive and clear strategy on dealing with Iran?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady is right. On 3 May, counter-terrorism police arrested eight individuals, including seven Iranian nationals, as part of two separate police investigations. Of course the Minister responsible for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has spoken to the Israeli ambassador.[1] As I said, on 4 March we put Iran on the foreign influence registration scheme. We keep proscription under review. We are fully engaged with our E3 partners, and we are very pleased that Germany now has a Government so that we can work with them together on the JCPOA and snapback, and of course we are speaking to Steve Witkoff.

1.[*Official Report*, 15 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 7WC.] (Correction)

1.[*Official Report*, 15 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

Humanitarian Aid: Educational Programmes

5. **Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of allocating 10% of humanitarian aid to educational programmes. [904076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The UK is a principled humanitarian donor. We prioritise giving humanitarian assistance to people in greatest need, which includes protecting the most vulnerable by supporting access to education in emergencies and crises. Decisions on future budgets are subject to the ongoing spending review and resource allocation processes.

Kirith Entwistle: According to the Education and Development Forum, planned cuts to the official development assistance budget could slash UK aid for education by more than 70% by 2027 compared with 2019 levels. In Gaza, where 95% of schools are damaged and 650,000 children go without formal education, UK-backed programmes will be vital in restoring hope, providing stability and equipping children with the skills to rebuild. Does the Minister agree that education aid must be protected, particularly in crisis responses such as in Gaza?

Catherine West: As the Prime Minister set out, the UK will continue to play a leading humanitarian role, including in Gaza, where children must be allowed to return to school in safety. Through our global funding, the UK enables thousands of children to gain access to essential education services, supporting recovery from the trauma of war and building skills and hope for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past, the Minister has spoken very positively about education. What assessment has been made of the potential progress that could be made in reducing youth radicalisation by allocating aid to education programmes, as we have witnessed over the years a number of young people being brainwashed online by extremist groups?

Catherine West: We have an excellent programme called Education Cannot Wait, which in 2024 provided £12 million in first emergency response grants covering not just the educational needs but the psychosocial needs of those affected by conflict and trauma.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We know that education can make a real difference to a girl's life chances, which is why the last Conservative Government committed to ensuring that every girl has access to quality education. However, we will now be spending less on development, so can the Minister give clarity on the commitments that the Government are making to support women and girls over the next few years? Which programmes will be kept and which will be cut, and how much will be invested in those programmes?

Catherine West: The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's humanitarian framework sets out our long-term approach through three policy priorities: providing humanitarian assistance for those in greatest need; protecting people at risk in conflict and crises; and preventing and anticipating future shocks and building resilience. When it comes to building resilience, the people most at risk are often women and young girls who fail to have access to education. The indices of educational attainment will be the basis on which many of these decisions are made.

Consular Assistance: Statutory Right

6. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Whether his Department plans to introduce a statutory right to consular assistance. [904077]

18. **Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on introducing a statutory right to consular assistance. [904089]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): We are committed to strengthening support for British nationals abroad, including introducing a right to consular assistance in cases of human rights violations. The Department is considering a package of measures, which we will announce in due course, alongside options for stakeholder consultations.

Christine Jardine: Every year, an estimated 5,000 British citizens are arrested abroad, many of them under false pretences. Many are used as hostages and denied access to legal representation, and their families are left without information, not knowing what has happened to them. High-profile cases at the moment include those of Alaa Abd el-Fattah in Egypt and of Jagtar Singh Johal in India. None of these people has an automatic right to support, as is the case with other countries such as the United States, so can the Minister give us more details about exactly what the consular assistance will be and whether it will be automatic for everyone?

Mr Falconer: The safety and security of British nationals overseas is a top priority for the Government. This is a complex area of policy—the hon. Lady has described the wide range of different consular cases that the Foreign Office responds to, from kidnap cases to more routine cases. As I set out to the Foreign Affairs Committee, given the complexity of these issues we will come back to Parliament in due course with options for consultation.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I remind the Government that their manifesto promised a legal right to consular assistance in cases of human rights violations. The Government have now been in power for close on a year. This is not something that should take a big shove; surely, we should do it straight away. Surely such assistance should be a legal right. People including Ryan Cornelius and Jimmy Lai are still being held. Ryan Cornelius has been held illegally for 17 years, which the UN has criticised as a human rights violation. For ages we did not send anybody to see him; surely now we must act and call out these regimes. The first place to start is by giving those people the absolute right to consular assistance.

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and his commitment to these issues. Were it only so that passing a right in this place would secure the release of the people whose cases have been raised. In every case that has been mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman and by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), the people concerned do receive consular assistance. I have met the families of Ryan Cornelius and Alaa Abd el-Fattah; they both remain very much in our minds. It is important that we get the rights correct. These are complex cases, and we are bound not just by what we decide in Parliament, but by the relevant conventions and diplomatic norms. We will take action to try to preserve the safety of British nationals overseas, but it is right that we take our time to ensure that we get it correct.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is at times of crisis that British nationals abroad need consular services the most. I share many of my constituents' concerns about the violence in India, Pakistan and Kashmir, including those of a 12-year-old boy who contacted me yesterday about his aunt and uncle who are stranded in Pakistan, as is one of my lovely neighbours. Although airspace has now been opened, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all British residents have access to consular services and are able to return to the UK as soon as possible?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for her constituents, including at all hours throughout the weekend, and I recognise her commitment and the commitment of many others in this House. The Foreign Secretary set out in a "dear colleagues" letter the details for ensuring that MPs are able to contact the Foreign Office in a timely way, and I encourage all those watching at home to sign up to our travel advice and to keep watching it carefully.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): One British citizen denied consular access is Jimmy Lai, who faces life in prison for exercising the rights guaranteed to him under the joint declaration between the United Kingdom and China. My hon. Friend will have seen reports that America intended to raise the case of Jimmy Lai during

its recent talks with China in Geneva. What steps can the Government take to capitalise on America's renewed interest in his case so that we can secure his freedom?

Mr Falconer: We continue to call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and release Jimmy Lai immediately. As my hon. Friend would expect, I will not comment overmuch on the actions of other states, but I will say that the Prime Minister has raised this matter directly with the relevant authorities, as have the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and many others.

Ukraine: Diplomacy

7. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to support Ukraine. [904078]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Last week I travelled with European partners to Lviv at the invitation of Ukraine's Foreign Minister, and yesterday I hosted, for the first time in London, Foreign Ministers from the Weimar+ group of key European allies to discuss our joint efforts to strengthen European security and secure a just and lasting peace in Ukraine.

John Milne: Last weekend the Prime Minister said that the UK would do all that it could to support Ukraine. If that is the case, why do the Government continue to prevaricate over seizing billions of pounds in frozen assets held in UK banks, which could be used to build Ukraine defences? The longer we delay, the more likely it is that those funds will become wrapped up in other negotiations and we will lose the chance altogether.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue, but it is not an issue on which the Government should act unilaterally. It is a multilateral issue on which we should act with our G7 partners and our European partners, recognising that some partners in Europe are hugely exposed. The best way in which to move forward is to pool those assets, and discussions on that are ongoing.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The Yale University humanitarian research lab was doing incredible work in tracking the 19,546 Ukraine children who have been stolen by Russia, but then became a victim of the cuts being made by the Department of Government Efficiency. Following international outrage, its work was preserved and given a reprieve for six weeks, a period that ended on 8 May. Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that the data collected by the university has been secured and transferred to Europol, or that its funding is secure for the longer term?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for continually raising this matter. We are an active member of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, and we fund the Bring Kids Back UA and Save Ukraine campaigns. We have raised this issue internationally, and I am proud to have worked on it with Mrs Zelensky. I will write to the hon. Lady as soon as I can to update her on the funding.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The sustainable success of Ukraine and its self-defence hinges very much on the appetite of the President of the United States of America. What steps are the Foreign Secretary, his Ministers and his officials taking to ensure that the President remains committed to defending the territorial integrity of not just his own nation but all nations, and will the Foreign Secretary ensure that the White House understands that allowing an aggressor to prosper in this case will encourage other aggressors to invade their neighbours in the future?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the experience and the strength with which the right hon. Gentleman has spoken. He will have noted that the Prime Minister was in Kyiv recently with President Zelensky and other European partners, and that they engaged with President Trump there. We welcome the desire to secure an enduring peace, but it seems to me that engaging in those talks will require a ceasefire. It is Putin who is prevaricating, it is Putin who is obfuscating, and we must call that out with our long experience of scrutinising that particular individual.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): We all hope the mooted peace talks between Russia and Ukraine on ending Russia's illegal invasion take place as quickly as possible, to stop the killing and save lives. Accountability is important, so will the Foreign Secretary outline his position on Russian war crimes and on how justice can be done?

Mr Lammy: I was very pleased to be with other European Foreign Ministers in Lviv to support the special tribunal and be crystal clear that those who have prosecuted this war must attest and be accountable for their actions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Ukrainians continue bravely to resist Russia's war machine, yet President Trump continues to indulge in the fantasy that Putin is serious about peace. The UK needs to maintain clear leadership in the face of Trump's unreliability. In the Foreign Secretary's response to me in March, he said that the UK wanted to pursue the seizure of frozen Russian assets, but that Belgium and Germany were blockers. I listened carefully to the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne), and he spoke about multilateralism. What conversations on this issue has he had with his counterparts in Belgium and Germany since March, and when will the point come when the UK shows leadership, calls time and leads from the front by seizing Russian assets?

Mr Lammy: I have had detailed talks with my Belgian counterpart—not just at Foreign Minister level, but technical talks that have involved our officials. I know that the hon. Gentleman understands multilateralism. He will recognise that the new German Government have only been in power for a matter of days. I was able to discuss this issue yesterday with my German counterpart but, with all grace, I am allowing him to spend some time getting into the detail of the issue.

Marine Biological Diversity Agreement

9. **Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): What progress he has made on ratifying the agreement under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. [904080]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): As the Foreign Secretary said in his Kew lecture, we are completely committed to ratifying the marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction agreement. Primary legislation is required to give effect to our obligations under the agreement, and legislation to implement the agreement will be introduced as soon as the legislative timetable allows.

Anna Gelderd: The UK has led world-class conservation efforts, and this Government have rightly committed to the landmark high seas treaty, but we must act now, as without ratification the UK risks losing its place in shaping this vital treaty's implementation and future direction. Can the Minister confirm when legislation to ratify the agreement will be introduced, or provide a clear timetable? If we want to stay at the table, we must claim our seat.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to push the Government on this issue, and the FCDO will redouble our efforts in this place to make sure that we do the necessary work to conclude the legal process.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The UK is a world leader in protecting marine environments, particularly around the British Overseas Territories, but tragically that reputation will be trashed when Labour surrenders to Mauritius one of the most important marine protected areas around the British Indian Ocean Territory. While Mauritian fisheries Ministers have been pledging to issue fishing and trawler licences for those waters, Labour Ministers have given no assurances about future protections, and have just made vague comments on working with Mauritius on a new MPA. Can the Minister state if the proposed treaty will have any guaranteed protections in place? Will she confirm what was said in a legal letter to British Chagossians—that their right of return is not guaranteed? Surely that would be a total betrayal.

Catherine West: I thank the shadow Minister for his question. Following the trip that he and I did together when we were both on the Foreign Affairs Committee, I am sure he is aware that the marine protected area will continue and that the environment has been at the heart of the negotiations. Indeed, he must remember that, because when he was the chair of the Chagos Islands all-party parliamentary group, he began the debate with the Mauritians, so I am sure he is in a very good position to ask any further questions that he may like to ask of the Mauritians.

Official Development Assistance Budget

11. **Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): Which development programmes he plans to maintain funding for after the planned reduction of the official development assistance budget in 2027. [904082]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): This Government are resolutely committed to development, but we recognise that we must do it differently. We will ensure that the aid budget delivers value for money and has impact globally. Supporting and growing economies will be at the heart of how we spend ODA going forward, and further decisions on the ODA budget, including specific programmes, are subject to the spending review and resource allocation processes.

Damian Hinds: These severely constrained budgets call for thinking smarter, not simply smaller, so what work are the Government doing with the World Bank and other international institutions to make sure that UK development spend is fully leveraged so that every penny is as effective as possible?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Member raises a very important point, and we of course continue to engage closely with our partners at the World Bank and other multilateral development institutions. Multilateral co-operation allows a global scale of investment and delivery that outstrips what countries can achieve alone. We are also looking at other ways, including through the important work of British International Investment and other bodies, so we are going to look across the board and multilaterally to increase our impact.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): The International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014 says the Government must have due regard to spending aid in a way that contributes to gender equality. Following on from the earlier question, will the Minister confirm that supporting women and girls is a ministerial priority and that we will continue funding vital programmes that support women and girls in many areas?

Stephen Doughty: It certainly is, and women and girls will remain at the heart of our programming. I can assure my hon. Friend that equality impact assessments are an essential part of how we make decisions on ODA allocations. Indeed, Minister Chapman will be appearing before the International Development Committee later today, and I think she will be setting out our approach to the equality impact assessment and other processes.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that Britain properly replenishes Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, a brilliant programme that has benefited so much from British leadership as well as taxpayers' money? When making his decision on how big that replenishment should be, will he remember that the polling shows that 83% of our constituents think this is a brilliant use of taxpayers' money and that we should support it?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman and I have engaged on these issues for a long time, and he knows that I recognise the importance of Gavi's work and that of other bodies such as the Global Fund. We are proud to have supported Gavi to vaccinate over 1 billion children, saving 18 million lives and generating $250 billion in economic benefits. We are considering our next investments as part of the spending review process, and we look forward to the June event.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): The reduction to 0.3% will require painful decisions, but there are innovative financing mechanisms on which Britain could lead—for example, increasing special drawing rights, using the exchange equalisation account, guarantees and debt relief. Can the Minister commit to working with the Treasury to look at all these non-ODA instruments in which Britain could show leadership and fund our development programmes?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely can make that commitment. I will not go into any individual item on my hon. Friend's list of suggestions, but as I said in an earlier answer, we are looking at all measures by which we can support development and economic growth globally, working with multilateral partners.

Victory in Europe Day

12. **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to commemorate Victory in Europe Day. [904083]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I was honoured to attend the VE Day military procession, reception and service of remembrance alongside the Prime Minister and His Majesty the King last week. The events were a fitting tribute to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice during the second world war.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Victory in Europe celebrations in Suffolk Coastal last week were a poignant reminder of the need to continue to press for peace today both in Ukraine and in securing an end to the war in Palestine. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that the lessons of world war two must not be forgotten as innocent civilians continue to face violence and warfare here in Europe and in the middle east?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is important to put on the record that the Commonwealth played a tremendous part in the second world war. Our European partners played an important part, and Europe benefited greatly from the sacrifices made to fight fascism. Wherever we see tyranny, we must continue to stand up for the rights of innocent people, and I was proud to spend the next day in Lviv standing with those who are fighting today.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The centenary of the second world war is way into the future, but will the Foreign Secretary ensure that the UK does not repeat the mistakes of the past when we were rather late coming to the party with the international commemoration of the centenary of the great war? Will he say when we will engage with international partners to start preparing for the centenary of the second world war, and will his Department, the Cabinet Office or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport take the lead?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Member asks an important question. Entering my 25th year in Parliament, I am not sure that I will still be in Parliament on that occasion. However, he is right that we commemorate that appropriately, so I will ask the necessary questions in the coming days and update him.

International Nature Restoration and Resilience Programmes

13. **Katie White** (Leeds North West) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support international programmes on nature restoration and resilience. [904084]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): We cannot address the urgency of the climate and nature crisis without co-ordinated global action. We are supporting nature restoration and resilience in many important ways, including by protecting and restoring forests, working with indigenous people in the Amazon and Congo basins, and supporting vulnerable coastal communities and ecosystems.

Katie White: Last week marked the 99th birthday of Sir David Attenborough and the release of his powerful new film, "Ocean". I encourage all Members to watch it. It makes a compelling case for ocean protection as essential to tackling climate change and restoring nature. With the 2025 UN ocean conference in France fast approaching, will my hon. Friend ensure the UK arrives in the strongest position for that conference by ratifying the high seas treaty and delivering our domestic nature restoration goals through measures, including ending bottom trawling in marine protected areas?

Catherine West: Let me wish a belated happy birthday to Sir David. His advocacy for the natural world is truly inspirational. We are committed to ratifying the agreement, and we will introduce legislation to implement it as soon as the legislative timetable allows.

Release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah

14. **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): What recent progress he has made on helping to secure the release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah. [904085]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The Government are committed to securing Alaa's release, and we continue to raise his case at the highest levels of the Egyptian Government. The Foreign Secretary has raised the case on multiple occasions, as have I. The national security adviser has also raised this case, as has the Prime Minister.

Siân Berry: I thank the Minister for his response. Members of the family of Alaa Abd el-Fattah are again in the Gallery today, and his mother Laila has now not taken food for seven months. I met her again recently and she is so frail now. Does the Minister agree that Alaa's arbitrary detention, long after his sentence ended, continues in violation of the Vienna convention, and that there must be consequences for Egypt, including international legal options and new travel advice, given the evident dangers to British nationals detained in Egypt?

Mr Falconer: I would also like to pay tribute to the fortitude and bravery of Alaa's family, both those in the Gallery and, of course, Laila, whom I have met on a number of occasions and the Prime Minister has met, too. We consider Alaa a British national. He holds both

British and Egyptian nationality. We have been clear on that point, even though it is disputed by the Egyptian Government. We are committed to continuing to work on this case.

UN Ocean Conference

15. **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prepare for the 2025 UN ocean conference. [904086]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The UN ocean conference is an important moment for protecting the ocean and progress towards UN sustainable development goal 14, "Life Below Water". The UK is attending and actively involved in negotiating the political declaration for the conference.

Sarah Champion: Sir David Attenborough's latest film, "Ocean" revealed the shocking devastation caused by bottom trawling and asked the Government to take action at the UN conference in just four weeks. Will the Government use the conference to announce a ban on all bottom trawling in marine protected areas? Why has the Minister still not set out when we will ratify the ocean treaty, which will keep our small island developing states and overseas territories safe?

Catherine West: The climate and ocean adaptation and sustainable transition programme is improving vulnerable coastal communities' resilience to climate change, including: protecting and restoring coastal habitats; supporting nature-based solutions; improving small-scale fisheries management; and, the issue my hon. Friend raises, the use of bottom-towed gear over rock and reef habitats in 13 Marine Management Organisation areas.

Topical Questions

T1. [904096] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Through agile diplomacy, the Government are striking new deals in the national interest, with trade agreements with the United States and India, the first ever UK-EU summit next week and intense efforts to deal with conflicts around the world. Yesterday, I hosted the Weimar+ group of European leaders in support of Ukraine. Last week, I pressed for the welcome ceasefire between India and Pakistan. And every day I am striving to stop the killing in Gaza, so we can get the remaining hostages, like Edan Alexander, home and aid to civilians.

Edward Morello: The Foreign Affairs Committee recently heard from the Falkland Islands Government about the urgent need for the UK Government to use the EU-UK reset as an opportunity to remove the detrimental post-Brexit tariffs on Falklands exports. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Department and European counterparts to address those tariffs for a new trade arrangement for the Falkland Islands?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are always seeking to reduce tariff burdens for our overseas territories, and we are in ongoing discussions with the European Union in particular.

T4. [904100] **Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): Alawite, Druze and Christian minority communities in Syria are still living in fear of attacks from militiamen. What steps are the Government taking to put pressure on the Syrian Government to prevent any further attacks?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): My hon. Friend has long been an advocate on these issues. We emphasise the necessity of demonstrating commitment to the protection of human rights in all our engagements with the Syrian Government. Our public statements have also made it clear that civilians must be protected from violence, and those responsible held to account. The protection of all civilians and their full inclusion in the transition process is vital for peace in Syria.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Can the Foreign Secretary explain specifically what the UK is getting in return from China, having been China's biggest cheerleader in Europe? Has China committed to stop threatening people on British soil? Has he received any new commitments from China on its adherence to the Sino-British declaration to uphold freedoms in Hong Kong, particularly with all the pernicious and malicious Chinese activities in the United Kingdom?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her questions. The important starting point on China is to be consistent and not to have four or five different China policies, which is what we had under the previous Government. We have been clear that there are areas where we will co-operate with China, but she knows that we challenge China every time we meet on Hong Kong and on Jimmy Lai. She also knows there are areas where we are absolutely clear that we will compete with China. We will be coming forward with our China audit shortly, and we can have a wider discussion then.

Priti Patel: We have hearing about and waiting for the China audit for some time. China has repeatedly failed to take action to stop fuelling Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine—we saw President Xi standing side by side with Putin in Moscow just days ago. Will the Foreign Secretary provide details on the discussions that have taken place with President Zelensky over his forthcoming visit to Turkey, and what direct support is Britain giving for any discussions he will have with Putin to ensure that any peace is secured and won on Ukraine's terms, in such a way that respects fundamental basic freedoms and the principle that aggressors should never, ever win?

Mr Lammy: On 22 April, I raised concerns with my Chinese counterpart on China's supply of equipment to Russia and on the relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—North Korea—and Russia and Iran. The right hon. Lady will know that I sanctioned Chinese entities that were supplying dual-use technology to the Russians, killing Ukrainians.

T5. [904101] **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I welcome that the UK Government are to convene an urgent session of the UN Security Council this

afternoon to discuss the food situation in Gaza. Will Ministers ensure that Dame Barbara Woodward takes a message from my constituents, including Mairi MacKinnon, Ian Stephen, Louise Scullion and Malcolm MacLean, who expressed their disgust and condemnation of the Israeli Government using food as a weapon of war? There are 71,000 children in Gaza. Will he ensure that that message is heard in New York?

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on—there are other people here. Please help them.

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for transmitting his constituents' concerns, which I know are felt widely across this House. I can confirm that our permanent representative in New York will be expressing the full force of our views, as we heard earlier in this session.

T2. [904097] **Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Will the Minister confirm the state of the current negotiations over the future of Gibraltar, including whether they will be concluded before the EU-UK reset, and will he confirm that the views and interests of the Gibraltarian people will be paramount?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The hon. Gentleman can be absolutely assured on that latter point. I spoke to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar just this morning. We have been working closely with him and, indeed, with our EU and Spanish counterparts, and all sides agree on the importance of concluding a treaty as soon as possible. We are working closely with all the parties in that regard, and we will only conclude an agreement that protects sovereignty and UK military autonomy, provides certainty for the people of Gibraltar and secures their future prosperity. We will endeavour to achieve that in due course.

T6. [904102] **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): Over the past few days, *The Times* has reported that an airport worker and his wife, who works in the NHS, have been raising funds in the UK through an unregistered charity called Zayir UK and sending them to Hezbollah-linked groups in Lebanon. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that charitable donations in the UK cannot be used to fund terrorism in the middle east?

Mr Falconer: The entirety of Hezbollah has been proscribed in the UK since 2019. Raising money for terrorist organisations is a criminal offence. This Government will continue to take robust action against those suspected of raising money for terrorist organisations in the middle east and around the world.

T3. [904098] **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Nearly every single child is at risk of famine in Gaza as the Israeli Government use starvation as a weapon of war. We have heard from Ministers today about the action that the Government have taken so far, but there are still some actions that they have not taken, including the recognition of Palestine as a state, individual sanction and a total suspension of arms to Israel. If now is not the time to take those actions, when will that be?

Mr Falconer: We are committed to recognising a Palestinian state at a time that has the most impact in achieving a reality most conducive to long-term peace in the region, and we continue to talk to our partners about that. The other issues that the hon. Member raised have already been discussed in this session.

T8. [904104] **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Given the Prime Minister's warning that the world has fundamentally changed and that we are in a dangerous new era, will the Secretary of State commit to protecting the British Council and its soft power role in strengthening global relationships, and does he agree that any cuts to its support would undermine decades of trusted UK diplomacy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The British Council has no greater champions than Labour Ministers on the Front Bench. It does a fantastic job to promote the UK abroad. Across this House, we love the British Council.

T7. [904103] **Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) raised a point of order yesterday following the Department's failure to respond to a letter from a number of hon. Members asking the Secretary of State to come to the House to make a statement on alarming research that shows that the UK continues to send large-scale exports of lethal weaponry to Israel. May I beseech the Secretary of State to make a statement to the House on this matter? If he is not willing to do so, can he confirm that all statements that he has made in this House since September 2024 relating to arms exports to Israel have been completely accurate and fully transparent?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I can.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend confirm that this Government are totally opposed to the expansion of Israel's military operations in Gaza and are four-square behind restoring the ceasefire?

Mr Falconer: As I said last week, we are opposed to an expansion of Israel's military operation. I was also asked about the Israeli Finance Minister's comments about the destruction of Gaza—comments that I had not seen at the time. I have since seen them and I condemn them.

Mr Speaker: I call Alistair Carmichael.

T9. [904105] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I apologise, Mr Speaker; I had not realised that my name was on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: I call Matthew Patrick.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): On Sunday, I had the honour of meeting Emily Damari. She told me about her good friends, Ziv and Gali Berman, who remain in captivity. It is so clear to me that no hostage will be free until all hostages are free. Hamas footage at the weekend serves only to deliver more torment to the

families. Will the Minister set out, before the 600 day-anniversary later this month of the 7 October attacks, the steps he will be taking to ensure humanitarian access for those hostages?

Mr Lammy: I welcome the release of Edan Alexander after an agonising 583 days in captivity, and I thank Qatar and Egypt for their support. We urge all parties to seize this opportunity to re-engage with negotiations and return to a ceasefire. That is what will see the return of those hostages. When I discussed this with Secretary of State Rubio and, indeed, with partners in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, I urged them to raise those issues with the President this week.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is a pattern emerging where the Trump Administration take initially extreme positions on international trade and foreign policy and then quickly re-adjust to more realistic and sensible policies? What opportunities does that give for British diplomacy?

Mr Lammy: In many ways, that question is better put to President Trump and I do not want to speak for him. None the less, I am pleased that the United Kingdom was the first country to strike a trade agreement with the United States. Many international partners are now ringing us up to ask us how we did it.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I know that a lot is going on, but the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction treaty is important. It is about our blue planet and our oceans, in which we used to have a leadership position. When we were leading it, 115 countries signed that treaty, but it needs to be ratified as well, and very few countries are ratifying it, including Britain. When we asked the Government about it, they said that it was because they did not have enough time. Have they dropped the ball, is there a Bill, will we ratify it, and will we ratify it before the UN Oceans Conference?

Catherine West: We will redouble our efforts to get into the legislative queue and do all that is necessary to maintain our leadership in this important area.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Today we welcome the release of Edan Alexander, the latest hostage freed by Hamas, after over 500 days in captivity. The fact that they still have people in captivity is disgraceful and barbaric and puts into perspective the fact that the group Kneecap are being platformed in Croydon, after they shouted support for Hamas from a stage. What pressure are the Government putting on the Palestinian authorities to ensure that the remaining hostages are returned to their families as they should be? They should never have been taken in the first place.

Mr Falconer: We continue, with all our partners, to call for the immediate release of all hostages. I think particularly of Avinatan Or, who has a British mother and who is still in captivity under who knows what conditions. We will continue to press for the release of all hostages.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On 15 May we will commemorate the 77th anniversary of the 1948 Nakba, which saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced from their homes and dispossessed, and it still continues today. I pay tribute to Ministers for the diplomacy they are engaged in and for the recent memorandum of understanding that was agreed with Palestine, but the children of Gaza cannot wait weeks and months. They need food and water now. What more can we do?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for continuing to raise these issues. We have a meeting of the UN Security Council this afternoon. It was important that I spoke to colleagues in Saudi Arabia and the UAE the weekend before last about these issues and with partners in the region, particularly as President Trump visits. I am very concerned following a meeting with my German counterpart about Israeli decisions to reduce the number of distribution points, and we will be making these representations very actively over the coming days.

Speaker's Statement

12.37 pm

Mr Speaker: It is not often in this House that we recognise a former civil servant, but before we proceed to the next business I would like to pay tribute to Sir Roy Stone, who died yesterday. It feels far too soon, given that he only retired from his role as principal private secretary to the Government Chief Whip in 2021—a role he held for more than 20 years, serving 13 Chief Whips, and in turn this office, with great distinction. Working in No. 10 before he joined the Whips Office, Roy served every Prime Minister from Margaret Thatcher to Boris Johnson. He was virtually invisible outside this place, but those who were involved in this tricky business of keeping the parliamentary machinery running smoothly all knew him well.

Roy was, despite the sometimes fearsome reputation of the Whips Office, a kind and generous man, loyal to his principles as well as to his political masters. He was highly respected and held in great affection by those in the civil service and with whom he worked closely. There are many Members and staff in all parts of both Houses who worked with him and benefited from his advice and guidance. I know that they will be deeply saddened by this news. As we know, the usual channels is not something we ever discuss. That just shows the great man we are talking about. I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in sending our condolences to Roy's family: his wife Dawn, daughter Hannah and son Elliott.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Sir Alan Campbell): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is by convention unusual for the Government Chief Whip to address the House. It is also by convention forbidden to refer by name to those who hold the office of principal private secretary to the Government Chief Whip. It is a measure of Sir Roy's service that today we lay those conventions aside.

Sir Roy was the literal embodiment of the usual channels for more than two decades, ensuring each day that while the Government got their business, the Opposition were able to scrutinise their work. As I look back on what were, on occasions, tumultuous times in this place, Sir Roy was, with skill and integrity, the constant that held things together. Trust was placed in him and his wise counsel was sought over many years.

I send my deep condolences on behalf of the Government to his family, friends and the many staff who worked with him. Such was Sir Roy Stone's diligence and long service that one could be forgiven for thinking that work was his main concern, but I know from speaking to him that his main priority was always his family, of whom he was tremendously proud. They should be equally proud of him. My thoughts are with them at this difficult time.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You have said much that was true and good, and it is hard to improve on what you said as well as the Chief Whip, but may I add a few words? Roy Stone went into the civil service at the age of 16 and served his entire life there and in this House. Twelve Chief Whips across extraordinary moments were the beneficiaries of his sage counsel and advice.

I think the House will be aware that there were several occasions on which I was able to benefit from his advice in somewhat tumultuous times, having offended various senior politicians. I did not always get a meeting with the Chief Whip with coffee—as hon. Members know, that is the key test—but Sir Roy and his team were the models of professional expertise, diligence, discretion, care and candid advice throughout. The fact that he has been taken from us so quickly, so prematurely and so early into his long-deserved retirement is, I am sure, a source of the utmost sadness for every Member of this House. I am sure that I speak for all members of His Majesty's Opposition. We will remember him with great fondness for a very long time.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have to admit to shedding a tear last night when I heard the news of Sir Roy's passing. Within nine months of joining the House in 2019, I became the Chief Whip of a small group of 11, and he treated me and my party with the utmost respect. He was the first person to refer to me as "chief"—sadly, my family have not picked up that term—which showed the respect he had for the House, MPs and the parties they represent.

I valued his counsel. We sometimes take the daily business for granted, but it is testament to the work of the usual channels and the Government Whips Office that we end up with the business and debates we have in this place.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is sitting with me. When Sir Roy left his role and the House in 2021, we took him for dinner at the Liberal Club. I will just say that the club's standards of service were exactly what my right hon. Friend and I expected them to be; I will say no more on that.

Sir Roy was the epitome of the best of the civil service. We had good conversations, but it is fair to say that no confidences were betrayed. I am very saddened to hear of his loss. My thoughts and my party's thoughts are with his family.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In his role in the usual channels, Sir Roy Stone had a unique influence in this place, as we have heard, working for decades for the Government Chief Whip and the Leader of the Opposition, providing advice to both and protecting the confidences of both, but answering honestly to each. Those in the usual channels hold the only role in government that means working for both the Government and the Opposition; Roy managed the Whips Offices for both. The British public see adversarial politics and parties in this Chamber, but for decades, Roy and his teams organised and co-ordinated legislation, debates, recesses, statements and urgent questions and managed the relationship between the parties. Woe betide any Chief Whip who tried to change Roy's recess schedule, which was almost always in tandem with the Kent school holiday breaks.

Every political science course in the country should have dedicated modules on the usual channels and Sir Roy Stone. Roy's dominance of this behind-the-scenes role made him one of the most impactful and consequential civil servants of his time. Despite being fair to all sides, he was political to his core, not least during the hung Parliament and Brexit. During that time, he was passionate about and focused on supporting the Government to deliver on the referendum, and was increasingly frustrated with us politicians, and in particular me, for failing to deliver a meaningful vote.

Roy loved his central role in this place, and had the respect, if not always the agreement, of everyone, politician and civil servant alike. Despite all the stresses and strains in that most demanding period of parliamentary history, which is when I worked with him, what shone out was the love for and commitment to his family: his brother, who was ill with cancer during the Brexit years; and his wife Dawn and children Hannah and Elliott. In particular, there was pride in Elliott's commitment to the RAF, in which he was a cadet, and of which he is now a full-time member. A patriot at work, a patriot at home. Rest in peace, Sir Roy Stone.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Roy was political to his core. He loved this place more than anyone could possibly imagine. He regularly got quite frustrated with Governments and Prime Ministers. I will always remember arriving at the office on my first day as Chief Whip, and seeing his look of frustration and irritation, which said, "Who on earth have they sent me now? He's never been in the Whips Office."

I remember Roy sitting me down and explaining that he worked for me 51% of the time and for the Opposition the other 49%. I wanted him to shift the dial a little more in my favour, but he was never going to do that. I asked him, rather naively, what I should read, and whether it was worth picking up "Erskine May". He looked at me and said, "Chief, only strange people and Clerks read 'Erskine May'." Yet there was a not a page in "Erskine May" that he did not know.

Roy started as an apprentice in the Ministry of Defence, worked his way through to No. 10 Downing Street and got briefings ready for Prime Ministers, and then went into the Whips Office. All that equipped him to understand raw politics. As anyone who has been Chief Whip will know, it is deputies, not Chief Whips, who whip their party; Chief Whips have to manage the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. They are there to save the Government from doing incredibly stupid things to themselves every single day—or that was the case in my day. I have a feeling that might not have changed that much.

I would sometimes come into the office and Roy's eyes would roll; he had heard the news about the latest decision emanating from No. 10. Yet he would always sit down, talk through the problem and give solutions—a potential way out of the awful mess that you found yourself in. I particularly recall the day after the 2017 general election. For those who were not here, it had not gone quite as well as we had hoped. I arrived at the beautiful Chief Whips Office in Downing Street and Roy, who was as good with his Anglo-Saxon words as any man—I will not say the word he used, but it rhymed with "clucking"—said, "Well, you clucking screwed that one up, didn't you? What are you going to do?" At the time, the Prime Minister was in shock and not really doing an awful lot, and it fell to the Whips Office to work out how we took things forward. Sitting down with Roy to work things out was essential to our putting together a deal with the Democratic Unionist party—a deal that made sure that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) did not have the opportunity to form a Government in 2017, or since.

Roy lived and breathed politics, but also cared about nothing more than his family. I would hear him talk with such pride about his daughter at university, and about his son, whom he took to countless events related to swimming, and then to the RAF. Altogether, Roy was a good friend. Just a few weeks ago, I was sitting down with him, having a cup of coffee and talking about his family. We talked about the difficult times, but also the amazing times. He will be so missed.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to pass on the sincere condolences of the Scottish National party to the family and friends of Roy Stone, and I really hope that they take comfort from today's proceedings. We speak of Roy in such terms not just because we respected him, but because we liked him. He was a likeable guy who was great company and such fun to be with.

I will never forget the kindness that Roy showed me as a new Member of this House, and as a recently installed Chief Whip who did not have a clue about House business or procedure. He patiently ran through how the House worked; getting a lesson from Roy Stone on parliamentary procedure is something that I will never forget. I was representing a group of five, and Roy had time for us all. The SNP finally got access to the usual channels when we became the third party in the House, and I was able to observe how effectively he did his work. I will never be in government, unlike others who are paying tribute today, but I saw how seamlessly Roy was able to serve Governments of different hues, and how the ship of state sailed on under his stewardship and command. Roy was the absolute epitome of public service and commitment to this House, which he loved, and we will all miss him dearly.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for allowing this quite exceptional but fitting tribute, which I am sure will give some comfort to Sir Roy's wife Dawn and his children, Hannah and Elliott. It was my privilege to work with Sir Roy during the first three and a half years of the coalition Government. Coalition government had never been done in this country in modern peacetime. The coalition required service to not one party but two in government, and for Sir Roy, it was a time of change and challenges, but they were all challenges that he took impeccably in his stride. There are many anecdotes that I could tell you, Mr Speaker, but unfortunately, too many of those who were involved are still alive, and there are limits to how far one can push parliamentary privilege.

The genius of Sir Roy Stone was that he never betrayed any personal political view. That was how he was able to serve Governments of all stripes. The dignity of Parliament and of the business of government really mattered to him. There was only one occasion when I

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saw Sir Roy's mask slip. It was the early days of the coalition Government. The Liberal Democrat Whips Office was in the business of babysitting, and on this occasion it involved an actual baby; it was not the normal babysitting that the Whips Office is called on to do. Inevitably, as happens with babies, there was a need for a nappy to be changed. I took the baby—I think it was Jenny Willott's son, Toby—into my office, and I had laid him on the sofa and was changing his nappy when Sir Roy Stone appeared in the doorway. One glimpse at his face told me that this scene realised his worst fears about having Liberal Democrats in government.

Sir Roy cared about both Government and Parliament, and being able to serve both requires very distinctive and particular talents. It was a privilege to work with him and to have the benefit of those talents. For those who mourn him, especially his family, the recognition of those talents should be an enduring comfort.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I first knew Sir Roy Stone when I became leader of my group after the 2017 general election. He did, in fact, pass views on the Chief Whips of the time, but I think they are probably best kept to myself for now, because some of them are in the Chamber. He was immensely supportive, and as the leader of a very small group, I learned so much from him. It was the first time that the group had had meetings with the Chief Whip. I speak on behalf of a small party, and Sir Roy's respect for Parliament, and for the presence of small parties in it, was evident. He felt that we had a role to play, and he enabled us to play that role very effectively.

My lasting memory of Sir Roy was from just after he left. A member of staff, Fflur Elin, could play the harp. Sir Roy found that out, and nothing would do but for Fflur to bring in said harp to play for him. It has been an honour to know him, and people's recollections of him today tell me that he had immense influence on all of us here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I want to convey to the family of Sir Roy Stone our deepest condolences at this time of tragedy and grief. To serve under a number of Prime Ministers and Chief Whips is no easy task, but he was always fair and impartial. He contributed loyally and with great wisdom. I would not like to say anything against any of the Chief Whips in my party, but I have probably challenged them all, and to be perfectly honest, I probably still do. Sir Roy's advice was much sought after and liberally given. He set a standard for others to follow, and to admire from a distance. It is always good to cite the Bible at these times; he has run the race, he has fought the good fight and there are many crowns laid up for him in heaven. Thank you, Sir Roy, and God bless all the family at this time.

Mr Speaker: These really have been fitting tributes to Sir Roy Stone. He will always be in our thoughts and memories because of what he did for this House. I know that the Clerks feel the same way.

Mansion House Accord

12.58 pm

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if she will make a statement on the Mansion House accord.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Mr Speaker, I would like to associate myself with your tribute and those of other Members to Sir Roy Stone, who was a true public servant, and a servant of this House.

Pensions matter. They underpin not just the retirement that we all look forward to, but the investment on which our future prosperity depends. This morning, 17 workplace pension scheme providers, between them managing about 90% of active savers' defined contribution pensions, signed the Mansion House accord. The accord was proposed and developed by the industry, specifically by the Lord Mayor, the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association and the Association of British Insurers, and builds on the work of the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), who is in his place.

Signatories to the accord have pledged to invest 10% of their main default funds in private assets by 2030. These are productive assets that boost the economy, such as infrastructure. At least 5% will be for UK assets. This investment could support better outcomes for savers and deliver growth finance to Britain's world-leading science and technology businesses. It could also support clean energy developments across the country, delivering greater energy security and jobs.

The shift towards greater investment in private assets is a journey that the sector is already on, because everyone recognises that UK defined contribution schemes stand out relative to their international peers for how little they invest in those areas. This is right for savers because it is in their interests for pension funds to hold a diverse range of assets, and it is in Britain's interests. This Government want to see higher investment levels in the UK. We cannot continue with the lowest business investment in the G7, as we managed under the previous Administration. Supply of capital is part of that—and today's agreement is expected to release £25 billion of additional investment into the UK economy by 2030—but so is the supply of projects to invest in: the pipeline. Our job as a Government is to support the depth and visibility of that pipeline, and that is why we are getting this country building once again.

The accord is an industry-led agreement—nevertheless, I hugely welcome it. The pensions industry's decision to invest in more productive assets, from growing companies to infrastructure, will support better outcomes for savers and faster growth for Britain. In the coming weeks, the Government will publish the conclusions of the pensions investment review to support the move to bigger and better pension schemes. We will implement the review's reforms, and others to improve returns for savers, in the forthcoming pension schemes Bill, which I look forward to presenting to the House.

Sir Mel Stride: May I start by associating myself with the very fine tributes made to Sir Roy Stone? My condolences go to his family.

No response from the Chancellor, we see, but I thank the Minister for his statement. The retirement incomes of millions of UK savers rely on the careful management of pension funds. Those pension providers have a fiduciary duty to act in the best financial interests of their members. We on the Conservative Benches support efforts to ensure pension funds are investing in assets that can both increase UK productivity and growth, and deliver stronger, stable returns for investors and savers. Indeed, that was the purpose of the first Mansion House compact, which was brokered by the last Conservative Government.

As we well know, Labour Ministers have a habit of thinking they know best what to do with other people's money, but it should ultimately be the responsibility of the providers, which have been entrusted by savers with their money, to make investment decisions. Reports that the Government intend to take new powers to mandate pension funds to allocate minimum amounts to specific classes of assets should be a matter of great concern to this House. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government intend to take such legislative powers in the pensions Bill later this year? If he cannot rule out making such a move, can he explain what it would mean for the existing fiduciary duties set out in legislation?

Major players in the industry, including Scottish Widows, have reportedly refused to take part in the latest iteration of the Mansion House compact. Can the hon. Gentleman explain to the House why that is, what discussions he and other Ministers have had with Scottish Widows and others that have chosen not to take part, and what concerns they have raised?

Let me be clear: we on the Conservative Benches want a pensions industry that is investing in growing UK businesses, infrastructure, housing and all those elements that drive a healthier economy, but it also has to be for the benefit of savers. Of course, the risks in this case would be borne entirely by private sector workers, while public sector workers would be protected. Finally, we are clear that pension savings should never be there to dig a Chancellor out of the economic hole that she has made.

Torsten Bell: I will directly address two questions and then come to the overall tone of the shadow Chancellor's remarks. There has been a debate across this House and in the wider industry about mandation, including on UK equities. It has been led by Conservative peers in the House of Lords—Baroness Altmann has called for exactly that—and by some Members in this House, including the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on the Conservative Benches. What we are setting out a voluntary agreement led by the industry. On the industry consensus behind the accord, 90% of the defined contribution industry, by active savers, have signed up this morning—and all providers, including those that did not sign up today, are committed to the idea of more investment in private assets.

More generally, the shadow Chancellor's tone is disappointing. The truth is that he is a lonely figure. There is a wide consensus about the direction of travel to invest more in private assets, as Canadian and Australian pension funds do, and today's accord is industry led; it sets benchmarks agreed by the industry, and in fact many industry players want to go further. There should be cross-party consensus. At the event this morning, the Chancellor spelt out that this work builds on the work of her predecessor in supporting the 2023 Mansion House compact. The shadow Chancellor will remember that compact because it was signed under a Conservative Government when he was the Work and Pensions Secretary—he was in the press release, championing it. He was right then, and he is letting himself down now.

I have some news: a response to the accord has just come in from Guy Opperman. Hon. Members will remember him, because he was the Conservative former Member for Hexham and the only Pensions Minister in the last Government to last more than five minutes; he was in post for five years. What did he say about this morning's accord? He said that it is a "good thing" and "should be welcomed"—he is not wrong.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a trustee of the parliamentary contributory pension fund. The points about fiduciary duty have been made. Given that fund managers will need time to pool together funds that reflect the Government's wishes and the voluntary accord, when does the Minister expect it to kick in? At that point, might he consider mandation?

Torsten Bell: The decision by the industry, reflecting the question that the Chair of the Select Committee raises about pace of change, is that the targets for asset allocation are for 2030.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Liberal Democrats cautiously welcome the response from the Minister. Clearly, ensuring that people have a good return on their investments is essential, but we welcome this step change where we are looking at investment within the United Kingdom within the appropriate parameters. Would the Minister unpick for us what core lessons he has learned from Australia and Canada, which have already embarked on this path? Also, it has long been a long-term investment opportunity for many in the pensions industry to invest in rental opportunities. How can we drive the opportunities in the social rented sector through the accord?

Finally, the Minister rightly talks about a pipeline of opportunity. Our fear is that these might only be large opportunities, such as the redevelopment of an airport, when many of our communities are worried by the collapse of our town centres; there could be buckets of opportunity highlighted there, which could be driven by appropriate investment through sources like this.

Torsten Bell: It is characteristically bold of the Liberal Democrats to cautiously welcome these measures. However, the hon. Member is right to raise the question of Australia and Canada. We look across at places with similar pension schemes to those in the UK, and the levels of private asset allocation in those schemes is far higher than we see here in the UK, so he is absolutely right on that front.

On the two specific points the hon. Member raises, I agree on investment in the social rented sector. Many of our pension funds are already doing that, and I know

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that other major ones will be making announcements in that area in the months ahead. He also raises the breadth of investment opportunity. He is absolutely right that there are large, national-level projects, but there are also many more local projects. Where those are financed by the private sector, pension schemes may want to look at them as well.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Will the Minister spell out how this deal provides real change for constituents across the country, and what it means for infrastructure projects, especially housing?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no way that Britain can return to growth unless it starts investing in its future again, rather than living in its past, which is, if we are honest, what we have been doing in recent years. This is part of a much wider story. I hope that there is cross-party consensus—there is certainly consensus across the pensions industry, and among most economists who look at the UK economy—that we need to move to a higher investment level. The finance for that is one thing; some comes from abroad and some comes in domestically, but it also needs to come from our pension schemes.

Obviously, it is for the public sector to play its part, but we should be careful in distinguishing this. The Government are doing our bit on public investment levels, with £113 billion extra of public investment compared with the plans inherited from the Conservative Government. That is doing a lot of the work to move us to the higher investment equilibrium, but there are lots of projects, and in the end most investment happens in the private sector. That is where I welcome the progress made by the pensions industry today.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I thank the Minister for building on the work of the Mansion House reforms that I introduced two years ago. Westminster works best when Governments do not automatically tear up the work of their predecessors. Who knows, with this constructive attitude, we may see some tax cuts in the autumn Budget.

Does the Minister agree that there is a circularity in the argument that the reason pension funds do not invest in the UK is because returns are lower here? In Australia and America, the stock markets can depend on more than 40% of pension fund assets investing domestically to create bigger returns, compared with just 4% in the UK. Does he agree that if we are really to make these reforms fly, we will need to involve the 28,000 defined benefit schemes as well as the 4,000 defined contribution schemes?

Torsten Bell: That is more like it! That is what we want to hear from the Conservatives. The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that progress was made under the previous Administration. I have made that clear, and the Chancellor made that very clear this morning, as I said. I have discussed with many leading members of the pensions industry the fact that we are explicitly building on the progress that the right hon. Gentleman made, rather than throwing any babies out with the bathwater—even after they have had their nappies changed by the previous Lib Dem Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

I very grateful to the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for the tone of his question. He is also right to highlight the lack of UK bias in some of our pension schemes. We see that right across asset classes, and it is not in the interests of the country in the longer term. As he knows, the focus today is on private assets, but we do need to think more broadly. What are we all after? We are after well-functioning capital markets, both public and private, and these reforms will make a big difference in that regard. I am not saying that there is not more to be done; I am sure that there is, and that he will continue to play an active part in those debates.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee inquiry into the innovation and growth of the regions has repeatedly heard evidence that the lack of access to investment, particularly outside London and the south-east, is a barrier to scaling up our fantastic science and tech start-ups, so I welcome the commitments to put more of our pensions and savings into the productive economy—and I am rather surprised by the response of the shadow Chancellor. Will the Minister say a little more about how these commitments will support growth through innovation?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has long talked about both the issues that she raises: the regional balance of investment and the ability of growing firms to get hold of growth finance. The latter is a long-standing problem in the UK economy, and today's accord will help to address it. Although we talk about private assets and investment helping with infrastructure, it is also about providing growth capital to a wider range of firms. Obviously, the onus is on us and private asset managers to provide ways for pension funds to direct capital. Those are often small-ticket items, and pension funds will need them to be aggregated up to a higher level. That is exactly the work of the British Business Bank, which I know she has engaged with through the Select Committee. On both points, she is 100% right.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Undoubtedly, the City of London is not in the best possible place when it comes to where it is investing and the amount invested in UK equities. When I was a Minister, we had the Hill review, the Kent review, the Austin review and the capital markets review. Everything was done to seek to open up the City to more initial public offerings and more momentum. This systemic undervaluing of UK equities, and therefore the lack of investment in them, needs to be set alongside the fact that billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is used to enrich the size of pension schemes through tax reliefs. I urge the Minister to continue engaging with the City. I welcome the voluntary commitments given, but we must come to the point where the risk-aversion of DB schemes is called out, considering the amount of taxpayers' money that is effectively going into them. Will the Minister continue to look carefully at the options available, given that the previous Government sought—and his Government will no doubt continue to seek—to meet them wherever possible?

Torsten Bell: I always enjoy discussing these things with the right hon. Member, as we have done over recent months. He offers a recognition of the challenge

facing the country, and in focusing on what we can do to start changing things, he takes a much better position than that adopted by his Front Benchers.

I recognise the right hon. Member's point about risk-aversion. There is a need for more innovation in our pension landscape more generally—that is one of the areas in which I am glad to see progress. I take a slightly more positive view than he does on the consensus that things need to change. We are seeing that in the pensions industry more generally, partly in relation to investing in a wider range of assets, as well as in embracing the agenda that we are setting out for a smaller number of bigger pension funds that are able to take different kinds of risks.

The right hon. Member asks specifically about public equities. My view is that the accord from the industry today will support that by funding a pipeline of companies that can grow to the level at which they can list publicly. Also, private assets will include private shares, including the alternative investment market and others. I think the picture is slightly more positive than the one he paints, but I am not hiding from the wider question he raises about capital markets. The UK Government, the Chancellor and my colleague the City Minister are focused on that—he will have heard their words on ISA reform and the rest of it. I look forward to further conversations on that.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): How will my hon. Friend bring together UK pension schemes and local and regional governments in order to invest in local infrastructure projects, given that European and global pension schemes invest when UK pensions schemes too often do not?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend asks a great and important question. We will have more to say on this in the months ahead as we come forward with the final report of the pensions investment review and the pension schemes Bill. Some local government pension schemes have a track record of investing locally, but we need to see that at scale, and we need to see it crowding in private investment, including perhaps from private pension funds. That is exactly what our package of reforms, combined with the industry's work with the accord today, will help us to deliver. He is absolutely right to push us on that, as I am sure he will continue to do in the months ahead given his record in previous roles. We want higher investment levels, not just in some parts but in all parts of the country.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Over the past 10 years, the Dow Jones has grown by 133%, the German DAX by 115% and the Nikkei by 87%, while the FTSE 100 has grown by 23%. It is against that backdrop that there is concern about investment in the United Kingdom. As other Members have said, given the fiduciary duty on asset managers, would they not be investing in the UK anyway if they thought that they were going to get the best return for their policyholders? If they were not already doing so, what has changed to ensure that that fiduciary duty is upheld as asset managers are coerced by the Chancellor to invest in markets that they would not otherwise have invested in?

Torsten Bell: Clearly, the hon. Member has not even read the accord. It talks about private assets. *[Interruption.]* No, the accord is about private assets while he mentions public assets. He also adopts the very market fundamentalist view that there is no role for Government at all, which is odd given what I hear him talk about in the Chamber day in, day out. Lastly, he also adopts extreme pessimism about the future of the country. I am much more positive about Britain than he is; that is not surprising, because his job is to pull it apart.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): In its first six months, the National Wealth Fund, based in Leeds, has fuelled almost 10,000 jobs and unlocked £1.8 billion of private investment. Can the Minister confirm that this deal will equal more investment in British businesses?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for Leeds and for Britain every single week in this Chamber, and everything she said is completely right. The job of the National Wealth Fund and the British Business Bank is to work with our nations and regions to ensure that projects can be de-risked and supported and that a wide range of private investors can come in behind that and make sure change actually happens, so that this becomes a country that invests in its future once again.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At a time when we have been commemorating a significant anniversary of VE Day, does the Minister share my concern that certain large pension firms are refusing to invest in profitable defence industries on spurious ethical grounds? Is that something that his pensions investment review might care to investigate?

Torsten Bell: I hear the point the right hon. Gentleman raises, and we have had those debates in this Chamber in recent months. The UK Government are doing what they need to do to invest in our security and defence and to support our defence industry more generally. We have made it very clear that private investment in those sectors is the right thing to do for our national security and our national economic growth. So far today, there have been calls for mandation and calls to oppose any mandation. There are choices available within pension funds for savers. The vast majority of funds—I think it is 99% within the National Employment Savings Trust, for example—invest in the broad defaults and do invest in the likes of defence companies.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I warmly welcome the statement. One of the most woeful things about our national story has been the lack of investment in infrastructure, but that story is not just about GDP and productivity at a national level; it is also about places. In Peterborough, the lack of investment over the last decade has been woeful. I know that the public sector cannot do it all itself. While I put on record my thanks to the Department for Transport for this week announcing business case approval and funding for our station regeneration project, can the Minister explain how this policy will help investment in places like mine? Does it truly meet the definition of "further and faster"?

Torsten Bell: I am sure that Ministers in the Department for Transport will have heard my hon. Friend's words and that his buttering up will have the desired effect over the years to come. He is right to highlight the synergies between public and private investment. We need to see higher levels of public investment, which is why this Government are putting in place £113 billion

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over these five years. That is being done because it will deliver real, tangible progress that people can see in their streets. Why do people think Britain went backward over the last 15 years? There are lots of reasons, but high up the list is visible potholes on every single road in Britain. We are turning that around as we speak. That wider investment also gives confidence to the private sector, and we see that across the piece—wherever we are delivering regeneration projects with public sector investment supporting them, it crowds in private investment in exactly the way my hon. Friend sets out.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Before I was elected to this place, I was a trustee of one of the large public pension funds, and a lot of the correspondence I received was from retired social workers who were quite grumpy about their funds being invested in extractive industry companies listed in London. We know that more young people will opt in to invest if they are comfortable with what their pension fund is investing in. What more can the Government do to engage with the industry but also with young savers to ensure there are pension options that reflect their investment preferences?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Lady is right to say that we see higher engagement levels among young people today in investing more broadly. Whenever I go into a school sixth form, a surprising volume of the questions are not, unfortunately for me, on what the Government are doing and how we will bring inequality down and get growth up, but are instead, "How do we make a lot of money quite quickly?" We should support that level of engagement and active investment.

On the hon. Lady's specific point, schemes are required to set out their policy and approach, and many pension schemes provide members with options for how they wish their funds to be invested. Nothing that has been set out today on the accord gets in the way of those approaches that are already in place.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Mansion House accord and the Minister's statement. During the last Parliament, I had the pleasure of taking part in a cross-party visit with the then hon. Member for Hexham to see a solar farm that was funded by pension investment. It is a wonderful scheme close to the M4 and my constituency. Could the Minister say a little more about how this announcement will support much broader investment in the green transition, both in the south of England and across the country?

Torsten Bell: I have benefited from conversations with my hon. Friend about this topic, given his previous experience. He is completely right to set out that one of the large reasons—although not the only one—why we need to move to being a higher investment country is that our energy infrastructure has to be upgraded, and fast, if we are going to give this country the energy security it needs. He mentioned solar. This Government signed off in a matter of days and weeks a string of solar farms that needed to be invested in and that had been sitting on Ministers' desks for year after year. More broadly, when the Leader of the Opposition stands up and says, "We don't want to see this progress on net zero," what she is really doing is putting up a sign across Britain saying, "Closed for business."

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Some 5,500 defined-benefit schemes have £1.6 trillion-worth of assets. The trouble is that the regulatory environment is skewed toward buying an insurance policy at the end of that journey. In order to change the way in which trustees and fund managers invest, the Minister has to change the end state. What discussions has he had with the Pensions Regulator and the Association of British Insurers about changing that particular game?

Torsten Bell: We have discussed some of these issues in the past, and I look forward to the conversations that I am sure we will have in future, not least around the pension schemes Bill. It is true that for many in the industry, buy-out of their defined-benefit scheme is the end point they are looking to reach, and the number that can reach that point has risen significantly in the recent past as more schemes have moved into surplus. Our job is to provide a range of options for those DB schemes. We have discussed the superfund regime that we will bring forward regulations on through the pension schemes Bill. We have also talked in the last few months about the role of surplus release, which can benefit both employers who want to make investments but also scheme members. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that there are a range of options available to schemes, and they can take the one that is in the best interests of their members.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): The Mansion House accord is clearly a welcome step in aligning the UK's pool of domestic pension capital with long-term growth, greater economic sovereignty and financial security in retirement. For this to succeed, we need greater clarity in who is stepping up, so can the Minister update the House on what discussions he is having with the industry about how firms intend to report progress under the accord in a clear and transparent way?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is completely right, but I would use a slightly more optimistic tone. It is now the settled consensus of the entire defined-contribution industry that this is the direction we need to move in. Almost every single scheme is moving to thinking about how they will invest in a wider range of private assets. Many of them are looking to go further than the benchmark set out in the accord today. They want to do that because it is in their savers' interests. It diversifies their assets and, over the longer term, leads to higher returns on average. The exact amount of those returns will obviously depend, but studies show that it ranges from 2% to 12% higher returns. It is absolutely in savers' interests, and I think there is a broad consensus about doing that.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that we need to make sure that change happens. We will come forward in the pension schemes Bill with more details about how these developments will be monitored to make sure that change is delivered, because in the end, what the British people want to see is less talking about this and more actual investment.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Pension funds are, by definition, long-term capital and are therefore particularly well suited to being invested in long-term infrastructure. British pension funds investing in British

infrastructure should be welcomed by us all, but I would caution against any specific mandating within sectors, which I fear may lead to lower performance. The thing about private markets is that they have almost no transparency in terms of valuation and liquidity. I urge the Government to encourage the pension funds voluntarily to be more open about how they value these private investments, to ensure greater confidence.

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for what I think is his support for the accord—

Richard Tice *indicated assent.*

Torsten Bell: He is nodding, so I will take that as support. He will worry that he sounds dangerously like a Liberal Democrat when he sits on the fence as much as he just did. At least the shadow Chancellor has the guts to say he opposes it, because he thinks that that is simple politics to get him through the day. I am glad to see that the hon. Member has not learned enough, and I hope he enjoys the fence sitting while it lasts.

The hon. Member is right to say that schemes will want to be transparent about their asset allocation, partly so that savers can see what is going on, but also, to refer back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson), so that the country as a whole can see that progress is being made.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): It was a disappointing but unsurprising response from the Conservative Front Bench, and similarly from the SNP, to talk our country down. I congratulate those in the City on this announcement, which will mean new funding for companies across the UK, driving growth. Will the Minister set out what this means for constituents such as mine in Central Ayrshire and across Scotland?

Torsten Bell: That was a characteristically punchy and accurate contribution by my hon. Friend, and that is the difference between this Government and some of the Opposition parties: we want to see Britain succeed. We are investing in Britain's success, and in the long run it will be higher investment, higher growth and higher wages that will turn round the long 15 years of stagnation.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The *Daily Mail* has said in its coverage of the accord today that industry leaders have warned that the Government must deliver a pipeline of investment opportunities to meet the new targets. What faith can savers have that this Government can deliver on that given that they touted GB Energy as a fantastic investment vehicle when in fact it is a damp squib?

Torsten Bell: Savers can have lots of confidence, because the pipeline is already being delivered: solar farms approved; onshore wind happening after being banned for years under the Conservatives; the national grid actually being built out for once; homes being built right across this country, and being opposed by Conservative MPs right across this country. The pipeline is happening, because this country is building once again.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome the agreement that has been reached today. Does the Minister agree that the pension funds are able to make those ambitious commitments only because of the improved investment environment that this Labour Government are nurturing through economic stability—economic stability that is vital to protect working people, including those in Paisley and Renfrewshire South?

Torsten Bell: Exactly; that is what is going on. I speak to pension funds every week who say they are looking to increase their allocation of UK assets because political stability has been delivered—because Liz Truss has been exited from this building. I speak to Australian and Canadian pension funds as well who are saying that they want to open an office in the UK because political and economic stability has arrived.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Increased investment in the United Kingdom is always welcome. Will the Minister confirm that this Government will never interfere in the fiduciary duty of pension trustees to get the best return for their members?

Torsten Bell: The job of pension trustees is absolutely to deliver for their savers and the accord today is delivering exactly that, making sure that we have diversity of asset allocations in our pension schemes. So the answer to the hon. Member's question is yes.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Chancellor spoke about public sector workers benefiting from this kind of investment. Before I came to the House, I was the chair of the Cornwall local government pension scheme, which very successfully invested 7.5% in local and social impact investments—in local renewables and local affordable housing. Will the Minister ensure that more of that happens in the future?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We should focus on the accord today, but the LGPS is a very important part of our pensions landscape; there are £400 billion-worth of assets under management, rising to £1 trillion-worth over the next two decades. It is right that we build on the LGPS track record of local investment to make sure that we get the absolute best value for that investment both for taxpayers in local areas and for local communities. That is exactly what our reforms will do—we will be coming forward with the final details in the pension investment review final report in the coming weeks—to make sure that we have bigger, professional, well-governed and locally investing pension pools.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive answers to the questions that have been posed from all parts of the Chamber today. While it is encouraging to see 17 workplace pension providers investing 10% in private assets, it is disappointing that Scottish Widows, for example, is refusing to sign up. What further can be done to ensure that investment will be focused not simply on London firms, as others have referred to, but throughout the United Kingdom, including the tremendous potential in Northern Ireland?

Torsten Bell: Some 90% of the industry, by active saver numbers, have signed up to the accord today, and the small number of large providers who have not signed up are supportive of the move towards greater private investment. There is a very broad consensus

[Torsten Bell]

across the industry that this is the right way to go. Unrelated to that, but much more importantly, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to see that investment right across the country, including in Northern Ireland and in his own constituency.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I welcome the accord and the Minister's words. People in Dartford are awaiting further news of a funding package for the lower Thames crossing, which the Government consented recently and is incredibly welcome to residents there. Does the Minister agree that this is just the sort of shovel-ready infrastructure project which pension funds could invest in both for the benefit of their savers and to drive economic growth for constituents including my residents?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The lower Thames crossing has been consented, and it is another example of this Government getting on with getting the country building again, and when we come to the spending review—*[Interruption.]* If I were in the Conservative party, I would not be talking about the lower Thames crossing; I really would not be. The regime for planning that the Conservatives put in place meant that hundreds of millions of pounds have been taken to build precisely diddly squat. This Government have given consent, and we will be setting out in the coming months the provision for that scheme to go ahead.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and Treasury colleagues on helping to deliver such an important agreement. The accord will unlock up to £25 billion of additional capital. It is a huge vote of confidence in the Government's demand-side reform agenda to get Britain building and in our economic strategy, providing stability. What steps will the Government take to help make sure that investment is ramped up as quickly as possible, and to ensure that regulators help encourage investment of pension funds directly in real economic assets, for instance by looking at changes to the matching adjustment?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. It is nice to hear the positivity coming from him and other Members in this House who believe that Britain can do better than the last 15 absolutely terrible years. The investments we will be making, delivering on the supply of capital with the likes of the reforms today, while allowing building for housing, transport projects and the rest, are exactly what will make the difference in the longer term.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Innovation is one of Britain's great strengths, with fast-growing firms driving over £1 trillion into the UK economy and supporting 3.2 million jobs. However, many of those firms, many of which are based in my constituency, still face stubborn barriers to scaling up, particularly around accessing long-term finance. How will the Mansion House accord help channel greater investment from pension funds into those scale-ups to help them grow?

Torsten Bell: Innovation is one of the ways in which we drive higher productivity, which is the only lasting way, alongside higher levels of investment, that we will see higher wages for all of our constituents, which is what everyone on both sides of this House wants. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a long-lasting barrier to scaling up for our innovative companies right across sectors. That point was raised earlier by the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). Specifically, we need our pension funds to invest in a wider range of private assets, and that will include through venture capital, which is how we make sure that we provide that growth financing that we all need to see. That is for the private sector to do, as has been mentioned, but it is our job to support that, and that is what the British Business Bank, drawing on some of the work put in place by the previous Government but now being scaled up, is seeking to do.

Point of Order

1.38 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 20 March the Foreign Secretary said in relation to the conflict in Gaza:

> "There are atrocities on both sides".—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 529.]

On 24 March, I wrote to the Attorney General asking how and when His Majesty's Government arrived at that determination. I further asked the Attorney General about the legal implications of the UK selling weapons to Israel directly or indirectly, and whether he believed it legal to supply those weapons when the Government had decreed that Israel was guilty of atrocity crime. On 8 April I received a letter from the Attorney General's Office saying that he did not consider this to be his responsibility and that my letter had been passed to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It is now 13 May, seven weeks after I first wrote to the Attorney General, and I still have had no reply.

This is not new, Madam Deputy Speaker. The record will show that I had to raise a similar point of order in November, when neither the FCDO nor the Attorney General's Office responded to my letter about the Foreign Secretary's interpretation of the genocide convention. Can you advise me on how I can get a reply to my questions, and how we as Back Benchers can have confidence that the Government will answer Members' questions, even those that they wish had not been asked?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Due to the hon. Member's experience, I think he will know that the matter is not down to the Chair. He will appreciate that Mr Speaker respects timely responses to correspondence and requests for answers to questions from Back Benchers. There is no doubt that not only has the hon. Member put his point on the record, but those on the Treasury Front Bench will relay that swiftly to the appropriate Department.

A34 Slip Road Safety (East Ilsley and Beedon)

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

1.40 pm

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for a review of the safety of the A34 slip roads at East Ilsley and Beedon; and to require the publication of plans to address any deficiencies in safety identified by that review.

My constituency is home to some beautiful rural villages, and East Ilsley and Beedon, nestled in the North Wessex downs, are prime examples. Both villages are named in the Domesday Book of 1086, and for centuries they have been home to west Berkshire families. Both have beautiful grade I listed churches, rich agricultural traditions and a vibrant community. Many residents of these idyllic villages use the A34 every day to get to work, take their children to school and travel to Reading, Oxford, Swindon and beyond. However, to get on to the A34, they first have to make a perilous journey down what must be some of England's most dangerous slip roads.

The slip roads, especially southbound at East Ilsley and northbound at Beedon, are intimidating and dangerous even for experienced drivers. National Highways data shows that in the five years up to 2023, tragically there were multiple fatalities and many serious accidents at these slip roads, and my constituents tell me of many more near misses. In fact, 91% of the nearly 500 people who filled out my survey on the slip roads had personally experienced issues on them, and 96% agreed that they were dangerous.

In the words of my constituent Jenny, the

"lack of visibility is treacherous and the slip roads are way too short."

My constituent Coreen told me that using the slip roads feels like "dicing with death", especially in the winter months when it is dark and raining. Jo and Steve told me that they often have to brake to a stop on the slip road, as there are no spaces in the near side lane to enter the flow of traffic. Even as an experienced driver, Paul finds the slip roads to be the most stressful part of any journey. Helena feels concerned for her children's safety, as they use the slip roads to commute to work. Nicola's son sadly experienced a four-car pile-up due to the lack of visibility.

My constituents should not feel afraid when commuting to work or every time that their child drives into town, and residents feel that the situation is only worsening. My constituent Arabella told me that the roads are getting more dangerous as the traffic on the A34 increases. That volume of traffic, including HGVs, is rerouted through the narrow rural lanes of small villages when accidents lead to road closures. Instead of "dicing with death", in the words of my constituent, many residents are choosing to avoid the slip roads at East Ilsley and Beedon and instead join the A34 at Chieveley or West Ilsley, adding significant amounts of time to their journeys and increasing traffic on our rural lanes. Others are thinking about leaving the villages altogether. My constituent Nick is one of those people; he is too concerned about the risk to his young family.

The human impact of these slip roads is my primary concern, but there is also a knock-on effect on economic growth. The A34 is an economically significant road, connecting the major ports of the south-east with industrial heartlands in the midlands. Every time there is an accident, the knock-on disruption not only prevents people from getting to work on time, but impacts the businesses relying on those deliveries. The situation is clearly unsustainable, and something must be done.

After raising the issue in Parliament in February with the Roads Minister, who I am delighted to see in her place today, and meeting the National Highways regional director to discuss my survey findings, I took the National Highways route manager on a site visit to East Ilsley and Beedon to experience the issue at first hand. We spent the morning having to accelerate along the slip roads, grappling with short bends and blind spots and dodging HGVs. It was patently obvious to everyone in the car that my constituents are right to be alarmed.

I am proud that this Labour Government are committed to improving the safety of England's roads. We are delivering the first road safety strategy in over a decade and have provided £4.8 billion of funding for National Highways for the next year. I welcome the fact that National Highways will invest in safety measures in the short term.

I know that this Government's commitment to road safety can deliver tangible change for the people of west Berkshire's villages, and the slip roads at East Ilsley and Beedon urgently need significant safety improvements. That is why I am delighted to present this Bill to urge the Government to provide for a comprehensive review of the safety of these dangerous slip roads and ensure that the necessary improvements are made as soon as possible. National Highways has already recommended a review, known as the "A34 Improvements North and South of Oxford" study. I want to see this delivered quickly, alongside any necessary improvements. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has made it clear that her Department is focused on improving safety for road users, and I look forward to working with her to make that a reality for my constituents.

Before I finish, I must note that I am not the only person who has taken on this issue. I pay tribute to all those who have made the case for change. They include, but are not limited to, local residents; the A34 Action Group; my neighbouring MPs and the sponsors of this Bill, the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr Dillon) and for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover); and our predecessors, including Laura Farris and Lord Benyon. This has been a truly cross-party endeavour, and I am grateful for the support of colleagues from across the political spectrum. We all want the same thing—a safer A34—and by taking on this campaign, I am building on their excellent work.

When my constituent Barbora's car broke down in Southampton, she called the AA. Once she told them that she was from East Ilsley, they immediately knew and said, "That's the village with the dangerous slip roads, isn't it?" I want East Ilsley and Beedon to be known for their tight-knit communities, beautiful scenery and unique heritage, not for how dangerous their slip roads are. By securing a comprehensive review and delivering the right safety measures, we can make these slip roads safe for local people and make a big difference for our community.

[Olivia Bailey]

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Lee Dillon, Olly Glover and Olivia Bailey present the Bill.

Olivia Bailey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 236).

Opposition Day

[7TH ALLOTTED DAY]

UK-EU Summit

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (a) in the name of the Prime Minister.

1.49 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that the Conservative Party stands by the result of the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU); calls on the Government to stand by that decision at the summit with the EU on 19 May 2025, to put the national interest first and not to row back on Brexit, for example by re-introducing free movement through a EU youth mobility scheme, accepting compulsory asylum transfers, creating dynamic alignment between the UK and the EU, by submitting the UK to further oversight from the European Court of Justice or by joining the EU's carbon tax scheme which will lead to higher energy bills; further calls on the Government to stand by the will of the British people by ensuring that no new money is paid to the EU, that there is no reduction in UK fishing rights, that NATO remains the foundation of European security and that the UK can continue to undertake strategic and defence agreements with non-EU partners; and also calls on the Government to put the negotiated outcome to a vote in the House of Commons.

It gives me enormous pleasure to open this debate on one of the subjects that has been central to this House since I was first elected in 2017. It is a debate that is necessary this week, because we know that next week, the EU and this Government are going to meet in London to discuss the next steps in our arrangements. Before that agreement is reached, it is important that this House receives some clarity on what this Government are fighting for, what they stand for and what their red lines are, because even at this late stage, this House is unaware of the Government's intentions.

I do not know whether you remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, but there was a very good TV programme in the 1980s called "Quantum Leap". In it, an American scientist, Dr Samuel Butler—[HON. MEMBERS: "Beckett!"] I stand corrected, and I apologise to the House. Dr Beckett stepped into the quantum leap accelerator and vanished, and awoke to find himself in strange new forms that were not his own. Every time the Prime Minister speaks, I think, "Which body has he leapt into now?" Is it the Prime Minister who spent his early life chastising all immigration law on the grounds that it was racist, or the Prime Minister who has a new-found love of strict immigration rules? Is it the Prime Minister who promised to protect winter fuel payments, or the one who immediately cast them away? Is it the Prime Minister who promised to protect farmers, but immediately did the opposite; the Prime Minister who said he knew what a woman was, but then changed his mind; or the Prime Minister who said he would not put taxes on working people, but then promptly did?

The Prime Minister does not know what he stands for or which way he looks, and that is a very difficult thing in negotiations. Our position is simple: there can be no going back. The Conservative party fought long and hard to take control of our laws, our borders and our

money, and with those powers, we succeeded in securing 70 new trade deals and the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe. The naysayers, gloomsters and dismal voices on the Opposition Benches said that it would come to nothing, but in 2015, UK trade—*[Interruption.]* I look forward to correcting the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), who chunters from a sedentary position.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Alex Burghart: No.

In 2015, UK international trade stood at just over £1 trillion a year, but by 2023, it stood at £1.6 trillion a year—all in spite of Brexit. Our concern is that this Government have proven themselves to be really terrible negotiators. We have previously heard the Administration talk about the need for ruthless pragmatism; one can only wonder whether that is the same ruthless pragmatism that gave us the Chagos deal. When I was a history teacher, we used to say that the worst deal in history was the one that the Lenape people of north-east America did with the Dutch settlers. As the House will recall, they gave away Manhattan island for 60 guilders and a handful of beads, but at least they got 60 guilders and a handful of beads—they did not spend £18 billion of their own money on giving away their territory, as this Government have.

I wonder whether it is the same ruthless pragmatism that immediately gave out £9.4 billion in above-inflation pay rises to the unionised sectors in return for nothing at all—no agreements on productivity or reform. Is it the same ruthless pragmatism that gave us the collapse of the £450 million AstraZeneca deal, the botched steel mess that we all had to return during recess for, or the missed opportunities of the US tariff arrangement the other day? Our concern, of course, is that this will happen again.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I wish I could say that I was enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech, but that would be stretching it a bit too far. I do not know why he is presenting all these faux disagreements; does he not appreciate that the Government are as hard Brexiteers as he is? How much damage does this Brexit have to do before both parties decide that it is far too much, and start to look at it seriously?

Alex Burghart: I always have respect and time for the hon. Gentleman's wisdom, but I feel I must correct him. The Government are not hard Brexiteers—they are just Brexiteers today. Tomorrow, who knows? What we know is that they were against leaving the EU, and then they changed their minds. Those people who change their minds on such fundamental issues may well change them back—they may well turn on a sixpence and do it again.

The fact of the matter is that the Government have entered these negotiations with no clear objectives, and with red lines so thin and washed-out that they can be quickly discarded. However, today is an opportunity for the Labour party to come clean about what it wants and what it is doing, because Labour Members will have to vote on our motion, which sets out our red lines. Those red lines are very clear and precise, and in keeping with the will of the British people.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The hon. Member talks about the official Opposition's motion being precise, but that is factually incorrect, in that the motion conflates freedom of movement with youth mobility. If youth mobility is good enough for Australia, Canada and Uruguay, it does not run against the red lines regarding freedom of movement. Does the hon. Member not understand that?

Alex Burghart: It is freedom of movement for young people, is it not? What we are asking for today is for the Labour party to set out what its clear position is. In a moment, I will explain why that is very important.

The fact is that up until this point, we have seen chaos in these negotiations. That will be easy for the Labour party to understand, because on 24 February, we heard the Home Secretary rule out a youth mobility deal—the Government were not going to do it and were not looking into it. At the beginning of March, though, the Postmaster General suggested in a Westminster Hall debate that he was open to such a deal, but then on 24 April, the Postmaster General ruled it out again. *[Interruption.]* I mean the Paymaster General—would the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) like to be Postmaster General? Okay, Paymaster General it is. He ruled it out on 24 April, but then at the beginning of May, he once again ruled it in.

This does not end with the youth mobility scheme. On 23 January, Labour Ministers ruled out joining the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean area. Three days later, the Chancellor said that the Government were looking at it, and then on 3 February, the Government ruled it out again. The Government do not know what they are doing; they do not know what they want to achieve, have no objectives, and have very blurred red lines. There is an emerging sense that this will be a good deal—a good deal for the EU, in which the balance of benefits will run against the UK. Despite the fact that the Government do not wish to give a running commentary—they are content to give a running commentary to the press—it seems that the EU's demands are being met in this negotiation, but because the UK has no demands, its demands cannot be met.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has referred to "Quantum Leap". The point about Sam Beckett is that he kept leaping back into the past, because he could not cope with the future—that does seem rather apposite. I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees with many Labour Members that one of the important things about next Monday is that we will be able to move forward on the security and defence partnership. Given the threat posed by President Putin, can the hon. Gentleman put aside his blindness to the benefits to this country of co-operating with Europe and at least agree that that partnership would be a good thing to secure?

Alex Burghart: I am glad to be the one to break it to the hon. Lady that we already co-operate with Europe on defence, and have done so for a very long time. She will know that the cornerstone of our defence is—and always has been, since the second world war—NATO. Now is an apt moment to remember that, because today is the 85th anniversary of the first speech that Sir Winston Churchill made as Prime Minister, given from

[Alex Burghart]

that Dispatch Box, or, rather, from the Dispatch Box that was there before the Chamber was bombed. It was his "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech.

It is obviously incredibly important that we co-operate with our European partners on defence, but that is why we do. We spend 2.5% of GDP on defence—and the Opposition would like to spend 3%, and more—largely to help defend Europe, and we know of no reason, because the Government have not given one, why NATO is insufficient for that task.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): British firms are calling for co-operation with our European allies so that there is investment in increased defence spending across Europe, including in my constituency. What would the shadow Minister say to them? The Government are calling for a security deal. Does he not agree that we need one with the EU?

Alex Burghart: I would say that if the terms of the deal are that the UK must pay to have access to that fund, we must ask very serious questions of our European allies about why we should have to contribute when we are already committed to their security. If the Government choose to go down that route, it is for the Government to explain why that should be the case.

The truth is that NATO must continue to be the cornerstone of our defence, but over the weekend there were reports in *The Sunday Times* that the EU might be inserted into our chain of command, which would be a very significant change.

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Absolute nonsense.

Alex Burghart: From a sedentary position, the Paymaster General says that that is absolute nonsense. I am pleased to hear it, but the right hon. Gentleman has not yet had an opportunity to tell the House that. It was clear that someone in the Government, or within the EU, was briefing journalists over the weekend that this might be true. *[Interruption.]* I think the right hon. Gentleman needs to take responsibility for his special advisers. If there is to be a defence pact, it is for the Government to explain why it would make us safer.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): One thing puzzles me slightly about the position taken by the Government, which is a bit like that on the Chagos islands: we already owned them, but we entered a negotiation to give them away and rent them back. In this instance, Europe threatens us that we cannot talk about other matters until we sign up to this defence deal, but we already have a defence deal and we already co-operate: we have built weapons with France, Sweden and various other countries. Rather than what they would lose, what is it that we gain?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend has a great deal of experience of these matters, and he has made a series of very important points, but it is for the Government to explain why this would be in the interests of the UK. The summit is taking place next week, and so far the Government have not done so.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Given that the last Government reduced our Army to a size not seen since the Napoleonic era, we should take no lectures on defence from Opposition Members. The people who will benefit from this are the defence contractors in my constituency who have been struggling to sell their components to the EU since Brexit and have had to cancel contracts, which has been affecting jobs all over the west midlands.

Alex Burghart: When I first arrived in the House, the leader of the hon. Gentleman's party was advocating leaving NATO and giving up Trident, so I will take no lectures from those on his side of the House. My party is committed to 3% defence spending, and I think that those defence contractors in his constituency would very much like to see a Conservative Government spend some of that money in his patch.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Would my hon. Friend care to disabuse Labour Members who seem to be under the impression that whatever amount we put in, somehow our defence contractors in the UK will get more out of the fund than we are contributing? The history of defence procurement in Europe is that France and Germany invariably make sure that they get more out of it than they put in, and we are always the losers. I do not think we will suddenly become winners when we are not a member of the EU.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend's experience in these matters speaks volumes. The truth is that we must be absolutely certain that this will not be just another scheme for funnelling money into French defence companies while keeping it away from defence companies in other jurisdictions.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my hope that in next week's negotiations the Government will make it abundantly clear to our European partners that for decades this country's contribution to our collective defence has been well above the level that our economy, our population or our size would dictate, and that Europe has benefited from that? While I am in no way recommending a Trumpian approach to these matters, it is nevertheless important for the Government to make clear to our interlocutors the scale of our contribution to collective defence.

Alex Burghart: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. The fact is that the UK has made a disproportionate, but necessary, contribution to European defence for many decades. I think that we were right to do so, and I would support our doing so into the future, but it is only right for our friends to recognise that contribution and to treat us not as an external power coming to parlay, but rather as a close and long-term friend whose loyalty has already been proved many times over.

It would also be good today to have clarification from the Government of their position on EU lawmaking. I was lucky enough to have a call with my friend Sir William Cash this morning. It was an unusually brief call, lasting only 20 minutes. *[Laughter.]* Sir Bill put it very clearly to me: he said that in any new arrangement with the EU it was important for us to see no EU lawmaking, no jurisdiction for the European

Court of Justice and no attempt to reapply the principles of EU law in our courts, because one principle of our departure from the EU was that we would take back control of our money, our borders and our laws.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The hon. Member is right to say that there must be no further surrender to EU law, but, in the same vein, is there not a need to recover the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom? I represent a part of the United Kingdom where in 300 areas of law it is not this House but a foreign Parliament that makes the laws. Should the starting point of a reset not be recovering the integrity of this Parliament in the territory of this United Kingdom?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman has made a very good point. It is one that he has made often in the House, and I look forward to his making it to the Minister in a few moments' time.

On the subject of fish, we are clear about the fact that there should be no multi-year deal, because that would reduce the UK's leverage in future negotiations with the EU. We should have 12 nautical miles of exclusive access. That is what our fishermen want, and it is what the Conservative party supports. There should also be fair distribution of quota schemes, and no trade barriers during disputes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has made the position very clear. This is an opportunity to defend the UK's fishermen, and to build on the deal that we had previously from the Brexit negotiations. We should not be giving up the freedom of our fishermen.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is important to remember the history here. There was no common fisheries policy until the prospect of Britain's joining the common market arose, and then those countries created one simply so that they could rip us off.

Alex Burghart: Ain't that the truth! Here is an opportunity for the Government to give guarantees and securities to our fishermen.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): The hon. Member is talking about fishing rights. Under his Government, the UK catch suddenly dropped by 80%. Will he now apologise for the damage that he and his party did to the UK fishing industry?

Alex Burghart: We are the party that took fishermen out of the common fisheries policy, which is something that fishing communities wanted. We very much hope that this Government will not concede the rights that were hard won in those negotiations.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I wonder whether the shadow Minister has quantum leapt into a body in which Brexit has been a huge success. Could he say either way?

Alex Burghart: If the hon. Gentleman had heard my opening remarks, he would have heard that in 2015, the volume of UK trade was just over £1 trillion. By 2023, despite Brexit, that had gone up to £1.6 trillion. Sometimes the people who were on the other side of the argument, many of whom had understandable concerns—we were making a big constitutional change that had not been made in over 40 years—seem trapped in the past, like Dr Samuel Beckett, and unable to realise that there have been significant improvements in the UK's trading position because of the freedoms that we acquired, and because of the 70 trade deals that the previous Government brought in. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to change his altered reality, there will be an audience for it in this House.

On the emissions trading scheme, we know that carbon prices are higher in the EU than they are in the UK. There is great concern among certain industries that if, as has been trailed in the press, the Government are planning to sign us up to the EU's emissions trading system, there will be a heavy price to pay, particularly in the ceramics industry. Two weeks ago, we saw a ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent close, citing high energy prices under this Labour Government.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Sadly, high energy prices are a result of the policy of the hon. Gentleman's Government, who had four industrial strategies, all of which promised significant help for the ceramics sector and it never materialised. One of the biggest problems for the ceramics sector is ensuring that the European Union's food contact regulations, which it has to comply with to sell its wares, match the British system. If he were in power today, what would he do to ensure that our trading arrangements allow for free trade of the goods that my city makes and sells into Europe?

Alex Burghart: Well, it will be irrelevant if all the businesses shut down because of high energy prices. The hon. Gentleman can talk about the previous Administration, but it was his party that promised to cut energy bills by £300. Instead, they continue to go up, and the market expectation is that energy prices will continue to rise under this Government. That would be very bad for ceramics factories, such as the ones in his constituency.

There are a range of other things that we could go into. If there are going to be negotiations with the EU, there are plenty of things that might be raised, but we do not know whether the Government have raised them. They include the arrangements with France on illegal migration, mutual recognition of food standards, conformity certification, touring musicians, rules of origin and so on. The point is that the Government have not told us whether they want these things, whether they are pursuing them and whether it is negotiating them on our behalf.

We on this side of the House are clear: following the referendum, this country turned a page, and it is very important that the Labour party does not turn it back. The fact is that we are on the brink of witnessing yet another disastrous Labour deal. We know that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses. To leave the House in no doubt, if and when my party is back in power, we will reverse any handover of power, any imposition of EU law, any new rights for the ECJ and any new budgetary commitments. It is my party that took the country out of the EU, and it is my party that will keep it out. I commend this motion to the House.

2.14 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to end and insert:

"notes the overwhelming mandate on which the Government was elected, which included resetting the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union to deepen ties with its European friends, neighbours and allies; welcomes the Government's commitment only to agree a deal that is in the UK's national interest and is in line with the manifesto on which the Government was elected; supports the Government's commitment to agree a new and ambitious security agreement between the UK and the EU to help tackle common threats, whilst noting that NATO is the cornerstone of the UK's defence; recognises the Government's ambition to negotiate a sanitary and phytosanitary and veterinary agreement to address the cost of food and to tackle a range of other issues to reduce barriers to trade; and further supports improvements to the UK-EU relationship that are aimed at making the UK safer, more secure and more prosperous, in line with the Prime Minister's Plan for Change."

First of all, I should say what a pleasure it always is to debate with the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who is across the Dispatch Box from me. Discussions with the EU are ongoing, and I am sure that Members from across the House will understand that I cannot, this afternoon, pre-empt what will be unveiled at next week's summit. We will not provide a running commentary on negotiations, nor would this House expect us to. However, after the summit has concluded, we will take the earliest possible opportunity to update Parliament on what has been delivered, and on the impact that any measures will have.

I will focus my remarks on how this Government are improving the lives of working people and making the people of the UK safer, more secure and more prosperous, and I am grateful to the Opposition for giving us the opportunity to talk about that. We have heard from the Opposition today, and from the Leader of the Opposition in recent days, that the only thing that has been surrendered is the credibility of the Conservative party as a party of opposition, let alone a party of government. The only quantum leap made is by the Conservative party, which has gone from government to irrelevance.

2025 started so well, didn't it? The Leader of the Opposition was turning over a new leaf and taking responsibility for her mistakes. She said of the previous Government:

"We were making announcements without proper plans. We announced that we would leave the European Union before we had a plan for growth outside the EU."

However, with negotiations ongoing, today the Conservatives are rehashing the arguments of the past. There is no analysis of where the United Kingdom's interest lies in the mid-2020s. The Conservatives simply do not believe in Britain's ability to win. Perhaps that is no surprise, given the 14 years of failure that they delivered for our country.

This Government were elected in July 2024 on a mandate to deliver change for working people, and we are delivering on the promises of our manifesto. If the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar does not know about the objectives of the negotiation, I suggest that he read the manifesto—a manifesto that delivered 411 Labour Members of Parliament, as the public overwhelmingly rejected the Conservative party.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: May I point out that the Conservative motion says that the Conservatives stand by the result of the 2016 referendum, but the Labour amendment does not say the same of the Labour party? Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that a one-term mandate in one election trumps a referendum result, or does he respect the referendum result of 2016?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I absolutely respect the referendum result. If the hon. Gentleman bothered to read our manifesto, he would discover that there are red lines: we will not go back to the single market, the customs union, or freedom of movement. Let me say to the Conservative party that delivering on our manifesto promises will unlock huge benefits for the United Kingdom, reduce barriers to trade and accelerate economic growth. In an uncertain world, it will keep us safer, more secure and more prosperous. That is what this Government are working towards.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Minister has referred to the Labour manifesto several times in a few minutes. Did it say anything at all about accepting dynamic alignment or becoming a rule taker—yes or no?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The objective of negotiating a sanitary and phytosanitary veterinary agreement, so that agricultural products, food and drink can be traded more cheaply between the UK and the EU, is in the Labour manifesto, and we have a mandate for that. The Government will put more money in the pockets of working people and create greater long-term stability and security for the British people. Apparently, the Opposition are against that, and so, I hear, is Reform. To be fair, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) says that he thinks the current deal with the EU can be improved, but he has never told us exactly how, and we wait to find out.

Since last July, this Government have been getting on with the job of resetting our relationship with the European Union in a number of important areas.

Pete Wishart: Right now, the young people of this country are confined to this island, and cannot live, work or move freely across the continent. There are discussions about a youth mobility scheme. Will the Minister commit himself to securing a mobility scheme for the young people of this country?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would not describe the hon. Gentleman as being confined to any island. I have already spoken about smart, controlled youth mobility schemes; the previous Government agreed a number of them.

This Government are exercising diplomacy in our national interest. We need only take one look at the trade deals that we have signed with the United States —[Hon. Members: "Terrible!"]—and India in the last fortnight to see that we are delivering for the British people. Conservative Front Benchers shout from a sedentaryposition about the US deal, but they can tell that to the workers at Jaguar Land Rover whose jobs have been saved by the deal.

I can tell the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) that I was in Scotland yesterday to talk to the Scotch Whisky Association about the enormous benefits for Scotland of the India deal. He should welcome that deal, not criticise the Government. Britain is back on the world stage, no thanks to the carping from the Opposition

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the point about carping from the Opposition, I will.

Harriet Cross: The Minister mentioned that he was in Scotland yesterday, which is wonderful. As a Scottish MP, I am in Scotland every week, and I quite often meet people from distilleries, who have recently said that they are suffering because of the family farm tax that the Government have brought in. Their farmers are downsizing and not investing, which is reducing their supply of grain. Are the Minister and the Government proud of that legacy, and that contribution to the Scotch Whisky Association?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very proud of the extra £25 billion that we have put into the national health service. Apparently, the ludicrous position of the Opposition is that they are in favour of the investment, but they will not tell us exactly how they would raise the money.

I put it to the Opposition: is there any country they actually want a British business to trade with? In government, the Conservatives promised a trade deal with India by Diwali—to be fair, they did not say which Diwali—but they delivered absolutely nothing for the British people. We secure an India trade deal, and they complain about it. We secure an economic deal with the United States—long promised by the last Government, but never delivered—and they do not like that. I like to be constructive, so can I make a suggestion to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith)? Maybe he should change his title to shadow Secretary of State for no business and no trade, because when it comes to the trade deals that we have negotiated, that is the Opposition's position.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): He has run a business, unlike you.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I was self-employed, actually. I would be careful about making remarks without knowing the facts.

While the Opposition continue to turn inwards on themselves, this Government will focus on delivery. Our priority is translating that strengthened relationship with the European Union into a long-term UK-EU strategic partnership that improves the lives of working people and puts more money in their pockets.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have heard what the shadow Minister said about the Conservatives' pride in Brexit. It seems to me that they are proud of the terrible Brexit deal that they delivered and completely unable to bring forward any constructive ideas. They have managed to set out five red lines, but does the Minister agree that the Opposition have nothing to be proud of when it comes to the botched Brexit deal that they brought forward, nothing to be proud of in making Britons poorer, and nothing to be proud of in making trade harder? Will he share with us some of the framework that he will be discussing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Conservative Members sit there defending the status quo, but if they bothered to speak to any businesses trading internationally, they would know that the status quo is not working for Britain.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Minister has spoken about UK deals with India and the United States, and next Tuesday there will be a UK deal, or a reset, with the European Union. Where is Northern Ireland's place in that? When the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and I have asked where the benefit is for Northern Ireland from the UK-India and UK-US trade deals, we have had no answers from the Government.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have visited Belfast as a Minister more than once, and I have listened very carefully to businesses in Northern Ireland about their priorities. Northern Ireland has dual-market access, and I am absolutely supportive of Northern Ireland taking the greatest possible economic advantage of that. On the Windsor framework and the checks at the border on the Irish sea, if we are able to secure a sanitary and phytosanitary deal, that will obviously reduce the necessity for checks at that border, which I hope the hon. Gentleman would be able to support.

On safety, the trade and co-operation agreement agreed by the Conservatives left a gap in our ability to tackle crime and criminality, and stopped opportunities to work with European countries on closing the loopholes allowing illegal migration. We have to improve on that. On security, which was raised by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar, we are responding to a once-in-a-generation moment for the collective security of our continent through an ambitious UK-EU security and defence relationship. In the shadow of the 80th anniversary of VE Day, which gave us all powerful historical reminders in our constituencies up and down the country, securing our collective future is paramount.

I remind the House that NATO was the creation of that great post-war Labour Government of Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin. It has been the bedrock of our security over three quarters of a century after the treaty was signed, and that will not change. In fact, a new defence and security pact strengthens European security and strengthens NATO, and to suggest otherwise is irresponsible. The United Kingdom is rapidly increasing defence spending, and it is playing a leadership role on Ukraine. The only person who would benefit from talk of division across Europe is Vladimir Putin.

On growth, the Government's central mission is to slash red tape at the border, making it easier for UK businesses to trade with the EU and to cut costs for businesses and consumers.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I am so pleased that the Minister is trying to negotiate a new SPS deal and working to remove the red tape. Would he

[Catherine Fookes]

agree with me that businesses in my constituency, such as Tri-Wall in Monmouthshire, are absolutely desperate to remove that red tape, so they can increase exports again, as they did before the botched Brexit deal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and businesses up and down the country will benefit from a reduction in trade barriers.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The Minister is making a good case. Would he agree with me that closer UK-EU defence ties do not diminish our role in NATO, but complement it, especially at a time when transatlantic security simply cannot be taken for granted? Would he also agree that securing access to programmes such as the Security Action for Europe fund would be a win for British manufacturers and for our strategic capability?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that that is in the UK's interests, and this would be the worst possible moment to start fragmenting defence across Europe.

Let me just say that on the three pillars of this negotiation—safety, security and growth—this Government will deliver for our country's future, reducing the cost of living and creating jobs. The Opposition motion is stuck in the past. Everybody else has moved on and, frankly, it is time for them to move on, too.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): The Minister raises the important issue of the cost of living. Given the dire economic impacts of Brexit, including food inflation being eight times higher than it would otherwise have been, and the costs of leaving the European Union amounting to £1 million an hour in 2022, according to data from the Office for National Statistics, does he agree with me that it makes total economic sense for the UK and the people in it to use next week's summit to start discussions with the EU on what the process of rejoining might be, and the timings for that?[1]

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We respect the result of the 2016 referendum. What the hon. Lady is saying on the cost of food is precisely what an SPS agreement on agricultural products, food and drink would seek to deal with—I would hope to see her party supporting that.

The Conservatives now seem to be the defenders of the current status quo. If they bothered to speak to traders these days, they would know that that status quo is not working in the interests of UK businesses, big or small. One Member said that the existing trade deal is

"not a very good one".

That was actually the hon. Member for Clacton; it is not often that I agree with him, but there we are. As a result of the previous Government's failure, companies have been enduring significant delays at our borders, and having to fill out hundreds of pieces of paper just to be able to import or export to our nearest neighbours.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is making an excellent speech. Like me, I am sure he is concerned about small businesses that could particularly benefit from an agrifood deal. Would he like to say a little bit more about the benefits for our small businesses?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There will be a particular benefit to small and medium-sized businesses, which simply have not had the capacity to deal with the additional red tape we have seen in recent years.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con) *rose—*

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD) *rose—*

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose—*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give way once more: to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Sir John Hayes: I am immensely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. The last time we exchanged comments in the Chamber, I think they were about Asquith, but I cannot match that today.

The right hon. Gentleman is making some sensible points about trusted traders and easing barriers at the border, but he will know, when he speaks of safety and security, that our key security relationship is the Five Eyes relationship: with America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Of course we co-operate with Europe, but any changes to our relationship around security with Europe would endanger the security of this country, if we compromised that core relationship. In particular, given that those Euro-enthusiasts on the continent have always wanted a pan-European army and a pan-European security policy, will he talk a bit about defence and defence procurement?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First of all, there is absolutely no compromise on the core principles of our defence, which we have had since NATO was founded in 1949. Far from any weakening, we are producing the opposite. This would be the worst possible moment to fragment European defence. That is not what this Government are doing. I dismiss any suggestion of a European army in the way that I think the right hon. Gentleman means it. This is a crucial moment for our continent. It is about leadership and peace on our continent, and strengthening and complementing NATO—absolutely not weakening it in any sense. I hope he will take that reassurance.

I have to go back to the point about businesses, because businesses themselves are speaking out. Businesses such as Marks and Spencer have been up front about how real the challenges are. Its head of food said recently:

"paperwork takes hours to complete and demands detail as niche as the Latin name for the chicken used in our chicken tikka masala."

It is not just M&S. All supermarkets have said the same, as recently reported in the *Financial Times*. Just yesterday, I was in Edinburgh hearing from businesses about the difficulties they face—difficulties that we could resolve with some ruthless pragmatism and a better deal.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

1.[*Official Report*, 14 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am going to make some progress.

Meanwhile, a few weeks ago more than 50 energy companies and organisations highlighted the need for closer energy co-operation with the EU to drive down costs and drive up investment. All those were voices that a Conservative party of the past might have listened to, but not, it seems, this lot on the Opposition Front Bench. There is an opportunity in front of us that the Opposition do not even want to try to understand. It will make a difference to growing our economy, boosting our living standards and eradicating the barriers that limit trade with our single biggest trading partner today.

The consequence of the Conservatives' position today is that they are defending a status quo that is failing businesses and failing working people. Their view—let us be clear about this—is that the trade barriers holding businesses back should stay in place. That impacts on the cost of living and on the number of jobs.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that at the heart of this debate is that this Government are taking proactive engagement with our nearest and largest trading and security partner, which is a quantum leap from the failed position of sneering resentment from the Conservative party?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The situation now is a quantum leap of improvement after what we saw from the Conservative Government.

Sir Ashley Fox: Will the SPS and energy deals that the Minister has in mind be on the basis of a mutual recognition of standards, or does he envisage the United Kingdom accepting EU standards now, being dynamically aligned and placing ourselves under the jurisdiction of the European Court?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Just to be clear, whether on energy, an SPS agreement or employment rights, this Government are interested in a race to the top, not a race to the bottom. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members feign interest in the details of the deal next Monday. The Leader of the Opposition did not even want to look at it before she went out at the weekend and made her mind up about it. That is not the behaviour of a serious Opposition party, let alone a party of government. But that is where the Conservatives are now: very happy to carp on about what they are against, not caring about reducing bills, not caring about people's pay checks, not caring about people's jobs, and forever trying not to spell out an alternative. They have not listened, and they certainly have not learned.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith *rose—*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the issue of learning and listening, I give way to the right hon. Member.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I just wanted to check on something. We can debate whether a trade deal can be improved—I am sure that all trade deals can be improved, whether it is the American one or what is an extensive one with Europe, and probably the greatest one negotiated in the past—but one area, as the Government go back into this discussion, needs to be very clear. I was looking at a paper produced by the Centre for European Reform, which makes one point very clear, as the Government go into the negotiation. It states:

> "Labour's red lines do not extend to ruling out dynamic alignment or a role for the ECJ in dispute settlement."

Is that correct? Is that the position of the present Labour Government?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have to say, having been for some years in this House with the right hon. Gentleman, that I never thought I would find him quoting the Centre for European Reform in a parliamentary debate, but clearly someone on the Opposition Benches is moving on, even if those on the Opposition Front Bench are not.

Driven by our ruthlessly pragmatic approach, next Monday's UK-EU summit will be the first annual summit between the UK and the EU. It will be a day of delivery. We are delivering on our manifesto—not returning to the customs union, single market or freedom of movement, or revisiting the arguments of 2016.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform) *rose—*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the subject of revisiting the arguments of 2016, I give way to the hon. Member.

Richard Tice: I can understand why the right hon. Member did not want to answer the two questions from the Opposition on dynamic alignment, but surely, given a third opportunity, he will commit the Government not to have dynamic alignment in any way, so that we can benefit from trade deals around the world—a great Brexit benefit.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In the past few weeks, we have absolutely been benefiting from trade deals around the world. Nothing we are doing with the European Union is stopping that. If the hon. Gentleman wants evidence of that, he can see the UK-India trade deal that this Government agreed in recent weeks, or look at the deal with the United States that we agreed in recent weeks. Nothing we are doing with the European Union cuts across that. Our position has been that we will not choose between our allies. The UK's national interest lies in deepening—*[Interruption.]* No, there is nothing dynamic about the Conservative party. The UK's national interest lies in deepening our trade relationships with all our partners.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have given way a number of times now.

Trade, security, defence and other areas of our relationship should never be treated as a zero-sum game. It is possible to deliver on all fronts, and that is exactly what this Government are doing.

I look forward to turning the page next week, as we forge a new strategic partnership with our European friends and make Brexit work in the interests of the British people. We are stepping up and meeting the moment, making people safer and more secure, delivering growth and delivering in our national interest—that is what this Government will do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.40 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank those on the Conservative Front Bench for bringing this motion, which reveals, if nothing else, the sorry state of their party—not a vision for Britain's future, but a stubborn fixation on a failed past.

The Tories' botched Brexit deal has left us not flourishing, but floundering—not prosperous, but poorer. Their dreadful Brexit deal has been utterly ruinous for our economy. While they cling to their Brexit dogma, British businesses, farmers and fishers in every corner of our country face the harsh reality of their record of incompetence. Britain deserves more than hollow promises and endless excuses—Britain deserves better.

The Conservatives' motion today is a checklist of their own failures. What was once a pro-business party that supported open markets and free trade now cowers behind trade barriers. There is only one liberal party speaking up for British business in this House, and that is the Liberal Democrats. Businesses that were promised a bonfire of regulation are now buried in paperwork. The Tories did not deliver the streamlined trade they promised; instead, they created a bureaucratic nightmare.

Freddie van Mierlo: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of one of my constituents, who started a business importing organic produce from the EU but has to pay to re-certify the organic produce in the UK at their own cost. That is killing their business. Is this the type of red tape, introduced by Brexit, that the Government should remove?

James MacCleary: Absolutely. My hon. Friend's point speaks to the nature of the deal that was agreed when we left the European Union. Far from creating the streamlined trade the Conservatives promised, and instead of boosting growth, they have strangled it. Our farmers were promised golden opportunities, but have ended up poorer and weighed down by yet more Tory Brexit bureaucracy.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The previous Conservative Government undermined farmers and our rural economy with a botched trade deal with Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs slammed it by saying

"the UK gave away far too much for far too little".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government should not allow our farmers to be thrown under the bus again?

James MacCleary: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for farmers in her constituency and across the country, and I absolutely agree with her.

Our fishing communities have suffered similarly. I hear from local fishers in Newhaven, in my constituency, who fear their livelihoods are close to collapse. Elsewhere, we have the example of offshore shellfish in Brixham, represented by my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), where a vet is now needed to sign 17 separate documents by hand for every shipment of mussels. If the deadline is missed at Calais, the entire catch goes to waste. That is not taking back control—it is losing the plot.

The Tories have thoroughly botched our relationship with Europe, but Labour's overcautious approach risks cementing this failure. We acknowledge the Government's recognition that this Brexit deal was not working, but their approach falls a long way short. Where Britain needs bold leadership, they offer nothing more than reluctant half-measures; where we need decisive action, they offer excuses and red lines.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point about shellfish. The environmental and hygiene standards we apply to our shellfish remained exactly the same the day we left the EU as when we were in the EU—it was the EU that supplied all that bureaucracy and requirement for wet stamps. Under World Trade Organisation rules, if a territory has equivalent standards, it is obliged to allow goods to enter its jurisdiction unchecked. Why does the EU breach this international law so wantonly, and why have the Government become a supplicant to the EU, trying to gain its favour to remove these illegal barriers?

James MacCleary: I think the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge that the regulations he references are not the only barriers to export in this country. I mentioned Calais; the port of Dover currently sees massive delays in getting any goods through the port because of the additional bureaucracy and security that are necessary as a result of Brexit. Newhaven port in my constituency, which I know very well—in fact, I humbly suggest that I know it better than other hon. Members—has had to spend millions of pounds simply putting in place more barriers in order to move goods through the port, and that is what is slowing things down. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about equivalence, but at the end of the day, it is not the only output of Brexit that is harming our industries.

With its half-measures, Labour seems so afraid of its Reform-shaped shadow that it has ruled out bold measures to set free British business and stimulate growth. Britain cannot afford such timidity; our businesses cannot afford it, and our young people, who face a future with fewer opportunities than their parents, absolutely cannot afford it.

Sir John Hayes: I assume the hon. Gentleman is not advocating returning to the common fisheries policy, which, with its ludicrous quotas and equivalence, was bad for fish, which were discarded live, and bad for fishermen, who were limited by quotas. It was a disaster that had a detrimental effect on the fishing industry across this country. Surely he does not want a return to that.

James MacCleary: Absolutely not. The common fisheries policy did a lot of damage to British fishing, as the common agricultural policy did to farming.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): On that point, it is possibly worth noting that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) attended only one of 42 European

Parliament Fisheries Committee meetings that he could have attended, thereby never speaking up for British interests, and that is potentially why the common fisheries policy was not to our benefit.

James MacCleary: I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

What we have advocated for on all these areas is a new relationship with Europe, which would involve a new discussion around fishing. Unlike the Conservatives, who apparently cannot cope with the idea that we can actually move forward in the world and have a different arrangement, we acknowledge that we do not have to go back to what we had before.

The Liberal Democrats have a clear four-step road map to rebuild our European relationships. First, we must have a fundamental reset, rebuilding trust trashed by years of Conservative recklessness. I absolutely acknowledge the positive work Ministers have done in that regard. Secondly, we must rejoin crucial European agencies that directly benefit British people, such as Erasmus+, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency and Horizon Europe, which back in 2023 the Conservatives agreed to pay more than £2 billion a year to rejoin due to the enormous harm that leaving that programme had done to our critical research and innovation sector. To recognise the necessity of such programmes, only to demand in the motion that the Government rule out paying for access to other schemes that could benefit the UK, is the very height of hypocrisy.

Thirdly, we must negotiate practical arrangements to slash red tape, culminating in a UK-EU customs union by 2030 that would give British businesses the oxygen they so desperately need. Finally, as trust rebuilds, we must pursue single market membership, unlocking maximum prosperity for businesses and maximum opportunity for future generations.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments about the common fisheries policy. Will he join us on the Conservative Benches and go one further by urging the Government not to give up any of the sovereign fishing rights that the UK currently benefits from by giving away fishing to France for other seen-to-be benefits from a wider deal? Can he be strong and urge the Government on fishing, like those on these Benches?

James MacCleary: I can be strong; I promise the House that I will never join those Benches—I can rule that out definitively. What we should not be doing, as the right-wing press have slightly hysterically speculated, is trading away fishing rights for a defence deal, for instance. That is something that Liberal Democrats have been very clear about, and that we continue to be clear about.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Member makes an excellent case. To his credit, he set out four clear points, which is more than the Government or the main Opposition party have done. Members across this House have previously said that a democracy fails to be a democracy if people do not have the ability to change their minds. Does he rule out ever rejoining the EU?

James MacCleary: It is impossible to rule out anything in the future. If the hon. Member had asked me 20 years ago whether it were possible that we would ever leave the EU, I would have said that it was extremely unlikely. Who knows what will happen in the future? We may have a Government of a different complexion one day who choose to take those steps, but right now that is clearly not something that we are talking about.

The EU must show flexibility, too. Britain is no ordinary third country. We are a major economy and an indispensable partner on defence, security and trade. The EU must make space for bespoke, pragmatic arrangements. Alongside that, the Government must immediately introduce a youth mobility scheme. Our young people deserve the same European opportunities that previous generations enjoyed, including many on these Benches. The Tories obstinately refuse this common-sense approach and Labour has so far flip-flopped on the issue. We have existing schemes with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Canada, but not with our nearest neighbours. Our young people do not deserve this short-sightedness; they deserve access to opportunities across Europe.

As global threats multiply—Putin's brutality in Ukraine and Trump's economic recklessness—Britain's security demands strong European partnerships. Our comprehensive UK-EU defence pact is not just desirable, but essential for our national security. We are no longer part of Europol, meaning that we have lost access to crucial intelligence sharing and vital databases that help track criminals and terrorists across borders. That is not taking back control; that is making British people feel less safe and less secure. To those who claim that a UK-EU defence co-operation pact would somehow weaken NATO, let us be clear: it would do the exact opposite. Greater mobility for personnel across Europe strengthens NATO's ability to deploy forces, particularly in the east. Access to EU procurement mechanisms allows us to purchase more equipment more efficiently and boost British defence firms.

Stronger co-operation on European defence not only bolsters the alliance, but improves our shared operational effectiveness. The Conservatives are undermining British security and scaremongering by suggesting otherwise. With Trump in the White House, the world has been plunged into a trade war. Britain's exports to the EU reached £356 billion last year, which is 42% of everything that we sell to the world. Imagine how much higher that would be and how much more money the British people would have in their pockets had the Conservatives' disastrous deal not shrunk our economy by 4%.

Calum Miller: In my constituency of Bicester and Woodstock, many workers at the Cowley Mini plant tell me that they are worried about the future of the plant, and one of the principal reasons is that the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal has introduced so much red tape that the just-in-time delivery of component parts across the European network that BMW operates is threatening the plant. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is just one example of how the Brexit deal damages our economy, rather than supporting our core industries?

James MacCleary: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for sticking up for his local businesses, as he always does. Absolutely; the effect on supply chains in particular has not always been obvious, but it has been detrimental to many, particularly large, complicated businesses.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Member give way?

James MacCleary: Not at the moment, no.

By contrast, the much-vaunted trade deal signed with India last week is worth just a fraction of our former deal with the European Union. It is around 20 times smaller than the economic boost that we gain simply by aligning with the EU on goods and services.

Mr Francois: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James MacCleary: Of course.

Mr Francois: The whole House will have noted that the hon. Member clearly failed to rule out a second referendum, because he did not much like the result of the first one. May I ask him this directly? Like the Government, as is obvious from their evasion this afternoon, are the Liberal Democrats prepared to accept a process of dynamic alignment, whereby we effectively become a passive rule-taker from the European Union? Yes or no?

James MacCleary: The right hon. Member makes two points. First, he mentioned a second referendum. I find this a fascinating contention. Elections happen every four years. At the last election, we returned a Labour Government. This argument that the result of that referendum in 2016 must be held in perpetuity—no matter what the British people think of it—suggests to me that everybody should join the Labour party, because now we will have a Labour Government in perpetuity, too. Perhaps Conservative Members might want to give some consideration to that.

Secondly, the right hon. Member used the term "rule-taker". I find that fascinating, too. It was quite noticeable that in the negotiations on Brexit, Conservative Members became enthralled by the philosophy of cakeism to the extent that it became their mantra that we could have our cake and eat it, and that, apparently, modern trade deals do not require any give and take. The recent India trade deal, which has been so trumpeted by Labour Members and, which, of course, was started by Conservative Members, does involve the UK having to take some things as well. That is what a trade deal looks like, and it certainly looks like that when we are talking with the largest trading bloc on the planet. The key question that the right hon. Member should be asking is what benefit would it bring to British people. That, ultimately, is the job of any Government and any politician: what will benefit us?

Mr Francois: Yes!

James MacCleary: I am pleased that the right hon. Member agrees with himself.

By contrast, my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) tells me of an engineering firm in his constituency that, due to the mountains of Brexit red tape, now finds it far easier to trade with South Korea than with Europe. This is not just damaging, but frankly absurd. The one thing that the Government will not do that is guaranteed to deliver growth is negotiate a bespoke customs union with the EU, yet they are hiking national insurance for businesses, stifling investment and refusing to support the most vulnerable in our society by not scrapping the two-child benefit cap or safeguarding personal independence payments.

Sir Bernard Jenkin *rose—*

Helen Maguire *rose—*

James MacCleary: I will, if I may, make a little progress, because I am conscious of the amount of time that I am taking up.

Only a customs union can give businesses the long-term certainty they need, which will help to shield British jobs from the looming threat of Trump's trade wars. I will take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman first and then from my hon. Friend.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman told us that he has a constituent who finds it easier to trade with South Korea than with the EU. What does that tell us about the EU? Is that not one reason why people voted to leave? It is because of its excessive bureaucracy and its protectionism. Why is it easier to trade with South Korea than with the EU if it is not for EU bureaucracy?

James MacCleary: Just to be clear, I was talking about one of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth. But on the hon. Member's point, the reason was the trade barriers put up by the Conservative party as part of the Brexit deal. It is as simple as that. It was a protectionist party putting up trade barriers, and it continues to advocate for it.

Helen Maguire: On the issue of red tape, Epsom and Ewell constituents are facing preventable delays on essential medication for conditions such as diabetes, ADHD and mental ill health. Does my hon. Friend agree that now is simply not the time to play politics, and that we must urgently seek a comprehensive mutual recognition agreement with the European Medicines Agency to cut the red tape that is so detrimental to the health of all of our constituents?

James MacCleary: That is a really important point. We have seen shortages of key medications—my hon. Friend mentioned ADHD medication, which has a detrimental impact on the lives of children and parents—like insulin and others.

The Liberal Democrats understand that Britain belongs at Europe's heart, not on its periphery, isolated and diminished. We recognise that rebuilding these ties requires patience and skilled diplomacy, but unlike the Tories, we will not bury our heads in the sand. Unlike Labour, we will not settle for tepid tinkering. As such, we will abstain on the Government's amendment. We believe in Britain's potential and in Britain's future. We believe that our future is brighter, stronger and more prosperous when we work closely with Europe. Today, the Conservatives' motion offers no solutions, only distraction from their disastrous record. Britain deserves leaders who will properly rebuild relationships, deliver genuine prosperity and restore our standing in the world. This is the vision that the Liberal Democrats offer—not Tory and Reform fantasies and not Labour fence-sitting. We believe in practical solutions, clear direction and an

unwavering commitment to Britain's best interests. Let us be honest, many on the Labour Benches agree with what I am saying. They know that this fence-sitting will not cut it, but they are not allowed to say so. Fear not, we will say so.

The Conservatives have nothing to say on Europe. Labour has tied itself up in red lines. The public know that our country's future is European. For businesses and jobs, for our nation's security and our children's futures, it is time to put the divisions of the past behind us and act in the national interest. We will vote against this nonsensical motion, and we stand ready to work constructively with the Government to build a closer, more pragmatic relationship with our European friends and neighbours.

2.59 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Many people may still be finding things a little bit gloomy and challenging as a result of the mess left by the previous Government, as I am after 10 months of being a Member of Parliament, but today I am incredibly heartened. It is probably the happiest day I have spent in the House yet, because we have a real opportunity to be hopeful and positive about the future of this country. The ideology and chaos that have caused so much damage, with the Conservative Government running frit from the Reform party, have now given way to a party that is pragmatic and has proven itself to be competent.

I would love at this stage to congratulate the Government on their tremendous securing of trade deals with India and the USA. I am looking forward to the hat-trick, where we secure a trade deal with the European Union that is even bigger and better than either of those two, and all in the British interest.

What is absolutely clear to me—everybody knows this in the Labour party and it runs through everything the Prime Minister has said—is that this country has to get growth. Over the last 14 years, services have been decimated. Every time the new Government open a cupboard, we find it bare. We have to rebuild our public services, and the swiftest way to get growth in the economy is by having a good trade deal with the European Union. Nothing will guarantee swifter growth for the economy.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What is the hon. Member's analysis of why growth projections have been halved since Labour came in?

Ben Coleman: I find it very hard to take anything that the Conservatives say with any degree of seriousness. What is their explanation for why, after 14 years, public services are on their knees and we have seen a collapse in the economy? We even heard a Conservative Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), say that there has been growth since leaving the European Union "despite Brexit"—even the Conservatives admit that it was a disaster.

Nothing will deliver the growth that this country needs faster than signing a good deal with the European Union, slashing red tape and reducing regulation with the biggest market on our doorstep. Opening up markets, kick-starting growth, boosting exports and investments and reducing prices at home—this prize would be welcomed by anyone who is not a crazy ideologue. We on the Government side are not crazy ideologues or prisoners of our past—or of a television programme from the past. The actions that the Conservatives took while in government have damaged the British people.

Businesses across the country, and in Chelsea and Fulham, want us to get a good deal from the European Union. People in my constituency do not want us to rejoin the EU, and I am not talking about rejoining. They would like us still to be in it, and they think it has done them damage. The importer of wine in my constituency who has to pay £160 for every consignment he now brings in would like us still to be in the EU and to not have to face that. But they do not want us to spend the next five years renegotiating the deal.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Constituents and small and medium-sized businesses are crying out for this Labour Government to come forward and renegotiate a good trade deal so that businesses can thrive. Does he agree that this Government are taking the right pragmatic approach in wanting to deliver growth for our country?

Ben Coleman: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for stressing that point. She is absolutely right; we have a Government who have replaced chaos and ideology with cool-headed, pragmatic determination. We have a trade deal with India and with the US, and we are going to get a good trade deal with the European Union. That is why it is a day for rejoicing, not for doom and gloom and people rehashing the past. Not a single one of the Conservatives, except the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar on the Front Bench, who accepted that despite Brexit the economy grew a little bit—

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Sarcasm!

Ben Coleman: Oh, I didn't realise sarcasm wasn't allowed.

As I was saying, I am very pleased, as many are, with the Government for being cool-headed and having a common-sense approach. We are going to reset our relationship with the European Union and put Britain first. Putting Britain first has to also mean putting our young people first, so I am excited by the opportunity for young people in my constituency and every constituency to take advantage of a time-limited, controlled visa-based youth experience scheme, which we already have with a dozen countries.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that thousands of young people—perhaps not in Chelsea but in most of the country—are NEETs, meaning they are not in education, employment or training, and that number is growing. Why should those young people, who are desperately seeking access to education or jobs, have to compete with large numbers of people from abroad? Is that what the people in Chelsea and Fulham really want for the people who live in the rest of Britain?

Ben Coleman: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman what people in Chelsea and Fulham really want. They do not want a Prime Minister like the last but one—a "bugger business" Prime Minister—who said that we would level up to help people across the country but then did nothing about it. What they want is a Prime Minister who will

[Ben Coleman]

invest in increasing skills and apprenticeships right across the country, as ours said yesterday that he will. That is what we need, and that is what we are getting now.

Stephen Gethins: On that point, because rhetoric is important, does the hon. Member agree with Lord Dubs, who said that what the Prime Minister said yesterday was outrageous, or does he agree with the Alternative für Deutschland leader, who agreed with the Prime Minister?

Ben Coleman: I have to say, when you ask about Lord Dubs—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member said "you", but I did not ask the question.

Ben Coleman: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member touches a soft spot when he mentions Lord Dubs, who is a great friend and a doughty campaigner in my constituency. Lord Dubs will have his views, but I was talking about the Prime Minister setting out an absolute commitment to increase the skills of young people right across the country, and that is in no way undermined by the prospect of a controlled visa-based youth experience scheme.

In such unstable times, it is right that we should seek a closer relationship with the European Union that will strengthen defence and security alongside our commitment to NATO. I am hopeful that the Government will pull off an agreement that, as hon. Friends of mine have said already, will bring new jobs in the defence industries of this country. We are facing the starkest, most serious defence challenge that we have faced for decades, and we have to meet it together with the European Union. Having spoken to many ambassadors here, I know that they welcome Britain playing its full role in defending our shared continent.

That is what we are doing as a Government. That is why it is so disappointing, with all the prospects and excitement ahead of us, to hear the Conservatives and Reform still putting ideology first, ahead of growth and security. They are failing to say what they would do instead and just want to continue with the status quo.

The hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) talked about the chaos that was brought to Kent, where trucks backed up for miles near Dover because the infrastructure for customs checks was never ready, and fresh produce rotted in the queue. That was under the Conservative Government. They jeopardised car manufacturing in Birmingham and the west midlands, which is a region that relies on just-in-time EU supply chains. It was hit with rules of origin checks, rising costs, and delayed parts—thanks to the Conservatives. They sold out Cornwall's poorest communities by moving out of European structural funds that has millions in them, replacing them with a shared prosperity fund worth far less. That was the Conservative Government's failed Brexit.

They weakened Port Talbot and the south Wales steel industry, made exports harder and reduced competitiveness in what was already a challenging global market. They undermined Scottish farmers and distillers by erecting barriers to their largest export market. This is all part of the record that the Conservatives are delighted to defend. I would not be delighted to defend such a record, but they are—so much so that they have brought forward this ridiculous motion today.

I am delighted by the amendment that the Government have tabled. The contrast between our pragmatic, cool-headed approach and these ideologues could not be starker. It is refreshing.

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Member has criticised the Opposition for the motion but, to give them their due, at least they have turned up. They delivered Brexit, but none of its architects, who would usually be sitting on the Benches behind me, have shown up. Does that not show the contempt in which those Members hold us, and voters as well?

Ben Coleman: I agree with the hon. Member. If the Reform party's entire shtick for getting elected is being anti-EU and thinking that it can defend the interests of the British people better by continuing the chaotic, unfavourable system we have, with that being its entire reason for existence, it is not okay for one of its Members of Parliament to ask a couple of questions and skedaddle. As for the hon. Member for Clacton—and for Florida—I do not know what he is doing today, but he ought to be here.

We should be cheered—it is refreshing—so let us be a little more optimistic as we look to next week and not say, "We're always going to be out-diddled by French and Germans." That counsel of despair is pathetic. We are perfectly capable of negotiating trade deals, as we have shown with deals with the US and India, to get the best for the British people, and that is what we will do with the European Union. That is what the people of this country voted for at the last election: an end to failed ideology, and the start of applied, cool-headed, determined common sense. As a result, at the end of the meeting next week and in future years, the British people will benefit. We should all be delighted about that.

3.10 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) and his flowery optimism for the future of this country, with it somehow being a terribly good thing that we are realigning ourselves with the European Union without actually rejoining it. It makes me wonder about all the debates I have attended over 33 years in the House about our relationship with what used to be called the common market, then the European Communities and now the European Union.

This debate has a ring of familiarity about it, because there are two sides in the House that tend to completely misunderstand each other—only, I think that Conservative Members now understand the truth, because that came out in the referendum. The referendum demonstrated that the House of Commons was completely out of alignment with the population on the question of our membership of the European Union. The whole Brexit story was about a battle within the House as to whether the pro-EU majority would assert itself and somehow negate the referendum, or whether the referendum would be respected. That is why my right hon. Friend the

Leader of the Opposition and her shadow Cabinet colleagues are right to put at the front of the motion the importance of honouring the referendum result.

The fact is that a referendum result represents a superior mandate to a single term of election for an elected Government, because that referendum takes place on a single issue. I do not think anyone would pretend that the European Union was the main issue at the last general election, so anyone in the Government or indeed in the Liberal Democrats trying to use the general election result as a mandate to circumvent the result of the 2016 referendum is playing a dangerous political game.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Of course, that argument was used in reverse on those of us who had had concerns about Europe for 40 years as we were told—exactly to my hon. Friend's point—that a referendum was superior to continuous elections. We made a decision after the last referendum; that was a generational move. We have hardly had a generation in the few years since the referendum.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The important point is that we do not have a written constitution, but we do have in our minds a hierarchy of legitimacy on which, in the end, the democratic credibility of the House depends. The fact is, a referendum represents a superior mandate on a single issue and, with a great struggle, the pro-EU majority eventually aligned itself with the decision that the British people had taken on our membership of the European Union.

Sir John Hayes: Since we are straying into political ideas and philosophy, is not the point that the democratic legitimacy we enjoy in this place is on the basis of popular consent, and there is no more direct expression of popular consent than a referendum, which is why its result has to be honoured?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I agree with my right hon. Friend, and that is why it was an extremely ominous portent that the Minister at the Dispatch Box refused to answer him on the question of whether there would be alignment or subjection to the European Court of Justice. If the referendum was about one thing, it was about taking back control of our laws. In fact, many of us in the leave campaign at the time argued that the British people do understand sovereignty—they certainly did by the end of the referendum—and getting into permanent alignment of regulation or subjecting the meaning of laws applied in the United Kingdom to the scrutiny and jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice is giving back control. It is a dangerous thing for a Government elected on the principle of honouring the referendum result, and one who are now playing dog-whistle politics with immigration, to be backsliding in secret, with a sleight of hand, into allowing jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and permanent alignment back into our law while pretending that is not happening. That is exactly what the Minister did at the Dispatch Box.

Mr Francois *rose—*

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I will give way to my right hon. Friend, but I have another point that I wish to make.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend will well remember that during the referendum a booklet was circulated to every household in the United Kingdom, which famously said:

> "This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide."

The people decided to leave, and some in this place spent three years trying to frustrate their decision. In that context, is he concerned that today the Minister blatantly refused three times to answer a straight question about whether the Government would concede dynamic alignment at the summit? Is that not the sort of duplicitous behaviour that made the public so angry in the first place?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I agree. But there is another dangerous game being played by another political party: the Liberal Democrats. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pressed the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), who wants to rejoin the European Union, on whether there would be another referendum, and he did not say that there would be. That we would have a referendum to leave the European Union but not require a new referendum to rejoin it would be incendiary politics for this country.

Why have people become disillusioned with their politicians? It is because politicians seem to agree to one proposition and then do something completely different from what was voted for. I hope we can all agree on one proposition: that there could be no possibility of a proposal to rejoin the European Union or to accept dynamic alignment or the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice—except over its current limited areas, which will eventually expire—without a further referendum. That is a serious matter.

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member talks about people losing their trust in politics. Does he agree that the promise of £350 million a week to go to the NHS, which was broadcast on the side of a big red bus during the referendum, might have somewhat reduced trust in his party?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am happy to point out that after the referendum and since we left the European Union, we are spending way more than £350 million a week more on the NHS than we were, and our contributions to the European Union have fallen dramatically—in fact, much faster than was expected under the withdrawal agreement. So the benefit that was on the side of the bus has turned out to be correct, although I believe it was a statistical sleight of hand to use that particular number; I disowned it at the time. But have no doubt that if we are to get drawn back into the European Union, we will have to start raiding the NHS to make payments to the European Union again. I do not think that is what the British people voted for.

That brings me back to this great defence fund, which I think will be borrowed. Will we have to borrow some of that fund as well? No, it was going to be borrowed through some European Central Bank mechanism. Will it instead be taxed? In any case, it is all Government borrowing, so will we add to Government borrowing by participating in the borrowing or funding of that fund, or would it not be better if we just remained aloof from it to concentrate on spending money on our own defence? That is the point that has already been made: the money

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

that we have committed to defence over the years, in the period since the second world war and, indeed, since the end of the cold war, is far greater than that of the vast majority of EU countries. We also mandate our nuclear deterrent to the protection of the whole of Europe. We play our part in the defence of Europe. As for the idea that we can deploy troops more quickly through free movement of people, what planet are the Liberal Democrats on? It is utterly ludicrous.

I come back to the point about the defence fund. There have been such funds in Europe before, but I can assure Members that the game that every country plays is the one where what they put in, they get out. The French are past masters at that. They will participate in a multilateral programme, but if they do not get the lion's share, they pull out. They pulled out of the Eurofighter programme when that was meant to be part of their deal because they were not getting enough work out of it. Therefore, the idea that it is a freebie for British defence companies to participate in the fund and get extra money into the British defence industries will simply not happen.

In any case, this fund is not about creating warfighting capability this year or next year, which is what we need; it is about the very long-term, big programmes that the defence industries want. That will not rescue us from America's absence from NATO, if that were to occur for more than a few months or a few years under Donald Trump. Let us also remember that Donald Trump will not be there forever; he has 45 more months to go. Let us not do more damage to NATO by making it look to the other side of the Atlantic that we will take care of our own defence in Europe from now on. That is very dangerous.

I remember Madeleine Albright, a Democrat Secretary of State, railing against what was then called the European security and defence policy. She warned that it represented the "Three Ds": the duplication of NATO assets, which was wasteful and unnecessary; the discrimination against non-EU members of NATO such as Norway, Turkey, Canada and the United States; and the decoupling of American and European defence policy. Is that what we want? Is that what this House wants? Is that what the Labour party wants? No. The Labour party says that NATO is the cornerstone of our defence and rightly so, but what signal is it sending to President Trump?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I ask that he wait just a minute.

What signal is it sending to Donald Trump by suggesting that we will have an EU defence policy that excludes the United States? It is exactly the wrong signal for this moment.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am pleased that my hon. Friend raises that point, which I want to elaborate further. The real point is that J. D. Vance, the vice president, came over to Munich and ripped a hole through the Europeans, including ourselves, for not having spent enough, although we were one of the top spenders. Since then, the Americans have gone on and on about that, but each time we get the sense that they are keener to decouple. Does what we are about to do not give strength to the argument that we do not need them any longer and therefore they need to look somewhere else? That is the danger, because NATO was not just about defence of the west; it was about making sure that the US never goes into isolationism again.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Yes. That promise of creating an EU defence capability has been on the table since the St Malo declaration of 1999, in the aftermath of the Maastricht treaty that first introduced the word "defence" into the EU. That was when France and the United Kingdom, under a Labour Government, declared that the EU would have autonomous military capability, with separable but not separate military forces from NATO.

We still have the absurdity in which the armed forces of the EU countries are allocated to NATO tasks but, at the same time, are ready for EU tasks. There had to be a complicated de-confliction arrangement to try to ensure that an EU defence mission does not conflict with a NATO defence mission. We finished up with something called the Berlin-plus arrangements, which Turkey has never accepted because it is not a member of the EU but is a member of NATO.

There has always been an impasse between NATO and the EU on those two questions, and it is all completely unnecessary because NATO has a military headquarters, it has a political committee and it is an international organisation. Indeed, it is the most successful military alliance in the world. Why is the EU trying to duplicate it just for itself? The EU is more interested in statecraft and state-building than defending our own continent. The anger with which Ursula von der Leyen and Friedrich Merz have attacked Trump reflects a latent anti-Americanism that has always been there and which we could do without at this moment.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a profound argument. He highlights the EU, which sees itself as a supranational body, and NATO, which, by nature, is anything but that, in that it is a confederation of sovereign nations. That tension lies at the heart of the EU's ill-concealed and now evident disdain for NATO. I do not know whether the Government are careless or unknowing of that. They are either complicit or ignorant; I wonder which one my hon. Friend thinks it is.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Sadly, European Union defence has always promised far more than it delivers. It was meant to galvanise all the European states into spending more money; it failed and just did not do that. When any serious military operation was required, it was NATO. To the EU's credit, some EU military operations are taking place, but they are on a very limited scale. The British and the Americans need to reinforce the Balkans now, because the Europeans are not committing enough on their own and are incapable of doing so.

Even if, this time, there were rapid growth in EU military capability to address the crisis that we face, it would take decades to replicate what the Americans currently provide, such as tactical nuclear weapons and air cover. Why does the EU need to have its own air defence policy when that is exactly what NATO does? It does European air defence. We need to bolster NATO. It is encouraging that force planning for a possible peacekeeping force in Ukraine is all being done at

NATO and not in the EU crisis management centre or at EU military headquarters. Only NATO has the capability to plan large-scale military activity.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD) *indicated dissent.*

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. What does he know about it? I would be interested in him challenging me.

Luke Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman not see the fragility of a European defence that is dependent on key items of American hardware, which he correctly identifies that we do not have, and which it will take decades for us to replicate, operate, integrate with our systems and train people on? Does he not see the fragility of our defence if President Trump or another incoming US leader says, "Actually, you're on your own. We don't care about the defence of Ukraine"?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. While I am in the Chair, interventions will be shorter than that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has made that point, but the best thing for all European nations is not to try to build our own EU defence capability, but to strengthen NATO. There is an argument that we are somehow doing this through the EU so that it can strengthen NATO, but I do not think that is really the ambition of the bureaucrats in Brussels. They have a flag and a Parliament, and they want an army—a Euro army. That is what people periodically talk about, particularly the Germans and the French. They want a Euro army, but that would send the wrong signal to President Trump. Yes, we need to develop those capabilities, but let us develop them through NATO.

Jim Allister: Is not the hon. Member's point put beyond all doubt by the wording of article 42 of the treaty of the EU, which expressly says that the purpose of co-operation is to arrive at common defence? Is it not therefore perfectly clear that the EU is setting itself up to have its own sovereign defence capability?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Yes, and when we look at the European Defence Agency and all the mechanisms that have been created, we can see that the European Defence Agency is an embryo European Ministry of Defence. That is what is intended.

Let us just suppose that, in the ideal world that Labour and the Liberal Democrats live in, this defence capability comes about. The fundamental problem is that the European Union was never originally conceived as a defence and foreign policy organisation. There are many countries in it with very different—*[Interruption.]* No, it was functionalism that drove the foundation of the European Communities. It was about trade and creating a single market. Defence was never in the minds of the early founders of the European Union, and it is very ill suited to the task of getting defence capability, because the institutions were not designed for that purpose. It is not in the culture of those institutions. To rely on them for our defence and security is extremely unwise. On the other hand, NATO is already very well suited to the task and does not need to be duplicated.

To put it mildly, given the political disunity in the European Union, particularly towards Trump—okay, that afflicts NATO as well—this is not an instant solution to the political problems in NATO, if those are what the European Union is seeking to resolve. We should dispense with the idea that making a defence pact with the European Union is somehow the great panacea for all the problems we face on our continent because of President Putin. On the contrary, I think it is likely to make things worse—more complicated and more bureaucratic—and it would probably make our defence industries less competitive, because they would be cocooned inside this fund, instead of competing on the on the global stage with the Americans. Incidentally, our defence procurement co-operation with the Americans remains essential. They have the lion's share of the technology; they are way ahead of the European Union when it comes to technology.

So, why are the Government doing this? I think they have always been religiously committed to the idea of EU defence—they introduced it in the first place, in the St Malo declaration—but why are they so devoted to doing this now? Of course, it is what the European Union really wants. We are the supplicant in these negotiations. We are asking the EU for concessions, and the one thing that would really make it feel good is drawing the United Kingdom into the defence arena of the European Union.

Meanwhile, what concessions are we getting from the EU? I do not see any. It will be interesting to find out. It will not instantly reduce all trade barriers, because we are not in the single market and will not be in the single market. It will still apply all the checks, including the antiquated wet stamps that are applied to forms certifying the fitness of shellfish. Wet stamps are so last century, but the EU is still using them on customs forms. That is how backward it is. There are electronic frontiers between African countries where there are no barriers. Incidentally, that is the answer to the Northern Ireland problem.

I fully support the Opposition's proposals, which are to question everything that the EU will demand of us and which the Government might pursue, and to reserve our ability to tear up those agreements if they are not in the national interest. The Government do not have a monopoly on the national interest. "National interest" is a subjective term—the national interest might be different in the mind of one person and in the mind of another. As far as I am concerned, we left the European Union in the national interest, because we wanted to remain a sovereign democracy, in charge of our own laws, and to be like most other countries that are not in the European Union; they get on fine. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) pointed out, the economy is still growing, or was growing until the Government hit it with their Budget. We have every opportunity at our feet.

One of the reasons we left the European Union—sorry to relitigate all these arguments—and left that slow-growth, high-unemployment, high-regulation, high-tax trade bloc was so that we could make deals with the high-growth, low-regulation, high-employment parts of the world, which in the end will provide us with far more business than we get from the EU. Actually, the vast majority of

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our trade, particularly our services trade, is outside the EU—people forget that. By being obsessed with trade with the EU, we drive our economy into a straitjacket; we are well out of that.

The Government should take away from this debate a warning. They know that they are being attacked by Reform. Those voters would probably never vote Conservative, or are less likely to vote Conservative than Labour, but they are going to Reform because they can sense the backsliding going on in this Government. If there were ever to be another referendum, I would hazard a guess that the vote would be against rejoining the European Union, so there can be no rejoining by stealth, which seems to be the Government's policy. We will stand by the British people, and will dishonour any agreement that the Government make with the European Union that is not in our interests.

Indeed, there are parts of the withdrawal agreement that we may need to revisit—for example, in the Northern Ireland protocol. The technology has moved on, and we can move to an electronic frontier across the north-south border, without the need for checks on trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. One of the founding principles of the Act of Union was that there should be frontier-free trade within the United Kingdom as a whole. If the continuing development of the Northern Ireland protocol continues to impose those checks, those checks are not in the national interest, and we should reserve the right to jettison the protocol and replace it with something better.

3.37 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak, and I commend the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on staying on his feet for nearly half an hour—quite an impressive feat. It is an honour to follow him; he was elected 33 years ago, when I was nine. I imagine that he has seen a lot of history over the past 33 years, and over the past nearly 10 years since the referendum.

If we think about the main features of that history, it is indisputable that we live in a new world. We have the illegal invasion of Ukraine; Taiwan is acting as a test point; NATO and the UN are at risk; and there is rising authoritarian populism, which risks democratic backsliding, be that through the undermining of institutions, power being concentrated in the Executive, the dismissal of checks and balances, growing electoral interference, or big tech captains involving themselves in democratic politics like never before. We see economic inequality on an unprecedented scale. That creates a risk of democratic instability, here and around the world. There is also the risk of wealth concentration, unaddressed tax haven networks, rising social inequality, and people feeling left out. Issues of development, aid and debt relief are gone from our political discussions.

The rise of technology risks creating democratic threats. Artificial intelligence and social media create the potential for deepfakes, automated disinformation, cyber-attacks and the development of lethal systems with no human oversight. There are health challenges, such as the global pandemic that we have been through. Climate change continues unabated and remains unaddressed at the scale needed, creating the possibility of resource conflicts, climate refugee flows and stresses on nature and wildlife. If that has not convinced the House that I am a fun time down the pub, I do not know what will.

I say all that because those are the major threats that have emerged in the past 10 years—and that is not an exhaustive list. If I carried on, Members would want me to sit down faster. We have to face reality. All of us in this place were elected to behave like grown-ups—to face the facts, debate on the basis of reality, and come up with common-sense solutions. Given that we face those threats—I have not even mentioned the lion's share of threats in the UK, which I would say we inherited from the previous Government—it is no wonder that people outside the walls of Westminster feel that we go too slow and do not focus on the things that they care about. It is no wonder that people are succumbing to hopelessness, and feel that politics is not meeting their needs.

A question was asked earlier about what was on the ballot paper. I accept that the European Union was not on the ballot paper as an existential question. However, what was on the ballot paper was quality of life in our country, the state of our economy, and the possibility that generations will be locked out of the democratic agreement and social contract on a fair chance at life. We Labour Members are saying that trade is a solution to some of those challenges.

As I was saying, people outside the walls of this Palace feel frustrated by the slowness of our debates.

Sir John Hayes *rose—*

Tom Hayes: I will come to you shortly.

We must recognise the importance of urgency. That is why I am genuinely extremely pleased that we have a Government who have moved forward in recent days and weeks with two significant trade deals. The first, with India, was achieved in 10 months, after the Conservatives had spent eight years saying that they would get a deal. We rolled up our sleeves and got a deal that will put more money into people's pockets, create jobs here, and benefit our economy. The trade deal with the United States is not what we would have got had Kamala Harris been elected President; it is the deal we could get with Donald Trump as President, and I think that it shows realistic, common-sense negotiation.

Dr Mullan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Tom Hayes: I will come to you.

That deal will put money in people's pockets, grow our economy and create jobs. Now, we have the prospect of a third trade deal, with the European Union, on the horizon. It would be a really important deal. That is crucial, because if we do not foster the conditions for trade in a world of global insecurity, we will create further problems in our democracy and around the world.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Tom Hayes: I think Sir John wanted to intervene.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member has said "you" twice, and now says "Sir John". It is a very long-established convention that Members do not refer to right hon. and hon. colleagues by name.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to my namesake for giving way. He is making an interesting speech. He is right that global power and its growth is making people feel that they cannot affect decision making; that is a profound point, but we need to root power closer to people, not detach it from them, as happens when power is given over to foreign potentates, whether in the EU or any other part of the world.

Tom Hayes: I agree with the right hon. Member. With the UK a sovereign, independent trading nation, we in this place are able to shape the debate and conditions of trade. We have the prospect of an EU trade deal before us, and we must grasp it. If we do not, we will see our country fall further behind. There are areas of possibility for that trade deal. For example, there is a need for the transfer and exchange of clean energy between the UK and France and the European Union on a larger scale. I had the privilege of visiting Gosport recently to see IFA2—Interconnexion France-Angleterre 2—where the subsea interconnector is exchanging clean energy between the UK and France, ensuring that we can keep the lights on not only here but in France and across the European Union. Surely energy security is an important feature of our democracy, in an age where we are threatened by Putin and other dictators.

Luke Taylor: The hon. Member talks about us being a sovereign nation and being able to choose our trade deals. I assume we will get a vote in this place on the shape of a future trade deal with the United States, so that we are able to examine it, vote and exercise our parliamentary sovereignty.

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for listening to some of what I said. I said that we in this place have the right to speak in debates such as this, to shape the conditions of trade. Clearly, with the Minister on the Front Bench listening acutely to everything that Members are saying, that message is being carried into Government —the Minister is nodding profusely—in which case, we will have that democratic accountability.

I turn to the other areas of potential EU-UK relationship improvement. Defence is obviously a core part of that. NATO is the cornerstone of our collective security, but a strong UK must sit alongside strong European countries. The UK is raising its defence spending to an unprecedented level and making efforts to grow our defence industrial base. We need to do that not only for our own security and the security of democracies, but to set an example to European countries about raising their own defence spending, while working with them to grow our collaboration.

On the question of trade, all of us in this House, whichever party we represent, will have had small businesses come to our surgeries and tell us about the red tape they encounter as a result of the Brexit deal. If they voted for Brexit, they did not vote for that Brexit deal; they voted for something very different. I think we can all recognise that, and if we do not, we are not listening to our constituents when they come to our surgeries and tell us their truth very clearly.

By reducing red tape, we can help to grow the number of jobs in our economy, open up our borders to more trade and smooth our exports, which is critical if we are going to achieve the Government's No. 1 goal of growing our economy. Without growth in our economy, we will not raise living standards, we will not be a country at ease with itself, we will not again be confident on the world stage, and we will not be a leading democratic voice in a world of strengthening democracies.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that rejoining a customs union would achieve all those aims of reducing red tape?

Tom Hayes: I do not agree. I am talking about a very different proposal that is meeting the needs of our constituents. In the interests of allowing more Members to speak in the debate, I will take no more interventions.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Hayes: After 30 minutes of speaking, the hon. Member has probably said everything he needed to say, and if he did not, we have a serious problem in this House.

On the question of expanding opportunities in the UK-EU relationship, I am particularly struck by the need for a capped, controlled, balanced youth mobility scheme. Around our country, including in my constituency of Bournemouth East, young people are suffering generational challenges that their predecessors did not face, be it their inability to buy a home at an affordable price, find secure work or get the education they want, or the fact that they have gone through a cost of living crisis and a pandemic. Surely we owe it to our younger generation to provide them with some of the conditions that will allow for a better life. A capped, balanced, controlled youth mobility scheme is key to that.

Such a scheme will not just be beneficial for the youth of the UK. I have in my constituency a significant number of English language schools. I had the privilege of visiting Beet Language Centre in my constituency last Friday for a roundtable that it hosted, and we were joined by other important language schools. They talked to me about the difficult financial circumstances they are all in and the difficulty of keeping the doors open because of the damaging Brexit deal that was negotiated. With a youth mobility scheme, we can put money back into our English language sector, which is critical.

We are living in an insecure world. Britain's soft power is critical to ensuring that we are respected around the world. By bringing people to the UK—and particularly to sunny Bournemouth—for one to two weeks, or four to six weeks, they get a sense of how wonderful, open and accepting we are as a country. They can then take that back to their families and their home countries, and they can grow an affection for this country, come back repeatedly, spend money here and grow our tourism sector. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole has the highest concentration of English language schools of any borough or local authority in the UK; they contribute £400 million to the BCP economy. Indeed, English language schools contribute £44 billion nationally. Imagine how much better we could be if we had a youth mobility scheme and support for our English language schools.

I will soon conclude my speech so more Members can speak, but before sitting down I want to talk about not just the importance of the UK-EU reset as a way of delivering trade in its own right between the UK and

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the EU, but the benefits of trade. In an increasingly protectionist world, we need to be talking up the benefits of trade. Trade brings people into closer, and more harmonious and profitable relations, with one another. It brings down the walls and the barriers between nations. It makes war less likely because it binds people in peace. It does not just put money into people's pockets or create jobs in our communities; it grows our economies faster and it raises living standards.

We know that trade has its challenges, but—done well—trade deals can help to make sure our countries prosper. At its heart, the EU-UK reset should be about trade, our economy and our businesses. It should not be a question of identity, culture wars and scaremongering. It should be about grown-ups gathering in this Chamber and talking about what is important to our constituents on the basis of the facts, rather than rehashing old, tired debates and scaremongering. We need to face the future, and I am pleased that finally we have a Government who are doing so.

3.51 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and to be reminded of how old he was when I first came here; I hope he stays here as long as well, or maybe I do not hope for that as it might mean we Conservative Members will be on the Opposition Benches forever.

Today's debate is on an important topic and there have been some very good contributions already, but I want to get to the bottom of what the Government really want out of this negotiation, because they have been a little bit tepid in coming forward on the key issues. I welcome the Government's negotiations in India—finishing off a trade arrangement deal or whatever it is with the Indian Government. I welcome too that they have been able to begin to negotiate with the United States, although they have not secured a full trade deal. By the way, they would not have got a trade deal if the Democrats had got back into office because they rejected it for four years. In fact, President Biden said that there would be no trade deal with the UK. Let us not just observe that because the Democrats are not Trump, somehow they were going to give us a trade deal. I have my problems with the current President, but President Biden absolutely did not want trade with us; it was as simple as that. That was a mistake on his part. He had a real opportunity, because the trade deal was pretty much all done—and then it was binned.

There is also the question of the reason we are able to do these trade deals with the rest of the world, to which we export more than the European Union. We should do more of those trade deals. The Conservative Government did 73 after Brexit, although some of them were mopping up the ones that we had before. I stand ready to congratulate the Labour Government if they use the freedom Brexit gives them to get more trade arrangements, because that is what we are here for. I might want to press them further and say they could get a lot more out of the US, but that is another debate all together.

I do not disagree with the idea that the deal we did with the European Union is capable of being improved. Of course it is, because the EU put up many barriers in the course of that negotiation; it weaponised Northern Ireland distinctly, and that was a grave error on its part. It risked some of the process of peace in Northern Ireland by making it a critical negotiating tool that could be used as leverage later in the rest of the negotiations, and as a result we have been left with a problem in Northern Ireland. I encourage the Government to have a very good look at that. I did not vote for the Windsor agreement because I thought it did not solve the problem by a long chalk, and it has left Northern Ireland in the same position as before, with a couple of small modifications.

This debate is really about getting into the issue. I say to the Minister that the European Union did not play straight about phytosanitary from day one in the negotiations, and it still does not play straight. The fact is that our standards in animal welfare and product health are, and always have been, above those of the European Union. The European Union knows that. The reality is that somehow it decided that there had to be all these phytosanitary checks and changes, and it is desperately keen to get dynamic alignment now, because that means that there will be a rules-based order coming from the EU. That is what it has always wanted to do.

The truth is that the European Union does not have that arrangement with other countries around the world. For example, it is quite happy to have New Zealand vets check their products before departure. Those products go in through Rotterdam without any checks, other than checks that they came from the area specified. The EU knows which vets it authorises, so it does that. It could have done that here in the UK.

I sat down with Monsieur Barnier and a group of people to have a long discussion when the negotiations broke down as a result of what was going on here in Parliament, and I very much remember that we talked about trusting each other's regulations and working with that trust to get an arrangement that made it as easy as possible to get goods across the border. He accepted that then, saying that, provided we could trust each other's veterinary authorities, we would not need to have the phytosanitary rules as proposed at the moment. It was only later, when my party in government came back and did a terrible shimmy with him, that he thought he had it all, so he took it. The reality is that the EU knew all along, from the word go, that it was easier to put in place these arrangements than it made out.

I have always found the phytosanitary objection peculiar, because it could be sorted out very quickly. Our standards are higher than the EU's, and our vets are quite capable of checking different producers to see whether they fit European standards. That is all it is: are they up to European standards, and are European standards up to ours when the EU exports to us? It is very simple. That can be done in every trade deal, and the EU already does it with other countries that are not, and have never been, part of that Union. There is an idea that to get this issue sorted, we would have to go into dynamic alignment and accept the EU's rules over our products, but it would make it more difficult to make future trade arrangements if we were rule-takers from the European Union and could not negotiate these areas ourselves. That brings me back to my previous point.

Before I return to that issue, I want to raise another point. The trouble is that the argument I heard made—that a phytosanitary agreement involving dynamic alignment

would address the price of food—is patently absurd. If SPS checks concerned the price of food, we could unilaterally relax them. They do not have to be where they are: that is our decision to take. It would not change or lower the price of food. If anything, it would be more likely to block us from doing a number of things, such as gene editing in food and work that we want to do that the European Union does not want to do. All these things put at risk where we may be in future trade arrangements and the direction in which we may want to develop farming here.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I want to make a couple of points on this issue before I give way.

We know, and everybody else around the world outside the EU knows, that the EU puts up very hidden tariff barriers. America is right about that; it complained that Europe finds all sorts of little regulations and problems, so that it cannot break in with its products and goods. That has happened for a long time, and it has happened with us—we know that it was even happening when we were in the EU. We are by nature a free-trading country, and there is no way on earth that we think the EU as a construct is as free trading in that sense. It wants to protect its markets more than anything else, rather than open up to the rest of the world.

David Chadwick: Welsh food and drink exports have fallen by 18% since 2018. Does that not evidence the damage that has been done to Wales by these deals?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: If damage has been done to exporting to the European Union, as I said earlier, that is about the attitude of the European Union to protectionism in the EU. Its trade with us has not fallen away on that basis, because we did not set up those barriers in the first place, so my argument to the hon. Gentleman is very simple: the European Union wants it all. That is the reality of what we are dealing with. It wants it all, and it negotiated in bad faith from the word go. We have an agreement, which is a pretty good agreement as trade agreements go. It is one of the largest trade agreements that we have. It can always be improved—I do not disagree with that—but the reality is that we need to deal with an organisation that is as relaxed about being fair to us as we are about being fair to it. That has been our biggest problem from the word go.

Returning to phytosanitary issues, I have had debates and discussions with the Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), in the past, and we have agreed with each other many times. I laud him for his stance on Russia and everything else—there is no question about that—but I want to quote from a little document that I came across from the Centre for European Reform. By the way, it is very complimentary to say that I read things that I do not agree with. I tend to do that quite a lot, strangely—it is a bad habit of mine, I know. That document is very close to how the European Union's heads of department all think, and it says:

"Labour's red lines do not extend to ruling out dynamic alignment or a role for the ECJ in dispute settlement."

As such, I ask the Minister this simple question: is the Centre for European Reform correct? Do the Government's red lines rule out dynamic alignment, or do they not? I will give way to the Minister right now, because I am generous like that, and he probably wants to answer that question. I tempt him to come to the Dispatch Box and say whether the Government's red lines rule out dynamic alignment. Could they, and will they, agree to dynamic alignment and ECJ rules? I will give way to him now, because I see that he is beginning to move.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty) *indicated dissent.*

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: He is not—what a pity.

Tom Hayes: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he has a little while to go before he stands at the Dispatch Box. I am after the Minister, not him, but we will get to that in due course. The reality is that the Government could agree to dynamic alignment—there was no denial of that. Essentially, the Government are going into this negotiation knowing full well that they are so desperate on phytosanitary matters that they will give way on dynamic alignment. That is exactly what the EU wants.

My real worry in all of this, however, is that we know what is going on—I will just move on to another topic, and then I will sit down and give other Members a chance to speak. Most of all, I am worried about bad faith. When we talked about improvements—which, to be fair to the Government, they did with the European Union—what did France do almost immediately? The Prime Minister is showing some leadership over Ukraine, trying to galvanise the other nations, which is his role. His role is to haul America and keep it with us, and he has been doing that. I do not have any criticism of that, but when the Prime Minister got involved, saying that Europe should form a coalition of the willing and that he wanted to drive that further forward and get some kind of agreement on it, what did France immediately say? "Not before you give us access to fishing." That was it. In no world does fishing have anything to do with defence, yet France weaponised fishing to block off the UK, which had taken the—I think—generous position of saying that it wanted to galvanise Europe to do more.

The problem here is that if we take out the countries that joined since the Ukraine war, Europe across the board spends half of what the United States does on defence in dollar terms. We have more people and more industry in Europe, yet we spend half of what America does on weaponry and defence. That is a shocking position for a member of NATO to be in. We have not stood up. We have done better—still not good enough—but what the rest of Europe has done has been shocking. By the way, the country that just told us that we will not get any discussions unless fishing is on the agenda has been one of the worst spenders on defence in the European Union, let alone in global terms.

Mr Francois: Less than us.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Way less than us, and less than most of the others—it is at the bottom of the scale. I simply say to the Government that the Prime Minister is right to press on defence, to get the European nations

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to step up, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said earlier, we have a mechanism for that. The Prime Minister is right to do it through NATO, and we must not allow Europe to slide away from NATO as its means of defence.

I watched, as did many of its leaders, when Vice-President Vance lectured the European Union in Munich. What he said shocked the European leaders, as it was meant to—he laid into Europe quite vindictively—but fair enough. However, where we are now heading, towards somehow encouraging those countries peculiarly to form some kind of European Union defence organisation, is exactly what will give the American Administration permission to say, "Well, you can do this yourself." We are already halfway there, by the way, because we are forming a coalition of the willing but America is not willing, and we are at odds with it over its relationship with Ukraine. We agreed about the ceasefire, but America has now changed its position and will now be holding negotiations before a ceasefire. I think that that is wrong, by the way. Although I am personally a big supporter of America, I think it is mistaken on that particular point and the Government are right.

My point is that we are putting the whole of NATO at risk for a phytosanitary and fishing deal. In what world does anyone do that? What are we doing it for? The answer, it seems to me, is that we are too desperate to curry favour with an organisation that, when push comes to shove and when it comes to defence, needs us more than we need it. It needs the UK to be locked into this because we are the key to so much of what it needs to do with defence. I say to the Government, "You have much stronger tools in your hand than you may think." We have key persuasive powers on defence, and we should not sell them on the basis that they should become European and we should destroy NATO, or damage NATO, simply because we want to make some kind of adjustment or improvement which includes dynamic alignment and the loss of the possibility of future trade negotiation.

4.6 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): Unlike many Opposition Members, my constituents have little appetite for a relitigation of the Brexit debates of 2016. Back at the time of referendum, 66% of them voted to leave the European Union; there is scant desire for us to rejoin, and even less desire for a return to embracing freedom of movement. I will always put my constituents first, and these are red lines that I understand, honour and respect.

However, my constituents also see the changing world around us, and recognise that the world has been transformed immeasurably since 2016. The terms on which we left the European Union do not match the global moment that we face today. President Trump's tariffs have rocked the international economic order. War has broken out in Europe, and there is a need for dramatically increased defence spending and new methods of working with international colleagues. A new wave of mass migration from the middle east and Africa, and the small boats crisis in our channel, can only be properly handled through further co-operation with our international partners.

Basically, my constituents are patriotic. They want their country to be resilient to new threats, and prosperous in a chaotic world. While any future with the European Union must respect critical red lines on controlling borders and protecting ultimate sovereignty in Westminster, there is now scope for a new thread, a new relationship, to embolden our security and economic interests in a volatile world. This new approach can, should and will, I believe, overcome the increasingly desperate, archaic, old-fashioned attacks from some Opposition Members about the so-called Brexit betrayal, and the British public know that.

Polling by the Good Growth Foundation shows that 73% of the public support significant co-operation with the EU on trade and the economy, defence and security. More than twice as many adults say that the EU is the UK's most trustworthy ally, rather than the United States under its current President, and about 60% of the public say that it is imperative for us to have a closer relationship with the European Union in the future. A new, better deal with the European Union is popular because few think that the current relationship is working. Many, while supporting the principle of Brexit and having voted in favour of it in 2016, feel that its execution during the chaotic Conservative premierships has been disastrous.

The public's desire for change is a reality that the Conservative party cannot seem to wake up to. Although I fundamentally disagree with its principles, it has been a great party. At their best, the Conservatives have been successful in modernising the country in line with global trends. They brought us into Europe, and played a pivotal role in building the single market that so many Europeans enjoy today. Given their track record, it is sad to see that they seem to oppose the notion of negotiating a new and better relationship with Europe. The party of Churchill and Thatcher, who once led on the world stage, is now left to carp from the sidelines, like talk radio commentators from a bygone era. The Leader of the Opposition is busy denouncing every post-Brexit deal that this Labour Government sign as inadequate or a betrayal, including those that she failed to get over the line when she was Trade Secretary.

On this issue, as with so many of the Conservatives' current fixations, the public have simply left them behind. The Conservatives are fighting yesterday's battles. Although the themes that won such support in the referendum cannot be ignored, change is required. Any entanglement of political structures, and any notion of increased immigration or a lack of control, will rightly be met with outrage by those who supported Brexit, but the benefits of a closer deal are now clear.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his tribute to the Conservative party; it has indeed been a great party and remains so. On entanglement, he makes a valid point about co-operation and collaboration, but that has always been the case. Of course we must work with other countries, but the core issue here is authority. Entanglement means granting authority to a power outside this country. Surely this movement of young people, which is a dressed-up form of free movement, is just that.

Jake Richards: I reject the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the policy. I will come on to that specific policy in a moment, but his characterisation is

unfair. I am not in the habit of giving advice to the Conservatives, but my understanding is that at the last general election, the party finished fifth among voters under the age of 35. Looking in the mirror and thinking about how they have ended up in that position might be a worthwhile way to spend some time.

The benefits of a closer deal are now clear: a unified carbon and electricity market could raise billions of pounds in revenue for the Treasury, and more collaboration on defence would ease pressures, enhance capability, and support joint procurement and R&D in key areas. There is also scope—this goes to the right hon. Gentleman's point—for a capped UK-EU youth mobility scheme to be part of the deal, but it has to be negotiated and the devil will be in the detail. There should be tight limits on the numbers, access to services and duration of stay, and it should be part of an agreement whereby the EU helps the UK with many of the challenges that we face with immigration. This is part of a relationship that does not stop at one moment or at one deal; it is an ongoing relationship. This Government are open, negotiating, listening and getting the best deal for Britain, and it is one that I support.

As so often is the case, the political class is lagging behind public opinion and fighting the last battle. The Brexit paradigm that certainly defined British politics between 2016 and 2020 is history, and the Government are right to look to the future and pursue a better and deeper relationship with our European partners in order to improve living standards, offer economic protection and ensure our country's security. I am pleased that this Government appear willing to seize the moment, and I look forward to supporting their efforts in that endeavour in the coming weeks.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I do not intend to introduce a time limit, but Members will be aware that there are in the region of 25 people wishing to speak. They might like to consider how long they will spend on their feet, so that as many colleagues as possible can get in.

4.13 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Last week, this House recognised the 80th anniversary of the allied victory in Europe, so I find it somewhat strange that today the party of Churchill is calling for a debate that seeks to drive a wedge between us and our friends and allies on the continent.

I speak on behalf of the young people, farmers, fishermen and small business owners of my constituency—[Hon. Members: "Fishermen?"] Yes, plural! They are hard-working people who have felt the consequences of our severance from Europe. The bungling of farming and fisheries policy since Brexit has led to supply chain disruptions, reduced access to export markets and financial uncertainty for our producers. Our farmers—once able to trade freely with Europe—now find themselves bogged down in paperwork, losing out to competitors who enjoy smoother trade arrangements.

Despite the turbulence of Brexit, the European Union remains our largest trading partner. To undermine this reality seems, to my mind, to be a curious act of economic self-harm. Grand promises of scaling back Brussels bureaucracy were made, but precisely the opposite has occurred, with more red tape, delays and headaches for our businesses and traders.

Dr Mullan: As was put to the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), at the start of the debate, the red tape is coming from the EU, not us. Why is the ire of the Lib Dems never directed at the people responsible for introducing the trade barriers?

Rachel Gilmour: I simply do not accept what the hon. Member says. Big corporations may be able to adapt, shift operations—*[Interruption.]* Do be quiet for a minute!

Big corporations may be able to adapt, shift operations and sidestep the chaos, but for our small businesses—the backbone of our economy—this is not merely an inconvenience, but a catastrophe. Ask my constituent Becca James of Williton what she has made of the Brexit fallout, having run a superb au pair agency that folded. As an MP representing many SMEs in my constituency of Tiverton and Minehead—Minehead being on the sea, hence the fishermen—I hear daily about their struggles to keep trading and to navigate new regulations. Conservative Governments have hung them out to dry, leaving them to fend for themselves in a post-Brexit economic landscape riddled with uncertainties. Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face.

We must swerve the temptations of dogma and pursue policies that benefit our economy, our people and our future. We must come to terms with the fact that forming a new customs arrangement would offset much of this harsh impact and would be a sign of a more grown-up politics. I and my party are looking forward eagerly to the Government's big reset in the weeks to come. Without a comprehensive trading arrangement with the EU, it will be clear that reset just means rebrand.

Fisheries have not fared any better. Grandstanding notions of reclaiming British waters turned out to be hollow, as coastal communities have seen dwindling profits, complicated licensing, and deals that have left them materially worse off than before. If only the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) had attended more than one of the 42 meetings of the EU Parliament Committee on Fisheries, which he was paid to attend, our fishermen might be on a more even keel.

We must embrace the EU youth mobility scheme. The West Somerset area of my constituency sits at 324th out of 324 on the social mobility index, and while there is no overnight panacea to this, I believe that those from disadvantaged backgrounds having access to opportunity on the continent can only be a good thing. The youth mobility scheme would democratise travel and work abroad by removing the financial barriers that typically make it an option only for the privileged. It would empower talented young people who may have the skills but lack the financial means to access the same opportunities as their more affluent peers. Why should they be reserved for a few?

It is my firm belief that travel and broadening one's experiences can be one of the best forms of education. Why would we deny our young people that golden ticket to live, work, study and build lifelong friendships in Europe? This is not entirely an argument about economics, for what monetary value can be placed on broadening the horizons of our young people wherever

[Rachel Gilmour]

those opportunities may lie? It is a peculiar irony that young people from nations on the other side of the world—the likes of our Australian and Kiwi friends—are part of this scheme, while the UK across that small body of water known as the channel, or la manche, remains on the outside looking in.

I will end with the words of the European Union preamble: nous sommes unis dans notre diversité, notre histoire commune, nos valeurs et notre avenir partagés. I will give hon. Members a translation if they need one.

4.19 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): As this is a debate in the name of His Majesty's Opposition, it is only right that I share some personal reflections on the record of the Conservative party when it was in government. I am feeling generous, Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure the House will be pleased to know that this will be a brief speech. But I am also feeling generous because I want to begin with three simple and constructive suggestions for the Conservative party on its future approach to the European Union.

First, a good place to start would be by accepting that the Brexit deal signed in 2020 has done substantial damage to our economy. Fundamentally, it was a deal that put up barriers to trade. As the Office for Budget Responsibility concluded, the UK economy will be 4% smaller than previously expected. That means the country is on course to be £100 billion poorer than it otherwise would have been.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is not the first time that the 4% figure has been referenced. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that it was based on the assumption that UK-EU trade would fall and there would therefore be a hit to our productivity? In fact, EU-UK trade has risen since Brexit, so the whole basis of that assumption is wrong. Will he please acknowledge that?

Andrew Lewin: It is curious, is it not? I have seen Conservative Front Benchers talking up the OBR when it is convenient, but in this case, when they do not agree with it, they decry it and say we must not listen to it.

Step one: it is time to accept that it was a deal that made the country poorer and it must be looked at again.

My second tip would be to apologise to the business community. He is no longer a Member of this House, so perhaps it is time to fully disown the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. As well as saying sorry for his language towards the business community, it might be time to say sorry to the 60% of companies that told the British chambers of commerce that it has become harder for them to trade as a direct consequence of the deal that was signed.

The highlight of the shadow Minister's speech was his reference to "Quantum Leap". He talked fondly of it, but I think it is time to jump back into the present. My third piece of advice is, therefore, that the Conservative party should listen to more podcasts. I know for a fact that the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride) and the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) listen to a certain weekly political podcast featuring former Chancellor George Osborne. I know they listen to it, because I have heard the voice notes they submitted as questions in recent weeks and months. It is an excellent podcast, but I fear that while Conservative MPs are tuning in, they are not really listening. George Osborne could not be more clear: the European Union is our single biggest trading partner and if we are serious about growing the economy, it is time for a new and more ambitious deal. On this, he and his co-host Ed Balls are united, and they are absolutely right.

I am a pro-European and an internationalist. In my short time in this place, I have already had the opportunity to speak at greater length in other debates on why now is the time for a substantial reset in the relationship with our largest trading partner. Today, I will not revisit those arguments at length. But we are less than a week away from the UK-EU summit and I am very hopeful that we will see a comprehensive deal that makes progress on security, trade and a visa-based youth mobility scheme.

This is not 2016 or 2020. While the Conservative party in Parliament may want to replay the old debates, public opinion in the country has moved on. In an uncertain and volatile world, there is no more important relationship for the UK than the one with our closest neighbour and biggest trading partner. People want to see progress. They want to see a deal that makes a material difference to their lives. I am confident that is exactly what this Labour Government will deliver, starting with the summit next week.

4.23 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is wonderful to hear from the acclaimed globalists from both the Liberal Democrat Benches and the Labour Benches who cannot wait to bring us back into the EU. For the record, I am opposed to doing so not only because the British people voted the opposite way and we should honour the referendum, but because, as Labour Members seem to have forgotten, we actually negotiated a trade deal with Europe.

What I am interested in is the evasive nature of what the Minister said from the Dispatch Box, which committed us to nothing other than resetting our relationship with the EU. I would like reassurances on what that means. What strategic partnership with the EU was he referring to? What concessions is he planning on making? Will some kind of new EU treaty renegotiation come out of this? What kind of active or passive role is the UK planning on taking at this summit? None of that has been made clear.

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joy Morrissey: In a moment—I want to make some progress.

While none of that has been made clear, we have heard from quite a lot of Back-Bench Labour MPs that we will have a wonderful new trade deal and a great new visa system for young people, which gives me pause. Either we are not being told fully what is going to happen at this summit, or there is such anticipation for back-door EU realignment that the Labour party cannot contain itself, and its Members cannot help but tell us what they are planning on doing.

My biggest concern in all this—forgive me for wanting reassurance from the Dispatch Box—is that the outcome of the summit might involve concessions of jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice, or the application of any of the principles of supremacy of EU law. I would like a guarantee from the Minister, on the Floor of the House, that that will not be the case. There can be no question of the European Court of Justice being brought back via the back door through dynamic realignment with EU law.

I want to hear reassurances from the Minister that nothing will be discussed or renegotiated at this summit that would tear apart all the work we did, through the withdrawal agreement and the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023, to ensure that our laws have supremacy over EU law. That was the point. Many of us voted for Brexit because we wanted to see our sovereignty and our borders restored; we wanted to see our laws brought back under our sovereignty. We want to ensure that we honour the commitments that we made, with both the Retained EU Law Act and the withdrawal agreement, to move forward with the EU.

I welcome trade deals all over the world; I want us to be as successful as we can be. Praise where praise is due: if the Labour party has achieved a trade deal, fine—I am happy to acknowledge that and to say "Well done". We should be trying to get trade deals with any country that we can.

The reason I am asking for assurances from the Dispatch Box is that I have seen the Labour party change its view on so many things: on Brexit, on Trump, on scrapping winter fuel payments, on energy bills—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: On national insurance!

Joy Morrissey: And on national insurance. Forgive me for needing reassurance from the Dispatch Box that the Minister will not come back with some sort of 1984 doublespeak and expect us to enjoy that.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend's scepticism is well founded, because many on the Government Benches—I do not say all—could barely sustain the result of the referendum and regarded it with outrage. The people had spoken and contradicted the long-standing prejudice of the liberal bourgeoisie. That is why they tried to block Brexit—indeed, the Prime Minister tried to block it 48 times. My hon. Friend is right, therefore, to be sceptical about Labour.

Joy Morrissey: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to protect our Brexit freedoms and make sure that we hold the Labour party to account.

We heard a lot from the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) about all the wonderful things he has planned for our free trade deal. However, I am concerned that we are going to rewrite history; that we are going to ignore the British people again and allow for dynamic back-door realignment with the EU without giving Parliament or the British people a say.

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Gentleman had a long time to speak, but I will give way once.

Ben Coleman: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I took a third of the time that her colleague, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), took for his speech. Is she genuinely suggesting that we should tell this House right now what we will be negotiating in Brussels next week—that we should give away the full details of our strategy? Perhaps that is the attitude that the Conservative Government took when they were negotiating the trade deal with Australia; the Conservative former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that it was a poor deal that let our farmers down. Given her approach, no wonder that happened.

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Gentleman should allow us to fulfil the deal to which we are committed. We have put in place a trade deal and the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023. Unless there are new negotiations to be had, what exactly is the purpose of the summit?

I was going to end my speech, but the hon. Gentleman has inspired me to continue. The Government's amendment relates to NATO, but NATO has nothing to do with the EU; it is a completely separate entity. Talk of dynamic realignment on defence came about after we left the EU. Ensuring an ever closer Union, through military, policing and social policy, has always been part of the plan of the European Union. That is welcome to internationalists, Liberal Democrats and Labour Members. I am sure that they would all love to have another way of binding us to the EU. NATO is separate; it has one document that has been agreed in the post-war period—

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Joy Morrissey: No, I will not.

NATO gives us an alignment on military matters that needs to be protected and fostered. A Liberal Democrat Member mentioned our technical and military capability. That is not the issue; the issue is: who bears the cost of our military capacity, which we deploy in defence of Europe and the free world? NATO was created post war, during the cold war, when we needed that strategic protection in Europe. That still holds true. Why would we disrupt that, and muddy the waters with this motion, which brings in NATO, which is separate from the EU? Why would we talk about something related to the military in a debate on EU jurisdiction?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Joy Morrissey: I will finish and allow others to speak. I want to hear from colleagues from across the House, because this is a very interesting debate. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your time. I will really enjoy hearing from the Minister when they return from the summit on what exactly they have in mind for us and the EU.

4.32 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I am delighted to contribute to the debate. I was really pleased to hear the Minister say from the Dispatch Box that, at the EU summit, we will focus on safety, security and growth. And, boy, don't we need growth, after 14 years of chaos and disaster from the Conservative party. Since leaving

[Catherine Fookes]

the EU in 2020, businesses in Monmouthshire and across the UK have faced the many barriers that resulted from the Tories' botched Brexit deal.

I must declare an interest: I am a big fan of the EU. No, that does not mean that I want to rejoin the EU, contrary to what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) said. We need a better trading deal for our farmers, and for businesses in Monmouthshire. I was lucky enough, when I was at Middlesex Polytechnic many years ago, to take part in the Erasmus scheme. I went to Europe for two years; I studied in France. I learned French and did my finals in French. That cultural exchange—that ability to go to another country—is so important for our future, and for our young people. That was even before I met my Catalan husband, so now I have lots of family in Barcelona. It is so important to have close ties with the European Union.

As a member of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, I was delighted that we were received with open arms in Brussels earlier this year. Our trading relations with our nearest and largest partner are too important to be taken over by playground politics from the Conservative party. I am so pleased that the new Labour Government are seeking a more co-operative and mature relationship with the EU. As one MEP said, "Thank goodness the grown-ups are back in charge".

Wales has a unique relationship with the EU, especially regarding our world famous, delicious and best-tasting Welsh lamb. Farmers and National Farmers Union Cymru have told me that we need a new SPS deal. In 2023 alone, Wales exported £600 million of food and drink to the EU, and a large proportion of that was red meat, but UK exports to the EU overall were down 19% in 2023.

Ben Coleman: On the subject of lamb, will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact—I asked this of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey)—that the previous Government negotiated a trade deal with Australia that a former Conservative Environment Secretary described as a disaster for our farmers, not least those farming lamb?

Catherine Fookes: Absolutely, I remember that well.

The reduction in exports is mainly due to the increase in paperwork, form-filling, and checks and barriers to trade. Some companies have simply given up because they have had such a difficult time dealing with the red tape. Companies have also had to put up prices, which has impacted consumers. For farmers, businesses and consumers, we need a strong, beneficial SPS agreement. I am so pleased that the Minister is working hard on this. Our Government's No. 1 priority is economic growth, and that would be supported by growing co-operation with the EU.

Recently, I met people from businesses in my constituency that export to the EU for a proper discussion about what Brexit has meant for them. Sadly, I was unsurprised by what they had to say. I have already mentioned the increase in admin, which has hit their productivity; they are doing more work for less reward. Requirements for product information and documentation are creating a time-consuming and costly burden. Once the paperwork is all done, there is another set of challenges. One person I met said that delays at Calais were borderline unmanageable. That is especially impacting the small and medium-sized enterprises of Monmouthshire.

One person I spoke to at the roundtable said:

> "The biggest issue currently is that inspections at Calais for our products are very slow and at the same time we are restricted in terms of time spent at the port due to dangerous goods that are included in the load. This is a balance that is barely manageable for us."

A person from another company said:

> "What a disaster Brexit was for the import/export business: for my company, although through the agreement we are now back to 'zero tariff', the net result is simply a huge increase in admin and transport costs, for which ultimately the consumer pays."

Finally, a person said:

> "Exhibiting in the EU is much more complex and requires greater admin".

They gave this example: if a business takes as much as a screwdriver to an exhibition in the EU, it must fill in a form for that screwdriver, even though it is to be used only to put up an exhibition stand. They said that every single piece of equipment must be counted in and counted out.

Three overall strands emerged from my roundtable: we must remove trade barriers; we must have dynamic alignment of standards; and businesses in my constituency would like a return to some kind of youth exchange scheme, like the one I benefited from. Trade is one of the most pressing issues at hand as we seek to rebuild our relationship at the summit next week. Removing barriers to export will be essential for farmers, businesses and consumers in Monmouthshire as the Government pursue their vital mission of economic growth.

4.38 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I will start with a few words about the context of the debate. Clearly, the accusation—as though it were a negative—is that the campaign for Brexit had a sort of nostalgic, backward-looking spirit, and that those of us who supported it did so in that spirit. There is something in that, because we were talking about restoring British sovereignty; there was a sense that something good had been lost and needed to be brought back. All good revolutions are in a sense backward-looking; the bad revolutions are the progressive ones, while good revolutions restore what was lost. That is what Brexit was about.

Nevertheless, despite that point, which I do concede, fundamentally the case for Brexit was forward-looking. It was about putting this country in the best possible position to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This century demands agility, and the independence that sovereignty can allow. Obviously, there must be co-operation and close working in partnership—Britain has always been an outward-looking country—but nimbleness and agility will be needed in the highly contested new world that we are in. That is what Brexit was about, and on a number of hugely significant occasions since Brexit, we have already seen why our independence was so necessary. We saw it in our covid response, and in the context of Ukraine and our defence policy, and we see it now in our trade. Indeed, we have done since Brexit. We have seen it in the UK's negotiations with the US, which we can compare with those undertaken by the EU in recent months.

On trade, as I said in an intervention, the challenge is often made that Brexit has harmed our GDP because it brought about a loss in productivity. The reverse is true. Trade with the EU has grown since Brexit, and it is not the case that we have suffered detriment because of that. Trade is growing between the UK and the whole world, including the EU, but it is growing more with non-EU countries, which makes the point about why it was so necessary to reclaim sovereignty over our trade policy. I echo the concerns raised by Conservative colleagues about what is being planned for next week, in terms of dynamic alignment on trade, and I call on the Minister to rule out a back-door alignment arrangement with the EU. We have seen worrying hints of that. I look forward to his response.

The case for Brexit was not primarily about trade. Of course, that is a very important matter, but let us acknowledge, as I think we all do, that really people were voting to take back control of our borders and our laws. Those two vital issues remain contested because this Government never believed in Brexit and do not understand the call of the people for independence and sovereignty in those two key respects.

On borders and immigration, I recognise the case for a youth mobility scheme. In principle, the abstract case for a reciprocal arrangement in which young people can spend a few months or a year working in another country is a good thing. The hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) said that it was a nice thing to do. Nevertheless, we see the value of such schemes only when there is a reciprocal arrangement and comparable numbers are coming and going. The same argument applies to the Indian trade deal and its reciprocal arrangement on national insurance. The fact is, many more people will take advantage of the so-called reciprocal arrangements by coming to the UK than will go either to India or to the EU, so we would not have a level playing field. As with free movement, this youth scheme would be another way for many more people to come to this country, undercutting British workers and continuing the stagnation of wages that we have suffered from for so many decades.

On laws and taking back control, I am concerned about the threat of European Court of Justice oversight of the trade arrangements, and potentially of the new veterinary agreement and deals on meat and dairy. I very much hope that the Minister will definitively rule out any extension of ECJ oversight. The fact is—we see this in the Government's rather mealy-mouthed amendment to the motion—that Labour does not believe in Brexit.

I really honour the Green party for its amendment, because in that we hear the true voice of the pro-European movement. It is almost a parody. It suggests that free movement and rejoining the EU are what the country needs and would be in the national interest. Indeed, it suggests that it would be a way to counter the hard right. Have Green Members seen what is going on in Europe? The extension of the principles of ever closer union, deeper alignment and concentration of power at the European level is stoking the far right across Europe. The fundamental reason why the Conservative party has always been so successful, historically, is that we have spoken for those people who otherwise would be outraged. Reform has been doing well—by the way, I do not associate Reform with the far right—because it speaks for those outraged members of the public, many of whom used to vote for us and for the Labour party, who feel that their Parliament has let them down and politics has left them behind. That has happened across Europe in a much more dangerous way, so if we are serious about countering the danger of the right, we should be absolutely clear about there being no suggestion of any return to the EU.

Let me finish on Reform. Its Members are not here any more, but there we go. They have a rather amusing amendment to the motion, which simply replaces the words "Conservative party" with the words "Reform". They are piggybacking somewhat on our good work, in a desperate search to be relevant and to catch up with the Conservative party, which is leading the way on this agenda. It is a bit of a problem, and two things occur to me: first, that they cannot even write an amendment of their own and they have to rely on us—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member might reflect on the fact that the amendment to which he refers was not even selected, so he should not even be speaking to it.

Danny Kruger: I will therefore end just by saying that the amendment tabled by Reform, which I appreciate was not selected, demonstrates that we are on the same page and I deeply regret their opposition to what we are trying to do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Reform Members are not here, so I will answer that point. They are not on the same page as us because their amendment, which was not a proper one, did not fit on the same page of the Order Paper!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is a very experienced parliamentarian and knows that he should be addressing the Chair, not facing the back of the Chamber.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker—that was a lapse on my part.

Danny Kruger: All sorts of things go wrong when we mention Reform, so we had best leave that topic.

I pay tribute to the Conservative Front-Bench Members, who have put forward an important and principled statement of the declaration that our party will stand for. We support the decision of the British people to leave the European Union, repeated in multiple general elections. It is a great shame that we cannot hear the Labour party make the same pledge.

Ben Coleman: I am trying to understand if, at some point, we will hear anything from the Conservative party about what its Members think could be improved in the Brexit agreement that has been so bad for their party. We are talking about getting a better Brexit agreement than the one they negotiated. Are they saying that what they did was perfect, or can it be improved on? If it can, how? Everything else the hon. Gentleman has said has been negative.

Danny Kruger: There are two things. First, we could do better on Northern Ireland, but let us leave that whole topic for another day. Secondly, the Brexit agreement

[Danny Kruger]

that we negotiated was absolutely right, but the problem is the EU and the fact that it is a protectionist bloc. We decided to leave because we believe in sovereignty and leaving a declining quarter of the world's economy. The problem is the trade barriers that the EU erected unnecessarily and which are harmful to both parties. I will leave it there.

4.47 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I start with a warning to my colleagues elected in 2024? Many of us who were here between 2017 and 2019 have been deeply triggered by this debate, which has rerun and rehashed the debates of old. We have the scars on all our backs. I warn hon. Members: do not go down that rabbit hole. No good can come of it. *[Interruption.]* I wager that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is laughing because he knows how much—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: Well, of course I have to give way to my constituency neighbour.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my neighbour for giving way. If she wants to deliberately not go down that rabbit hole, she should be talking to the Government Front Benchers.

Ms Creasy: And lo, Bugs Bunny did appear. We have also heard from the man I started arguing with 33 years ago as a young campaigner about the merits or otherwise of working with Europe. It appears that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) was on the other bus in the debates about Brexit. That is exactly it: our constituents, who might listen to this, would be horrified to see us going backwards again, acting as if the last 10 years had not happened and there was no evidence about what Brexit means.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: I do not want to try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. You have had to sit through many a lengthy speech.

Sir Bernard Jenkin *rose—*

Ms Creasy: Oh, go on—I will give way. The hon. Gentleman was like this when I was 15, too.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Who is it that is trying to take us back to the past? It is the Government. Brexit is giving this country its new future and the Government are trying to turn the clock back. That is what is wrong.

Ms Creasy: I hate to warn the hon. Gentleman, but I have a horrible feeling that if he were to compare the speech he made today with many of those he made between 2017 and 2019, he might find that he would lose "Just a Minute" on the grounds of repetition. That is going backwards. This country deserves better.

Let me start with a clear statement of intent. Brexit has happened; we have left. I am not here to prosecute the argument to rejoin. We do not have time for that. What we need is a salvage operation, because of the damage that has been done, especially in a world with so much uncertainty, where tariffs are now part and parcel of the everyday conversation and the damage that is being done to our constituents.

We can fight many things in life, but geography really is not one of them, however hard some Members on the Conservative Benches try. We heard from the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) the continued myth that somehow the isolation to our status that Brexit has brought would bring us strength. The last 10 years—indeed, the last six months—have shown how clearly that is not the case. In fact, we are uniquely isolated and at risk as a nation. That is why what this Government are doing is absolutely right. They are getting on with signing trade deals, trying to sort out the damage that has been done and, indeed, looking for that hat-trick.

I have to say to Conservative Members that there is no conspiracy here. Those of us who were here in 2019 remember exactly the details of that deal and the fact that a five-year review process was written into it. What we are going to see next Monday is not some secret negotiation; it is part of the trade and co-operation process—*[Interruption.]* I hear Conservative Members chuntering. Hang on, I can see their tin foil hats! I beg them to look at the details of the agreement, which said clearly that there would be a renegotiation point, where we would review whether or not it was working. I am sorry that the shadow Minister is not in his place. He tried to claim affinity with Sam Beckett but frankly I suspect he is going to be more like Jim Trott from "The Vicar of Dibley". He will say, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no", and then have to say yes. The summit is not the end. It is the start of the process of reviewing the trade and co-operation agreement, and looking at what is in the best interests of this country.

Let me be clear: I am absolutely committed to the idea that there should be parliamentary scrutiny. My colleagues on the Front Bench will know that I have been concerned that the European Scrutiny Committee was deleted, because I think we should be able to discuss these matters. However, I think there probably ought to be a summit first in order for us to have something to discuss. I hope that will account for me putting in an advert for the Backbench Business debate that the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and I were going to have after the summit on 22 May, so that we parliamentarians may properly examine what comes out of it. Sadly, he is not in his place, which is a shame because I know how strongly he feels about these things, and I am sure he would want to talk about the benefits of Brexit and other mythical creatures. The summit is the starting gun. It is not the final deal, and it is really important to look at it in that way.

This is the test for the motion today. Are the Opposition really telling us that the trade and co-operation agreement is perfection? Is there absolutely nothing in that agreement that they would not wish to amend, revise or refine? Is there absolutely nothing in what it has delivered in the last five years that they are troubled by? For example, there are 1.8 million fewer jobs in our economy because of the Tory hard Brexit, and the academics who have

studied this recognise that that figure will rise to 3 million by 2035. Trade is down 27% with the European Union—a bloc that we do five times more trade with than we do with America. Over 16,000 businesses have given up trading with Europe all together, because the truth about Brexit is that it was just paperwork—reams and reams of it—and small businesses in this country have sadly had to up sticks.

I declare an interest as the chair of the Labour Movement for Europe. I am not standing here arguing to rejoin, but I am a red against red tape and what I see is the amount of paperwork—*[Interruption.]* I am loving the fact that Conservative Members are chuntering from a sedentary position, as if this was some sort of revelation. Perhaps they can borrow some tin foil from their fellow Members and talk about a conspiracy. They would do better to reflect on the impact of the border trading operating model—an entirely self-inflicted wound by the previous Government on British farmers and British food supply chains that pushed up inflation, because charging for pallets of food coming into the country created more and more paperwork. Unless Conservative Members are genuinely telling us that they think "chef's kiss" for the trade and co-operation agreement, it is right for us to look at whether there are things we can do to deal with the problems it has created for our constituents—including the £6.95 billion of additional cost to households—and to account for some of the myths that have been created.

Again, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire—he will accuse me of being obsessed, but let us look at what he talked about—said that somehow being out of the European Union made our response to covid better. Well, he might want to talk to the UK covid inquiry, which found that it was the reverse. It found that our failure to prepare was increased by the fact that we were dealing with a no-deal Brexit; it harmed our covid response. He might even want to reflect on the words of the UK medicines regulator, which said we could have used the emergency processes to bring forward our own vaccine. I am sure that is what he was talking about.

The hon. Member also talked about Ukraine. He might want to reflect, as he thinks about the summit on Monday, on how hard it was for us to make the case about the importance of standing with Ukraine from outside of the room, and that those who were less convinced who were part of the European Union would have heard our message more clearly if we were inside the room, particularly when it came to gas imports. We championed Ukraine, but we had to shout from outside rather than being part of the conversations from the start.

This summit needs a strong agenda, and that is exactly what this Government are talking about. It is an agenda focused on fixing the problems that this trade and co-operation agreement has created. That is what the public want—they agree with us. They do not want us to spend five to 10 years on treaty renegotiation and the possibility of rejoining; they want us to salvage this country from the damage that Brexit has done. Two thirds of the country say that Brexit is bad for the cost of living, and 65% say that it has had a negative impact on the economy. Opposition Members might want to reflect on the fact that that is nearly twice the number of people who think that immigration is bad for our economy.

The British public are not daft; they are wise about what needs to happen next. They understand the value of a defence deal. They understand that, in a world with Putin at our doorstep, with the challenges we face and the uncertainty in other parts of the world, it is absolutely right and proper, and will complement NATO, to work more closely with our European counterparts, to increase investment in the UK defence industry and to collaborate on crime. Those of us who used to have constituents whose needs were served by the EU arrest warrants know the damage that the previous Government's deal has done. Those of us who want to see us stepping up the way we collaborate on international aid know that we need to get round the table with our European counterparts. The best way to tackle those who might be stuck on a boat, fleeing persecution, is to try to stop the conflict at the source. That is what collaborating on international aid with Europe could offer.

The public understand the value of an SPS deal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) mentioned, and the value of the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, which deals with the paperwork about rules of origin. Thanks to the Tory hard Brexit, those rules mean that every time a tomato is brought into this country to make a pizza in the Wirral, extra paperwork comes with it. The public would want us to look at the VAT rules, because small businesses are now struggling with 27 different VAT regimes. They would also want us to sort out the carbon border adjustment mechanism; that is how we save British steel, which will be affected if there is a divergence. We need to look at how the emissions trading schemes can be linked, and we can save British business £800 million in charges.

The public want us to look at mutual conformity assessments to try to reduce duplication. They want common sense on regulation. The previous Government tried to bring in separate regulatory regimes and, understandably, British business said, "That is twice the cost." British businesses want to be able to sell to their neighbours; they do not want extra pieces of paperwork. The previous Government tried to make us have separate regulations on airline safety—as if an aeroplane taking off in London would need to follow a different set of regimes if it landed in Berlin. That is bonkers. Understandably, we walked back from it, and we should not go back to those kind of arguments just because those on the Conservative Benches have a blindness when it comes to Europe.

This Government have got their head on. They are looking at what they can do to help the chemicals industry and supply chains, and of course it is looking at what a deal on youth mobility might look like. This is a summit; it is about having the conversation, looking at the details and looking at how we can support apprenticeships through youth mobility. Clearly, youth mobility is not freedom of movement, otherwise I would have heard complaints from Opposition Members about the fact that we have freedom of movement deals with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Uruguay—*[Interruption.]* I can see a Conservative Member saying, "Yes, indeed." I presume they are going to call for the abolition of freedom of movement from Canada, then; that would be consistency.

We could also do more to help our creative services and financial services, and, yes, to resolve some of the tensions in Northern Ireland. Many of us feel deeply

[Ms Creasy]

that the people of Northern Ireland have suffered the most as a result of the Tory hard Brexit. Yes, we could do a deal on fishing. We could acknowledge the fact that our fisheries industry felt sold out by the previous Government by supporting them to be sustainable. All those are issues that we can return to in that Back-Bench debate, but we cannot do that if we do not have the summit. We cannot walk into the summit saying, "No, no, no." We need to walk in saying, "What gives? What are the opportunities here? How can we solve some of these challenges?"

Many, many years ago, one of my next-door constituency neighbours was Winston Churchill. We on the Labour Benches have become the defenders of his vision of ending conflict in Europe. Conservative Members spend all their time fighting with each other and fighting a ghost. We need to talk about the future. We need to get away from the fantasy that somehow Brexit will deliver and start getting back to the cost of living crisis in our communities and how we can help people.

Danny Kruger *rose—*

Ms Creasy: I was going to sit down, I promise, but I cannot resist. I give way.

Danny Kruger: The hon. Lady mentioned Churchill, so I cannot let her sit down yet. She talked about conflict within the Conservative party. Winston Churchill had a few battles in his own party, as she might recall—he was not averse to that. Sometimes one has to stand up for what is right, which is what Conservative Brexiteers did. Does she really think that Winston Churchill would have supported the EU in its current form? Does she really think that he would have supported what the ECHR has become? How can she possibly claim Winston Churchill for the politics that she stands for? Go on!

Ms Creasy: I think Winston Churchill would turn in his grave if he saw what the Conservative party and its libertarian wing have become, and how the proud defence of our ability to participate in international organisations, and to speak up for freedom, for shared interests and for the national interest, have been diminished as a result of the previous Government's approach to Brexit, as well as that of Conservative Members today.

I will draw my remarks to a close. The world is changing. We are living in a world in which trade, security, co-operation and climate issues move at pace. Many of us could not have predicted—remember, it has been only 120 days since President Trump was elected—what would happen next. Never more have we needed good relationships with our neighbours. Monday is about being good neighbours. The world might be changing, but we have the same old Conservative party, on the same page as Reform—that is all they seem to care about. We care about the British interest. I look forward to hearing what comes out of the summit, and I look forward to the Back-Bench debate to discuss it. That really is taking back control.

5.2 pm

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): It is good to contribute to the debate. On the matter of Churchill, I am of course one of his successors in Dundee, where he was defeated by the only prohibitionist ever elected. It was after his defeat that he went on to make his speeches about Europe, after he had joined the Conservative party.

I suspect that I will in a moment slip into the same levels of exasperation expressed by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy)—I hope that she does not mind my saying that we agree on so much—but before I do, let me thank the Conservative party for bringing this motion. I have to say, I salute their—how should one put it—courage in securing the debate. Nobody is saying that the Conservatives' Brexit has been a success. In that context, I feel that they are leading with their chin today. Nobody is arguing that it is something that has gone well. Nobody is arguing that it has become a triumph. Rather, we are debating and discussing today how to tackle a problem that has been well set out by the Government. I am sorry to say that Brexit continues to cast a spell over the political classes at Westminster.

We have heard a rerun of some of the arguments and some of the falsehoods about the European Union, but let us talk about the evidence—I will be brief, as it has been well covered. There is the 4% drop in GDP that the Treasury has outlined, and the 15% drop in trade that was part of the Budget documents. The UK has now lost more than it ever contributed financially, with absolutely nothing in return. There is the loss of jobs, the loss of regional structural funds that were never replaced despite the promises, the loss of opportunities for SMEs and, critically, the loss of opportunities for our young people. I can remember when the Brexiteers told us that lots of countries would follow the UK out the door. Nobody has followed the UK, and I wonder why. It leans into the sense of British exceptionalism that we hear time and again. The UK has been left impoverished as a direct consequence of those arguments.

I have heard the warm words from Labour Members about wanting to be closer to Europe, but they are fundamentally grabbing hold of a hard Tory Brexit. I fail to see why a Labour Government do not stand up for Europe more. Rather than try to imitate failed Conservative policies and failed Reform policies—let us not forget that Reform has a track record, and it is not a good one—Labour should take them on, on that track record.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: Before I move on to the Treasury and some of the right hon. Gentleman's points, I will give way to him.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman was pointing to an empty Bench when he talked about Reform, by the way, because its Members have not turned up.

On the structural funds, I know the hon. Gentleman would not want in any way to say something misleading. After Brexit, my constituency attracted Government funding of something like £60 million or £70 million for roads, a new leisure centre and the regeneration of our town centre. In the last year we were in the EU, does he know that it cost us £17 billion to be a member? What sort of price is that?

Stephen Gethins: Seventeen billion is less than half the amount lost from the public finances. Those are not my figures, but the Labour Mayor of London's figures. That is money lost without getting anything back in return, and the Scottish Government has lost £300 million in money that has not come from regional structural funds.

Let me turn to devolution and sovereignty. The EU is a Union fit for the 21st century. The UK is barely a Union fit for the 18th century, because it has not been modernised since. We have a Brexit deal that ripped up the devolution settlement, which Scottish Labour and others spoke out against but which has now been imposed on the devolved Administrations in a way that the EU could never do to its member states. I remind Members that not one of the 27 independent, sovereign member states of the EU consider themselves any less independent or sovereign for being a member of the European Union—not one of them. Just one did, and it is this British nationalist exceptionalism that is so utterly damaging to everybody in the UK.

The most sovereign country in the world is North Korea, because we give up a tiny bit of sovereignty with deals. All these other states that see themselves as sovereign—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) talks of Ukraine. Ukraine wants to join the EU. He talks of democracy. The democrats in Georgia and Moldova drape themselves in European flags because they see that as the future of the rule of law, democracy and greater wealth for their country. Every country that has joined the EU got better off. The one country that left got worse off, and its citizens had fewer rights.

We all have to recognise that the EU is a security actor, and a majority of European states now see the EU and NATO as the twin pillars of security. Those sovereign states see that. While I welcome the UK Government's steadfast support for Ukraine—both the current and previous Administrations—we are not realistic about the challenges we face. Putin's Russia fears the EU. That is why we saw the initial war in Ukraine in 2014, because of the EU accession agreement. We know that, and everyone else gets it except those in the United Kingdom. The EU provides food security and energy security for its members, and sitting outside leaves us more isolated and less secure. Why is the UK so exceptional? What makes the UK so special? How is it that everybody else has got it wrong, but the UK has somehow got it right? It is a piece of nonsense that is damaging us all.

Turning to young people, I am getting tired of hearing Labour talk about youth mobility schemes. I would like the Minister to tell me whether a youth mobility scheme will be put in place, and then say how it will compare with the free movement we all enjoyed when we were in the EU. We are leaving younger generations with fewer rights and opportunities than we ourselves enjoyed, and that is a failure of our political generation—an abject failure.

I am sorry to say that the Prime Minister's rhetoric yesterday feeds into that. That he was called out by Lord Dubs, a Labour Member of the House of Lords, and yet praised by the leader of Alternative for Germany should surely give Labour Members some cause for reflection—some cause to reflect on how others are seeing them right now. I would expect such rhetoric from Reform and others, but I did not expect it from the Labour party and I say to Labour Members, "I'm sorry, I oppose you sometimes and you stood against me, but I did not expect that from the Labour party."

The worst part of this is that we are getting it from a Labour Government who do not really believe in what they are doing. I know that from working with them over the years. They do not believe in the damage this is doing. What is damaging us in politics right now is that people are standing up for things they do not really believe in. They do not say what they believe in. They might say, "I believe in leaving the European Union"—*(Interruption.)* The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talks about Parliament—I just heard that—in a Parliament where we do not have an idea of British sovereignty. The definition of Scottish sovereignty—I would encourage him to read MacCormick *v.* Lord Advocate—is different from the idea of English sovereignty, because the supremacy of Parliament does not exist.

Mr Francois: I think it is fair to say that in the years I have been here generally most people have known what I believed in, but is the reason the hon. Gentleman is so incredibly angry this afternoon because, from his point of view, he lost not only one referendum, but two: on Scottish independence and then on the European Union?

Stephen Gethins: I will concede the point. I know what the right hon. Gentleman believes in. I was not surprised that he wanted to take me on not on the substance of what I said but rather on some of the semantics, because as the Secretary of State for Scotland said, a democracy ceases to be a democracy when it ceases to have the ability to change its mind.

My appeal would be this: yes, I believe in independence; I believe that the European Union provides a model that the UK Union does not. That is something I believe in, and some Members disagree with me and I respect them for that, and I know that Scottish Labour Members disagree with me on that, and I respect them for that as well. What I struggle with is that we know this is a bad deal with Europe. We know that staying outside the customs union and the single market is making us poorer every day. I would encourage Members to stand up and put the case of what they believe in, because that is the way to return respect back into politics—not repeat what has been said in the past, but truly look to the future.

5.12 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I will keep my remarks fairly brief, and we have been treated to a lot of good, well-informed speeches. On respect and speaking up for what we believe in, it is important to remember the poison that was brought into the body politic before I entered this place. On the local election night I was particularly concerned in my constituency about the return of a Reform councillor whose Facebook page has been described by Hope Not Hate as

"a slew of anti-Muslim content."

That really worries me. It worries a lot of my constituents, and it worries a lot of people across the country. I am very disappointed with Reform and question some of its vetting processes.

[Joe Morris]

To return to the matter in hand, I meet every week with businesses in my constituency—with farmers, small businesses, businesses that export and those that want to export but do not feel they have the facilities or support in place to do so. There are failures in the Brexit deal, and I know that there are many sober and mature Members on the other side of the House who recognise those shortcomings, and this summit is an opportunity to recognise that we live in a world that is changing every single day, where the demands of yesterday are not the same as the demands of tomorrow. We have a Government who are looking to the mature, reasonable and responsible thing to do, which is to improve the day to day lives of our constituents, which is what we are sent here to do.

I speak to farmers who suffer from being caught up in red tape when trying to export or small businesses who do not have access to the "Rolls-Royce" access programmes that larger businesses do to go abroad, and that is one of the major failings of the previous Government's trade policy. I hope that in winding up the Minister will address how we can get small businesses exporting across the world as part of the slew of trade deals that we have just signed.

It is really important that we do not go into conspiracy-theory baiting on backsliding on the EU and what that means. I do not particularly care about chasing views from accounts amplified by Elon Musk: I care about getting good results, jobs and outcomes for my constituents. For far too long, my constituency was denied a voice because it was a safe Conservative seat. It was a seat where Members would go up every six weeks and not really engage with the solid issues. We have a school in my constituency that was built eight-and-a-half years ago that is already structurally unsound. That is a pretty damning failure of the Conservatives. We need to ensure that the system we have inherited works properly.

I urge the Minister and the Government to get to the negotiating table, work through the kinks in the deal, work out what is going wrong and holding businesses back, and approach the issue with a mature, honest and genuine discussion on how we can improve things. As it says on my party membership card, we achieve more by our common endeavour; ultimately, we need that approach. We need an internationalist approach rooted in pragmatism that does not fall victim to some of the appalling cynicism and rather brutal mischaracterisation that we often see from Opposition Members.

5.15 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to contribute to this important debate on the forthcoming UK-EU summit next Monday. As someone who has, I hope the House will concede, followed these matters reasonably closely for a number of years, I will focus on three broad areas. I will say something about the summit itself, make some points about the very worrying suggestion that we are about to waive a large part of our fishing rights, and raise my concerns and those of many others about the potential for so-called dynamic alignment by which the United Kingdom effectively would become a passive rule taker, despite voting peacefully and democratically to leave the European Union in the first place.

Before I do that, I pay a personal tribute to Sir Roy Stone, who has tragically passed away. He was a constituent of mine and lived just a few minutes away from me. I once inadvertently canvassed him some years ago during the local elections. As a highly professional public servant, he was completely inscrutable about his voting intentions. I subsequently worked with him closely for two years in the coalition Whips Office between 2010 and 2012. He was always very patient, especially with me. When I was the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household, he always gave well-informed and canny advice. He believed passionately in the institution of Parliament and the principle of representative democracy, which he served so well. Our thoughts and prayers are with his widow, Dawn, and her family. May he rest in peace and always be warmly remembered.

A crucial summit will take place between the leaders of the UK and the EU in London next month. I recall being told repeatedly during the referendum campaign that if we left the EU, we would be isolated and friendless. All the meetings that have taken place in London recently, including one with virtually every EU leader at Lancaster House regarding the so-called coalition of the willing, show how absolutely ludicrous that assertion was. However, according to multiple media reports, it seems as if this summit could involve some kind of defence pact between ourselves in the UK and the European Union. As I have Front-Bench responsibility for defence, I shall not dwell at length on those matters, but hopefully we will have a lot more to say on them next week once the details of any such agreement have been made public and, crucially, we have had an opportunity to read the small print.

Nevertheless, I am sure that the Government's tactic will be to try to talk almost exclusively about defence as a form of camouflage to mask likely concessions both on our fishing rights and, potentially, relating to our food. When the British people voted democratically to leave the European Union some nine years ago, they did so in order to decide their destiny for themselves. It would be completely against the spirit of the referendum, under the guise of some kind of reset with the EU, to surrender that principle next week. Moreover, after the absolute chaos of the Labour Government's proposed Chagos deal, the Spanish Foreign Minister asserted only yesterday that the UK should make concessions over the sovereignty of Gibraltar as part of our reset at the summit. This is despite the fact that the Gibraltarians themselves voted by a majority of 99% to maintain the current position in their own referendum on the subject, a margin so emphatic that even the SNP would have to accept it.

On fishing, in early 2020 during Boris Johnson's premiership, the United Kingdom agreed what was known as the trade and co-operation agreement between the UK and the EU. While there has been much recent talk of trade deals, including with India and now the US, the TCA was in effect a major, comprehensive trade deal with the EU, negotiated in the context of having left the European Union. For the benefit of the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), who is no longer in his place, that agreement was 1,245 pages long—I know, because I read it. In essence, the TCA guaranteed virtually tariff-free trade between the UK and the EU. Moreover, the fact that we had left the EU, including the customs union, meant that we were able to negotiate unilateral trade deals of our own around the world.

Catherine Fookes: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment.

While we were in the customs union, it was possible to negotiate those agreements only collectively via the auspices of the EU. That is a fundamental difference. It is important to note that by using this critical Brexit freedom, we have been able to negotiate almost 80 independent trade deals with nations around the world since we left the EU, including important Commonwealth partners such as Australia, New Zealand, and now India. We have also joined the trans-Pacific partnership, which materially improves our access to Asian markets worth trillions of dollars. Moreover—

Catherine Fookes: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: If the hon. Lady will let me finish this point, I promise I will do so, but I want to enjoy this bit.

We now have the delightful visage of our ambassador to the United States, one Lord Mandelson, having to acknowledge through metaphorically gritted teeth that we have been able to negotiate a trade deal with the United States—albeit one that is limited in scope—only because we left his beloved European Union. I think our Peter is struggling with that.

I will give way to the hon. Lady, who has been patient.

Catherine Fookes: If those trade deals were such sunlit uplands and such wonderful deals, can the right hon. Member explain to me why our seafood exports to the EU plummeted by 80% since the Brexit deal? Why did that happen on his watch, if that deal was so good?

Mr Francois: The hon. Lady pre-empts me. If she will give me a moment, I will get to fishing very shortly.

The TCA—part 2, heading 5—contains transition arrangements relating to fishing. In essence, the TCA allowed for a period of over five years during which there would be temporary arrangements on access to UK waters by EU fishing fleets. After that, under international maritime arrangements, the United Kingdom would become solely responsible for its own territorial waters, out to 200 nautical miles in some places. As this transition period is now approaching its expiration in 2026, the EU is pushing very hard to maintain its access to our fishing waters and—it would seem—even to expand its access in certain cases, were we naive enough to give in. It would be a complete betrayal of our fishermen if the United Kingdom Labour Government were now to grant major concessions to the EU in what will become indisputably our own sovereign waters once again come 2026.

Ben Coleman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: In a second—the bourgeoisie will have to wait. While our sovereign rights are enshrined in both the TCA itself and wider maritime law, we have yet to see the final details of whatever Faustian pact the Government have agreed with the EU on fishing. However, our fishermen and those of us on the Opposition Benches—although not Reform Members, who are not here—will be watching the Government very closely, and will be highly alert to the prospect of a sell-out on fish.

We then come to veterinary matters and SPS—and ultimately, therefore, food—which would involve the United Kingdom in a process known as dynamic alignment. In essence, this means that if the EU were in any way to change or modify its rules in those areas, we would in turn be compelled to follow the EU, regardless of the wishes of our own Parliament. In other words, we would become a "rule taker" in those areas, even though we have left the European Union. Moreover, it seems that these arrangements would apply throughout the United Kingdom, and in the event of a dispute, that would be arbitrated by the European Court of Justice rather than the UK Supreme Court or even an international tribunal.

Joe Morris: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment.

To have left the EU but submit to becoming a passive rule taker would be entirely contrary to the spirit of the 2016 referendum. That is why, time and again today, no Minister will admit that the Government are going to do it next week.

Ben Coleman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: No.

When Labour talked about a "reset" in its general election manifesto, there was absolutely no reference to rule taking as part of any such accommodation. Labour would therefore be giving away our rights, entirely without the consent of the British people. That must be fiercely resisted and, if necessary, overturned. Moreover, there is the prospect of additional concessions over everything from so-called youth mobility schemes—a euphemism for a return to freedom of movement in another guise—to capitulation over net zero mechanisms and, specifically, the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism, or CBAM, which would make our remaining industries even more internationally uncompetitive than the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband) has achieved to date.

As someone who sat here during the last Parliament—as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) kindly mentioned—and witnessed, night after night and week after week, the then Labour shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, now the Prime Minister, pulling every procedural trick from the depths of Erskine May in order to try to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union at almost any price and despite the referendum, I am in no way surprised that his Government are now attempting this act of capitulation. Our Prime Minister has always been a passionate Europhile; in short, he remains a remainer in his heart of hearts, and he always will.

What the Labour Government are up to—and I say again that they will try to use a defence pact in order to hide it—is beginning a process of gradually taking us back towards and even back into the European Union, if they think they can get away with it. They will never risk another referendum, because in 2016, almost up to the last minute, the polls were showing that remain

[Mr Francois]

might win, but when it came to it, the British people had the temerity to vote to govern themselves, despite the best efforts of the British Establishment and "Project Fear". What they will do is try to take us back in very gradually, via a process of grandmother's footsteps, or, to make another analogy, trying to boil a frog slowly. If they get away with submission next week, despite their manifesto commitments, they will eventually try to take us back into the single market—although, no doubt, under some other name—and if they can get away with that, they will suggest that we might as well rejoin the customs union. They will put the argument to the British people that we are so far back into the blooming thing that we might as well go the whole hog and rejoin it entirely—all without a vote or the consent of the people of the United Kingdom, at any stage, whatsoever.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I just want to draw something out. Dynamic alignment is not a small thing; it is huge, because it is rule taking. Can my right hon. Friend imagine our engaging in any other trade arrangement—with the United States or Australia, for instance, or the trans-Pacific partnership—and being in a position where we had to say, "We will accept your rules and your adjudication"?

Mr Francois: It would be far better to do this via a process of mutual enforcement, of which my right hon. Friend has always been a staunch advocate. When the Minister sums up the debate, we will ask him if he will rule out, very clearly, any prospect of dynamic alignment at the summit next week.

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment.

This is a yes or no question. Perhaps the Minister, at that time—because he would not answer my right hon. Friend's question yesterday—will give us an honest answer to an honest question. In fact, if he wants to do it now I will give way to him. A stunning silence! Well, as he has not the guts to get up, I will give way to his Back Bencher.

Ben Coleman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his nomenclature, and I am most grateful to my Jacobin friend for taking my intervention. I did not want him to finish without having the opportunity to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) put to him. Exports of UK seafood to the European Union have fallen by 80% since Brexit, and there have been lots of new checks, and there is lots of new paperwork and bureaucracy. What does he put that down to? Exports of seafood have collapsed. Does he put that down to Brexit, or to something else?

Mr Francois: People have made market choices, but under the common fisheries policy, we had the absurdity of so-called discards. Our fishermen had to throw fish, many of which were already dead, back into the sea in order to comply with the absurdities of the CFP. Hopefully, we will never return to that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: This is something that I have looked at quite closely. The reason for the collapse is that the United Kingdom is not in the internal market, so we do not give direct applicability and direct effect to EU SPS laws. The EU procedure is to check every consignment of shellfish coming into the EU to see if it complies with EU standards, even though the provisions in EU law on clean rivers, clean beaches and clean water all exist in the United Kingdom, and our provisions are probably of a superior standard to those that apply in much of the EU.

Mr Francois: I defer to my hon. Friend, who is clearly a subject matter expert.

I will conclude, because others want a chance to speak. The Labour Government will go for dynamic alignment. They will sign us up as a passive rule-taker at the behest of the EU, despite the British people voting in 2016 to take back control of their laws. I have absolutely no doubt that if the Labour Government get away with this surrender summit early next week, that is precisely what they will do. It is therefore very important that we alert the British people, and the media that serve them, to exactly what Labour is up to, in an attempt to expose the situation and prevent it getting any worse.

In summary, we will not allow our obsessively Europhile Prime Minister—in this context, our "white flag" man—to surrender our right to govern ourselves. This surrender to the EU has absolutely no democratic mandate, and we will oppose it tooth and nail. If necessary, we will eventually overturn it. Remember what the booklet in the referendum said:

> "This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide."

The British people decided to take back control of their own laws. It is not for Labour to give them away.

5.32 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): This has been an interesting debate, but, to reflect on the unhappy nostalgia of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), it is quite clear that some people are having trouble moving on, as we need to. The summit is happening because of the process agreed by the Conservative party when it was in government. This is not a surrender summit; it is a summit for success for business and business people, and we can only achieve that if we move on in this debate. At one point, I thought Bill Cash was going to stand up and contribute. We are not moving forward as a Parliament, and thinking about the real priorities of the British people and our future relationship with Europe, but other people are prepared to move on and want to do so.

Today, I was pleased to have the chance to meet representatives of the Scottish Advisory Forum on Europe, known as SAFE, at an event that I had the pleasure of co-hosting with the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins). It was an excellent event that reflected all their great work in collaborating with their colleagues and counterparts in Europe. They have been collaborating not just with Governments but with civil society, academia and a whole range of organisations, because that is in their interests. This is about growing the Scottish economy and furthering the interests of the Scottish people.

I pay tribute to my good friend Dr Irene Oldfather, who, as chair of SAFE, has done so much to promote ongoing collaboration with colleagues in Europe. She is a happy constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) and is doing vital work. We should go into these negotiations in a spirit of collaboration, seeking mutual benefit, in order to build a better relationship between the UK and our European Union colleagues.

Stephen Gethins: I put on record my thanks to Irene Oldfather. On a very hard issue—and we have seen today that it is very difficult—she is doing something extraordinarily constructive, and I think we can all learn from her work.

Richard Baker: I could not agree more. On the issue of learning, it is so important, good and welcome to hear that, ahead of this vital summit, the Minister for the constitution and European Union relations, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), attended a meeting with SAFE in Edinburgh yesterday. I understand that it was held at the Scotch Whisky Association, so I hope he enjoyed an excellent afternoon.

This is a good point at which to mention that our trade deal with India is securing £1 billion for the Scottish whisky industry over the next five years, and 1,200 extra jobs. This fantastic deal is in no way frustrated by our pursuing a better deal with the European Union. At that event yesterday, the Minister met young people who look to our future in Europe, rather than seeking to debate the battles of the past. They asked the Minister to find ways to ensure that they have the opportunity to work and study in Europe. I hope he can think inventively about how that can be achieved within the policy framework that the Government have set out, because the previous Erasmus+ scheme was important not only for the young people who participated, but for Scotland's economy. It was worth £340 million annually, delivering £7 in value for every £1 invested.

Economic growth is rightly the priority for this Government. If they changed course in these negotiations in the way proposed by the Opposition, that would not be putting the national interests first. The Minister and his colleagues should proceed with the vital work that they have taken forward with their European counterparts ahead of the summit. That is the right thing to do for economic growth and in our national interests.

The Government's approach, which is absolutely essential, recognises the EU's status as our biggest trading partner. It accounts for 41% of our exports and 51% of our imports. I am encouraged to hear from the Minister that issues that are vital to growth in my constituency of Glenrothes and Mid Fife—including closer co-operation on energy policy, which I hope may include increasing co-operation with the North Seas Energy Co-operation—are the issues on the agenda next week.

I hope that there will be measures that benefit small businesses in my constituency, particularly in the creative sector. Rightly, at the election, our party committed to making it easier for musicians to tour in Europe. That is vital for the future of our brilliant creative sector in Scotland, and in the UK, and I hope that we can make progress in this area.

Of course, we have to respect the decision of the Brexit referendum. However, while we should not simply repeat the debate on Brexit in this House, as we seem to, neither should we repeat the mistakes of the previous Government, who failed to ensure that our new relationship with the European Union created the right environment for trade and co-operation in key areas of policy. This Government have already made significant progress on resetting the UK's relationship with the European Union in our national interests, and particularly in line with this Government's policy on economic growth.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend has covered a range of groups—he mentioned farmers, businesses, young people and the creative sector—but is it not the truth that all these groups are simply looking for practical measures that the Government can take to improve their lot, and to improve our relationship with Europe? That could involve cutting red tape, unlocking energy and deepening security co-operation, without being to the detriment of the previous agreement.

Richard Baker: I could not agree more. This will absolutely be in line with previous agreements. In our new relationship with Europe, we are doing far better than the previous Government, who agreed very poor deals, which resulted in economic decline; we could have achieved more with a different approach.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to go further, faster, on this policy area and Government priority. I urge him not to be deflected by Opposition Members who wish to fight the battles of the past. The Government are right to seek a better relationship with Europe, and to be ready for the opportunities, and indeed the tests, that lie ahead for our continent.

5.39 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In human affairs, there is a persistent fascination with novelty. It is curious that people clamour for what is different—for the other, whatever that other might look like. It is this fascination that leads to the similar interest in—indeed, preoccupation with—internationalism, even to the point where that means giving up power to someone beyond these shores. It is a damaging preoccupation. At its most curious, it leads to the peculiarity of—I am sorry the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) is not here, because he made a remarkably articulate speech, as I told him afterwards—a representative of a nationalist party making the case against nationalism, and a Member who believes in sovereignty making the argument that sovereignty does not really matter, although he did qualify that by saying that sovereignty in Scotland meant something different. He and I will no doubt have an opportunity to debate that at some length in future.

That fascination fuelled the sentiment that, after the referendum, pervaded the Labour Benches and the Liberals; it is a matter of record that I do not have a liberal bone in my body of any kind, whether socially, culturally, politically or economically, and I shall make the case against free trade in a few moments. As a result of that fascination, the cadre of people who populate a good deal of the establishment—the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) will know this, because a lot of the establishment live in his constituency; it is not surprising that they picked one of their own,

[Sir John Hayes]

really—could not bear to come to terms with the result of the referendum. For the people had spoken! And of course, the people's will directly contradicted the assumptions—the presumptions—of that establishment, which they had foisted on the people for donkeys' years.

I do not say, by the way, that all the guilt lies on the other side of the Chamber. This began with Harold Macmillan, and then was carried on by Ted Heath, who sold out our fishermen. It went on and on; the gallery of villains is almost endless. One thinks of Roy Jenkins. There were noble exceptions, including Labour's Peter Shore, and Tony Benn, who made the case for national self-government in what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) told me was one of the best speeches he has heard in this Chamber in his years here. On our side, there were noble exceptions, too. Enoch Powell stands proud among those, but there were many others. *[Interruption.]* There was Michael Foot, of course, on the other side. I will not go into the whole list, Madam Deputy Speaker, just in case you thought I was going to. I was thinking of our lamented friend Sir Bill Cash, who gave such great service. He was seen as a bit of an outsider for the great bulk of his career, and then, in the last part of it, was proved right. My goodness, what is better than that in politics? They say all political careers end in failure, but Bill Cash's didn't; his political career ended in success.

Mr Francois: It has not ended yet. Sir Bill is a sprightly 83, and he has been texting some of us throughout the debate. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that Sir Bill's great success was the sovereignty clause, which finally said, after years of campaigning, that this Parliament is sovereign? That is on the statute book because of Bill.

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; Sir Bill's political career has not ended; his parliamentary one has. I can, like my right hon. Friend, acknowledge that Sir Bill has texted me this afternoon, along with no doubt many others—*[Interruption.]*—including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, I just gathered. This tension—between the will of the people as expressed in the 2016 referendum, and the prevailing assumptions of what I described earlier as the liberal establishment—underpins this debate.

In the spirit of generosity, which I tend to employ—there are exceptions, by the way; Members can intervene on me, if they like—I note that there are those on the Government Benches, such as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), who acknowledge, albeit grudgingly, that the referendum result cannot be reversed and that we cannot go back into the EU. That was not what those people said immediately after the referendum, of course. They fought hard for ages to try to frustrate the outcome. They used every parliamentary technique they could conjure, as well as extra-parliamentary techniques, including well-funded legal cases, to try to derail Brexit.

The scepticism personified by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who said she was doubtful about the Government's intent, is well founded. I know that the Minister will want to reassure us, when he rises at the end of the debate, that that scepticism—in his case, at least—will not prove to be a prediction of what might happen next. Scepticism is well founded, though, because of the history. It was a Labour politician who said, "You don't need a crystal ball when you've got the record book"—Aneurin Bevan, of course. We have the record book when it comes to Labour, and, worse still, when it comes to the Liberal Democrats.

I hope the Minister will be crystal clear, as he has been invited to be throughout the debate, on dynamic alignment, or, as I think it would be better described, dynamic realignment: realigning our relationship with the EU. Such alignment would bring us closer not to our friends and neighbours in Europe—of course, co-operation and collaboration is a natural part of mature policies—but to the EU, in terms of governance, regulation, law, interference in our affairs and, crucially, jurisdiction. It is the exercise of authority that we are really debating here—not the ability or, indeed, the willingness to share, but the danger of succumbing to a power that takes authority further and further from the British people.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) talked about some of the challenges the world faces and the answers to those global challenges. He was right to do so, by the way; I thought the first half of his speech was very good, although it got worse as it went on. The answer to those challenges is not to become more globalist or to give in to the forces he described that exert power in an unaccountable way, but to bring power back to the people.

When those of us who advocated Brexit spoke of taking back control, we did so partly because we wanted power to be vested in this Parliament, which is accountable to the people whom that power affects. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, are almost a model for this, and others would do well to follow your model. We are answerable to and known by our constituents; they understand that we make decisions on their behalf. New Members of the House will be coming to terms with what that means and its relentlessness. I do not mind it myself, but I can see how it could wear down souls less forceful and robust than me. It is that constant interaction with our constituents that is the lifeblood of democracy.

Whoever knew who their Member of the European Parliament was? I could not remember who the Tories were, let alone the Members from the other parties. People certainly did not enjoy that kind of intimate relationship and sense of mutual ownership when we were members of the EU. We feel as though we own our constituencies and they feel as though they own us, and quite right too. *[Interruption.]* I am being chided, Madam Deputy Speaker. I first heard of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) when he arrived here—I never knew who he was before then. I say that without disrespect.

Sir Ashley Fox: My right hon. Friend is correct. While I was in the European Parliament, opinion poll research was conducted into whether people could name their Member of the European Parliament, and only 2% of British people could name any Member of the European Parliament—regrettably, it was not me.

Sir John Hayes: It is typical of my hon. Friend's humility and good humour that he should acknowledge that in the Chamber in such an open and frank way, and I pay tribute to him for it.

The scepticism that I have described and tried to articulate takes the form of real doubts about what realignment will really mean. Let me just deal with three or four specifics. I spoke earlier in an intervention about security and defence. Of course, it is right that we have a continuing relationship with our neighbours in those terms. We do work with the agencies across Europe, but the critical security relationship we enjoy is with the Five Eyes countries—by the way, we also enjoy relations with many other countries in the world outside the Five Eyes and Europe—and it is vital that we reinforce that relationship. That, of course, overlaps with our commitment to NATO and defence.

There may be some virtues in information sharing—indeed, there certainly are virtues in various kinds of co-operation—but anything that undermines the sovereignty of that security and defence alliance seems to be highly questionable and also risky, which is worse.

Let me turn now to free movement. Although the referendum was not all about immigration, immigration was perhaps the most pressing and salient matter during those times. People resented and resisted free movement and they wanted to bring it to an end. For many, the term "take back control" epitomised the need to control our borders—to decide who came here and who did not. Although it may be understandable that people want to wax lyrical about young people being able to travel across the continent, what they say less enthusiastically, or do not say at all, is that young people from the entire continent will want to travel here. Until we know the terms of that, that could easily mean those people competing with Britons for scarce jobs.

We have large numbers of young people not in education, employment or training. No Government have dealt with that satisfactorily. I started speaking about this more than 20 years ago. Previous Labour Governments and, indeed, Conservative Governments did not really grasp that nettle as firmly as they should have done. Disturbingly, the trend is upwards, and so I do not want people in my country to have to compete for education and training places and for other opportunities with possibly tens of thousands of people who have entered the country by those means. There will be suspicions that it is the beginning of a return to free movement.

What did mass immigration do? The Prime Minister was right about this yesterday. He is a very late convert, but the Bible says that we must welcome all converts with enthusiasm. What mass immigration did was to displace investment in recruitment, training and retention of workers and in automation and improving workplaces, making us ever more dependent on low-skilled labour. It had the effect of stultifying the economy. Any suggestion that we may return to that will inhibit—perhaps ruin—the Government's intention of improving productivity. If we really want to deal with productivity, we have to create a high-tech, high-skilled economy. I am fearful that that broader consideration will not necessarily hold sway when we get into negotiations with the EU on this issue of some relaxation of the bar on free movement, which was brought by the referendum.

Mindful that there are enthusiastic, insightful and bright colleagues on all sides of the House, but mainly on the Conservative side, who want to contribute to the debate, I will draw my remarks to a close. I can hear colleagues saying, "No, go on", but I am going to resist those overtures and finish with this thought: C.S. Lewis said, "We are what we think we are". I think we are a proud, independent nation that has made a disproportionate contribution as part of western civilisation to world history. I think that our past is noble and should give us a sense of achievement and pride. I do not buy the self-loathing that seems to have taken hold with too much of the very establishment that I derided earlier.

Ben Coleman: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will happily give way—let us see whether the hon. Member is a self-loathing individual.

Ben Coleman: I trust that I am not. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman appreciated when I said earlier how excited I was for the prospects ahead of us. I want to thank him for identifying me a couple of times and associating me with my constituents, which I am certainly proud of. I also thank the right hon. Gentleman and a number of his colleagues for making me feel like I have been in this place not for 10 months but for 10 years, and for giving me the privilege of seeing the Brexit debate live, writ large again. It is a rare opportunity that I did not know I would get as a Member of this House, and I am most grateful.

Sir John Hayes: I invite the hon. Gentleman to look at it through this prism: for all intents and purposes, I am Brexit, I stand for Brexit: I am a patriot, proud of my working-class origins; I am determined to do my best for my constituents and my country; and I am driven by a combination of the national interest and the common good. That was the spirit that inspired Brexit. It inspired those of us who campaigned for it, and those who voted for it, which 75% of my constituents in South Holland and the Deepings did. I am a bit resentful that Boston and Skegness next door had an even higher percentage, but it was only by 1%.

As I said, C.S. Lewis said that we are what we think we are. I think that we are a proud country who can stand in the world, in collaboration with other nations, of course, but free and sovereign. Labour cannot have it both ways. It cannot say that we have done a great deal with India because we did not have to kowtow to the EU and that we have done a great deal with the US because we escaped the clutches of the EU, while at the same time saying that we want to creep back in and for them to have more say in any future deals we might do.

Let me end with the words of one of my political heroes, Joseph Chamberlain, who understood that to protect our economy we need to protect the jobs, industry and enterprise that are part of it and not to give in to the free trade liberals. He said:

"a democratic Government, resting on the confidence and support of the whole nation, and not on the favour of any limited class, would be very strong. It would know how to make itself respected, and how to maintain the obligations and the honour of the country."

No Member of this House should do less than that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am now instating an immediate three-minute time limit. I call Luke Charters.

5.58 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Next Monday is a really important day, as the UK rebuilds our relationship with Europe. This is a big issue for my constituents, because they were failed for far too long.

Let me be clear: I cannot believe that the Conservatives think that they have the credibility to run an Opposition day debate on this topic. The absolute cheek of them is off the scale. They come in here to talk down the merits of the youth mobility scheme—an arrangement that we already have with many non-EU countries. What they are really doing is demonstrating yet again a prehistoric approach to young people across this country. It is no wonder that support for them among that age group is virtually extinct. They want to deny a reset that will benefit our national security, food security and economic security with our biggest and most proximate trading bloc.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent, powerful speech. Does he agree that the summit is not about giving away power, but about working with our European neighbours in our mutual interests, of which there are many?

Mr Charters: My hon. Friend is spot on. That is why the Conservative party is completely irresponsible. Conservative Members are so out of step with reality that I may as well be asking them to take advice from the stone age. They said that they wanted to take back control once upon a time, but the reality is that over the last eight years they completely lost control of our economy, of our borders and of our future. They do not want the pragmatic, sensible summit next week that will be focused on the future, not the past—a far cry from the chaos and Conservative circus they presided over.

Let me move on to something we should all be welcoming: a youth mobility scheme. It is important that we strike the right balance with that, just like we have with other countries we already share deals with. But unlike Conservative Members, who focus on themselves rather than the public, let us talk about how such a scheme would matter to ordinary people. Nobody would want an 18-year-old at the start of their adult life, eager to explore the world, to be limited to just 90 days in Europe. It is natural for young people to swap Bishopthorpe in my constituency for Barcelona for a year or so, or Copmanthorpe for Copenhagen.

As a parent in York, I would love for my children to have the privilege to enjoy an experience like the youth mobility scheme: an opportunity that can open minds and broaden horizons. Research from the University of Oxford has shown that mobility schemes lead to returnees who launch their own enterprises, start social ventures, reform hospital practices and launch tech start-ups—that sounds good to me.

A really important topic that we must address in the forthcoming summit is defence.

Ben Coleman: Before we leave young people, Opposition Members have said that we are not doing enough for our young people and that a scheme would cause problems. Does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that yesterday the Prime Minister said that we must put British young people at the front of the queue for skills and training? The Government have already committed £625 million for training up 60,000 young engineers, chippies and brickies—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order.

Mr Charters: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. A youth mobility scheme could be sensible and pragmatic and lead to opportunities across the continent.

Let me briefly touch on defence. Last week, I held a Westminster Hall debate about the benefits of a multilateral defence bank. I was pleased to have with me the founder of the Defence, Security and Resilience bank, Rob Murray, who is an inspirational ex-Army officer. I really believe that the UK could anchor a multilateral defence bank at the heart of any future defence pact with Europe. That is the single most transformative lever that the Government could pull to fortify our collective security, acting as an industrial deterrent to Russia. I would welcome my hon. Friend the Minister thinking about that running into next week.

Finally, I will touch on holidays. Over the next few months, hard-working families across the country will travel to airports up and down the UK to go away for some hard-earned summer sun. Since leaving the EU, many of us have landed at a foreign airport to see a huge queue and waited with envy as others pass straight through. I would really welcome it if, as a small gesture to give back to the grafters of this country, we could look at a new arrangement with the EU to ease airport congestion.

Dr Mullan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Charters: I will not, because we are on a three-minute limit for speeches. Perhaps the hon. Member does not want to give back to the grafters of this country, but I think we should be helping hard-working Brits get through to the gates and straight to their sunbeds. Could we have some co-operation with the EU on airport congestion?

There is lots that I could talk about, but I will leave it there. This is about moving on pragmatically and securing our future, just as we have recently with India and the US.

6.4 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Next week, the EU and the UK will meet in London for a much vaunted reset of our post-Brexit relationship. If that delivers real benefits for our country, that is great—let us hear them—but forgive me, because I am a doubter.

I have learned two lessons from my miserable direct experience of how Labour operates. First, do not trust the Prime Minister. Between 2017 and 2019, I and others watched him, as the shadow Brexit Secretary, twist every parliamentary rule to block what the British people voted for. That was not principled opposition; it was sabotage. In so doing, he connived to empower Brussels in a way that directly and actively undermined our national negotiating position. He was not alone in that endeavour, but it was a spectacle that disgraced this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I respectfully suggest to the hon. Lady that she needs to be very careful in the language that she chooses to use about the Prime Minister?

Julia Lopez: I was deliberately careful to adhere to the rules of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I hope my intent was clear.

Let me be clear. I do not think that the Prime Minister is a straight dealer. He says what suits him, poses as a man of decency and hopes—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest the hon. Lady withdraw her comment, in which she has accused the Prime Minister of not being straight.

Julia Lopez: If that is outside the boundaries of what is acceptable, I will withdraw the comment.

My second lesson is that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses. We have already seen it in this Parliament, from the Chagos islands to the backroom deals with the unions. It is ideological naivety dressed up as serious and sober diplomacy. Labour thinks that signing a deal is the same as securing a good one. It is not, and all that will become clear.

Let us remind ourselves that Brexit was never a rejection of Europe and its people. It was a demand for democratic control over our laws, our borders, our trade and our future.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The hon. Lady is a great fan of honesty in this Chamber, so I am sure that she will give me an honest answer. One way of understanding Brexit is that it replaced a circular flow of people with a one-way flow of people. Does she think that Brexit increased or decreased migration into this country?

Julia Lopez: Brexit allowed us to introduce a points-based system and that is what we did. I will accept that mistakes were made in the introduction of that points-based system, but the key is that we can tweak and tune that to accommodate the needs of our economy and those of the people we represent.

The British people could feel the world changing around them and they knew instinctively that the UK needed to be nimbler, faster and more accountable in responding to those currents, be they the movement of people or the regulation of businesses. We will not let it be said that there have been no Brexit benefits, because that is simply not true.

For a start, we no longer hand between £11 billion and £12 billion a year net to Brussels. We have secured trade deals, including from the fast-growing comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership nations. Whatever we think about last week's US-UK tariff deal, we are not paying the same prohibitive trade taxes as the EU. We are setting our own course in areas such as AI, financial services and agritech. Those are not abstract wins or nostalgic impulses; they are real opportunities for a modern, outward-facing Britain.

If next week's summit can ease practical frictions, that is all well and good. I want what works for British people. However, I am worried that Labour does not know what it wants, only that it wants a deal. I am worried it does not grasp what the EU will demand in return. And I am worried that Labour thinks slick comms matter more than real outcomes for the British people.

Today, we lay down a clear marker. On immigration, there should be no youth mobility scheme. It might sound harmless, but let us not be naive and have partial free movement by stealth. On defence and regulation, we want no dynamic alignment, and I am fascinated by the Minister's refusal to say anything further on that matter. If Labour really thinks it has a great deal, there is a simple thing it could do, which is to bring that deal back to this House for a vote.

6.8 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): We are here to look forward to the UK-EU summit next week and not to relive the past; although, listening to today's debate, I feel like I have gone back about 10 years. As we look forward, it is important that we all, in this place, do what we can to make the lives of people across the UK better. That is our job.

Even though the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), who is no longer in his place, would probably not agree, times change, as do opinions. We know that many people—even some of those who might have voted for it—now realise that Brexit has damaged our economy and our country. We only need to compare the result of the election in 2015 with the result last year for the Conservative party to see that opinions can change quite drastically.

Looking forward to the summit next week, I would like to focus on reality, not rhetoric. The former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said in May 2016: "We think that leaving the single market would weaken our economy and hurt jobs, trade and investment". That is exactly what we have seen: an act of economic self-harm that no other country is dreaming of. Research by Aston University has shown that exports to the EU have fallen by 27% since Brexit, and the Office for Budget Responsibility has projected a long-term reduction in GDP of 4% relative to remaining in the EU. In contrast, the great Brexit benefit of the Australia trade deal negotiated by the Conservatives was projected to increase UK GDP by just 0.08%, and the Government's new India trade deal, while welcome, is estimated to add only 0.1% to GDP.

Neither of those trade deals even come close to touching the sides of what we have lost through Brexit, which is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to approach next week's summit with ambition and boldness and to agree a road map and a timeline for the creation of a new, bespoke UK-EU customs union to free up the red tape that is strangling our businesses. We have had lots of examples. I could give the House many from my constituency, but in the interest of time I will move on.

I also want to see us agree a youth mobility scheme as part of next week's summit. It would be a win-win for young people and deliver a boost for our economy. Yes, we do want to see young people coming over here. I no longer want to see the pubs in my constituency closed two days a week because they cannot get the staff. I do not want to see cafés closing down because there are not enough young people to staff the hospitality business. It is estimated that 120,000 young people have left the

[Caroline Voaden]

hospitality industry since Brexit. We need progress. We need to improve the terrible deal that was done by the Conservatives, so I hope the Government will be bold, forget this rhetoric and bluster and sign a deal that we can all celebrate across this House.

6.11 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am grateful to be able speak in this Opposition day debate ahead of next week's UK-EU summit. I campaigned for, believed in and continue to believe in the promise of Brexit. At its core, Brexit was a vote for the importance of national democracy, a vote for national sovereignty and a vote against regionalisation and government by bureaucrats. I believe strongly in international co-operation, but I do not believe in institutionalisation. I do not believe that decision making gets better in aggregate. My experience has taught me that it only gets worse. It gets more remote, less well informed and riddled with compromises that barely satisfy anyone and please no one. I continue to believe that the UK—its people and its Government—deciding its own future, not locked into continental bureaucracy, provides the best possible future for us.

Behind all the carefully choreographed language from Ministers about resets, there is one inescapable truth: this Labour Government risk laying the groundwork and taking the first steps to betraying the full promise of Brexit. That should not be any surprise, given that they are led by a man who campaigned for the leadership of the Labour party on the basis of restoring freedom of movement. He supported a second referendum and he voted against Brexit 48 times. We on this side of the House are not prepared to watch this slow train wreck in silence.

Many issues have been raised by many Members, but I want to raise just two that are of particular importance. First, on the youth mobility scheme, the fundamental issues that made freedom of movement so unpopular would remain at the core of any youth mobility scheme. The level of economic disparity across EU member states is fundamentally incompatible with the scheme becoming anything other than yet another route for mass low-skilled migration, at a time when the Government tell us they want to drive that down.

Secondly, there can be no dynamic EU rule taking or ECJ oversight. Any agreement on food standards, services or carbon trading must not come at the price of automatic alignment. We did not leave the EU to find ourselves bound to it in everything but name. We must demand mutual recognition and independent dispute resolution, and that is the only thing we should accept. That would reflect a relationship of mutual respect. These are not unreasonable demands. They are the bare minimum that any sovereign state would expect when engaging in talks with a foreign bloc.

The United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, whether the Prime Minister and his Ministers like it or not. Is it any wonder that they are looking for answers internationally when we look at their domestic picture? They are restricting winter fuel payments, inflation is still biting us, business confidence is shaken, working families are being hammered with job-destroying taxes, and growth is stalling. We must not allow this to serve as a diplomatic distraction from their domestic failure. We will not allow Labour to turn a reset into a roll-back, and any future Conservative Government will not be bound by any agreement that breaches these clear red lines. We will not allow Brussels to disguise control as co-operation, and we will not let the democratic choice of the British people be eroded by stealth.

Brexit was not a pause; it was a pivot. It was a huge opportunity for our country, and I believe that the benefits will accrue for decades to come. The Government might be able to hide their true intentions this week but they will not be able to hide them forever, and we will be here to make sure that the British people know what they really believe in. It is not the freedom and sovereignty of Brexit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With regret, it may not be possible for all Members to speak in the debate, even with this time limit.

6.14 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): No one representing Northern Ireland wishes more than I do for a proper reset of the relationship with Europe. To be a proper reset, however, it must acknowledge and respect the fundamental concept of international agreements: that the agreeing parties respect the territorial integrity of each other. That is the fundamental flaw and failing of the present arrangements.

There is not, and there was not under the last Government, a requirement for the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom to be respected. That is how and why it came to be that, in my part of the United Kingdom, in 300 areas of law we are subject not to the laws of this House but to those of a foreign Parliament. The EU insisted, and alas the British Government accepted, that Northern Ireland should be under its customs code, which treats GB as a foreign country and Northern Ireland as EU territory, and that we should be in its single market and subject to all its laws. In that, we had the most dramatic refusal and repudiation of that fundamental concept of mutual acknowledgment of territorial integrity. Unless and until that is addressed in a reset, we will never have a fair deal with Europe, and that is what I would dearly like to see.

When I hear talk about dynamic alignment, it is not academic for me; we experience it every day of the week. We experience the indignity of being subject to laws that we do not make and cannot change. We are subject to the indignity of the other part of this United Kingdom being described as a foreign country whose goods must be checked coming through an international EU customs border.

If the Government are going to do an SPS deal with Europe, it inevitably falls, as it has in Northern Ireland, that we submit to the yoke of dynamic alignment with EU rules. That is the price that the EU extracted for Northern Ireland. It is the price it will extract for an SPS deal with Great Britain. Therefore, that is not the way forward. The way forward is to retrieve sovereignty over all of this country and to retrieve respect for territorial integrity.

6.17 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): In mid-March, in my role as a vice chair of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, I formed part of

the delegation that headed out to Brussels for the assembly meeting ahead of the 19 May summit meeting. While it was a convivial affair, I came away with great concerns about the tone of the conversations and contributions made by Labour Members. While the Prime Minister is on the record as saying, as part of his red lines, that there would be no return to freedom of movement and no rejoining of the customs union or the single market, the assembly would not allow me to include such a statement in the committee's recommendations that were published. If, as was said, it was implicit, surely it is not controversial to include it as a statement of fact. The tone of the conversations and debates indicated a different direction. The red lines seemed to be drawn in disappearing ink.

It very much felt that the leadership and the Members were singing from different hymn sheets, or perhaps the Members belie the Government's true intentions. If that is the case, the Government should be much clearer with the British public and those in this House about what they are trying to achieve. Going into the summit, the conspiracy of silence cannot continue.

Brexit at its heart was about restoring powers to Britain, allowing us sovereignty. Despite the result of the referendum, the goal of Labour Members seems to be to get ever closer to the EU again. Talk of youth opportunities seems innocuous, but Labour Members must explain their terms and be realistic about what that would mean for opening up free movement of people between the European Union and the UK via the back door.

We must also be alert to the trade-offs in this debate. I fear that, to secure a veterinary agreement, we will concede on dynamic alignment. The Minister has another opportunity to intervene, should he so wish. Silence once again. I also fear that our fisheries, which were not mentioned once in the Labour manifesto, may be the next sacrificial lamb.

The PPA recommendation, which the Conservatives dissented to on the whole, states that the assembly would provide

"a signal at or before the Summit that a fair deal on fisheries will be reached, building on current arrangements",

but what does "a fair deal" mean to this Government? If, as a condition for getting an SPS agreement, the French insist on a multi-year agreement that naturally shifts the favour further towards their industry and our Government agree, they will have harmed another community. First, they attack our farmers; now they attack our fishermen.

At the PPA meeting, members said that everyone should be clear that this Labour Government are clear in their ambition to reset the relationship with the EU, but I offer a word of warning: we must not betray our fishermen and risk our food security in doing so.

6.20 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I could speak about so many aspects of the Brexit renegotiation that the Government are entering into—Conservative Members in particular have spoken a lot about those issues—but I wish to focus on fishing and farming.

It is always a worry when this Government go into bat in a negotiation, because when Labour negotiates, Britain invariably loses. The current agreement with the EU on fisheries should be a baseline, and preferably a springboard, so that if the Government negotiate, they improve on that deal. That was always the intention. What is a negotiation if we go into it with a mind to sell out and come away with a worse deal? That is what is on the mind of UK fishing communities right now. When my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) asked the Prime Minister only last week to rule out giving away sovereign British waters to the EU, he refused to do so. The Minister may intervene on me to give our fishing communities the reassurance that the Government will not sell out to the EU on our sovereign waters.

We know what the French want: to send their trawlers closer inshore to our fishing waters in order to catch fish from UK waters and take them back to the EU and sell them. We are already in a situation whereby Dutch trawlers—4,000 tonne vessels—travel up and down the English channel trawling the bottom of the ocean. They take a huge bycatch of fish, including bass, right in front of small British vessels—such as those fishing out of the Isle of Wight, where my constituency is—that have a set of rules restricting their bass catch. They have to watch the Dutch boats scrape those fish up by accident and take them home.

If the Government enter a negotiation, the current arrangement for fishermen must be a baseline. They must improve on the deal and absolutely rule out any concessions to the French and the EU on sovereignty over British territorial waters.

6.23 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome the Government's stated aim of negotiating a closer trading relationship with the European Union—I wish the Minister well—but given this Government's record of negotiating international agreements, I worry about what the Prime Minister will agree on our behalf. We have seen his weakness in the negotiations on the Chagos islands. The Government intend to give away the sovereignty of a territory that we already own and then pay billions of pounds to lease it back. I can assure the Minister that when he comes to negotiate the details with the European Commission, he will find it a great deal tougher to deal with than the Government of Mauritius.

The Government say that the agreement will improve growth in our economy, and that is commendable, but we on the Conservative Benches would take that assurance far more seriously if the Government had not spent the last 10 months making life more difficult for British business. The Employment Rights Bill will increase costs to businesses by £5 billion a year, borne mostly by small and medium-sized enterprises, and the £25 billion national insurance jobs tax will make it more expensive to employ people—unless, of course, it is an Indian business importing workers from India, because then it will benefit from the new trade deal negotiated by the Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

A closer trading relationship with the EU would be very welcome. Trade frictions could be diminished easily. An agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary measures could be reached were the EU and the UK to recognise each other's standards. Our standards are already the same as, or higher than, the EU's, and the EU knows this. But the EU has no intention of doing that. It intends

[Sir Ashley Fox]

to wait until the UK has a Government who will agree to its rules, agree to the dynamic alignment of those rules and then agree that the Court of Justice of the European Union is the final arbiter of those rules.

It seems that the EU's patience has been rewarded, because when I asked the Minister earlier to clarify what approach he intended to take, answer came there none. It is clear that this Government intend to sign us up to EU rules, over which this House will have no say. When those rules are changed by the EU, Britain will simply have to follow. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that this is the beginning of a process to bring the United Kingdom within the regulatory control of the EU, and thereafter, perhaps an attempt by the Labour party to make us join the EU.

6.26 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): There has been an astonishing lack of transparency by the Government ahead of the dud deal that they look set to agree next week, and that was personified by the Paymaster General, who refused to engage on any of the substantive issues. Briefings suggest that the Government are preparing to sign a deal that pulls the UK back into the EU's regulatory and political orbit. Anyone listening to the debate will have heard Ministers repeatedly refuse to deny that the Government are preparing to make the UK a rule taker once again.

One of the frustrations when we were negotiating the trade and co-operation agreement was that the EU refused to back a veterinary agreement based on regulatory equivalence. Given our record and our commitment to high SPS standards, that was clearly the common-sense approach, but the EU simply refused to engage. Instead, it has imposed higher costs and regulations, which fall on businesses and consumers. Now, extraordinarily, it seems that this Government are simply going to roll over and concede that the UK will have to follow EU rules over which it has no say, and bring back ECJ jurisdiction. That is not necessary, desirable or consistent with a democratic vote to leave the EU and restore our sovereignty. Once again, let us see whether the Minister will rule it out when he speaks.

Having spent three years in the Ministry of Defence advising the then Defence Secretary, I am concerned at the approach the Government are looking to take on defence and security. NATO is the cornerstone of our defence, and the alliance should be our focus, yet a leak reveals that the deal will pull the UK into the EU's common security and defence policy, duplicating many of the functions and institutions of NATO—and for what? The deal does not even guarantee British firms access to the rearmament fund. Instead, that will be subject to future separate negotiations, and the UK will have to pay; how much and on what terms is completely unclear. It is very disappointing, given the need to defend our continent, that some in the EU want to link access to the defence programme to fishing rights. *[Interruption.]* France, indeed. Once again, the Government have simply rolled over.

I know from my time in the Cabinet Office and No. 10 working on Brexit issues that the EU was determined to be inflexible from the start. Michel Barnier, the negotiator, embodied that rigidness. Unlike the man from Del Monte, he delighted in saying no. Improvements to the TCA can be made. The agreement provides for that precisely and deliberately in the review mechanism. To get trade flowing, there are easements that the EU could easily agree to, benefiting businesses and consumers. Instead of pursuing those from a position of principle, this Government are negotiating a backroom deal and look set to do so badly and undermine our national interest.

6.29 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I start by paying a small tribute to the Government because just last week they passed secondary legislation, albeit made possible by the Conservatives' groundbreaking Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, that will mean more resilient crops, further food choices and enhanced food security. Although it might pain some of them, Labour Members have to admit they are making some use of the hard-won Brexit freedoms secured by the Conservatives. Why would we give them away? The example I have used might seem somewhat niche, but this is exactly what a modern industrial strategy focused on technology, productivity and the future looks like, and in doing this, we have a head start on the continent, which is now fumbling to produce regulation of its own in this area.

We should be going further still. Gene editing has the power to reduce the impact of animal disease and stop pandemics in their tracks. Researchers at Imperial College London and the Roslin Institute, Edinburgh, are now close to making breakthroughs on bird flu-resistant poultry using gene editing. The Government must introduce secondary legislation for farmed animals, as they have done for plants.

I visited Imperial's Silwood campus in my constituency. The students there are doing incredible things. When they make breakthroughs, our regulatory framework should allow us to nimbly make use of them, but there is a very real risk that with next week's reset the Government could kill the progress with the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement they are negotiating.

Companies at the forefront of the agricultural industry have raised concerns about this reset, and I know that my colleagues, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the all-party group on science and technology in agriculture have done the same. This is a rare—and much needed as those on the Government Benches hammer our farmers—competitive unique selling point for British agriculture. Reports suggest that this Government will make concessions on SPS to give them more bartering power on other issues, setting a precedent for the wider agricultural relationship with the EU, bending over backwards for an establishment that the British people voted to reject. We would also be signing up to rules we have no power to influence. There were good reasons to leave the EU and good reasons to stay in the EU, and reasonable people could and did disagree, but there is no good reason to leave and opt into rules over which we have no say. That is the worst of both worlds.

Under Switzerland's agreement with the EU, it must align with almost all the EU's food safety demands and replicate any further regulatory changes made in the future. That agreement may well be in the best interests

of the Swiss but it would not work for Britain. Every time we want to diverge in a way that could benefit the British people, we would have to supplicate to those in Brussels once again. Carve-outs are possible, but we all know what tends to happen when the Prime Minister negotiates. When Labour negotiates, Britain loses. A reset deal with a deep SPS agreement would be short-sighted, perhaps offering a quick boost in the near term but taking the wind from the sails of longer term, game-changing investment that is starting to flow in.

We need to maintain a competitive advantage to supercharge investment in areas like the Thames valley, where we have a world-leading life sciences sector. So I warn the Government not to chain Britain to the economic anchor of the EU and the dead hand of its precautionary principle regulators, especially when last week's secondary legislation on precision breeding is such a clear example of what regulatory autonomy for an innovative UK could do for us.

6.33 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and to highlight the impact of the botched Brexit deal on businesses in my constituency, including pharmacies and the local hospitality industry.

Stuart Yalden, the managing director of GW Martin, a small and medium-sized enterprise in engineering in my constituency, has raised concerns over the additional costs and regulatory requirements the business now faces when trading with the EU. In one recent case it exported a small volume of products to a customer in France worth around £5,000 but the combined cost of paperwork, export licences and transport came to £2,500. This is not a sustainable way to trade. To reassure my constituents, I hope that the Minister will give this important matter some consideration, and that he will raise these issues next week.

We cannot ignore the opportunities that have been taken away from young people for no good reason and with no benefit to anyone. I have listened to arguments from Conservative Members, but I still cannot understand why anyone would want to stop young people from experiencing all that the world has to offer. I hope the Minister will agree with me that giving young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the opportunity and freedom to live, study and work in Europe with a youth mobility scheme would be hugely beneficial to them and to the country. We must also recognise the negative impact that Brexit has had on our creative sector. We need urgent action to renegotiate touring arrangements with the EU, ensuring that British artists can showcase their talent abroad without excessive red tape.

The Liberal Democrats have set out a clear road map to reset UK-EU relations. We must start by restoring trust, rebuilding co-operation in key areas such as research, climate policy and security and removing the barriers that have been strangling our economy. It is time to take meaningful steps to repair our relationship with Europe and restore the prosperity that our country so desperately needs. I sincerely hope that the Government will use the EU-UK summit to turn a page on the chaos of the last five years.

6.35 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Dirprwy Llefarydd. The people of Wales have been let down by those who promised that Brexit would lead to a brighter future; instead, it has caused huge damage right across our communities and economy. The hard Brexit pursued by the previous UK Government has cost the Welsh economy up to £4 billion and reduced the value of Welsh exports by up to £1.1 billion, and post-Brexit trade deals, such as those with New Zealand and Australia, have been unfavourable for Welsh agriculture and manufacturing. Since Brexit, Wales has lost out on £1 billion in European structural and rural development funding, which could have been used to support our deprived communities. That is despite the promise made by the then Conservative UK Government in 2019 to

"at a minimum match the size"

of former EU funding in Wales and the other nations across the UK.

In my constituency, the port of Holyhead, which is a strategically vital port for UK-EU trade, has seen dramatic falls in traffic since Brexit. I note that following the closure of the port after Storm Darragh in December last year, the value of trade going through Holyhead has dropped by £500 million. At the time, I called for the Government to establish a hardship fund to support businesses impacted by the closure of the port. I urge the Government, as part of their strategy towards the EU, to make clear commitments to safeguard the port against future crises, given its strategic importance.

We need a relationship with Europe that works for Wales, and the opportunity to improve relations at the upcoming UK-EU summit is welcome. Given that Wales is more reliant on exporting to the EU than the rest of the UK, it is crucial that we make trading between Wales and Europe easier. I have seen the challenges that exporters in my constituency face, with local business The Lobster Pot telling me that it has struggled to export under the post-Brexit system. A veterinary agreement covering plant and animal health to cut red tape and costs for our exporting businesses will be vital. The Government should create a youth mobility scheme and join the Erasmus+ programme so that our young people can study and work abroad, creating new skills and opportunities for the next generation. We also need to see co-operation on the environment, the arts and defence.

I hope that next week's summit will be the start, not the end of strengthening our ties with Europe. This Government have said that their first mission is to grow the economy, and I can see no better opportunity to improve growth than by committing the UK and Wales to the long-term goal of joining the single market and customs union. Wales has been made to suffer badly by those who championed the false promises of Brexit. This Government must now take action to fix our damaged relationship with Europe to protect the Welsh economy.

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

6.38 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): We have had a strong debate this afternoon, with many contributions on both sides. I thank so many of my hon. and right hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends

[Andrew Griffith]

the Members for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) and for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who knows a great deal about this subject, as well as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my hon. Friends the Members for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool), for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) and for Windsor (Jack Rankin)—what a fantastic set of knowledgeable contributions and real concerns about the impending EU surrender summit. It is in the spirit of such rigorous debate that this House finds its strength and purpose.

It has been less than a year since the general election. In that time, this Labour Government have tanked the economy, crushed British business, seen—as we have learned today—100,000 fewer people in employment, driven wealth creators overseas at the rate of one millionaire every 45 minutes, and shattered any signs of economic growth. I am afraid to say that the next item on this bleak agenda of declinism is the betrayal of the 17 million people who voted for this country to leave the European political union. This should come as no surprise to anyone, because those on the Benches opposite—and, I regret, some of those on the Benches to the left of me— voted against Brexit on no fewer than 48 different occasions.

If this debate is reminiscent of the past, it is because that is precisely where some Members wish to take us back to. Ever since they were seduced by Jacques Delors, the Euro-socialist, their hearts have never been in the mission of taking back control of our laws. Next Monday's EU surrender summit formally marks the start of Labour's plan to dismantle the powers of not just the Government, but this House, and push us back into the European Union as a passive rule taker. We Conservatives ask, "To what end? Why are the Government capitulating the very same hard-fought Brexit freedoms that permitted the signing of two trade agreements—notwithstanding their limited scope—in the past seven days?"

Had we followed the policies that Labour was advocating in opposition, this Government would never have been able to reach an agreement with the USA or with India. They would not even have been in the room; they would have been one of 28 member nations, resorting to asking—begging—Ursula von der Leyen to perhaps consider putting British interests first. We were right not to follow Labour's advice then, and the Government would be right to listen to our advice now, yet it appears that they still have not learned. As we heard from many speakers this afternoon, the opportunities of the future will fall to those states that are agile—opportunities in areas such as artificial intelligence, genomics, space, the creative industries, financial and professional services, and the life sciences.

This country already has a good deal with the European Union. We have a mutually advantageous zero-tariff agreement that is valued at £184 billion in services and £174 billion in goods. Nothing is perfect, and where there are sensible measures—such as pursuing opportunities for mutual recognition—they should be explored. For example, one of the biggest frictions our businesses face today is the denial of the use of e-gates, which was imposed by the European Union out of spite. There was no such small-mindedness from us.

However, the problem we face today is that the Government have failed to come to this House and explain exactly, or at all, what the Prime Minister's EU reset will look like. We have seen nothing on the Government's negotiating objectives, their red lines or the supposed benefits, and we have not seen an impact assessment or even an interim update. Of course, I understand there will be finer negotiating details that the Government will not want to share, but that is very different from sharing absolutely nothing. That is disrespectful of Parliament, and forces this House to rely on leaks and read between the lines of Downing Street press handouts. If those leaks are to be believed, we know that Labour is planning on signing up the British armed forces to an EU army, binding our strategic military decision-making powers to bureaucrats in Brussels. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is very welcome to rule these things out—perhaps he will be more forthcoming than the Paymaster General was earlier.

When it comes to security, there is no bigger challenge than our borders—I think even the Prime Minister recognised that on Monday—but the UK's request for shared access to a joint illegal migrant database has already been rejected by the European Union. So much for co-operation on security. Defence procurement must never be "pay to play". I have no idea why the European Union member nations would cut themselves off from the UK's excellent defence primes, unless this is once again a protectionist industrial policy cloak—and what twisted deal-making trades fishing rights for the French for working more closely together, as we have so many times, on Europe's defence? We warned that Labour would betray our fishermen, and it has sadly proved us right by putting fishing rights back on the negotiating table.

Harriet Cross: My hon. Friend has referred to the betrayal of our fishermen. I wonder whether the Minister will take the opportunity to deny media speculations that the Government are about to consent to multi-year agreements. The fishermen want single-year agreements, which are the international norm. Can the Minister rule that out today?

Andrew Griffith: I am afraid the Minister is as talkative as a haddock when it comes to clarifying his objectives, but perhaps he will confound our expectations when he sums up the debate.

Just as the Prime Minister pretends to talk tough on immigration, by the same token he plans to open our borders to an EU youth mobility scheme. Perhaps the Minister will deny that, but it could mean millions from Boulogne to Bucharest. Limited volume schemes with comparable economies whereby the UK is able to decide who comes here are fine in principle. We have such a scheme with Australia, but Australia is 10,000 miles away and its economy is very different from those that we are discussing. The wrong type of youth mobility scheme would disadvantage young British workers who, thanks to this Government, are already struggling to get a foot on the ladder, whether for a job—unemployment is up again today—or to secure a roof over their heads

in Britain's housing market. What part of the Government's objective involves making things harder for our young people?

What we do see is the Government proceeding at breakneck pace with the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill. Beware of Bills with boring names, Madam Deputy Speaker! This is a Trojan horse, blank-cheque Bill giving Ministers the power to roll back Brexit, sign us up to EU rules and abandon imperial measurements for good, all at the stroke of a pen. It provides unchecked ministerial power to make us a passive rule-taker of Brussels diktat. Let me be clear. The Conservatives are certainly not opposed to co-operation with Europe as one among other markets—that much should be obvious from the hard-fought trade agreement that we obtained under the last Government—but we must not in any circumstances surrender our Brexit freedoms so that the Prime Minister can reassure his next law school reunion that he has undermined our sovereignty.

After the earlier equivocation from the Paymaster General, let me give the Minister—they have been chuntering all afternoon—a final chance to answer these questions once and for all. Can he reassure the millions of people who voted to leave the EU that his surrender summit will not betray their wishes? Will he confirm that there will be no backsliding on free movement or compulsory asylum transfers? Can he reassure taxpayers, or those who have lost their winter fuel allowance or whose benefits are set to be cut, that the UK will not be agreeing to any new payments to the EU? Is he able to confirm, for the benefit of our coastal communities, that there will be no concessions on fishing rights? Can he assure the House that there will be no rule taking, dynamic alignment, or extension of European Court jurisdiction? Will he pledge, in deeds as well as words, that there will be no compromise on the primacy of NATO as the successful cornerstone of European security?

If the Minister is not able to provide those assurances, this Government are betraying Brexit. All of the evidence that we have seen today suggests that they are limbering up for a surrender summit to damage Britain's interests. They are determined to deal away our hard-fought freedoms, and we will lose control of our borders, our laws, our fish and our armed forces. I urge the Minister to come clean and to have the honesty to explain to this House and this country why Labour is preparing to surrender the right of the British people to choose their own destiny. We know that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses.

6.50 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I am grateful to have the chance to respond to this afternoon's debate. I did not know that the House had so many fans of "Quantum Leap"— a favourite show of mine when I was younger. Of course, fans of the show will know that Sam Beckett was advised by a hologram called Al, a US admiral who would come in and give good advice on how to get through challenges. Instead, we have had the spectre of Sir Bill Cash coming in via text to Conservative Members. Who would have thought it?

This debate has been a journey back to the past. On this side of the House, we have a Government who want to take this country forward, not back. That is a stark contrast with those on the other side, who seem stuck in the last decade. We will not be rejoining the EU, the single market or the customs union, or returning to freedom of movement, but we look forward to welcoming Presidents von der Leyen and Costa to London next week for the first ever UK-EU summit—the first annual summit to take place between the UK and the EU.

The Leader of the Opposition recently said:

> "We announced that we would leave the European Union before we had a plan for growth outside the EU. These mistakes were made because we told people what they wanted to hear first and then tried to work it out later."

Of course, the lesson that we have learned, and to which the Conservative party might want to pay careful attention, is that failing to plan is inevitably planning to fail. This Government will not take the same reckless, chaotic and dogmatic approach when it comes to the British people and our national interests. That is why, under the leadership of our Prime Minister, this Government were elected on a mandate for change, which is what we are delivering. We have been resetting our relationships with our EU partners and our wider European partners, and we are using those strengthened relationships to deliver growth, prosperity, safety and security. I, the Paymaster General, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and others have been working to do that.

Just this week, we hosted the Weimar+ Foreign Ministers meeting on Ukraine, and we have had high-level engagement with many European leaders. We have been travelling around the continent, driving forward growth, driving forward action on illegal immigration, and driving forward relationships for our security and our defence. We are also setting up structures to ensure that our European partnerships deliver in the long term, including treaties or leader-level summits with some of our closest partners, such as France, Germany, Poland and Ireland—not to mention the exciting and successful state visit by His Majesty the King to Italy last month. I am delighted that Buckingham Palace has today announced that President Macron, accompanied by Mrs Macron, has accepted an invitation from His Majesty to pay a state visit to the UK, and the Prime Minister and President will hold their next summit during that visit.

Increased engagement has already delivered results for the UK. On growth, we have had £250 million of Czech investment in Rolls-Royce small modular reactors and a £600 million investment by the Polish logistics company InPost, and Iberdrola is doubling its investment through ScottishPower over the next four years. On security, we have new defence agreements with Germany and Romania, and new negotiations on defence agreements with Poland and Norway. On migration, we have a joint action plan with Germany and new migration deals with Serbia, Kosovo, Slovenia and Slovakia, and we have also agreed new measures to tackle people-smuggling gangs with France. On energy and climate, we have new civil nuclear co-operation between the UK and Finland, and other European countries are responding positively to that. Crucially, on security and defence—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith *rose—*

Sir John Hayes *rose—*

Mr Francois *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: They want answers to the questions they have asked. I am going to give them some answers, and then I will happily take interventions.

On foreign security and defence policy, let me be absolutely clear: NATO is and remains the bedrock of our security and our transatlantic alliances, but there are many strands to a muscle. Whether it is the joint expeditionary force, our bilateral security and defence partnerships, or our work through other pan-European bodies, through the European Political Community, in the western Balkans, through the Quint or, indeed, through a new UK-EU security and defence partnership, a muscle gets stronger when its multiple strands are flexed. Those things do not contradict each other; they are strengthening this country and our place in the world, and delivering on defence, on technology, on jobs, on industry and on security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and as I have said, we have worked together in the past quite a lot. I will just ask a very simple question. The Government have constantly said they will not breach their red lines. They have apparently said that publicly in Europe, and they have said it here. My simple question is: is dynamic alignment one of the red lines?

Stephen Doughty: I will come on to that in a moment, but we are absolutely clear. I have been clear, and so has the Paymaster General. I will come on to answer that question specifically in a moment.

Talking down Britain's role in NATO at a time of war in Europe when we are showing such leadership is, quite frankly, irresponsible. I will not take lessons on NATO, European defence and security or the defence and security of this country from a party that shrunk the British Army to the smallest size since the Napoleonic era, when we have made the tough choices of investing in defence.

Let me be absolutely clear: there is no suggestion that the UK would ever join a European army, and no formal proposal for that has ever been put forward. Indeed, on Gibraltar—I answered questions on this earlier—we absolutely take a stand on the sovereignty of Gibraltar, given the importance of our military base there. I spoke to the Chief Minister earlier about that, and the wild speculation that is being put about is hugely unhelpful.

On fisheries, we should be clear that there was of course a Brexit deal negotiated by the last Government, and we are looking for an overall arrangement that is beneficial for our fisheries and our coastal communities, but I am not going to get into a running commentary.

On SPS—and, indeed, on the question the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—asked, let us be clear: since 2018, the UK's agrifood trade with the EU has fallen by 20% for exports and 11% for imports, after adjusting for trade inflation, so it is in the interests of both sides to seek an SPS agreement that removes those barriers to trade. We are not interested in divergence for the sake of divergence or in a race to the bottom on standards. We will not get into a running commentary on this, but we have been absolutely clear. Of course, there need to be appropriate dispute resolution mechanisms.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: Conservative Ministers ask questions, but they may not want to hear the answers. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

Stephen Doughty: We are absolutely clear: we are taking serious action to reduce net migration, but we support controlled schemes that create opportunities for young people to experience different cultures, travel and work. Important questions were asked about issues such as the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. It is of course right and responsible that we look at it, ensuring that any final decisions are made in the national interest.

However, I want to address a very fundamental point, which is this absolutely absurd and nonsensical suggestion of surrender. What an absolute disgrace to be talking Britain down—talking Britain down! In fact, what we see is strength. We see strength from this Prime Minister and strength from this Government. In a world of turmoil—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: No.

In a world of turmoil and uncertainty—

Mr Francois: Is there a red line on dynamic alignment—yes or no?

Stephen Doughty: I have answered that question already. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister will be heard.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been absolutely clear: surrender—what nonsense! Instead, we see strength in standing up for our steel and our car manufacturers, delivering trade deals with the US and India, investing in green energy, leading Europe with our key allies in the defence of Ukraine, tackling illegal migration and serious and organised crime, and boosting funding and support for our national defence after shameful disinvestment by the previous Government. That is talking down Britain; we are standing up for Britain.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 104, Noes 402.

Division No. 196] [6.58 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims

Davis, rh David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Smith, Greg
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Wild, James
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Richard Holden and David Simmonds

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane *(Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy)*
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana *(Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana)*
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coghlan, Chris
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Collins, Victoria
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Doogan, Dave
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
George, Andrew
German, Gill
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah *(Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine)*
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gilmour, Rachel
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Goldsborough, Ben
Gordon, Tom
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harding, Monica
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Heylings, Pippa
Hinchliff, Chris
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jardine, Christine

Jarvis, Dan
Jarvis, Liz
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacCleary, James
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Maguire, Ben
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, Anneliese
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla *(Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin)*
Morden, Jessica
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Murray, James
Murray, Susan
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate *(Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson)*
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Perkins, Mr Toby
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Roome, Ian
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sabine, Anna
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Jamie
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Luke
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry *(Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson)*
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Waugh, Paul
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Anna Turley

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 321, Noes 102.

Division No. 197] [7.13 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane *(Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy)*
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David

Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Murray, James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate *(Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson)*
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry *(Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson)*
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Waugh, Paul
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Anna Turley

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Smith, Greg
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Wild, James
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Richard Holden and David Simmonds

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That the House notes the overwhelming mandate on which the Government was elected, which included resetting the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union to deepen ties with its European friends, neighbours and allies; welcomes the Government's commitment only to agree a deal that is in the UK's national interest and is in line with the manifesto on which the Government was elected; supports the Government's commitment to agree a new and ambitious security agreement between the UK and the EU to help tackle common threats, whilst noting that NATO is the cornerstone of the UK's defence; recognises the Government's ambition to negotiate a sanitary and phytosanitary and veterinary agreement to address the cost of food and to tackle a range of other issues to reduce barriers to trade; and further supports improvements to the UK-EU relationship that are aimed at making the UK safer, more secure and more prosperous, in line with the Prime Minister's Plan for Change.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Medical Devices

That the draft Medical Devices and Blood Safety and Quality (Fees Amendment) Regulations, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 13 May 2025

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

Churches and Religious Buildings: Communities

9.30 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of churches and religious buildings on communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I am pleased to have secured this important and timely debate with the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). Today, I speak with two hats on, as the MP for Battersea and as the Second Church Estates Commissioner.

It is undeniable that churches and religious buildings have a positive impact on our communities in constituencies across the country, and I intend to show examples of this throughout my speech. Churches such as St Mary's in Battersea do valuable work in their communities every day, and their contributions are often delivered at no cost to the state but with such a great return for the communities in which they serve. That is part of their vocation to serve—their desire to reflect the values of Jesus Christ through their faith, love, hospitality and service to their neighbours. I hope that this debate will allow us to recognise the incredible work of our local churches and other religious organisations.

A parish church is often central to the community. It is a hub around which a village, town or city has grown. It gives a great sense of place. Parishes have a specific duty to serve all their communities, regardless of faith, background or affiliation. Our churches are not just there for Sunday services; they are active seven days a week.

I must declare my interest as an attendee of Holy Trinity Clapham, or HTC, which is a grade II listed building. The church supports the needs of its communities through services for victims of domestic violence and young families' support services, as well as by serving breakfast to more than 200 people every week. Similar Church of England churches and cathedrals support more than 31,000 social action programmes annually. They deliver more than 14,000 of those projects themselves, while other projects are hosted by churches and carried out in partnership with volunteers and supported by donations.

The National Churches Trust's "The House of Good" reports, which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister has seen, clearly show the community benefit of churches: every £1 invested in any church creates a return for the community of £16. Dare I ask where else the Government could get a return like that?

Although a core activity of churches is worship, they do so much more. They are pillars for community, social action, culture and heritage. They support the national economy, offer apprenticeships for key trade and craft skills and are collectively one of the largest commissioners of the arts in the UK. They are drivers of regeneration and place making. They are well on their way to achieving net zero by 2030 across all their buildings. They are involved in running or supporting food banks, groups for the elderly or vulnerable, and parent and toddler groups, often in the places where they are most needed. They offer warm spaces during the winter. During the winter months in Battersea, St Peter's, St Michael's, St Barnabas's and the Ascension church host night shelters, which I had the pleasure of visiting last winter.

The UK has 15,000 historic listed places of worship in use across all faiths and denominations: churches, chapels, synagogues, mosques and temples. Approximately 12,500 of them are Church of England churches or cathedrals, and in the past decade the number of listed places on Historic England's heritage at risk register increased to 969, some 911 of which are Church of England buildings.

The listed places of worship grant scheme was introduced by the last Labour Government under the then Chancellor Gordon Brown, and it has been a lifeline in maintaining those buildings. Although the Church welcomes the continuation of the scheme for an additional year, the reduction from £42 million to £23 million a year and the new cap of £25,000 per place of worship jeopardise the ongoing future of many projects.

We know that 94% of applications are under the £25,000 cap and will not be affected, but 260 Church of England churches will be. Although that makes only 6% of claims on the scheme, the impact will be huge. The retrospective implementation of the new scheme is causing immense difficulty, preventing responsible budgeting, commissioning work on multi-year refurbishment schemes and good stewardship of the buildings.

It is preventing craft businesses, such as masons and glaziers, from taking on apprentices, as they are unable to guarantee work. Obviously, it is adversely affecting our communities, particularly those most in need of support. There is no doubt we need a long-term solution beyond the year-on-year extension.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The hon. Lady and I have had a number of exchanges in the Chamber on this issue. In her role as a Church Commissioner, given the concerns she has raised about projects failing and craftsmen being put out of work, has she had any reassurance from the Government that schemes already started, even if above the £25,000 cap, will be allowed to progress so that the projects can continue?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Member is right that we have had many exchanges. He knows that I am firmly committed to ensuring that the scheme is extended and, more importantly, that schemes in train will be protected. I will come to that shortly.

It is time to give stability and certainty to these treasures of our built heritage. I will not list all 260 churches, as we do not have time. My own church of Holy Trinity, Clapham has raised more than £6.2 million for vital repairs designed to make the church more accessible to the local community. As I said earlier, it provides local communities with huge amounts of support, such as advice and advocacy on debt, providing hot meals and sport and social activities.

[Marsha De Cordova]

Other examples include Sunderland Minster, another grade II building, with a long-standing ministry to refugees and asylum seekers. It holds drop-in and collection days for food, clothes and children's toys. All Hallows-on-the-Wall, London hosts a young person's programme in its nave, which for 30 years has supported thousands of challenging and excluded young people across the city into work. Wells Cathedral's "warm rail" initiative provides free donated clothes and winter coats, and offers a warm space and hot refreshments. Many churches support the warm welcome campaign in response to the cost of living crisis.

I share those examples to show the significant impact those churches have socially and economically. I know the Government recognise their impact and would not want to see any listed places no longer able to make their vital contributions to the communities they serve.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Member gives an eloquent account of how churches active in communities can have an impact. Another point concerns those buildings no longer being used for religious purposes. The Church of Scotland is divesting itself of a number of churches, including in East Neuk in my constituency. Does she agree that, even if those buildings are not being used for religious purposes, they need to continue as the community hubs she describes, with Government support?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Lady makes a really important point: churches are a place of worship, but they do so much more in their communities.

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and Tavistock) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for the work she does on behalf of the Church. She occupies a very important role and commands considerable respect for what she has been doing. I wish to add to the point that the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) just made about the closure of churches, particularly in rural parishes, which is becoming an increasing problem. In my constituency, we have experienced difficulty getting the Church to recognise that it too has an obligation to stand by the side of local communities when those wonderful and precious buildings are to be closed as places of worship, and that it must help find a community purpose for them. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Church cannot ignore its responsibility?

Marsha De Cordova: The right hon. and learned Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I fully agree.

I turn to some of the work that churches do. The Church Commissioners already contribute considerable sums from their funds to provide grants to Church of England dioceses and support many projects, particularly in underserved communities. The Buildings for Mission project has provided £9 million for dioceses for 35 locally based church building support officers, and grants for minor repairs and improvement. Through the cathedral sustainability fund, the Church Commissioners have provided £30 million of targeted funding for cathedrals since 2017.

But no one organisation can provide support on its own; we all need to pull together to support these treasures. A bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund or other grant funding may rely on the listed places of worship scheme to match funding. Last year, the Heritage Fund announced £100 million to support places of worship over the next three years, and parish giving continues to be a form of local support, but I say again that that will not be enough to support the work that every church needs to undertake.

Aside from their social and economic impact, church buildings contribute to the creative and performing arts by providing hundreds of locations for amateur and professional arts of all genres for the Government's Arts Everywhere initiative. England's heritage generates a £45.1 billion gross value added impact, supporting more than half a million jobs, and our cathedrals attract millions of visitors, fostering local economies and preserving our cultural heritage. I am sure the right hon. Member for Salisbury will touch on that in his remarks.

Does the Minister agree that our churches make an invaluable contribution to our communities? Will he raise with his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport the following three key things that the Government could do to support these valuable community assets? First, will the Government make the listed places of worship scheme permanent, without a cap, for each place of worship beyond March 2026? It is vital that those churches are supported so they can continue to serve their communities.

Secondly, will the Government prioritise support for projects that are already under way and/or for which contracts were signed before the cap was introduced? I highlighted a number of churches in that position; the overall figure is estimated to be 260.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Would the hon. Lady's second question for the Minister include All Saints Mudeford, which burned down two years ago? The rebuilding process cannot be started because of the extra burden of VAT, so the church is raising money for that.

Marsha De Cordova: If that church is on the list of 260, it would be, but I would be very happy if the hon. Gentleman follows that up with me after the debate so we can look into it.

Thirdly, will the Government consider establishing a new capital funding scheme for listed places of all faiths and denominations? Finally, would my hon. Friend the Minister, when he is liaising with Ministers in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, agree to meet me and representatives of some of the churches that are affected by the changes to the listed places of worship scheme, to listen to their experiences and find a solution? I think we can all agree that if we do not find a way forward, the impact will be great.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I remind all Back-Bench colleagues to bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

9.45 am

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I commend my friend, the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for opening

this co-sponsored debate, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. This is a useful and important opportunity for colleagues across the House to draw attention to the considerable impact that churches and church buildings play in their communities.

I will make some points about the listed places of worship grant scheme, and I will reflect on and amplify some of the points that the hon. Lady has made about the social impact of church buildings. I will also spell out some of the opportunities that the Government could consider with respect to capital grants. However, I first reflect on what the hon. Lady said about her own church, Holy Trinity Clapham. Jago Wynne, rector of that church, has been a personal friend of mine for 25 years. Let us not underestimate the leadership role that many rectors and vicars play, outside their core remit of preaching the gospel, in raising funds to maintain and extend the missions of their churches. Next year, Holy Trinity Clapham will celebrate 250 years of existence; it is rooted in the Clapham Sect. Jago said to me this morning, "This is a mission project, so that the building can be a blessing to the community, not a barrier." The church now finds itself £1 million short because of the changes to the terms of the listed places of worship scheme. As the hon. Lady has set out, there are 260 other churches facing similar challenges. They have undertaken a considerable fundraising effort, the works are under way, and now they face a deficit. Some may be able to meet the gap, but others might not.

I am privileged in Salisbury: I live in the shadow of the cathedral and worship at Saint Paul's.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I would like to reflect on the words of the hon. Gentleman. My three brothers spent many happy years as choristers at Salisbury Cathedral. As the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said, churches are the backbone of our communities; as she also said, some 969 in England alone are at risk due to crumbling roofs and vanishing heritage funding. Recently and famously, my party was mocked for fixing church roofs, so I can only surmise that the more Liberal Democrat MPs there are, the better. Having said that, instead of leaving congregations and communities up and down the country seemingly praying for a miracle, can the Minister comment on whether the Government will commit to making the listed places of worship scheme permanent, and to removing the cap?

John Glen: I am trying to avoid making party political points, but the hon. Lady does tempt me, because at St Paul's in Salisbury—where I go to church and where my grandmother went 100 years ago—we recently had a win in the local elections over a member of her party. That says something about the commitment that Chris Taylor has to the St Paul's community.

I have visited many churches in Salisbury—including St Mark's, and St Mary and St Nicholas, the famous Italianate church in Wilton, where the Rev. Mark Wood does a fantastic job—where we are seeing growth in the congregations, but also constant anxiety about how the fabric of those buildings can be maintained. The buildings are integral to the vibrancy of the communities that they serve. They are a source of great encouragement and a convening point for community activities, which have a big impact across all age groups.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The point about community activities is ever present in my constituency of Carlisle, so I profoundly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is almost 35 years since St James Church in Carlisle, the church I was christened into, set up an op-shop in the community of Denton Holme to repay the loan it had taken to expand its parish centre. I am delighted to say that that op-shop remains today. It has been joined by a coffee shop, which is a real community hub in Denton Holme. But more than that, the diocese of Carlisle took on that op-shop model. Today, there are five shops, all specifically located in communities on our larger estates in and around Carlisle where there is real need. It is not just the goods that they are selling, but the fact that they have a model that is about outreach into those communities. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the ability of our churches to diversify and innovate is one of their great strengths?

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman responds, I observe that interventions are getting progressively longer. If those who want to speak are going to be able to speak, we will have to have shorter interventions.

John Glen: I acknowledge the hon. Lady's point. Every Member present today will have a vivid portrait in their mind of an impact that a church makes in their community. It is quite different in different places, and evolves according to the needs of that community. I will not go through every single church that I have visited over my 15 years as Salisbury's MP, but the range and depth of their impact is considerable.

Andrew Rumsey, the Bishop of Ramsbury in the diocese of Salisbury, is, coincidentally, the co-lead on church buildings for the Church of England, which has 16,000 buildings, 42 cathedrals and 300 major parish churches. Of those, 12,500 are listed. That is nearly half of grade I listed buildings in our country. Contrary to elsewhere in Europe—France, Germany and Italy, for example—there is no central church funding for building works. While it will always be right that people look to the local community to raise funds, we have to examine what we have done in the past and what we might do in the future, given that churches and church buildings are a delivery vehicle for community services alongside local authorities, and how we can embed that understanding in public policy so that churches are supported and become a sustainable force into the future.

The first point I want to make is about the listed places of worship scheme. The hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant) gave an assurance of continuity for one year, which I suspect is related to the spending review. On 11 June, we will have some clarity over what is happening on a multi-year basis—that cannot come soon enough. The point has been made about the 260 buildings that are in progress and outside the cap. The Government need to address that. Typically, this excellent scheme, which Gordon Brown set up in 2001, was underspent—I remember being Chief Secretary and seeing that the line was £42 million, and it was usually in the 20s. That money will be netted off at the end of the year, but I respectfully say that this is so valued that the Government must reconsider stopping those 260 buildings and putting them at risk of not achieving what they need to complete the works so that we are not left with a deficit.

[John Glen]

In my constituency, I think the figure in the last year was £93,855. That is a considerable amount of money, and it makes a lot of difference on individual projects. That will have covered 15 or 20 projects.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Church of St Mary Magdalene in Stockland Bristol in my constituency has been planning since 2019 for extensive repairs and to turn the church into a community hub. Due to the changes in the listed worship scheme, it finds itself £300,000 short. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is an enormous sum for a small community to raise?

John Glen: It is, and I wish St Mary's parishioners well in all their endeavours. There is scope for the Government to come out of this in a very positive way in June by looking back over what they can do to put this right.

For my second point, I want to spend a few moments reasserting the impact that church buildings have on local communities. The hon. Member for Battersea mentioned "The House of Good" report. One of my constituents, Luke March, has been working for 10 years as chairman of the National Churches Trust, which put that report together, and it makes for interesting reading. We are talking about enormous support for communities, working with local authorities. The National Churches Trust report talks about how the care for those in need is worth twice as much as the total spend on adult social care by local authorities. There is a risk—I recognise this from my ministerial experience—that we say, "Well, this is going to happen anyway," so we can bank that, and then worry about our overall budget. The Minister must recognise—he will know this from his own constituency—that there is often a synergy between statutory-funded local authority provision and the provision of churches working together. We need to look at embedding that understanding in policymaking.

The hon. Lady mentioned the value of church buildings as a source of encouragement and fun, through arts and cultural experiences. I massively recognise that at Salisbury cathedral: the flower festival this week, Sarum Lights, the number of visitors to evensong, the "From Darkness to Light" services—all of those things. Sixty-two per cent of church spaces are useful for leisure-time music performances, and they are used as such. Then there is the other side: the food banks, warm spaces, or acting as a venue for Alcoholics Anonymous, debt counselling, grief counselling, youth clubs and parish meetings.

Last year the independent Khan review looked into social cohesion and resilience. As the Minister will know, it understandably focused on the financial vulnerability of councils, but I reinforce the point that churches can surely be an effective and investable vehicle to deal with some of those deficits. Putting right the issue with the grant scheme can give more security to more buildings going forward. In its report, "Pillars of Community", the Centre for Social Justice asserts that 12 out of its 29 policies for community thriving are supported by the presence and role of churches.

My third and final point is about capital grants. There is a considerable precedent here, although, as a former Chief Secretary, I feel anxious about that constant demand for more money. I recognise that, but we did find money from 2014 to 2018 for the first world war centenary cathedral repairs fund, which benefited 57 Anglican and Catholic cathedrals. The roof repair fund gave £55 million over a similar timeframe and was administered by the National Heritage Memorial Fund. The heritage stimulus fund gave grants for programmes of major works as part of the culture recovery fund after covid in two tranches in 2021 and 2022.

The public finances are clearly challenged, but there is enormous willingness in many communities where the Government are doing something to match that funding. There is an enormous opportunity for a multiplier effect. It is usually easier to secure capital funding than revenue funding. A Chancellor is always looking for small items, or good news stories, as George Osborne did back in the day, so I urge the Minister, when he plans his budget and finalises what is happening in these final weeks, to recognise that this would be a great opportunity to find a capital grant scheme for match funding from philanthropic and charitable giving that would be really popular and welcomed across the House.

I will not detain colleagues for much longer, but I want to emphasise that we must fully acknowledge the enormous contribution that our church buildings make and the value-add that they provide—spiritually, socially and in looking after the most vulnerable people. I call on the Minister to take to heart the cumulative effect of all that he will hear this morning and reflect on the impact of church buildings, which is felt across our country. There are just four weeks until the spending review on 11 June. There is time for a late addition and to put a few things right; this would be a great opportunity to do so.

I also want to give thanks to all those church leaders—not only in the Anglican Church, but in all denominations—who do so much to achieve positive outcomes for people in our communities. They do so alongside their formal ministry of preaching the gospel, but the impact they have, and what they speak of Jesus Christ to their communities, is instrumental in the mission they have. I hope that we and the Government can acknowledge that and assist them in the maintenance of this vast estate of church buildings, which is so important to our country.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. We will need to move to Front-Bench speeches at just before 10.30 am, so if colleagues can keep their speeches to around three minutes, we might get everybody in.

10.1 am

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to hail the amazing contribution of churches and religious buildings in our local communities. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost every religious building offers invaluable service to its local community. We see that especially in times of national hardship, such as during the pandemic and in

the cost of living crisis, but we also see it in everyday life. Holy Trinity Clapham, which is in my constituency and which is my hon. Friend's church, is a clear example of the impact that churches and other places of worship can have on their local community. It is the largest Church of England church in the diocese of Southwark, with around 800 worshippers each Sunday, a number that has tripled in size over the past decade.

The work of Holy Trinity Clapham has touched so many people in the community. Like so many other churches that we have already heard about, it ran a significant food bank during the covid pandemic, supporting those who were unable to afford basic goods or to get to a supermarket. To carry on that work, the church has established a breakfast club that feeds approximately 200 people every week. It also runs youth clubs, works with ex-offenders, puts on courses for those who have suffered from domestic violence, prepares couples for marriage, and does so much more. Holy Trinity Clapham is not just a place of worship; it is a community hub.

Members may also be intrigued to know that Holy Trinity Clapham is the church where William Wilberforce and the Clapham sect worshipped. Continuing that legacy, Holy Trinity has worked with other organisations to help to tackle modern day slavery. It has also extended support to other churches and communities in the area, having sent teams of people to help revitalise other struggling churches and communities in Brixton, Vauxhall and Mitcham. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea and the right hon. Member for Salisbury have expressed words of support for Holy Trinity's vision and I am sure the church is very grateful for that.

To facilitate the plans to expand its work, Holy Trinity has begun a project to make its building more suitable for the modern day. It has raised a total of £6 million, with £4.5 million coming through donations from the congregation and the remaining £1.5 million coming from successful grant applications. That is a huge amount of work that the church has already done on its own. The whole project is a massive undertaking, but Holy Trinity has managed to raise the funds and the works will take place over the next 12 to 18 months, or so we hope. As we have heard today, the changes to the listed places of worship grant scheme, and particularly the £25,000 cap, have put those plans in doubt. Holy Trinity had assumed that it would be able to recoup most of the VAT on the £6 million project and it entered into a number of contracts on that basis and on the assumption that the scheme will continue. Now it faces the prospect of an extra £1 million in expenditure.

The church does not have that money, nor does its already generous congregation. However, without finding that extra £1 million—or unless the Government introduce an exemption for places of worship that had already signed contracts for projects set to conclude in 2025-26, before the cap is introduced—the project will have to be brought to a temporary halt and potentially a permanent one. I am sure Members will agree that that would be a great shame, with hugely negative repercussions for the local community and those who rely on the church's services, as well as more widely in the boroughs of Lambeth and Wandsworth, which the church was hoping to reach.

Holy Trinity Clapham is not the only church impacted by these changes. It serves as a very clear example of the impact they will have on the estimated 200 churches across the country whose restoration projects have been placed in jeopardy. Will the Minister tell us what plans the Government have to support churches that have already begun their restoration projects, and stick to the agreement—or the belief—that the churches had when they began them? This morning's debate has been filled with many shining examples of the crucial role that churches and places of worship play in their local communities, and it would be a great shame to lose that. I hope the Minister shares that sentiment.

10.5 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the joint sponsors, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), on obtaining this very important debate, which highlights the important role that churches play in our local communities. I will give a few examples of that.

Last week, we marked the 80th anniversary of VE Day. Yes, there was a grand national service across the road in Westminster Abbey, but there were civic services up and down the country to mark the occasion. I attended one that had been arranged by the Mayor of North East Lincolnshire. He is a Catholic, so we attended the Catholic church last Thursday evening. Amazingly enough, while we were there, we heard of the election of the new Pope. Just as an aside, I would say that perhaps the Catholic Church has something to teach the Church of England in the speed with which it appoints its head. We desperately need a head of the Church of England, and that it takes a year to come up with a candidate is staggering. I am sure the hon. Member for Battersea has relayed that point already, but I emphasise it again. VE Day showed the importance of church buildings and the role of the Church within our national and civic life.

On Sunday, it was National Fishing Remembrance Day. Part of my constituency has a ward in Grimsby, which is noted for fish. Sadly, the deep sea fishing industry is no more, but many people in the area worked as trawlermen or were connected with the industry. It is still vital to the area. At the service I attended, Canon Mullins from Grimsby Minster drew links between VE Day and the fishing industry. The great west window in Grimsby Minster depicts St Peter and the fishermen going out into the Sea of Galilee. In 1943, two bombs landed on the minster, or St James' church as it was then, shattering every window in the church. The original drawings still existed, so many of the windows were recreated, but the new west window paid tribute to the fishing industry.

Any country church or churchyard tells the story of the local community. This weekend was an open weekend for many churches in Lincolnshire, and on Saturday, I visited St Mary's in Broughton, a village close to Scunthorpe. I heard there from a local historian who lives across the road from the church. He was extremely knowledgeable about the history of virtually every brick in the building. He pointed out to me that it was one of four churches in Lincolnshire to predate the Norman conquest, and guided me to the evidence for that. I was a bit disturbed by that because the church that I attend regularly in Scartho in Grimsby, St Giles and St Matthews, has what is claimed to be an Anglo-Saxon tower dating to 1042.

[Martin Vickers]

I pointed that out to the historian and he said, "Oh no, it must be at least 50 years later than that", but nevertheless, it points to the long history of the stories that churches tell of their local communities.

One of those other four churches in Lincolnshire that was referred to as pre-dating the conquest is St Peter's—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Before the hon. Gentleman gets on to any more churches, I gently pointed out to him that he is well over his three minutes. It is not a formal time limit, but I am trying to get everybody in.

Martin Vickers: My apologies, Sir Jeremy. In that case, I will conclude by saying that our churches and cathedrals play such an important part in our local communities. The National Churches Trust is conducting a survey at this time, which I urge Members to take part in to refer to the importance of the churches in their local communities.

10.10 am

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing this important debate.

Our churches and religious buildings are so much more than the stone and bricks and mortar that they are made from, but if their walls and roofs fall down, then what we lose is far greater too. In Derby, we are blessed to have churches, Sikh gurdwaras, Hindu temples and Muslim mosques, and in the middle of our city, we have our cathedral. Next year, it enters its 100th year as a cathedral, although its tower dates back to the 16th century. It is our tallest building at 212 feet—that height is rather firmly imprinted on my memory, having abseiled from the top of it for charity alongside my then nine-year-old. Inside the tower is the oldest ring of bells in the world. The oldest is more than 500 years old, older than the tower itself, and they peal out across the city. At our VE day celebration, there was a commemorative peal that lasted three hours, which was no small feat for the bell ringers, the youngest of whom was 10 years old.

The coming together of people of all ages always strikes me in our churches and religious buildings, and the churches in our city have groups from the little nippers to the university students coming together at St Alkmund's or the monthly tea for older people at St Peter's. I had lots of really interesting studies and stats about loneliness and crossing generational divides, but given the three-minute limit I will have to leave those out.

We have heard from many Members, and I am sure we will hear more, that the work done in our churches is so often there to meet the wider need in our communities, with food banks, community cafes and warm spaces such as that at St Philip's church in Chaddesden, to name just one. Often, it is in our churches and religious buildings where we see examples of humanity at its best and looking after one another. Nearly 80% of Church of England buildings host more than 31,000 social action projects a year, and His Majesty's Treasury Green Book estimates that for every pound invested in our church buildings, the benefit to communities is over £16.

Our religious buildings are often opened up for wider cultural events as well as social action. At Derby cathedral, people have heard Queen by candlelight. Again, I had a whole list of other events, but Members will have to look them up for themselves. The incredible sound of Derby cathedral choir fills the cathedral most days, giving moments of peace and reflection in busy lives and what feels like an uncertain world.

I would like to give a final example of the work of our church going out beyond their walls. Derby cathedral has a music in schools programme that is currently working with more than 900 children weekly across 17 different schools. To hear their voices fill the cathedral creates moments in time that nourish the soul. Those buildings were built with the knowledge that they would build communities and lift the health, education and culture of Derby and of every part of our country. I would ask that the Minister ensure that all the social good carried out within the bricks and mortar—but which extends so far beyond them—is taken into account when decisions on funding are made.

10.14 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for leading today's debate. I extend my heartfelt thanks to all who are gathered here today and, furthermore, to all who support the work of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, of which I am privileged, honoured and humbled to be the chair.

I want to give a perspective on churches and their impact on communities, and I will describe three countries where they are important. Churches and religious buildings have long played an essential role in our communities. They are places not only of worship but of support, guidance and service. In my constituency of Strangford, I have seen churches that run food banks, offer support to the elderly, provide youth programmes and bring people together across the community—including my own Baptist church in Newtownards, which I love and am grateful for. Those buildings serve the whole person—not just spiritually, but practically—and it is important that we do that.

I want to focus first on Morocco and the challenges that religious buildings face around the world. The recent destruction of minarets—symbols of religion and cultural identity—has caused great distress. Those structures are much more than buildings: they are central to the spiritual life of the community. For many Moroccans, the minaret is a sign of their faith and history; losing it is about not just architecture, but identity, culture and the right to express their beliefs.

Secondly, just a week or 10 days ago, on a parliamentary visit to Egypt—I encourage our Christians here to do the same—I had the opportunity to visit one of the evangelical churches in Cairo. It is a congregation of 1,800, with 600 children who attend its services on a Sunday morning. Pastor Youssef Samir's words were, "It's a golden age for churches." That should be encouraging for each of us here—although we see persecution and discrimination across the world, we can also see a country trying to come to terms with that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On that point, unfortunately, it is not a golden age for churches everywhere in the United Kingdom. We need to do more to highlight what those buildings offer, because many people take them for granted and put them to one side, simply because of their age and historical context.

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

To put the situation in Egypt into perspective, each church, irrespective of denomination, has the police and army on guard 24 hours a day. In 2013, Christian churches were burned and Christians were murdered. Today, however, the opportunities have changed, and there will be a new church in upper Cairo.

In Jordan, churches and mosques have been working hand in hand to support Syrian refugees by offering shelter, food and education. Those interfaith efforts are rooted in the power of religious communities, and the spaces that those communities occupy serve as a powerful reminder of what is possible when freedom of religion or belief is respected and protected. That includes ensuring that places of worship remain accessible, protected and supported.

I end on a Scripture text, as I often do in these debates, because I think it is important. Isaiah 56:7 says:

> "Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."

That is not just a call to protect buildings; it is a call to safeguard the freedom to worship. Every individual, regardless of faith, should be able to worship freely without fear of persecution or obstruction. When such places are attacked, it is an assault on the fundamental right to practise our faith, to live according to our beliefs and to do so without fear. Let us continue to support efforts to ensure that churches and other religious buildings remain places of peace, welcome and faith. Let us speak out for those whose right to worship in safety is still denied.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): We have five more speakers and about 10 minutes left, which means, I am afraid, about two minutes each.

10.18 am

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I will speak quickly. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy.

In a Westminster Hall debate earlier this year, I was pleased to note that there are an impressive 138 listed places of worship in my constituency. I am very proud of the work they do; they enrich our lives in so many ways. More disappointingly, I recently noted that I am the Labour MP with the highest number of places of worship on the heritage at risk register—13. I hope that reflects the sheer number of churches locally, rather than our desire, or not, to look after them.

Earlier this year, I was delighted that, despite the difficult economic situation the Government inherited, they confirmed that they would extend the listed places of worship grant scheme, providing £23 million to enable important restoration work. That includes many places in my constituency that have been busily co-ordinating their improvement plans, because churches, particularly in such rural areas, are often the heartbeat of the community.

A couple of weeks ago in the village of Welney, on the Norfolk and Cambridgeshire border, I was pleased to join St Mary the Virgin church to mark its 100th community coffee morning. That initiative was started during covid by Laura and her husband Antony, along with Marie, Guy, Sue, Karen, Shirley and Tracey. They estimate that they have now had more than 3,000 visits, which is very impressive for a small village. As nice as the cake was—as I can attest—they also, more importantly, provide a warm space in the winter, bring people together, reduce isolation and much more. I commend them for their efforts. It was through the church in Welney that I heard about fen skating—I urge hon. Members to look it up; it is a really important part of our heritage in South West Norfolk.

Although I am the Labour MP with the highest number of churches on the heritage at risk register, the second on that list is my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). I gently suggest to the Minister that I am sure that the Prime Minister will be very interested in ensuring that the Government continue to support churches and commit to a long-term plan for the listed places of worship grant scheme.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): We will find out in a few minutes.

10.21 am

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for leading the debate. Let me be clear: we do not own these buildings. We are simply their caretakers and custodians for a future generation. Our job is not to profit from them, but to protect them—ideally without charging them 20% for the privilege. These places, whether they are cathedrals, churches, mosques or gurdwaras, are much more than bricks and mortar; they are history books made out of stone and community centres made out of marble.

Let us take, for example, Leicester cathedral: a 12th-century gem so ancient that it gets a shout-out in the Domesday Book. It gives our town a sense of awe and is a much-needed break from the concrete jungle around it. It is also home to King Richard III, who spent 500 years lying low in a car park before getting the royal treatment. Some even say it was his reburial that triggered the greatest miracle in modern sporting history—Leicester City winning the premier league. Was that a coincidence, or was it divine intervention?

Those buildings do not just have beautiful backstories. As many hon. Members have mentioned, they are where the lonely find company and the hungry are fed. Just last week, I visited the Geeta Bhavan mandir in the Clarendon Park area of my city, and the commitment to sustainability and the environment was much more progressive than in half the tech start-ups in Shoreditch. Another example is the local gurdwara, the Guru Amar Das, which serves hundreds of meals daily with no

[Shockat Adam]

questions asked. In fact, the only question asked is, "Do you want some more?", to which the answer is always, "Yes".

This unity and service crosses boundaries—I am a Muslim, and I volunteer for a Sikh charity, the Midland Langar Seva Society, which operates out of a church and serves people of all faiths and no faith. That is what community looks like and what Britain looks like—it is not an island of strangers. I say to the Minister that we cannot put a price on such things, so let us not be the generation that taxes them; let us be the generation that funds them for future generations. Beauty, service and spiritual refuge deserve relief and not receipts.

10.23 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I will keep my remarks fairly short. As many Members present know, churches in my constituency are much more than just places of worship. They are vital hubs for community cohesion and provide crucial resilience in the face of events such as Storm Éowyn and Storm Arwen, particularly for the most rural parts of the constituency. They are marks of local identity and symbols of the rich history that Northumberland, the north-east and Newcastle have to offer.

Northumberland is often called the cradle of Christianity due to Holy Island, also known as Lindisfarne, but Members will appreciate that, in my view, the west of the county has far more to offer than the coast—my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) is not here. We benefit greatly from that religious history through the great amount of tourism coming in and the huge involvement of local communities.

Organisations and churches operate throughout the Tyne valley and the more rural parts of the constituency, particularly the Holy Cross Anglican church in Haltwhistle, St Mary the Virgin in Throckley, St Mary Magdalene in Prudhoe. Hexham abbey is one of the most iconic buildings that my constituency and the north-east have to offer, not just because I will be getting married there later this year, but because there has been a church on that site for around 1,300 years. For anyone interested in history, it has been there since Queen Etheldreda made a gift of lands to Wilfrid, the Bishop of York, in roughly the year 674.

The constituency is home to more than just Hexham abbey. Bywell is the only village in England with two surviving Anglo-Saxon churches. In Bellingham, St Cuthbert's has been attracting worshippers for over 800 years, dating back to at least the 13th century.

Such churches are not simply relics, attractions or bits of our history that have seen their day and are now merely decorations. They are the beating heart of our communities and they provide a community spirit in Northumberland that is unparalleled elsewhere in the world. I am tremendously proud to represent all of them. They also provide a crucial venue for hosting constituency office surgeries and for meeting individual members of the community.

10.25 am

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Yeovil has some truly beautiful religious buildings, and polling of the general public shows that 75% of people agree that church buildings are important for society. Holy Trinity runs a baby bank, supporting three to four families each week with essential items for newborns, such as nappies and baby grows. The church also has a thriving eco-garden cared for by volunteers. St John's has the Gone Fishing café, which is very popular in the community. It also hosts Christians Against Poverty once a week, providing support services.

Almost half of all grade I listed buildings in England are historic churches. Over 900 churches are at risk, according to Historic England's heritage at risk register. That is why the listed places of worship grant scheme for church repairs is so important. The scheme allows congregations of all faiths to recover the value added tax costs of vital repairs to the listed buildings, making it the most universal and accessible source of relief.

I was glad to see that, following public pressure, the Government extended the scheme until March 2026, but with a lower cap of £25,000 towards repair costs. I thank the Minister for writing to me to confirm that following my early-day motion on the topic. I am concerned about the introduction of the cap, and I urge the Government to make sure that existing claims are honoured under the previous agreement where no cap existed.

In conclusion—I am under time, which is good—churches are not just for the faithful, but for all communities, whether that is local groups and clubs, charity workers and the vulnerable, or people celebrating weddings and christenings or mourning the passing of loved ones. Religious buildings play an important role in key moments throughout our life, bringing us together as a community. That is why we must do all we can to support these fantastic buildings as cornerstones of our British society and culture.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his brevity, as I am sure is Brian Mathew.

10.27 am

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I also thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for leading the debate.

For over 20 years, the Government have run the listed places of worship grant scheme, which allows listed churches, chapels and other places of worship to reclaim VAT on the costs of repair. That grant scheme has been renewed every few years, and it needs to be renewed again in full if communities are to be allowed to keep what is often their heart and soul in good order, and in doing so, keep themselves healthy.

Any reduction in the scheme would be a disaster for listed places of worship. Nearly half of all grade I listed buildings in England are churches. Those buildings are largely run by volunteers who have to raise the funds needed for repairs. The ability to reclaim VAT on such works makes an enormous difference, particularly when the cost of all building work has increased substantially.

Historic churches are not only places of spiritual importance, but architectural and cultural landmarks. They offer a window into our past, reflecting the diversity of our communities and our shared history. They also

do a tremendous amount to support local communities, often hosting or helping to run services such as food banks, youth clubs, and drug and addiction support, which contribute to health and social welfare across our country—from rural idylls to inner city neighbourhoods.

Without the scheme, many historically and architecturally significant buildings will quite simply face neglect, and even closure. That would not only have a severely negative effect on local communities, inevitably impacting the most deprived communities the most, but result in a loss of this hugely significant heritage. By continuing the listed places of worship grant scheme, the Government can ensure that those treasures are protected for future generations as places that promote beauty, education, community cohesion and tourism.

I have received 40 letters from 24 church communities in my constituency of Melksham and Devizes. Those churches are quintessential to what makes up the best of our nation; they should be celebrated, visited and utilised, because that is what they were built for in the first place.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank all hon. Members for their co-operation and self-discipline. I now call the Front-Bench speakers, beginning with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.30 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), on securing this important debate.

As a Liberal Democrat, I am primarily interested in the fixing of church roofs, as the Leader of the Opposition has so keenly pointed out, so it is a pleasure to take part in today's debate. Actually, I take her statement as a compliment, because such work shows an interest in our communities, which is what we have all displayed during the debate.

Across the United Kingdom, churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship have long stood at the heart of our communities. They are not just architectural landmarks, but vital, living institutions, and it is the people who make them. They are the anchor points of community life, and today, more than ever, they remain places of refuge, service and solidarity. Historically, churches have provided more than spiritual guidance, although that is their primary service. They have funded hospitals, built schools and supported the most vulnerable long before the modern welfare state. They were, and still are, the institutions to which many of us turn first in times of hardship and crisis.

Today, their role has evolved. The 40,000 churches across our country offer mental health services, youth clubs, after-school programmes and warm spaces. Churches are responsible for running the majority of food banks in the UK. They often step in where the state has stepped back. Before the pandemic, churches and other places of worship were co-ordinating around 35,000 social action projects, including 8,000 food banks, 4,000 parent and toddler groups—more about them later—2,600 breakfast clubs and 2,400 night shelters for homeless people. Around 2.6 million in the UK sought help from churches during the cost of living crisis, the majority for food but a significant number to access a warm space, too. These are extraordinary numbers: they represent not just acts of charity, but the fabric of care that binds our communities together, thanks to the dedication of the religious institutions that continue to serve them.

I know this from personal experience. Prior to my election last summer, I was a full-time dad—I think I am the only newly elected MP who was a full-time dad in the lead-up to my election. With my daughter, I regularly joined the Highbury congregational church play group, just around the corner from my house, and Little Notes baby music class at St Mark's. I am particularly thankful for the role that those two churches have played in our family life.

I would like to thank the religious groups that support our most vulnerable in my town. At St Michael's church in Whaddon, the Cornerstone centre plays a vital role in looking after people who need a bit extra to get by, ably supported by the Rev. James White, who is a truly wonderful man. It also hosts community counselling services to help people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. I have seen that work in action when I have visited and the responses of the people who use those services. It is truly moving to see the change that those services can stimulate in the people who need that. At St Gregory's Roman Catholic church and among those who attend the Quaker meeting house in Cheltenham, there is a community working very hard to support refugees and asylum seekers. They do not ask for our thanks, but they deserve it in bucketloads.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for securing the debate. I know my hon. Friend is a big fan of soft play centres, so will he join me in thanking the deans, priests and vicars of Brecon cathedral, St Mary's church in Brecon, Kensington church in Brecon and St David's in Llanfaes—unfortunately, I cannot name all the churches and religious institutions in my constituency—for providing soft play centres that are much needed and much appreciated by local residents, and in thanking them for all of the other services that they provide to young parents in our communities?

Max Wilkinson: Absolutely—as the parent of a toddler, soft play centres are a vital service that I use. I am sure that all around my hon. Friend's vast constituency, there are far more soft play centres in the various churches, and I join him in saying thank you. The individuals who volunteer deserve our thanks, although they never ask for it.

Churches also act as an economic driver. Anglican cathedrals alone contribute £235 million to local economies and support around 6,000 full-time jobs. The tourists visiting those sites—I almost said Tories, although I sure they like to visit churches, too—spend an extra £128 million per year. The heritage value of the buildings is a testament not only to the faith of Britain but to our enduring cultural history.

In the centre of my constituency is Cheltenham minster, which is our oldest building at more than 850 years old. It now sits next to one of our newest buildings, the Minster Exchange development, which is a hub for tech and cyber businesses. The fact that Cheltenham's oldest

[Max Wilkinson]

building sits next to a building at the forefront of modern technology is a testament to the enduring social utility of religious spaces throughout the ages. That is why it should concern us that so many churches—more than 900, as I understand it—are on Historic England's heritage at risk register. The Church of England's repair bill of more than £1 billion is a matter of huge concern for the cultural life of our nation.

We welcome the Government's recent decision to extend the listed places of worship grant scheme until 2026. That is good news, and we seek confirmation that it will be renewed after that. However, we remain concerned that the new £25,000 cap may limit its effectiveness, and believe that outstanding claims under the previous, uncapped arrangement should be honoured. We are also concerned about the long-term sustainability of these institutions. In the past decade, more than 3,500 churches have closed in the UK. In Scotland, 40% of churches are at risk of closure, and in Wales nearly a quarter have already shut their doors. This is not just about religion, but about community life. We ignore the value of that at our peril.

10.36 am

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for securing the debate. I also thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner for all that she does for churches, and for her eloquent speech and argument. My right hon. Friend highlighted the important role of churches in the community, especially when it comes to leadership. I thank both Members for making the case for Holy Trinity Clapham.

Last week, we celebrated VE Day. During the day's events, I was struck by the many references to community and spirit, which often related to street parties and dancing, but also frequently to the important community role of parish churches, chapels, cathedrals and minsters, both 80 years ago and today. I attended a moving beacon-lighting service at Elmdon church in my constituency. I was privileged to meet a 96-year-old veteran and ex-para, Frank Spencer, whose charitable endeavours included jumping out of a plane at the age of 92—perhaps an idea for the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), if she wanted to graduate from abseiling down churches.

With the peal of bells echoing throughout the country as part of a nationally co-ordinated effort, it was clear how important churches and religious buildings are to local people. Many people's real-world experience of places of worship is not of the grandeur of St Peter's or St Paul's, but often of an ancient, parochial building or hall used as a meeting place or hired venue for birthdays, or as a soft play centre, as has been mentioned. It may be a space that offers some quiet time at Christmas or Easter for reflection and a sense of something deeper. Other communities open the doors of the local synagogue, mosque or temple, which fulfil a similar function and sit just as prominently and importantly in local life.

Just a few weeks ago, I visited the Balsall common Parkinson's café at the Balsall common methodist church, where I met a 30-strong community group committed to helping people with Parkinson's. Crucially, the church offered the venue free of charge, providing the group with an invaluable space to support local people in navigating the complexities of life with Parkinson's.

Over this last cold winter, which saw the Government's cut to the winter fuel payment, an army of churches and other places of worship, including 485 Church of England churches, played a vital role in providing safe and warm spaces for those in the cold. Communities also make countless donations of food and clothes every year via places of worship—a point eloquently made by the hon. Member for Battersea. I thank all our places of worship, especially our churches, for all that they do.

For many churches, however, the future of their support schemes looks far bleaker than they perhaps expected. Many will be celebrating the election of the 267th supreme pontiff—I send my warmest congratulations to Pope Leo XIV—and others might be getting ready to welcome a new Archbishop of Canterbury; I am less brave than my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), so I will not be commenting on church affairs. However, hundreds of these churches will also be looking to the future. They will probably be less thankful to the Government for their cut to the much-valued listed places of worship grant scheme. The scheme has been a lifeline for many churches and other places of worship seeking essential and fundamental repairs by helping to cover the VAT incurred on repair costs, within certain limits. I will focus on churches, because Historic England's heritage at risk register found that of the 969 places of worship at risk in 2024, 959 were churches. Indeed, between 2023 and 2024, 55 places of worship were added to the list.

Nationally, the established Church of England—the mother Church of global Anglican communion—has a backlog of repairs to churches estimated at more than £1 billion, with an annual repair bill of about £150 million. Hon. Members might think that, confronted with those worrying statistics, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport would be working tirelessly to ease the burden on places of worship, but unfortunately they would be wrong. The Government's response to the repairs crisis has been one of delay, confusion and cuts. After leaving those community assets in the dark by continuously delaying the announcement on the scheme's future, the Government finally came to this place to confirm the fears of many: there will be cuts to the scheme and to the lifeline of many of our historic churches and places of worship.

As I have previously said in this Chamber, many of my Meriden and Solihull East constituents have told me about their concerns about their beloved places of worship. One told me that the cut

"would be a disaster for listed places of worship",

and that the ability to reclaim VAT

"makes an enormous difference, particularly at a time when the cost of building work has increased substantially."

Many Members have made that argument in this debate.

Sir Philip Rutnam, chairman of the National Churches Trust, said, after the funding was slashed, that the scheme

"simply does not provide enough certainty or support for"

churches,

"who need more time to plan and deliver repairs…We strongly believe that the scheme should be made permanent—it's vital to help these buildings stay open, serving local people, and it's the poorest and most isolated who will suffer most if these buildings are forced to close."

He highlighted that local people—indeed, communities—will suffer if places of worship are forced to shut their doors for good due to the miserly actions of a Government way out of their economic depth.

Furthermore, this all comes despite the fact that the scheme offers tremendous value for money. As the National Churches Trust has shown, every £1 invested in a church generates £16 of social good.

I call on the Government to end the dithering and ensure that this is the final time they leave our community assets in the dark. The Minister must confirm whether the Government plan to continue the scheme beyond the one-year extension, which does next to nothing for the confidence of those responsible for the affected buildings and communities. They must protect our national heritage with pride, not leave it crumbling in the dark shadow of bureaucratic delays. I gently say to the Minister: the Opposition often ask the Government to stand for something, so why not stand for our churches?

10.42 am

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. Good morning to everybody in the Chamber. I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for securing the debate and the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for the significant work that she does.

I will respond to some of the points that hon. Members raised and set out the Government's position on this topic. Given the subject of the debate, it seems fitting to begin by reflecting on some religious terminology. I understand that among Christian communities it is common to remind one another that, biblically, "church" refers not only to a physical building but to a gathering of people assembled, united by their Christian faith. Nevertheless, for most the word "church" invites images of Christian places of worship, be they the Gothic cathedrals in the shire counties or the churches of all denominations in towns and cities across the country, which were built not just as places of worship but as anchors of the communities they serve. They serve not only the community's spiritual needs, but its social needs, and many stand in support of the local school, the community hall and more. Many churches, including in my town of Oldham, are buildings of note whose status and heritage have stood for generations.

There are many modern parish churches on estates around the country. Town planners would often draw up the ideal community, with local schools, shops, pubs and, alongside them, places of worship, which were always seen as integral to a thriving community.

We also know that church buildings often welcome through their doors not just Christians, but those of all faiths and none, because they are a wider anchor of the community. That can equally be said of places of worship belonging to other faiths and belief communities, including mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras and temples. The public service and care for their neighbour enacted by faith and belief groups are not just words; they are seen in actions that are often very practical and grounded in the place they live in and represent.

That brings us to the focus of this debate: the importance and impact of religious buildings in communities. There are an estimated 40,300 churches in the UK, according to the National Churches Trust, plus many places of worship belonging to other faiths and beliefs. The invaluable contribution of religious buildings to the built landscape of our nation cannot be overstated. My noble Friend Lord Khan, the Minister for Faith, has made more than 120 visits since last July, including to places of worship, and seen at first hand how they serve their communities.

Only last week, the Minister for Faith spoke at the Shah Jahan mosque in Woking, marking VE Day and the sacrifice of Muslim soldiers in defence of our country. The mosque, built in 1889, is the oldest purpose-built mosque in the country. The Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha gurdwara in Birmingham, which the Minister for Faith visited in December, was built in the 1970s, following the arrival of Sikhs from India and East Africa. The Nishkam campus includes not only a place of worship, but a school, a health centre and a social enterprise that serves all members of the local community, regardless of faith.

We have heard numerous examples of how religious buildings are being used to build more compassionate and resilient communities. I can think of a number of churches, mosques and temples in my area that reach out and offer support to the homeless, provide food banks and do an amazing amount of charity work. We have heard about services based in those buildings for older people, younger people and marginalised groups, from food banks and community kitchens to vaccination centres and now modern family hubs. I will add the work that my Department funds through the near neighbours cohesion programme, which often operates out of places of worship, bringing together people from diverse background to collaborate on initiatives that improve their local community.

Sadly, because these buildings matter, they can become the focus of hate for those who seek to sow division in our communities. We saw that in the wake of the tragedies in Southport last summer, when the local mosque became the target of thugs participating in violent disorder. What those criminals did not anticipate was the response of local people, Muslims and many non-Muslims alike, to protect and rebuild that mosque. But protecting religious buildings from violence cannot be just the responsibility of local citizens. The Government are committed to protecting the right of individuals to freely practise their religion at their chosen place of worship, and to ensuring that our streets and communities are safe.

That is particularly important at a time when attacks on synagogues and mosques in the UK, and worldwide, have risen. In 2025-26, up to £50.9 million is available to protect faith communities and their places of worship. That includes £18 million for the Jewish community protective security grant, £29.4 million for the protective security for mosques scheme and for security at Muslim faith schools and £3.5 million for the places of worship and associated faith community centres of all faiths.

We know that those measures, though vital, do not necessarily address the deep-seated issues that lead to the need for such protections in the first place. I am sure

[Jim McMahon]

we all wish they were not needed at all. That is why my Department is leading the cross-Government effort to develop a longer-term, more strategic approach to community cohesion, working in partnership with communities and local stakeholders, including faith and belief groups, to rebuild, to renew and to address those deep-seated issues.

As part of that ambition, the Government recently announced a plan for neighbourhoods: £1.5 billion to invest in 75 areas over the next decade, highlighting the Government's commitment to repairing fractured communities, bringing people back together and ensuring that people see a visible difference and improvement in their communities. Local neighbourhood boards will provide a space for community representations, which could include those from faith and belief communities, to help shape how the funding is delivered through their local neighbourhood. That could include discussions on the role of places of worship in serving their local communities.

Religious buildings help to make up not just the physical, but the social fabric of our nation. They are a record of our history, a resource for our present and an asset for the future. That is why this Government have continued to fund the listed places of worship scheme. It was due to the difficult fiscal circumstances that we inherited that the scheme's budget was reduced to £23 million from April 2025. Despite that, the evidence of previous years suggests that that sum should meet the demand, with 94% applying to the scheme for less than £25,000 and more than 70% applying for less than £5,000.

It is worth noting that there is also a range of support for listed places of worship via DCMS and the Department's arm's length bodies. For instance, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has committed to investing around £100 million between 2023 and 2026 to support places of worship. In exceptional circumstances, listed places of worship may also be eligible for Historic England's heritage at risk funding, and in February DCMS announced an additional £15 million for 2025-26 for this sector.

The Churches Conservation Trust also funds repairs to and maintenance of more than 350 churches in its portfolio. Moreover, town and parish councils are civil local authorities, and in that capacity may choose to support the upkeep of religious buildings, which support the development of other community assets.

In addition to the critical day-to-day work of providing spaces that help to meet the needs of local people, churches and religious buildings also often host events of national commemoration and celebration. Examples include the funeral of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, His Majesty the King's coronation and services of remembrance in every community across the country—moments when religious buildings become sites of history and stir the nation's collective soul. That has also been movingly evident in the images of St Peter's basilica in Rome over the last few days and weeks, with great crowds gathering to pay their respects to the late Pope Francis, and scenes of jubilant celebration to mark the election of Pope Leo XIV.

I thank the Members who secured this debate, the right hon. Member for Salisbury and the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea, and those who participated in it for providing the opportunity to demonstrate—

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for giving way. He is making a good speech responding to the debate, but I raised three points at the start: making the scheme permanent, prioritising support for those projects that are already under way and looking at a capital fund. Will he respond to those specific points?

Jim McMahon: I did my best to outline the range of different funding available to local churches and places of worship; this fund is just one of a number. On my hon. Friend's particular point about the continuation of the fund, Members will appreciate that any matter of future funding is a matter for the spending review, and every Department across Government will make a submission to that.

John Glen: Of course the Minister is absolutely right in what he has just said. However, he will also be very aware that within the budgets he is responsible for, there will be capital underspends in-year, so there will be an opportunity for him to make the case to his Secretary of State and to the Treasury, to say, "Should some of that underspend be allocated to these works in progress—the 260 projects that anticipated a VAT return that they do not have?" I urge him to consider taking that opportunity. It would be a very savvy and politically sensible way of proceeding, and would earn him a lot of credit.

Jim McMahon: What I can say is that the passion, enthusiasm and commitment shown by all Members here today in talking about the importance of these places of worship—not only the historical status they give to a place in terms of belonging and sense of pride, but how they act as a community anchor for the future—is absolutely appreciated. Our wider work in terms of the plan for neighbourhoods, with the £1.5 billion that we have announced, and the wider work that we are doing, for example on community ownership, is all part of this process.

In my own constituency, the Holy Rosary Catholic Church, which was built in 1955, has now unfortunately closed. Members might think that a 1955 church would be quite mundane in its feel and architecture, but there is a significant grade II listed memorial in that church, designed by George Mayer-Marton, which is a significant focal point for that community. We are working locally to see how we can marshal funds from different places. I give that as an example of how—as everyone in the Chamber will know from their own communities—there is never just one fund that provides answer to the question; we must blend different funding streams together to make these schemes add up. The importance that Members have given to these local schemes is appreciated and supported by this Government.

To directly address the question from the right hon. Member for Salisbury about capital underspends, we will look at that in the round and across the whole range of interventions that the Government take to support local communities. However, I will certainly take the

enthusiasm of this debate back to other Ministers in DCMS and make the point to the Minister for Faith, who I am sure is following today.

In a way, we finish where we started: recognising, through the contributions that Members have made, just how important these buildings are as both places of worship—something that has an important role to play in our society—and as places to convene. They are places for people of all faiths and no faith to get the support they need to live a decent and fulfilled life in their community.

10.55 am

Marsha De Cordova: I think Members across the Chamber will agree that this has been a good-spirited debate. It has not been party political, because churches and places of worship are present in all our constituencies. We have heard some good examples of the significant role and impact of our listed places, whether they are providing a breakfast club, a warm space or wonderful musical recitals—I feel I need to be invited to Derby cathedral at some point. The Government cannot afford not to act to ensure that these places are protected, so I hope that the Minister will take that message back.

I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for co-sponsoring this debate, showing how we can work across party on issues of common interest, and my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who made a wonderful speech on the importance of our church, Holy Trinity Clapham—a thread throughout the entire debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers); I will take back his point about the speed with which we appoint our archbishop.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Leicester South (Shockat Adam)—let us hope that one day Leicester will be back in the premier league, not least for my own family interest—for Yeovil (Adam Dance), and for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) for their speeches. I also thank the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox), the hon. Members for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), and for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), and my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for their interventions.

Finally, I thank the many church leaders for their leadership, for their selfless service and for the incredible work they are doing in our communities and constituencies up and down the country. I thank each and every Member who spoke, and all those who continue to raise this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of churches and religious buildings on communities.

Venture Capital: Access

11 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to venture capital for people from ethnic minority and other underrepresented backgrounds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. Venture capital in the United Kingdom is a unique and valuable industry that supports many smaller innovating companies with high growth potential. Our VC market accounted for £8 billion of investment in 2023. It is the largest VC market in the world after the US and China, and the largest in Europe by a considerable margin. As the CEO of the UK's trade body for venture capital, the British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association, eloquently put it:

"Venture investment helps turn ideas, research and development into thriving businesses, generating economic growth, stimulating innovation and creating jobs and opportunities across all nations and regions in the UK."

However, while our VC market is growing and strong, it is highly inequitable. For ethnic minorities, women and many other communities which there is either insufficient data or insufficient time to discuss today, our system of venture capital does not work. Businesses with founders from those communities receive a disproportionately lower percentage of VC deals and of total VC funding. With their priority of growth, the Government must do more to ensure that the venture capital market in the UK is inclusive and accessible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. In Northern Ireland we have the Minorities Recognition Awards, which launched the innovators grant competition for ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland. It has been a successful collaboration that offers entrepreneurial individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds who are resident in Northern Ireland and have a novel business idea a choice to apply for a grant of some £10,000 to further develop their ideas. But to make it go further and work better, does the hon. Lady agree that the devolved institutions could benefit from further funding for the likes of these grants to potentially bridge funding gaps and ensure that people from all backgrounds can have the opportunity to succeed? I believe that many people have that ability.

Sarah Olney: I entirely agree that we need to do more to bridge that gap. I am delighted to hear about some of the efforts already being made towards that goal in Northern Ireland.

In 2022, 10% of first-time equity deals went to all-ethnic minority teams, with 19% of total investment value. However, while I welcome the broadly representative nature of these first-time equity deals, they are unequally distributed within ethnic minority communities, with only 0.24% of venture capital funding between 2009 and 2019 going to black founders. On a similar note, all-white teams accessed a mean investment of £224,000, whereas teams with one or more ethnic minority founders received an average of £49,000. All-ethnic minority teams received an average of £94,000—less than half of what all-white teams received.

I am proud to be a member and former chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ethnic minority business owners, which has not only supported ethnic minority business owners, but considered the intersection of diverse

[Sarah Olney]

characteristics, including gender and ethnicity, on access to finance, which I will come on to later. I am proud to welcome Diana Chrouch, who provides the secretariat for the APPG and does amazing work on behalf of ethnic minority founders.

I am pleased to note the recent successes in the financial industry. In particular, I welcome the work of the Lending Standards Board on creating their access to financial services for ethnic minority-led businesses code. While that was an important and significant step towards greater equality, the Lending Standards Board does not directly cover venture capital, instead covering other financial instruments for investment. With the LSB acting as living proof that positive change can happen, and given the statistics I have mentioned, it is time for the Government to step up and ensure that that success is replicated in venture capital, and that we can tackle the inequality within VC.

Lack of equality for venture capital investments is not only an issue in relation to ethnic minority communities; female founders are also far less likely to secure this kind of investment. In 2022, a report by the British Business Bank found that only 13% of first-time equity deals went to all-female founder teams, representing 6% of total investment value, and that there had been no statistically significant improvement in this during the past decade. The data is even more worrying for women from ethnic minorities: only 0.02% of the total amount invested through VC went to black women entrepreneurs. One of the most damning statistics of the inequality within the venture capital system is outlined in a 2023 British Business Bank report: only 3% of individuals in senior investment and non-investment positions were women from ethnic minority backgrounds, and concerningly, zero black women were found in positions of seniority in VC firms at the time of the study.

I am sure that many of us are aware of this as an issue affecting founders and business owners across the country. However, this inequality was highlighted to me by a constituent of mine in Richmond Park, who is the founder of Parli-Training, a business that has supported the Northern Irish and Scottish devolved Governments, NATO and even parliamentary offices in this very House. In the years leading up to and including 2024, it employed 170 people and, at its peak, generated a £250,000 in turnover. Despite that strong performance over many years, my constituent, who is a woman from an ethnic minority community, was recently denied investment from the Greater London Investment Fund. In her correspondence with the fund manager, she was told that the fund would not be viable for someone like her because she would be viewed as a risk, that those who access the funds usually come from wealthy backgrounds, and that the only funds available to female-led businesses in London usually take the guise of a grant. My constituent was told that she should try to find a grant that suited her business, or start a GoFundMe. Clearly, something has gone wrong.

Of course, a long discourse on the issue at hand can only go so far. What entrepreneurs from affected communities need is for the Government to take meaningful action to ensure that the UK's venture capital industry is accessible and inclusive. The first thing we need is greater transparency in the reporting and recording of data, particularly for venture capital deals. That has been championed by many leading voices in the venture capital sector and by the APPG for ethnic minority business owners.

Ladi Greenstreet, CEO of Diversity VC, has said:

> "There is a significant amount of power in reporting. Simply measuring the problem creates momentum for change",

whilst the July 2023 British Business Bank report stated:

> "Venture capital firms should participate in industry-wide surveys and make D&I data on their investments public"—

an effective action to improve diversity.

Furthermore, a November 2023 report by the British Business Bank in collaboration with other leading trade bodies outlined the

> "scarcity of comprehensive data on ethnic minorities particularly at the intersection of gender and ethnicity."

One measure that I hope the Government will consider is integrating the reporting of diversity data within venture capital tax reliefs. As recommended by the Treasury Committee's 2023 report, provision of diversity statistics as a requirement for eligibility to receive the enterprise investment scheme or the seed enterprise investment scheme tax reliefs and the venture capital trust tax reliefs may be an effective way to improve reporting statistics, and to push companies to act on this important issue.

Secondly, I urge the Government to take more robust action to support women in finance and venture capital, including through the Treasury's women in finance charter and the British Business Bank's investing in women code. Despite their success, the schemes continue to be voluntary initiatives with relatively low levels of uptake, meaning that their progress in improving diversity in venture capital is too slow and restricted. For instance, the women in finance charter is currently signed by 400 companies covering 1.3 million employees, but there are more than 80,000 companies and 2.5 million employees in the UK's financial services industry. On the other hand, signatories to the British Business Bank's investing in women code accounted for 47% of venture capital deals, meaning that over half of VC deals would not fall under the code. Therefore, I echo the calls made by the Treasury Committee in 2023: will the Government consider mandating the Treasury and the British Business Bank to adopt a "comply or explain" policy with regard to both the WFC and the IWC?

I should note that the Treasury Committee also outlined that, should diversity statistics and reporting not improve quickly enough, it would be wise to consider calling for compulsory membership instead. With these changes, the Government can strengthen existing processes to ensure that women are not negatively impacted.

Another key call from groups including the British Business Bank concerns diversity at the top, referring to the lack of diversity in key bodies, including investment committees, which often have ultimate decision making on where capital is allocated. Too often, investment committees are made up of members with similar characteristics and backgrounds, leading to groupthink and the preservation of the status quo—a status quo that we know is inequitable.

In its July 2023 report, the British Business Bank recommended pushes for greater diversity in these leading committees as a crucial opportunity for greater accessibility and inclusion, with a correlation between diverse investing

groups and diverse investment recipients. As recommended by the APPG for ethnic minority business owners, would the Minister consider requiring VC firms to adopt and implement a strategic investment inclusion framework, modelled after the Lending Standards Board framework, to dismantle structural barriers?

In conclusion, the Government have said that their priority in this Parliament is growth, but what good is growth if it is not accessible to all our communities? We are cutting ourselves off from a key source of that growth if we continue to enable barriers to accessing investment for all the excluded groups I have mentioned. The Government are committed to supporting businesses, but what good is that commitment if a number of businesses are excluded, whether deliberately or not, from finance and investment?

Our venture capital system continues to be unrepresentative of our communities, and the Government must do better to tackle the issue. The Government have long championed themselves as a Government of change, but many entrepreneurs looking for venture capital have so far seen more of the same from this Government. I hope that the Minister has heard the points made in this debate and takes meaningful steps to resolve the injustice we see in our venture capital industry, which hinders businesses, damages growth and continues a legacy of inequality.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): I will begin in the usual way by congratulating the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing this debate. I also acknowledge the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who seems to represent the whole of Northern Ireland in Westminster Hall. The hon. Member for Richmond Park rightly referenced the impressive work of Diana Chrouch, as the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group for ethnic minority business owners. I am grateful to her for the challenge that she poses to Government on this issue. Perhaps unusually for a Minister, I hope that she will continue to challenge us in this space. She is absolutely right to say that although there has been some progress, we need to do an awful lot more.

It was a pleasure to join the hon. Member for Richmond Park and other members of the APPG for ethnic minority business owners at the King's awards for enterprise reception in April, recognising current holders of the King's award and encouraging more ethnic minority business owners to apply. There were some really inspiring stories from some of the ethnic minority business owners there who had won the King's award. I welcome the work of the APPG in encouraging other ethnic minority business owners to apply for the award.

We do not do enough in this country to encourage and celebrate entrepreneurship among a range of under-represented groups, be it ethnic minority owners, on which the hon. Lady has rightly concentrated, or disabled entrepreneurs, women-led businesses or businesses led by veterans. We know there is more to do in this space, which is one reason why, last month, we launched a call for evidence on access to finance, to look at a range of issues facing small businesses in their access to finance. As part of that, we are considering particular challenges for ethnic minority business owners and other groups that I have referenced.

Preparing for today's debate, I was struck by the quote from Meghan Stevenson-Krausz, the joint CEO of Diversity VC, summarising the latest findings from the British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association. She said,

"Progress? Absolutely. Enough? Not even close."

That is an excellent summary of the position and reflects the collective sense of urgency right across the VC industry, which I welcome. The BVCA study, to which Meghan was referring, is a good example of the progress that has been made, but, as a result, it underlines how far we still have to go. That 2025 report on diversity in UK private equity and venture capital covers 370 firms and over 14,000 employees, which is a significant proportion of the industry. It differentiates between roles, such as membership of investment committees, which take the key investment decisions, and junior or middle-ranking posts.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park cited an earlier report from the British Business Bank in her speech. That more recent report focuses on the VC sector itself. I will share some of the most striking findings. The encouraging headline is that 18% of investment professionals in the study are from an ethnic minority background, reflecting the UK population as a whole, and one third of that cohort are women. That matters because the most significant predictor of backing diverse entrepreneurs is the diversity of the decision makers themselves. One argument made is that the 18% overall figure masks a concentration in more junior roles, and there is some truth in that criticism. It takes time to progress to a decision-making position on the investment committee, so one would hope and expect that that disparity lessens as overall numbers improve. It is less pronounced than I expected. The study found that the proportion of ethnic minority staff was 25% in more junior roles, 19% at mid-level and 16% on the investment committee. The numbers at more senior levels have risen since the last survey and the trend is going in the right direction. But, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park rightly said, there is still more progress needed.

The final point I found striking was the representation of different ethnic groups. Within that 18% total, 11% were from an Asian background, while just 2% identified as African or Caribbean. For a black entrepreneur seeking investment, that 2% is perhaps the most relevant figure. As I am sure the hon. Lady and other hon. Members would agree, it is the individual experience that matters. Each individual has their own identity, which the term "ethnic minority" does not fully capture. When it comes to levels of venture capital itself, I welcome the data that the hon. Lady cites on first-time equity deals, with the number of deals for all-ethnic minority teams rising from 5% in 2013 to 10% in 2022. I share her concerns about the unequal distribution across different ethnic minority communities and agree that there is certainly more to be done, as I have previously alluded to. I was disappointed to hear about the very unfortunate experience of the hon. Lady's constituent in applying for investment from the Greater London investment fund.

We have said that progress is happening but is insufficient. What more can we then do? The hon. Lady made a very eloquent case for compulsory data gathering and

[Gareth Thomas]

membership of industry codes. I will certainly reflect on the arguments that she makes on each of the different points that she raised. The hon. Lady will understand that I am, sadly, not the only Minister that has to be sympathetic to her case. I will certainly draw the attention of other colleagues in Government to the points she has made.

Taking her example of the investing in women code, that is growing year on year. The hon. Lady noted that signatories already accounted for some 47% of venture capital deals. When this year's report is published, she will find that that figure has grown further. I have asked my officials to ensure that the hon. Lady gets an advanced copy. The power of a voluntary code or a pledge, such as the women in finance charter, is that it signals a shared commitment. Membership of a compulsory scheme perhaps merely signals compliance. For example, the invest in women taskforce has successfully raised a £255 million fund from its members to invest in women entrepreneurs. This private sector-led, Government-backed initiative has been effective in part because it is voluntary and not constrained by moving at the speed of the slowest.

Sarah Olney: I just want to highlight that part of my pitch was that we could do more to encourage that voluntary take up. Anything compulsory would be very much a last resort. We should be encouraging voluntary take up in the first instance.

Gareth Thomas: I am completely with the hon. Lady on that point and recognise that is exactly where Government can play a useful role in getting behind industry-led initiatives. We have certainly been doing that in the context of the invest in women taskforce and are also working with the Lending Standards Board on the code that it is developing. More broadly, we have the benefit of world-leading experts in this area, notably Professor Monder Ram, who leads the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship at Aston University. Professor Ram's comprehensive report "Time to Change: A Blueprint For Advancing the UK's Ethnic Minority Businesses", which was prepared in partnership with NatWest, was launched in 2022 and sets out the £75 billion potential in unlocking growth of ethnic minority businesses. As a Government committed to growth, that is a huge win for the UK if we can do more to unlock that potential. My Department plans to become an implementation partner for Time to Change, joining organisations such as the West Midlands combined authority and Be the Business. We will be working in partnership with Professor Ram's centre to implement the recommendations of the report. I can tell the hon. Member for Richmond Park that by happy happenstance, I will visit Professor Ram at Aston University later this week.

To shift the dial, there has to be a shared drive to improve things. I pay tribute to the pressure that the hon. Lady and the all-party parliamentary group for ethnic minority business owners are placing on Government and on the industry more generally. I hope hon. Members will see the issues of access to finance for under-represented groups addressed in the Government's small business strategy, which we aim to publish later this year.

Just yesterday I had the pleasure of attending the launch of the Lilac review here in Parliament. Its report considers the experience of disabled entrepreneurs and how investors and the financial services sector can better meet their needs. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Michelle Ovens and Small Business Britain for their work in driving that review. It was a genuine pleasure to co-chair the review and in a similar way to this, many of the issues that came up around access to finance in that work generate significant questions for Government that we will seek to address in the months ahead. There are obviously similarities between our discussion here today around the needs of ethnic minority business owners and the needs of disabled entrepreneurs. For example, we know from research published by the British Business Bank that ethnic minority-led businesses are not as likely to be using external finance as white-led businesses. There is no lack of demand, but what ethnic minority-led businesses are pointing out to us is that when they apply for bank loans they are significantly more likely to be turned down, at 49% compared to 32% for white-led businesses. That appears to reflect differences in credit ratings, which suggests that that form of assessment may be insufficient. That view is supported by the fact that community development finance institutions, which are relationship-based, perform much better. In 2023, 24% of CDFIs' business lending went to ethnic minority-led businesses and 41% went to women-led businesses. Similarly, the British Business Bank offers start-up loans for new businesses, of which 21% have gone to ethnic minority entrepreneurs and 40% to women.

Information is a key enabler to closing the finance gap. The British Business Bank research that I referred to earlier found that under-represented entrepreneurs are, overall, less confident about obtaining information on the different finance types and providers available. I urge all Members to point ethnic minority-led businesses in their constituencies to the resources available to them—particularly to start-up loans if the business is less than three years old, which are run through the British Business Bank, the CDFI that serves their local area, and more generally to the range of online information available from the British Business Bank.

The small business strategy, which the Government are working on, will begin to address the information gap and enhance our business support offer later this year. In the meantime, my Department has participated in events such as the UK Black Business Show, and we will join Founderfest 2025 to support entrepreneurs. We will continue collaborating with NatWest, Professor Monder Ram and the all-party group for ethnic minority business owners and others to advance this agenda.

I return to the summary from Diversity VC:

> "Progress? Absolutely. Enough? Not even close."

I welcome the constructive challenge that the hon. Member for Richmond Park posed of Government policies, and I share her sense of urgency on this issue. Through our industrial strategy and small business strategy, and partnerships with the private sector, we will seek to accelerate progress so that all entrepreneurs have a fair chance to secure the investment they seek to unlock the potential of their businesses.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Local Housing Need Assessment Reform

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reform of the standard method for assessing local housing need.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse.

Everyone agrees that across much of the country, homes have become far too expensive either to rent or to buy. There is less consensus on the best way to get things back under control. I will argue that throughout the history of the standard method for assessing local housing need, that method has been part of the problem, not the solution.

For a long time, the free market ideology we followed was to build houses randomly until the price came down. Ever since the days of Margaret Thatcher, who single-handedly killed off the public sector contribution, we have never got anywhere near to keeping up with demand. In recent years, the strategy has been to set stiff compulsory building targets and, to that end, the Government introduced the standard method.

We were told that the method would produce clear, objectively determined house building targets for every local authority. We were assured that they would be equally and fairly distributed in line with genuine local need. We can now confidently say that that failed. Many authorities got nowhere near their number. Sometimes that was through dragging their heels, but often it was because their individual targets were outright bizarre and unachievable.

Meanwhile, the system has kicked up terrific public anger and opposition, which in itself gets in the way of success. At times, the Government have resorted to wielding a bigger stick or they have backed off in the face of Back-Bench pressure. Under the present Government, we are heading back towards the big-stick approach. There is almost no attempt to win consent.

I will argue not only that the standard method failed to do what it says on the tin, but that the failure was inherent from the first. It never stood a chance. Far from solving the affordability crisis, the method has significantly contributed to making that crisis worse, and it will continue to do so even under the remodelled version announced before Christmas, because it is based on a false premise.

To be absolutely clear, this is not about national targets. Whether we aim nationally for 200,000, 300,000 or 400,000 homes a year is a separate debate, and I hope we will not get sidetracked by that today. It is easy to tweak the standard method to meet whatever national target we want it to meet, but in practice, national targets have been not much better than slogans, such as Boris Johnson's 40 new hospitals, which never existed in reality. Instead, it is the local target as applied to individual planning authorities that matters.

Broadly speaking, the standard method compares local house prices to local wages to estimate an affordability ratio, and it adjusts targets upwards if that shows prices to be unaffordable. The sums have been fiddled with many times since the method was introduced, and I do not doubt that such a process will continue. That is where the first big failure comes in: the standard method is supposed to provide an objective assessment of local housing need but, if we were honest, we would acknowledge that it is actually designed to reflect national need.

For example, in my constituency, the growth target based on existing households should now be 527 a year, but our poor affordability ratio takes us all the way up to 1,329 a year, and that is before we add on more for our neighbours. That is a whopping uplift by any stretch of the imagination. The face of Horsham district is changing at breakneck pace. Villages such as Billingshurst and Southwater are on the way to doubling in size in less than a decade. That is not because Horsham is experiencing some kind of spectacularly large birth rate; it is just an arbitrary calculation.

Once again, to be clear, I wholly accept that this is a national problem and that we need national solutions. Every area, including Horsham, has its role to play, but it is insulting people's intelligence to describe that as a local need, when we plainly have nowhere near enough locals to go around, and they mostly cannot afford the new homes anyway. If we keep telling obvious lies to people, how will we ever win public consent? This brings me to the next big failure of the standard method, which is that there is no meaningful public scrutiny. Most local councillors do not understand how it works, sadly, let alone the general public. The standard method is never an election issue, yet it has a massive impact on our communities. In this case, ignorance is not bliss. It is a big reason why Conservative councillors have, election after election, proclaimed their commitment to allocating brownfield sites over greenfield yet somehow ended up doing the exact opposite. They cannot do anything to stop the logic of their own inflexible system. The standard method is a kind of mathematical bulldozer, sweeping aside our open spaces.

The single worst failing of the standard method is that it fails in the very purpose that it was supposed to be designed for. In Horsham, as in many areas, the average price of a new house is higher than that of our existing stock. Ironically, the more houses we build, the worse our affordability ratio gets, and the higher our target will be next time around. The standard method does the exact opposite of what it is supposed to do. The more housing that is built, the more the method asks to be built, with no obvious mathematical limit.

I stress again that I completely agree that building many more houses than we have over the last 40 years is an essential step on the path to affordability. However an obsession with one arbitrary number, without thinking what goes into it, does not work. It is actually getting in the way of success. We have to focus attention on the type of housing we are permitting, not simply the raw total. The standard method is based on a false premise, because many things affect prices besides the house building rate.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and sorry I missed the first minute of his speech. I warmly congratulate him on the point that he is making. I agree that what he describing is a false premise, in the same way that the targets themselves are based on a delusion. The delusion is that private developers would be prepared to collude with Government to drive down the price of their final

[Andrew George]

products in order to deliver affordable homes. That clearly is not the case. The combination of these two things is working against what the Government are trying to achieve, which is to meet housing need.

John Milne: I thank my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. The system is working almost to the reverse of what was intended.

In my constituency of Horsham many people either work for London businesses or perhaps have traded down from a more expensive London property. From their point of view, Horsham represents excellent value. The official affordability ratio does not reflect real working conditions in Horsham for locals, and therefore overstates local targets.

Local councillors all strive to get the best for their communities, but the way we receive targets under the standard method destroys our negotiating position with developers. Developers are not stupid. They can work out as well as anyone else how many sites are needed to meet our targets. They have no need to concede on civil amenities or on affordable housing because they know that, at the end of the day, they have got the council over a barrel.

I have no issue with a private developer seeking to make a profit—what else do we expect them to do?—but do not rely on them to do social planning. In areas like Horsham, years of free market ideology have turned councils into mere editors of private developer proposals. We build on greenfield sites because they are the only ones that get presented. There is literally nothing else to choose from in Horsham. The free market approach to affordability does not work for the housing market. Competition has driven prices up, not down. In Horsham we would arguably be better off if we granted a monopoly to one single developer and let them push down local land prices.

To add insult to injury, we also have the standard method's bullying friend, the housing delivery test. I am not sure whether there ever was a carrot in this process, but the HDT is definitely the stick. Failure to meet targets can ultimately result in losing local control over planning altogether. It is a Catch-22 situation: the developer controls the rate of delivery, but the council pays the price if targets slip. Heads they win, tails we lose.

In fact, the single biggest factor that influences prices has nothing to do with house building. It is availability of credit. If interest rates were to double tomorrow, the price of a mortgage would soar and we would see a house price crash, yet all that would happen without a single new home being built. A succession of policies under the Conservatives only served to make the problem worse, not better. Subsidies such as Help to Buy or stamp duty holidays simply inflated prices further, like a giant Ponzi scheme. The market adjusts, and the subsidy ends up in the pockets of developers until the next upward turn in the spiral.

Therefore, any analysis of UK house building must take into account the key role of finance. Since Thatcher, houses have come to be seen not simply as homes but as investments. In line with that, the explosion of the buy-to-let market in the 1990s correlates suspiciously closely with overall house price inflation. Older generations benefited from decades of property asset inflation, but today it is getting harder and harder to board that train. Putting all that together, it is clear that the standard method is getting its social sums all wrong.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. He mentioned some of the incentives for first-time buyers. Through the stamp duty discounts, we saved the typical first-time buyer around £6,000 on their purchase, which helped about 640,000 young people get on to the housing market. Is he saying that he is not interested in that and that it was the wrong thing to do to help those first-time buyers on to the housing ladder?

John Milne: For the individuals who benefit, no one can argue with it. It is the same with the sale of a council house—if you are the family that gets it, it has clearly given you a massive uplift. What I am saying is that we have a national societal problem to solve in the housing market in general. We have a certain amount of money to put towards it. That was a subsidy. There are far better things to do with that subsidy that do not inflate prices further, as that simply eats up the subsidy.

As I was saying, putting all that together, it is clear that the standard method is getting its social sums wrong. The affordability ratio is actually a lousy proxy for actual housing need. What we need to do is factor a proper analysis of local housing conditions back into the system. That should include an assessment of local homelessness rates, the need for social housing, pensioner poverty and all the other factors that make communities tick. We also need to find a clear role for neighbourhood plans. Neighbourhood plans started as a great way to bring local consent and local knowledge into housing, but from the day the standard method was introduced, they have been effectively overruled. In the latest planning reforms, they were completely marginalised and were not even mentioned.

How can we change the standard method to do the job it is supposed to do? I suggest at least two inputs: a local needs calculation, which focuses on helping local people into the homes they need, and a national needs top-up. Having a separate national needs figure will help us to focus on the delivery of new towns. When our housing needs are as great as they are, new towns are essential. In contrast, the standard method spreads targets indiscriminately across every area. It leads to endless incremental add-ons to existing settlements until they begin to lose their identity altogether. In rural areas such as mine, the standard method has an inherent tendency to create low-density suburbs. Not only do they tend to be more expensive houses, but they use two or three times as much land as they strictly need to.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this valuable debate. Does he agree that, as well as causing the issues he described, incremental building contributes to problems with the sewerage systems? If a developer builds 50 houses here, 50 houses there and 50 houses elsewhere, and each one is considered on its own merit, it does not warrant an upgrade to the sewerage systems, so the water companies do not upgrade, systems become overloaded and we start getting sewage in the water.

John Milne: Yes, it makes strategic planning very difficult. Provision of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, is a major problem and not sufficiently built into the planning system to compensate for it. It is easier in urban centres where the infrastructure is already in place.

This is the reason we have contrived to have perhaps as many as 1.5 million unbuilt permissions nationally, at the same time as a national housing shortage. That is because too many of them are permissions for unaffordable and, therefore, unbuildable homes. There is a degree of land banking but, for the most part, developers build as fast as they can sell. If they are serving only the top end of the market, that will be slowly. As Oliver Letwin described in his excellent 2018 report, sadly unacted on by the Government of the day, we need far greater variety in housing type.

As much as 80% of housebuilding is aimed at the top 20% of the market. The fastest way to fix that is to build a guaranteed quota of social housing. My party is asking for 150,000 a year. I guarantee they would be snapped up like hot cakes, as fast as they could be built. There is a fundamental difference between permissions and actual, physical houses. If all we ever think about is permissions and alleged impediments to permissions, we will never get to grips with the problem. Wrong permissions do not increase supply, they suppress it. Wrong permissions bake high land prices into the system. Handing out more permissions like confetti simply chokes the system with unbuildable sites that will hang over the market for a generation. There are lots of ways the standard method could be reinvented, but any future form must empower local authorities to deliver social housing in significant numbers from day one. How we do that is up for grabs, but somehow it must be done.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I intend to give the lead Member two minutes at the end of the debate at 3.58 pm. I will call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats at 3.28 pm. I will not impose a formal speech limit for the time being. I hope there is time for everybody to come in.

2.47 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for bringing this timely debate for all of us to consider. Before I come to the main thrust of my speech, I should say that it is universally accepted that, irrespective of the Government in power, over the past 20-odd years hardly any housebuilding has happened. The last time there was a proper housebuilding programme in place was in the ’70s, ’60s and ’50s. I am going back in time, but it has not happened in a number of years. It does not matter which political party has been in charge.

Kevin Hollinrake: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s giving way. By way of correction, during the period of our last 10 years in office, there was an average of 207,000 net new home additions every year, which was higher than in the 1970s.

Yasmin Qureshi: I know, but that is still not a sufficient amount. Some of those houses did not come through. There was an amount of housing that needed to be done and was not done. It was done in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s, which cannot be denied. We need to build more homes, including more affordable and social homes. This is an important debate because it asks Government and builders to look at how to assess local housing need.

In Bolton, more than 20,000 individuals are on the social housing waiting list. Families face an 18-month wait for a three-bedroom house, with 800 to 900 applicants for each available home. Many are referred to the private sector, where of course the rents are very high, increasing the financial strain on already struggling households.

The current methodology for assessing local housing need fails to capture the realities on the ground. It overlooks income disparities across our country, the availability of affordable housing and the specific needs of our communities. That disconnect results in inadequate housing provision, leaving many without suitable options. There are homes out there that could be used to reduce housing waiting lists, but they need substantial work to bring them up to standard.

In my constituency recently, I hosted a roundtable with housing providers as well as homelessness charities, and one of the things that they asked for was a ringfenced fund to help social housing providers to make their stock fit for purpose, release more housing and give more people the homes that they desperately need. In the private rented sector, what is called affordable housing is often not affordable, because many of my constituents are on the minimum wage or living wage and they are not able to afford homes that people in the south or in other parts of the country might think are reasonably affordable. They are not affordable for those living in Bolton and the surrounding areas, because “affordability” is based on market prices, not what people are earning locally. It is all about the central, national figure, whereas we should be looking at local wages and what is affordable to people there, as opposed to somebody in a more prosperous part of the country. Of course, the current system also allows landlords to charge higher rents and make profits because they are taking advantage of the fact that the need for homes is greater than the availability.

We have to understand that housing is not merely about shelter; it is about dignity, stability and opportunity. It is not a coincidence that often the people we find in the criminal justice system have come from an economically and socially deprived background, and housing is a big part of that. We saw during the covid time that in poorer areas, where many people live in one house, there was a higher rate of covid being spread among them as opposed to people who lived in large houses, where they could properly and safely quarantine themselves. In a lot of the smaller houses where many people were living, they were not able to do so.

There are a lot of reasons why a decent home is important for everyone. What I ask is that we all work collaboratively, and certainly I try hard to ensure that individuals and families in Bolton South and Walkden have access to safe, affordable and appropriate housing. I therefore welcome the Government’s plan to create 1.5 million homes. I wish them luck and hope they will be able to achieve that. It is a welcome—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton may laugh, but at least it is an initiative. It is a great initiative,

[Yasmin Qureshi]

a great thing to work towards, a great aim to have, because if we do get there, that should hopefully alleviate a lot of the challenges.

I wish the Government great luck on this and hope it will happen. In the meantime, could we have some additional funding, especially for social housing?

2.53 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Mrs Hobhouse, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair—I think, in my case, for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing the debate and bringing us together to discuss this important matter.

It is very good to see this Minister in his place. I thank him and his Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government colleagues for their engagement on these issues. I have been in this place on more than one occasion to talk about related issues, including about how national parks work relative to local authority planning areas. I am grateful to his colleague the Minister for Housing and Planning for also meeting me separately as well as corresponding. Today, I am going to talk not about those issues, but about the algorithm overall and how it works and, in particular, about the affordability ratio and how it works—or, more correctly, does not work.

We know that the Government are looking for a big uplift—a 50% increase—in the number of housing completions, but in areas such as mine in Horsham, the increase is much greater than that. In my local planning area the target is up from 575—already a pretty punchy annual target—to more than 1,100, which is effectively a doubling. It is not a north/south thing, it is a rural/urban thing. Rural areas throughout the country have some of the biggest increases, such as in the rural far north-west and far north-east. There have been really big increases in the target, and at the same time major conurbations are seeing much lower increases in their numbers—typically 16% or 17%. Some places, including parts of London and Birmingham, are actually seeing the numbers go down at a time when we are trying to build many more homes. Sometimes it is thought that this is correcting a historical imbalance—that homes have not been built in the countryside for all these years—but that is not the case. Proportionately over the last couple of decades, in the rate of additions of homes per 1,000 existing dwellings, the predominantly rural areas have seen a greater build-out rate than predominantly urban areas.

I do understand that the Government need a formula—the 0.8% of housing stock multiplied by the five-year average affordability ratio, minus five, divided by five, multiplied by 0.95, plus one. It looks okay. Trust me: it looks logical if we break it down, but the truth is that in practice, it is not working. It is not delivering what all of us want to see, or what the Government want to see, which is a material, sustainable increase in housing stock in the places where people need it.

The affordability formula matters so much more now because of that 0.95. It used to be 0.6, but since it has gone up, it has made the affordability ratio do that much more work. There are multiple aspects to query, such as whether to use workplace-based earnings or residency-based earnings. I think both of those things are relevant, and a comprehensive formula would probably use both. Whether earnings or income is used makes a difference, because it means capturing only the working population or the retired population as well. Crucially, the formula lumps all types of housing together, so it does not distinguish between the cost of a starter home and a two-bedroom flat, a one-bedroom flat or a three-bedroom house in these different places.

Echoing what we heard from the hon. Member for Horsham, I have lots of people coming to my surgery who are unable to afford a home; probably everybody in this room has lots of people coming to their surgery in the same position. Some of those people are looking for social housing and there is a shortage of that, but when most people come to our surgeries and talk about the unaffordability of homes, they mean the affordability of a home they can buy—a decision that, I am guessing, most of us made at some point in our 30s or 40s. However, many more homes get built every year and I still get the same number of people coming to my surgery saying that they cannot afford to get on the housing ladder.

We want there to be more affordable homes in both senses, both the public sector sense, in what I call "capital A" affordable—social rent, part-ownership and all that—and for young couples and young families to be able to buy a home and invest in their security and that of their children. But the problem is that, other things being equal, the best returns for developers are on larger, five-bedroom or four-bedroom executive homes in large plots of land outside of town centres, which are very aspirational homes for people to buy. Although there is nothing wrong with that, it does not address the needs of the people coming to our surgeries saying that they cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. Therefore, because we have high unaffordability ratios, we get lots more houses being built but they tend to be five-bedroom, four-bedroom executive homes disproportionately. That makes the area even more unaffordable on average, because the average price of a new build house is greater than the median price of the existing housing stock, so over time the formula ratchets up the price. It just says, "However many more homes you build, you will need to build more and more." Honestly—there is no mathematical logic to it. We should be trying to address the actual need.

I ask Ministers to look again at the formula, not to get rid of it but to change it. Development targets must be sustainable and reasonable in different areas of the country, and crucially they must target the addition of homes that people can afford to buy, so that over time affordability ratios improve.

3 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing the debate. I intend to keep my remarks relatively short. I want to make it clear from the outset that I am speaking not to score political points or to point a finger, but to share my experience, which I hope will be useful.

I recognise the immense challenges that local authorities, such as mine in Harlow, face. Only yesterday, housing officers, led by the wonderful Cara Stephens, supported a number of families forced to leave their homes because of fire safety concerns. The challenge is partly caused by a lack of social housing.

Before I came to this place, as well as being a local councillor, I spent two years working for a homeless charity in Harlow called Streets2Homes, so I saw the challenge from both sides. Like the hon. Member for Horsham, I saw the reliance on the private rented sector. I have raised this issue a number of times, not because I think the previous Government had any malicious intent—absolutely not—but because when they raised the housing allowance of universal credit, it led to the private sector in Harlow raising rents, which ultimately meant that the state spent more money on benefits and it just went into landlords' pockets. I ask the Minister to consider that point.

Streets2Homes had the resource to do what local authorities often cannot: sit down with those making homeless applications and really get to the root of the problem. Clients often said to me that during the process of applying for council housing, they felt dehumanised. The lack of council housing meant that it often became a tick-box exercise for housing officers. I recognise why that is the case, but for the person applying for housing—if they face homelessness, they may be suffering a huge amount of anxiety and mental health issues—it was not suitable.

On the substantive point that the hon. Member for Horsham made about housing need and local allocation, there is cross-party agreement about the need to build council and social housing in Harlow, although there is a limit to the amount of housing we can provide. I often say that Harlow is a very small district, and it is very much built up to its borders, so would the Minister comment on how local government reorganisation will potentially impact that? I have regular conversations with the Conservative leader of Harlow council, and we both agree that we need to build housing, but Harlow is limited in where it can be.

The new standard method includes consideration of the affordability ratio and average wages. I enjoyed the maths equation from the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds)—as he knows, maths is one of my favourite things to talk about. Will the Minister touch on how the method will help constituencies such as mine?

I am concerned that the increase in the cost of private sector renting means that more and more people are reliant on social housing, so there is even greater need. I did not agree with the local authority's decision to remove band 4. In Harlow, when there is an application for a council house or a homeless application, there are four bands: 1 to 4. The administration decided to remove band 4, which I opposed, mainly because I think it just pretends that the issue does not exist. There is a need for social housing, given the increase in the cost of the private rented sector.

Permitted development, which was a quick fix by the previous Government, has had a huge impact in Harlow. I echo the points that the hon. Member for Horsham made about housing conditions. He is right to champion new towns. Harlow is a fantastic new town—I am obviously proud to represent it, and I am proud of its sense of community—but one of the issues that new towns face is that things were built at the same time, so the houses need repair and wear out, almost, at the same time. I will never again defend anything that Margaret Thatcher did, but one thing I will say about the right to buy is that it allows housing stock to go into private ownership, so that repair is not then an issue for the council. However, my issue with right to buy is that it did not replace the stock and led in part to the issue we have now.

The other issue that Harlow faces—I am just throwing them all at the Minister now—is land banking. I take the hon. Member's point about there not necessarily being a desire to land bank, although I think there is an element of that in Harlow. Finally—I said I would not speak for very long and I have managed six minutes, so apologies for that, Mrs Hobhouse—the housing crisis is without doubt one of the biggest crises this country faces. I absolutely welcome the Government's attempt to tackle it, and I will do everything I can to support them to do so, because I have seen at first hand the impact that a lack of housing has on my community.

3.6 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate.

In West Dorset we face growing housing challenges. Young families are struggling to find homes in villages where they were raised, key workers cannot afford to live close to their jobs, and older residents wanting to downsize find too few suitable options. We need more homes, but they must be affordable, well designed and rooted in the needs of the people who live in them. For the record, our landscape is—in my totally unbiased opinion—the most beautiful in the country, with over 70% of West Dorset falling within the protected national landscape, or area of outstanding natural beauty, as it was formerly known. It is a landscape at the heart of our £320 million tourism economy. Housing policy must reflect the balance we need to strike between delivering homes for our residents and protecting the places that define our communities.

Building more homes must not mean building the wrong homes in the wrong places. The standard method for assessing local housing need currently fails to reflect the complex reality of rural communities such as West Dorset. Rigid housing targets, imposed without flexibility or enough local insight, risk forcing inappropriate developments on these precious areas, undermining the very qualities that sustain our economy and our environment. We need a system that empowers local authorities to deliver the right homes in the right places and with the right infrastructure.

In West Dorset, 78% of homes are under-occupied, with nearly 46% having two or more surplus bedrooms. It is not a crisis of space; it is a crisis of sustainability. Nearly half our population is over 55, and many older residents are living in homes that are simply too large for their needs and are unable to downsize while staying in the communities that they love, while young families are priced out of moving in, or moving back to the communities where they grew up.

It is not just about numbers; every home must come with the infrastructure it needs. Too often, developments in our area go ahead without the GPs, schools, dentists and roads needed to support them, let alone the sewerage system. In West Dorset, our sewerage infrastructure is outdated and overwhelmed. Last year alone, we saw 4,200 sewage spills. It is an environmental and public

[Edward Morello]

health disgrace, yet water companies are still not statutory consultees when housing need is assessed or developments are approved. This must change. If the Government are serious about protecting our environment while building new homes, they must require water companies to be involved from the outset, to ensure that the infrastructure can cope and that new homes do not just add to an already failing system.

In constituencies such as mine, many homes sit empty for most of the year, driving up prices and hollowing out our towns and villages. We must give councils the tools to tackle this through planning powers and council tax premiums, and by properly assessing the impact of holiday lets and second homes when calculating housing need. The Liberal Democrats believe that this should be a local authority-driven process. Councils know their areas best. They should have the powers to set planning fees, buy land at fair prices and shape the future of their communities. Development should be community led, not developer led.

If the Government want to build 1.5 million homes, which are sorely needed, then we must reform the standard method so that it reflects reality. Let us give local councils the tools and flexibility to deliver the homes and residents they need in ways that infrastructure and environment can support, as well as taking occupancy rates into account, in order to identify the needs of people to downsize and stay in their communities, and also make water companies statutory consultees, because we cannot build a sustainable future on crumbling foundations. West Dorset does not need imposed numbers. It needs good, affordable homes that work for local people, protect the land and restore trust in the system.

3.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for setting the scene so well. I always bring a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Jim Shannon: It is good that we understand the importance of these issues. The Minister is a regular visitor to Northern Ireland and as he engages with relevant Ministers there, as he always does, he will be asking these questions and talking about the matter. I look forward to his response.

The hon. Member for Horsham set the scene well. I am flabbergasted to hear from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) that the water companies do not play a role in planning. In Northern Ireland, there cannot be any planning application without contacting Northern Ireland Water. It is important to have the input of a major facility that looks after sewerage and storm water and that will set out the systems for any development. I understand the Liberal Democrats will possibly table an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill on that and it would be great if Government accepted it. That would be the easy way of doing it. I am sure when they listen hard to what others say, they will understand that is the way forward.

I have heard the comments made by the hon. Member for Horsham on the issues surrounding local house prices and the comparison to the cost of living and people's wages. In my constituency of Strangford, and specifically within the Ards and the North Down borough, new house builds are more expensive than current housing stock, causing higher targets to be set and ultimately limiting affordability for people to buy. The University of Ulster has stated that the average house price in Ards, Strangford and North Down as of 2022 was £221,000. The Northern Ireland average was £200,000, so we are already above the norm in my constituency. That was three years ago, so it will be even higher now.

The banks of mum and dad and of grandpa and grandma are so important to many young people. I am not better than anyone else and never profess to be, but we will help our children achieve their home goals. Where there is the ability to do so, it is important to do it and help them get on the first rung on the ladder. The thing is that not everybody can do that, and that is why it is important that Government have an input into the process.

In late May 2024, it was announced that 100,000 private and social homes would need to be built over the next 15 years, so by 2039. One third of those, about 33,000, will be social homes. It is so important to have social homes in place and to have availability of social housing stock for those who cannot buy their homes and get on the first rung of the ladder. To look realistically at waiting lists, nearly 48,000 households are on the waiting list for a social home and about 36,000 of those are in housing stress, meaning that they are in priority need. In the social sector there is a huge need for additional homes and there is clearly a disjoint between the need for homes and the allocation by which people can get one.

One of the biggest issues I had as a councillor back when I was first elected in 1985 was housing. Housing matters took priority. It is probably more about benefits now than it is about housing, but at that time it made me very aware of the need for those who wished to have social housing. Again, I am not better than anyone else but I have always pushed for extra social housing in my constituency. We will have a fairly major development in the Castlebawn site in Newtownards, which is a brown site that will have about 120 social housing units of all sorts—for disabled people, families and elderly people, and there will some flats in there as well. It will be a mix of all that is needed in the Ards area. It will only scrape at the surface, as we need many more.

I have been proactive in ensuring that social housing units become the norm. Yet it seems we see the housing reality focused on new developments that range between £200,000 and £250,000 to purchase, which is not within everybody's pocket. For the majority, it is simply not doable. That is not to mention the need for social housing accommodation due to the extortion that is the private rental sector. Again, remembering that the wages in Northern Ireland are lower than they are on the mainland, rental accommodation in Newtownards is between £750 and £1,000 a month for a two-bed property. In many cases it is completely out of touch with the issues that need to be dealt with.

I will conclude, Mrs Hobhouse, as I know others wish to speak. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Horsham for raising these issues. They are applicable to

all our constituents across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in one way or another. There is hope that over time we can do better to look at the issues on the ground as opposed to the overall targets in figures.

I wish the Government well; it is churlish of anybody not to wish the Government well with the 1.5 million or 1.4 million new houses that they wish to build. It helps the economy and provides housing opportunities for those who can purchase them and for those in need of social housing. At the same time, more must be done in engagement with the devolved Administrations to tackle the issues. I am very keen to see the Minister engage with and speak to those in the Northern Ireland Assembly, in particular to the Minister responsible, to see how we can learn from each other. These great nations can learn from each other: the Scots, Welsh, Northern Irish and English. We are better together. The Scots Nats are here together, so they cannot object to that. We can learn from each other and do better as a result.

3.16 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse, for the first time, I think. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this vital debate. My constituency of Chichester has been grappling with serious housing challenges, which have been continually worsened by a deeply flawed planning process. The demand for social housing vastly outstrips supply. Private rentals are prohibitively expensive, and sky-rocketing house prices have made home ownership increasingly out of reach for those who have grown up in my constituency.

Housing developments should enhance our communities, delivering affordable, sustainable homes alongside essential infrastructure, but the current approach does the opposite. The standard method for assessing housing need imposes arbitrary national targets on local authorities, which ignore the specific needs and constraints of each area. It fails to deliver genuinely affordable homes and does little to reflect local demand or geography. As my hon. Friend highlighted, the standard method fails to address above-inflation house price rises. Our average house price in Chichester, according to the Office for National Statistics, is £454,000. In just one year, to February 2025, the price of a semi-detached house in Chichester rose by 8.1%, yet Chichester has seen huge-scale development in recent years. Meanwhile, the average salary in my constituency is under £30,000, which is below the UK median.

When new homes are delivered, they often enter the market at prices higher than the local median, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned. That artificially inflates the affordability ratio, which then increases future housing targets, creating a vicious cycle that drives prices even further out of reach. It does nothing to address the real challenges that my constituents face in getting on the housing ladder. Instead, it leaves new developments affordable only to those who are moving into the area, not those already living there. At the same time, councils face an uphill battle in trying to ensure that developments, required by the same standard method, include adequate levels of social and affordable housing.

At present, we have over 2,000 families on the wait list for social homes in Chichester. Any development of 11 homes or more is expected to provide at least 10% as affordable housing. Both Chichester and Arun district councils, which sit within my constituency, request 30% social and affordable housing in their local plans to address some of the unmet need locally, but those targets are continuously undermined by viability assessments submitted by the developers, because of the high land prices in our constituency.

A recent example is a 2,200 home development to the west of Bersted, approved by Arun district council on the basis that it was included in the Conservative local plan from 2022. There is strong opposition in the community to the proposal, not only because those homes will add to the strain on local infrastructure, but because only 10% of those homes will be "affordable". The very definition of affordable is fundamentally flawed when even 80% of unaffordable is still unaffordable for so many people. The developer claimed that a higher proportion of social and affordable homes on the site would have made the project commercially unviable, so the council was left with no power to enforce its requested levels of social and affordable houses.

That is why I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, calling on the Government to adopt a separate social housing target. I am sure that would be welcomed by local authorities up and down the UK, because they are best placed to know what their communities need, not the developers that are trying to build in them.

The standard method also fundamentally fails to consider any geographical constraints, which ties the hands of councils during land allocation. In my area, 70% of Chichester district is covered by national park, with an additional 5% designated as national landscape at Chichester harbour. That means that our ambitious housing target, which has doubled under the Labour Government, must be met within just 25% of available land, yet the housing target remains unadjusted.

We need a method for assessing local housing that actually works for communities—one that recognises local constraints, delivers genuinely affordable housing, protects the national landscape and ensures that every development contributes positively to the places that we call home. This will not change until the top-down approach of the standard method for assessing local housing need is reformed to genuinely reflect community need, and until local authorities are given the power to challenge and regulate developers effectively. I beg the Minister to look again at the standard method so that we can truly address the local housing need for areas such as mine in Chichester.

3.21 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) not only on securing the debate, but on the very erudite manner in which he took us through the issues and correctly analysed the weaknesses of the system. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller). I note that, before her, the omnipresent hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to the importance of seeing this

[Andrew George]

across the piece—not only in Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland—but he forgot to mention Cornwall. Well, I will forgive him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham recognised the need for a needs assessment, as it is an essential building block to resolving the issues. It is the methodology currently used that is both flawed and inevitably inaccurate, and sometimes leads the process in the wrong direction. I do not think it is ill-conceived in itself; rather, the interrelationship between that and the target-setting process is flawed. The target-setting process ends up with house building targets—we have housing need and then we have the house building targets.

If we were to set targets to reduce need—rather than for developers' greed, if one were to put it in pejorative terms—we would approach the matter in an entirely different way. Let us take Cornwall—I know it well and I live there. I have also worked there as a professional in the sector as a chief executive of a housing charity delivering affordable homes—during my nine-year sabbatical from this place—so I know how this market works. Over the last 60 years, the housing stock in Cornwall has almost trebled—it is one of the fastest-growing places in the United Kingdom—yet the housing problems of local people have got worse. We cannot necessarily deduce from that fact that building homes is therefore harmful to meeting local housing need; however, the build targets are not in themselves the answer. The answer ought to be setting targets to reduce need, and that can be done if one has a robust method to do it. Not only would that be better for planners, councillors and others who want to meet the local need in their communities, but it means that when applicants come forward with their planning applications, they would have to demonstrate not how many homes they can build towards a target, but how much need they can address by delivering their projects. Although the Government's aims and policies are laudable, they need to look at the dynamics of how need and their build targets interrelate with each other.

In my intervention, I referred to the delusion—it is a belief adopted by successive Governments of all parties, including, I am sorry to say, our own—that developers will somehow collude with the Government to drive down the price of their final product. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester referred to the unviability of schemes that cannot be delivered with enough affordable homes, but that is only because of the way in which the methodology is used to permit those developments to go ahead in the first place. Once planning permission is granted, not only does the setting of high targets often create hope value on every piece of land around every community—which starts to make them unaffordable before the planning process has even started—but once the planning process is established, the value of the land becomes so great that the scheme becomes unviable for delivering affordable homes. The whole system is built to fail.

I am afraid to say that we need to look at the methodology for delivery—that is, the building of a new lower rung on the affordable housing ladder of "in perpetuity" intermediate market homes, which needs to have a life of its own. We need to address the problems that a lot of social housing providers have in delivering homes, which is that they are prevented from delivering homes in low house price value areas, and low-income areas, because of the cost-to-value ratio. A lot of people probably do not understand that the places that need the homes most, where the incomes are lowest, are the most difficult to deliver on because of the cost-to-value ratio, which has to apply before providers can go forward with their schemes.

There is a whole set of other methods that could be used to address the issue, but I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham on what he has achieved. I hope the Government are listening, because this is a constructive debate. We are not attacking the Government, but urging them to adjust their approach in order to achieve the outcomes we all want to see.

3.27 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this debate, and hon. Members from across the House on their excellent contributions. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am still a sitting councillor at Teignbridge district council.

The Liberal Democrats support housing targets, but believe we need to win the case for that housing within the communities we represent, and that enforcing them from Whitehall without community consent will continue to fail to deliver the homes we need. Homes must be built to meet local need and not be driven simply by developers seeking the highest profits. Development has brilliant potential for providing a wealth of opportunities to rural communities, but that can be realised only by genuinely involving those communities in the decisions that affect them. That means the right houses in the right places.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's decision to make housing a priority, given the desperate number of people denied the basic right to a safe and warm home. The Conservatives' poor commitment to house building has left 8.5 million people in England with unmet housing need. The Conservatives let developers get away with building housing to poor standards, and without GP practices, schools and community infrastructure, which are badly needed. They also let them off the hook for leaving land for housing unbuilt and new homes empty. We believe everyone has a right to a safe and secure home, but without more support for councils, more people will be left without access to quality and affordable housing. The previous Conservative Government forced councils to do more and more with less and less, plunging many into financial crisis.

Although we have welcomed this Government's commitment to our call for multi-year funding settlements, with additional pressure on councils to accept national insurance contribution changes, it is essential that they are funded robustly to achieve those aims.

We have been disappointed by the Government's reluctance to commit to a target for social house building. In addition to an overall target for new homes, the Liberal Democrats would target 150,000 new social homes to tackle the housing shortage and homelessness crisis. We are committed to ensuring that house building does not come at the expense of our environment.

The Government should not be either delivering house building or protecting our environment; they can and must do both.

We welcomed the Government's recent announcement that they are adopting the Liberal Democrat policy and wording mandating all homes to be built with solar panels, in a solar rooftop revolution. We also welcome the measures in the Renters' Rights Bill to ban no-fault evictions and create a national register of licensed landlords. We believe that these steps are crucial to overcoming the housing crisis. Liberal Democrats have long called for leasehold reform to make house ownership fairer and more accessible—we have been campaigning against leasehold since Lloyd George introduced the people's Budget.

On the specifics of the standard method, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham, who pointed out that it does not and cannot work—as did the right hon. Member for, I believe, the Isle of Wight.

Damian Hinds: Well, I have been there, but I represent East Hampshire.

Martin Wrigley: My apologies to the right hon. Member.

Since 2018, when the Conservative Government introduced the so-called standard method, which was supposed to calculate housing need, the country has suffered from a top-down, dysfunctional system that fails to prioritise the importance of affordability or the infrastructure necessary to support new development. The constant tinkering, with the introduction and subsequent withdrawal of various failed algorithms, has led to the near paralysis of our planning system. That came on top of the central Government's starving local planning authorities of the resources they need to function, and the lack of direction as a result of no fewer than 13 changes of Conservative Housing Minister in the nine years from 2015.

It is illiberal, and contrary to the interests of a community-led planning system, to remove options for how to assess housing need from local communities. Although the standard method of assessing housing need is likely to be followed by most authorities, councils with the resources and ability to assess housing need in ways more suited to their areas should be permitted to do so. All housing need assessments are, in any event, subject to the same scrutiny by the Government's inspectors.

In the district of Teignbridge, in which my Newton Abbot constituency sits, the average house price in 2019 was just under 11 times the average income. After a substantial increase in housing targets due to the standard method calculations, that ratio is going up, and the average house price is now over 11 times the average income. Housing developers build homes only as fast as they can sell them and at the price they need to protect their profit and viability, given the often extortionate prices they have paid for the land. Asking them, via the flawed standard method, to build more to reduce the price is much like asking the owner of a gold mine to increase extraction to a level that reduces the price of gold. It will not happen.

A big part of the solution is to build more council homes, and I am proud to have overseen the resumption of council house building at Teignbridge for the first time in 30 years. I urge the Government to help more councils build more council homes to help more people.

3.33 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) and congratulate him on securing this important debate.

I am afraid this is just another example of the two-tier society that this Government are presiding over. We have had two-tier taxes and two-tier justice and now we have two-tier targets. That is the reality, and it militates against the basic British principle of fairness. I will go through the numbers in a second, but Labour's own council leaders have called the Minister's targets unrealistic and impossible to achieve. The leader of West Lancashire council used exactly those words: "impossible and unrealistic". The targets are unachievable.

I am in no way, shape or form a nimby. Unlike 15 of the Minister's colleagues in the Cabinet, I have never objected to any developments in my constituency as a Member of Parliament or as a member of the public. I am absolutely on the side of young people who want to get on the housing ladder and those on lower incomes seeking affordable homes. The only way to deliver that is to deliver more homes. I am not against the Minister's 1.5 million target, but it will be very challenging. We should look at the data: over the last 10 years we were in office, average net housing additions were 207,000 a year. That was the highest level for 50 years—even higher than in the 1970s, because we were knocking down an awful lot of houses back then.

The targets have been driven by the change from assessment of housing formations to a measure of stock already delivered in an area, with a multiplier on top for affordability, but they are totally unfair. London has seen an 11% decrease in its target, Leicester a 32% decrease and Birmingham a 38% decrease. Coventry has seen a 55% decrease in its housing target, yet the neighbouring authority of North Warwickshire has had a 123% increase. That is despite the fact that North Warwickshire, like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said of his authority, has over-delivered on its housing targets. Nuneaton, another bordering authority that is over-delivering, has had a 75% increase in its housing target compared with Coventry.

I am trying not to be too parochial but in my neck of the woods, York, which has been under-delivering massively against its housing target for years and years, and had not had a local plan since 1956—it has just got one in place, thank God—has seen a 19% increase, yet neighbouring North Yorkshire, which is my local authority, has had a 199% increase, despite significant over-delivery.

Of Members who have spoken in the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire has had a 100% increase in his area; the hon. Member for Horsham a 48% increase; the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) a 63% increase; the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) a 72% increase; and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) a 66% increase. I like the Minister and we get on very well, but his authority in Nottingham has had a 32% decrease. How can that be fair? It is against the basic principle of fairness. Yes, there is a 50% increase in delivery across the board, but why have some targets been decreased and others massively increased? That is simply unfair.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

Those are not anecdotal cases. Based on information from the House of Commons Library, across the board, mainly rural areas are seeing an average 71% increase and urban areas an average 15.6% increase. On top of that there is the duty to co-operate and strategic planning, which is likely to see even more houses going into rural areas. There is no justification for that unfairness. It also sits against the principle that the Government say they adopt, as we did, of a brownfield-first approach.

Brownfield development is the least controversial approach, and it is what we would all like to see, but it is complex and costly, particularly in a world of increased costs of delivery. Over the past few years, developers have seen a 40% increase in costs of building. On top of that is the building safety levy, the Building Safety Regulator, biodiversity net gain, the future homes standard, section 106, the community infrastructure levy and the remediation of brownfield sites. Those things, and the Government's policy on grey belt, will mean that more and more development will be pushed from urban areas into greenfield and green belt.

What the Government are doing with the national planning policy framework cannot be divorced from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and the Trojan horse that they called grey belt. What they sold to the public as being a few former garage forecourts or wasteland is far from that. It is greenfield and green belt. The Minister cannot shake his head. There used to be protections between villages to stop them merging, and they have gone. There used to be protections to stop villages merging into towns, and they have gone. This is not about grey belt; it is a fundamental change to green belt.

Of course, this is not about targets. It would be pointless to have this debate and just talk about targets—we have to talk about delivery. The 1.5 million homes are a huge ask. The reality is that to hit that target for England, for the rest of this Parliament, delivery will need to hit not 207,000 a year, which we averaged, but 375,000 a year. That is a 180% increase—a doubling.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate you, Mrs Hobhouse, on your chairmanship and the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing the debate, which has been well-mannered and thoughtful on all sides. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is giving a fighting and boisterous speech, but I remind him that we both stood on manifestos that contained numbers of new homes that we would build. In fact, his party's number was bigger than the Government's: it was 1.6 million. If we are going to talk about facts and how we deliver these things, let us talk about sense and pragmatism, and not rhetoric, because, unfortunately, what he is saying now is not what he said at the election.

Kevin Hollinrake: Good for the hon. Gentleman for reading our manifesto—not enough people did, I am afraid. He is right: we did set a more ambitious target, which I am not against. As I said right at the start, I am in no shape or form a nimby. However, I am for honesty and fairness. The point is that the housing targets have been moved away from certain types of area where people tend to move. They tend to move from rural to urban to take their first job or start their first business, as I did, but the targets are going from urban to rural.

The Minister faces many challenges alongside the huge number he has set himself. The Office for Budget Responsibility and Homes England have said that the number targeted is impossible. Let us see. I wish him well for delivery, although not on the skewed figures that we have discussed today. There are real challenges here, as the Minister knows: things such as the Building Safety Regulator; the skills issue; small and medium-sized enterprises, which build a far smaller proportion of homes than they used to; and making sure that we get first-time buyers on to the housing ladder.

We have tabled a number of amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that will solve all these problems, and I very much hope that the Minister will look at them. One of them proposes no solar on any best and most versatile land. I am sure that the Minister will look at that, because it would potentially leave space for more British farmland to produce fantastic food. We have also tabled amendments on protected landscapes—my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire has a significant section of protected landscape in his patch, which is bound to constrain supply, but no recognition has been made of that—and on ensuring that there is no plus or minus beyond 20% in any of these targets, which would be fairer. We will also seek to amend the national scheme of delegation, which disgracefully removes votes from councillors, and restore the protections for the green belt. As some in this excellent debate have said, we need a better mix that is more suited to demand in local areas.

I very much hope that the Minister will support those amendments, but, because I feel that he will not, I will make one plea to him: please, look at the Building Safety Regulator. There is a queue of 18,000 homes with planning consent that are waiting six months or more for an answer from the Building Safety Regulator. That is a huge bottleneck in supply. I hope that the Minister will at least touch on that point.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I know that the Minister has quite a lot of time, but I ask him to leave two minutes for the Member in charge to wind up.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): Thank you for that clear direction, Mrs Hobhouse; it is very helpful.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate and on his leadership. He clearly articulated his concerns on the revised standard method for assessing local housing need. He set us off on a good course: this has been a very strategic debate, which is not always the case with debates about housing. I have a disclaimer that I and colleagues in the Department always read out at this point about our inability to comment on individual matters or individual local plans, but colleagues have not tempted us in that direction. That is very important, and it set the tone for an excellent debate. I will cover many of the points that the hon. Member and others made in the course of the conversation.

The debate has been relatively non-partisan. I think the shadow Secretary of State slightly missed the memo, but I like him as much as he likes me, and I know he

does not mean it and that his instinct is always to work constructively. I have no doubt that he and his colleagues will want to do so. At this very minute, colleagues from all parties are upstairs discussing in great detail the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which will provide us with a vehicle for many important changes. Clearly, there will be lots of debates to come on very important amendments.

Multiple members have said that we are in the middle of a really acute housing crisis. I get out of bed every day, as do my colleagues, because 160,000 children live in temporary accommodation. As mentioned by the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley), that is the tip of the iceberg of the multiple millions who are under-housed and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) said, their housing and under-housing has profound impacts on their opportunities and life chances. That has been in the spirit of this debate. We made that signature commitment at the election to build 1.5 million new homes over this Parliament exactly for those people, because they need decent housing to build decent lives and decent communities.

Home ownership is out of reach for too many. Too few homes have been built, and too few are genuinely affordable. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the bank of mum and dad—that ever-present and indeed growing feature that now seems inevitable for people of my generation or those who are perhaps are a bit younger, but was not a feature of my mother's generation. That is such an important issue of social justice. We must build more homes, and they must be in places where people want to live and work. The planning system has to underpin that, but as the hon. Member for Horsham said, the history of that is chequered. Indeed, as the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) said, we have all had our stake in that. I certainly approach this in the spirit of humility. We want to get this right.

I will now turn to the work of the previous Government. We must have a method that is clear and transparent. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) talked about what it looks like in detail. At least it is there in detail for people to say, "I don't like this element of it. I think this is weighted wrongly". It is clear, it is transparent, it is there, and it produces the numbers. That is the basis for plan-making. I do not want to make a political point out of this, because the right hon. Gentleman is proud of the previous Government's record on housing, but we have had a little test of the alternative in the final year of the last Parliament, and there was a sense that targets were out the window. I do not think that was a very effective decision, and the impact on housing starts is a matter of public record.

I do not think we have heard much of an argument for not having a method at all, but without one, the situation tends towards stasis. That is why last December, following consultation, we implemented a revised method that is aligned with our ambition of a million and a half new homes over this Parliament. There is one point that I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Horsham about, although I appreciate that it may well be a separate debate: I do not think we can decouple the national target and the local target. If the local target does not meet the national target or the national target does not tally with the local target, there will be disconnect and frustration.

This target and this method point us towards 370,000 homes. The formula incorporates a baseline of local housing stock and is adjusted upwards to reflect affordability pressures. Areas where unaffordability is most acute see the largest adjustment. We think that supply is an issue here alongside demand—I disagree slightly with a couple of colleagues on that point. However, I think it is really important for those watching to hear this stated from the Front Bench: this method does not exist in a vacuum. It is the underpinning of the development of local plans, which have been and will be the cornerstone of our planning system. The plans take into account all the development needs of a local area, including affordable housing.

I appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) about the challenges facing her local authority in ensuring that its plan holds, but the fact that it has that 30% target is a sign that local authorities can put on record the nature of housing that they want in their communities. Notwithstanding the point made by the hon. Member for St Ives, if it is an arm wrestle with developers, it has that guiding document at least to halt it, because we know that the alternative is a lack of planning that exposes communities. They make up the bedrock, and we want all communities to have one. York is always a prime example—I am overjoyed that York has got to that point after more than six decades. That community is better protected in terms of development, and it will also deliver more effective development. It is a win for all.

I cannot concede the point made by the hon. Member for Horsham that councillors do not know enough; I think that they do. There is a point about local authority resourcing and planning, and we made that commitment at the previous Budget. We want councillors to have the skills to feel empowered, but crucially, as the hon. Gentleman said, local communities also need to feel empowered. I cannot agree that housing and development is not an election issue; I think that it is. The 1.5 million homes target was very much a feature of what we said at the general election. I want to empower local authorities and people to have their say on plans, because they are a bedrock. If they want development that is sustainable, of the right type and in the right place, perhaps on brownfield sites, the local plan is the route to that. It means engaging with it in a way that goes beyond the questions of, "Should there be development? Is our development target too high?" We need to get to, "Where is it going to happen? What type does it need to be?" That is, I believe, the way to deliver the development that they want.

A number of colleagues, including the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), have mentioned local circumstances. Indeed, last week, he and I were talking about West Dorset in the context of having the right parking in the right places. Things like that are facilitators and enablers of place. The standard method is a starting point to inform the preparation of local plans. Once local need has been assessed, authorities can establish the number of new homes that are to be provided in the area. That takes into account evidence showing what land is available and any constraints on

[Alex Norris]

development—for example, those relating to national landscapes, areas at risk of flooding and other relevant matters.

That approach recognises that some areas—as, I think, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire said—will not be able to deliver the figure provided by the standard method. If they can justify that fully in their local plan during examination by an independent inspector, they can make that case. However, of course, they must only adopt a plan that is legally compliant and sound. It must be consistent with national policy, supported by evidence, and we want the views of local people to be taken into account.

A point was also made about brownfield sites. We want local authorities to make sure that they maximise those sites, and I think local authorities want to do that too. We also want them to be sensible about where they review green-belt land. I think there are different types of land within the green belt. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire characterised it as a Trojan horse; that is not our intent. Who is best placed to make that assessment? It is, of course, the local authorities, by leaning into it. The right hon. Gentleman made an interesting point, as did the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton, about whether it is a question of urban versus rural. I do not think that that is the case. Hon. Members will see in our approach to growth in city regions the importance of those regions to the economy; they are places where people want to live, or where people cannot currently access housing.

As the Minister for town centres, I can say that we are enthusiastic in the Department about communities taking control of their town centres, notwithstanding challenges about permitting development. In future, town centres will not be purely retail; the mix will be retail, leisure and, of course, there will also be a need for accommodation. That mix should be locally owned. In his opening speech, the hon. Member for Horsham mentioned new towns. It will not be a case of: is it urban, rural or new town? It is going to be everywhere; the mix will be a bit of everything. Similarly, it will involve big builders and SMEs. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton shares my enthusiasm for getting SMEs building. It is going to be the entire mix.

I am conscious of time, but I want to address the points made by the hon. Member for West Dorset and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about water and local housing. Of course, water is important. National policy is clear that housing must have water infrastructure. There are clear expectations that local authorities should work with each other and the infrastructure providers to ensure that housing has that infrastructure. I think that, in general, they are doing that and ensuring that the water supply is sustainable. The companies have a statutory duty to provide new water and sewerage connections. I appreciate that the subject needs to be seen in the round, but that goes back to the need to have an effective, comprehensive local plan, which local authorities can use as their guiding document. They can then say to the water companies, "We do not want you to look at 50 houses at a time; we want you to see it in the round." That is the sort of leadership that we want.

There are larger issues that colleagues have raised frequently. I would be stretching the scope of this debate if I talked about the behaviour of those who manage water, but we could have a whole new debate on it. Of course, there is an independent review ongoing on the regulation of the water sector for the UK and Welsh Governments. I assure the hon. Member for Strangford, as I often do, that we are very active in talking to the Northern Ireland Executive on a variety of issues, particularly on building safety. I always talk to my counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland about their approaches.

On strategic planning, this is a chance to have a higher level but still localised view of the best sites, working and collaborating with local planning authorities. That is an exciting innovation. My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) asked how that will butt up against local government reorganisation. Of course, those partners will be part of that, but there will still be a local planning authority so that people can submit their views on a local plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, the hon. Members for Chichester and for Horsham and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) talked about affordable and social housing. There can be no doubt about the commitment of this Government and the Deputy Prime Minister to social housing, genuinely affordable homes and homes for social rent. We have already put our money where our mouth is by committing £800 million in-year for the affordable homes programme, and a further £2 billion injection at the 2025 spring statement. Alongside that, there are new flexibilities for councils and housing associations within the AHP and in how they use right to buy.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I commend the Government on their work to change the local connection rules to ensure that veterans can access social housing. In our region, the local authority has come in off the back of that and given veterans the highest priority banding for social housing. Will the Minister take a moment to commend our local council for that reform, which comes off the back of the work that the Government are doing?

Alex Norris: That excellent innovation by the local authority reflects one of the needs that the public want to see met.

In my final minute, I want to address the point that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton made about the Building Safety Regulator. It is right that we have a regulatory framework in place; we have seen the consequence of not having one. It has to protect people but also enable building. There is a moral imperative to ensuring that people are safe in their homes, but also to ensuring that people have homes. The BSR is a relatively new regulator—it has only been in place for a couple of years—and obviously the Building Safety Act 2022 is a relatively new part of the scene.

We are working very closely with the BSR to ensure that its operational processes are as effective as possible. Where that is a challenge, we have made more money available. I speak with the industry about that in great detail, as I am sure the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton does, so he will know the conversations that we

are having. I totally accept that we need to ensure that the BSR is working effectively, because it is a really important part of having a safe system.

I reiterate our determination to build the homes that the country needs. Through the standard method, we have the right tool to get to 1.5 million homes. In that context, local people will have the leadership they need to deliver what that looks like locally.

3.58 pm

John Milne: I thank the Minister for his reply and all Members for their very interesting contributions. One thing that is really striking is that we see the same problem up and down the land. It may manifest itself locally, but it is a national problem.

Like many Members of this Parliament, I come from a local council background—I was the cabinet member for planning in Horsham district council—so I have personal experience of trying to get what we needed for the community out of the plan and developers. It was a battle. My reaction to the changes made to the standard method and to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which is currently in Committee, is to say, "Would that have given me the tools I needed to do the job? Would it have improved my chances?" I feel that the answer is, "Not really, no." That is the standard by which I judge it.

Changes to the standard method could really enhance—make or break, actually—what the Government are doing in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. It is not just a technicality on the side, but a crucial interface. I realise that the Minister will be a bit distracted, given that the Bill is going through Parliament right now, but I hope that in the fulness of time he will take a closer look at the measure, because it can be revised at any point and does not require legislation. I again thank everybody for a very good-natured debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered reform of the standard method for assessing local housing need.

Defence Industries: North-East

4 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Luke Myer will move the motion and the Minister will respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

4.1 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for defence industries in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this important debate on how the Government can step up to support the strong defence industry in our region. I thank my hon. Friends here today and the many manufacturers, both big and small, from across the region for meeting me recently to discuss the issues that they face. This topic is of great importance to our constituents and to our nation, and I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions.

Last week marked the 80th anniversary of VE Day. It was a moment to remember not only the courage of those who fought on the frontline, but the grit and sacrifice of the men and women who powered our industry at home. The north-east has never stood on the sidelines when it comes to national defence. Our proud industrial capabilities have always served this country well, in times of peace and conflict. Our region forged the steel that built the tanks, ships and munitions during those years. Our docks sent supplies to the front. Our communities gave sons and daughters to the war effort. That legacy is written in the fabric of the towns and villages in our region and it lives on today.

In our region, there are some 2,500 jobs directly in the defence sector and many thousands more in the supply chain. There are large prime contractors—for example, BAE Systems, which has had a footprint in our region since world war one and today employs more than 400 staff in Washington, and the nearby Rolls-Royce, which runs excellent apprenticeship programmes. It was a pleasure to meet one of its apprentices, Lucy from Gateshead, in Parliament recently.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is right to underline the importance of the defence sector right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Something that is also important and that he has rightly spoken about is the need for apprentices. The Government have given a contract to Thales in Northern Ireland, and through that there will be 200 new jobs and 20 new apprentices. Does he agree that when it comes to defence contracts right across this great United Kingdom, they need to involve apprentices, to build for the future and to ensure that we have those skills?

Luke Myer: I absolutely agree. The investment that is coming to Thales will mean thousands of advanced air defence missiles that will be supplied to Ukraine. That is

[Luke Myer]

a really important cause, and of course there will be a benefit to the entire supply chain across the United Kingdom as well.

Strong national defence starts well before the battlefield. It is about the skilled workers in our factories—

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) for giving way. I wanted to intervene just after his description of the excellent existing capabilities and proud defence industry history in the region, to add the caveat that nowadays, sadly, we have the fewest defence jobs directly supported by Ministry of Defence spending of any of the regions—there are 1,600 according to recent MOD figures—and the lowest amount of MOD spend by region, at £380 million. Those jobs and that spending are obviously welcome, but the figures are below those for the next lowest region, which is Yorkshire and Humber, and in some regions, such as the north-west, which obviously has a significant cluster with BAE, Barrow and things like that, spending reaches £7 billion.

Does my hon. Friend agree that that imbalance represents something of a missed opportunity, given the region's defence heritage and the passionate, patriotic nature of the workforce, who would probably love to work in the defence industries? Does he agree that we need to ensure that when the increased national spending is rolled out, some of that imbalance is addressed and the north-east is restored to its historical role as one of the flagship regions for defence manufacturing in the UK?

Luke Myer: I agree. The increase in defence spending an opportunity to uplift regional economies and tackle regional inequality. However, I do not want to talk down our region because we do have firms, large and small, that are contributing to our national security and industrial resilience, including Babcock in Newcastle, Nifco in Stockton, Merlin Flex in Hartlepool, Draken at Teesside airport, Tees Components in my constituency, and many others. I am proud to champion Tees Components, a family-run business based in the small village of North Skelton. It delivers world-leading precision engineering for projects including our Astute-class submarines. That is our region in action.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Merlin Flex from my constituency. I had the pleasure of visiting Merlin Flex recently, and people there have talked in such positive terms about the growth and expansion that they are seeing. Does he agree that the unprecedented, record injection of cash that the Labour Government are putting into defence has the ability to transform regions such as ours? Does he also think that it is critical that we support the small and medium-sized enterprises that need help to access those funds?

Luke Myer: I completely agree. I have one note of caution for our region: although we have fantastic manufacturers and SMEs, it is important for our regional economy—the one my hon. Friend and I share—to have a proper skills pipeline. There is a real job for our combined authority and our mayor to step up and work with education providers to ensure that proper planning is in place. My hon. Friend has a fantastic college in his constituency—Hartlepool college, which has inspirational leadership from its principal, Darren Hankey—but such colleges need to be joined up with local manufacturers, so that there is a proper skills pipeline.

All those manufacturers are vital for delivering local skills. Many of them offer advanced training and apprenticeships and ultimately provide high-quality, well-paid jobs in the areas that need them most. I recently met various manufacturers, both prime and SME, to discuss the issues that they face. They strongly welcome the Government's decision to identify defence as one of the eight growth sectors in the industrial strategy. One manufacturer told me that it "puts defence in a different place" from where it was before. Manufacturers also welcome the decision to increase defence spending to 2.5%, the strategic defence review, the progress on trade with the US and the decision to step in to save British Steel. This Government are stepping up, not stepping back, and putting our strategic industries on a secure footing.

Just four months ago, I spoke in this Chamber during a debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on the challenges that SMEs face in defence procurement. I called for better access for SMEs to the pipeline. I was therefore pleased to see the Government's recent commitment to set direct SME spending targets, and I hope that the Minister will provide further clarity on when those will be published. As it stands, SMEs in the defence sector are often contracted for one-off, short-term jobs, and that can create challenges. The unpredictable, project-based nature of the contracts makes it difficult for companies to commit to the up-front capital investment needed to grow.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for her recent visit to our Teesside defence and innovation cluster, where many small businesses, such as those my hon. Friend described, experience challenges in accessing procurement contracts. Does he agree that it is important for the Ministry of Defence to try harder to engage with small businesses further down the supply chain to help them develop capability, and to create visibility for them so that they can be sure of continuity of contracts and can invest in their own businesses and future growth?

Luke Myer: I agree. The best way to ensure that we are building the right approach to procurement is by listening directly to the SMEs that operate on the procurement frontline. I am grateful to the Minister for visiting Teesside to meet the defence and innovation cluster, and for visiting NETPark to meet other businesses. It is clear that she is listening, and that is welcome and appreciated.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): This Government are absolutely determined to reset public procurement for SMEs. In places such as Darlington, we have fantastic SMEs that employ local people, drive local growth, have great terms and conditions, and are a source of local pride. For too long, those SMEs have been missing out because they do not have the bandwidth on a day-to-day basis to put in bids for these contracts, let alone to then offer huge incentives and massive savings,

as some of the bigger clients and players in the field can. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be great to hear from the Minister about the work that she is doing with the Cabinet Office to strengthen public procurement, and to make sure that public money gets into our communities in Darlington?

Luke Myer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. By boosting SMEs we boost not only the defence industry, but other sectors, because many of these SMEs are working on dual-use technology, which has a strong crossover with other areas.

Ultimately, growing our sovereign capacity by building more in Britain is a smart and strategic move that will pay off in the long run, both for our national security and our economic growth.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for this excellent debate and the Minister for the leadership that she is showing—I was grateful for her recent visit to NETPark in Sedgefield in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another significant benefit of more work going to SMEs? Warfare is changing at such a rapid pace that we need to take hold of innovation and the innovative products being delivered by our SME community in Sedgefield and around the country, so that we are battle-ready for the future.

Luke Myer: Absolutely. One of those innovative projects in my hon. Friend's constituency is a semiconductor plant, which the Government stepped up to save with £20 million of investment. That is exactly the kind of active Government and leadership that we need.

The previous Government set up procurement processes with a singular focus, which was awarding contracts to the lowest bidder. That may seem sensible on the surface, but in fact, it has stifled British growth and ultimately cost the taxpayer more. To give an example from Middlesbrough, a local company was forced to step in and finish works that were initially being done by a contractor in south-east Asia, which had been chosen purely because it was the cheapest at the time. Time and time again, we have seen Conservative Governments make decisions on industrial policy that erode our manufacturing base, see jobs disappear overseas and weaken British industry. That Middlesbrough business was there to pick up the pieces and finish the job, but the delay was wholly unnecessary. It ended up costing the British taxpayer more than if we had simply built in Britain from the start.

We need an approach that prioritises British values over mere price. This is about not just securing the cheapest deal but ensuring that every pound we spend strengthens our national security. We must grow our sovereign capacity and put British business first, and support our local economies in the process.

It is also time that we took a more intelligent and long-term approach to defence procurement—one that does not cost us more and builds the kind of capacity that we need here at home, especially in the current global climate. For industries to invest and grow, and train apprentices and support communities, we need to move away from short-term projects and annualised budgets. Businesses need long-term clarity. That will give them stability to plan for the future with confidence.

One SME I spoke to feels that the industrial strategy will help with that, but we can do more to give further confidence to the supply chain, especially through rapid and clear decisions on projects and support for the up-front capital investments that they need to make. This is about investment not only in specialised equipment, but in people. In our region, the jobs in this industry are high-skilled, well-paid and secure, and many of the manufacturers invest strongly in skills and apprentices.

Lola McEvoy: In my Darlington constituency, we have a fantastic engineering firm called Cummins. I recently visited the plant, and I want to bring hon. Members' attention to the fact that they have automated a lot of their processes and, in doing so, have grown their workforce. They have upskilled, reskilled and hired more on the basis of bringing in new technologies. That kind of employment practice is second to none, and we want more of that across our region. As I am sure my hon. Friend would agree, our values around hard graft mean that we are ripe for more defence and manufacturing investment.

Luke Myer: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which just goes to show there is a false dichotomy between jobs and automation. A business can be grown well by embracing the future, so I commend Cummins on the work it is doing in her constituency.

The industry needs a strong skills pipeline. There is a role for Government to support these businesses by making sure our workforce has the skills to meet the demands of the coming decades. As I mentioned before, there is also a role for our regional mayors to play in making sure there is a more joined-up local skills landscape and working with education providers and manufacturers to get the best people into the best jobs.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I was lucky to go a secondary school that was sponsored by BAE systems, and we benefited from that investment. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is focusing on not only the importance of the Government procuring British, but the social value that employers can add, which includes ensuring that they offer apprenticeships and invest in training. Does he agree that we should be encouraging the Government to prioritise the businesses that demonstrate good practice in these areas?

Luke Myer: I agree with my hon. Friend. He and I both worked in the education sector prior to coming to this place and working in policy. It is about joining up those two things, and making sure that people have access to opportunity. So many people across our region have the can-do attitude to succeed, but they are held back by lack of opportunity. Through skills and training we can make sure that they can get into industries such as this, where there are decent well-paid jobs for the future.

One group of people who can bring an extraordinary skillset to our workplaces is veterans. Not only can the defence sector support our armed forces but our armed forces can support the defence sector by establishing routes to civilian employment for those who have served. In my constituency I have recently seen the strength and tenacity of our veteran community. I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for Veterans and People for coming to my constituency to listen to veterans, particularly on the issue of mental health. Operation Valour,

[Luke Myer]

which was announced last week, will help to join up employment, health and other services for veterans across the north-east. I believe that by trusting our veterans and giving them opportunities, we can contribute to their mental health and wellbeing and offer them purpose and community after their service, as well as strengthen our businesses.

This is an important time for the Government to strengthen our defence industry in the north-east. We have already seen the Government stepping up, with £20 million to save the Aycliffe semi-conductor plant, the £173 million contract for Draken at Teesside airport, the creation of steel jobs for Teesside, the £9 billion contract for Rolls-Royce to power Britain's nuclear submarines, and the clarity brought by the strategic defence review and the industrial strategy. This Government are making significant investments in Britain's security. By going further for British defence industries, we not only strengthen our national security, but support local jobs and regional growth. There is no better time to act than now, and there is no better place to invest than our region, where we have the track record, the potential and the drive to lead the way.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): It is great to be here under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) on securing the debate and shedding light on the vital defence industry in the north-east, and particularly his part of the region.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland), for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), and for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for accompanying him to show the great strength of will among elected representatives in the north-east to boost and push the development of their defence industries. I congratulate them all on the contributions they made. I have managed to visit some, but not all of the constituencies represented here today. I know that people will now ask me to go to the other ones, and we will have to bear that in mind as time goes on.

As we heard today, defence makes a considerable contribution to the north-east in terms of jobs, investment and growth, but my hon. Friends have also made clear that a huge contribution could be made beyond what has already been done. The nation as a whole needs us to boost our defence industries, and this Government are determined to do that. It is clear that the world is becoming much more dangerous and Britain is facing rising threats. At the same time, the Government face the challenge of rebuilding and reinvigorating our armed forces to meet those threats better, after a decade and a half of underfunding and hollowing out.

We are conducting the strategic defence review to assess fully the threats we face and to determine what capabilities we need to meet them. It is also why we brought forward an increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027, with plans to raise it to 3% in the next Parliament; and it is why we are working hard on defence reform and the new defence industrial strategy. We cannot continue to spend money in the MOD as we spent in the past. We have to get better value. There is no point in increasing spending if we pour some of it down the drain. We have to do things better, and that is what defence reform is about.

The defence industrial strategy is in part about how we can transform procurement to unlock the potential of suppliers across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland spoke about the need for us to do procurement better and reform it. He mentioned some very good small firms, including Tees Components, which I know to a degree. It is a family firm in a small community that does wondrous things.

There is enormous potential in north-east communities for innovation and dual-use technologies, but the way we do procurement now positively excludes small companies from being able to participate, partly because it takes us so long to do it and partly because of the requirements on the firms to prove all kinds of things and produce all kinds of documentation that they do not normally have the staff to produce. BAE Systems might, but a small family firm does not. The system excludes small firms and they end up, at best, in the supply chains of the primes, which is fine as far as it goes, but does not enable them to show us what they can do in terms of agility and innovation.

My hon. Friends will recall the Chancellor's announcement in her spring statement that we are going to reform defence procurement. Part of that reform will be to speed up getting to contract. The average time to contract is six years, which is ridiculous in the current situation. Procuring a nuclear submarine might take a bit longer than procuring the latest drone, so we are going to segment our procurement arrangements to recognise the fact that not every contract is the same.

We will do this in three layers. One layer will be major programmes, on which we will aim to cut the time to contract from the current average of six years to three years. The second layer is developing new upgrades—a new radar for one of our platforms, for example. For that segment, we aim to get to contract within one year instead of within three. At the faster end—I will not say the smaller end—we aim to get to contract for novel and agile dual-use technology within three months. That will challenge the MOD, but we are determined to do things better and make sure that our spending gets better value and better capability faster into the hands of our warfighters. Many companies in the north-east will be able to benefit from this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland will recall that the Prime Minister announced the formation of an SME hub, which ought to enable small firms to plug into the available opportunities and help them to know where to get finance, which is a problem for small firms. We need a clearer idea of what the capabilities are to enable them to plug their ideas and their dual-use technology into the opportunities that are available.

The establishment announced by the Chancellor of UK Defence Innovation, with a £400 million ringfenced budget this year, which has already started, means that there is more money available for dealing with innovative and novel technologies. The Chancellor also committed us to making sure that there is a ringfenced budget that will increase to 10% of our acquisitions budget.

I therefore think the prospect is good for our small and innovative firms. When I go to trade fairs, go on constituency visits and do roundtables to find out what industry wants, I meet many of these small firms from around the country, including the north-east—I have met some on a couple of occasions in the north-east. Many of them say the same thing: "We need a way in. We need to know what you are doing, and what you want and when you want it. And we need to be able to engage faster and more effectively." I hope that we will be able to do that.

It is going to require wholesale reorganisation, and us to learn how to do things differently, but I will just say to this Chamber and to my hon. Friends that the efforts we have put into supporting Ukraine show that we can do things faster, we can procure better, and we can ensure that we get capability into the hands of warfighters who desperately need it on a much faster timescale than we have done traditionally. The people who have done that are the same people in the MOD who have traditionally done the slower, more long-term, more stately work. It is just about risk appetite and about what we want them to do.

With the strategic defence review publication coming up shortly, in due course, and with the defence industrial strategy also to be published—not at the same time, but not too far away from that—we ought to have an obvious and transparent framework, backed by resources that are guaranteed to be increasing into the future. That is not something that industry has had in the past, which is something that it has always complained about, telling us, "We need a demand signal. We're not going to invest until we know that you really want this long term."

I think we will have the kind of ecosystem and opportunities that small firms and large firms in the north-east, in the constituencies of my hon. Friends who are here today, will be able to take advantage of to grow and bring forth their agility, ideas, energy, and patriotism. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland said, many people in the north-east who work in the defence industry are very proud of doing so and really do want to support our country in its defence and security needs. They will be that much more motivated because there will be more opportunities.

I know that my hon. Friends, who are here in numbers today to represent the north-east, will make sure that I know what the opportunities are in the north-east and what more can be done, and I will rely on them to do that. I cannot get out of the office as much as I might like, so I rely on right hon. and hon. Members to let me know what is going on, what the issues are and what the problems are. I hope that, between all of us, we get into a position to boost our defence industries in a way that not only increases our defence and security, and our ability to deter our potential adversaries and, if needs be, make sure that our warfighters are properly equipped, but leads to regional growth and job opportunities, real lives and careers for our young people and our older people who work in the defence industries and in dual-use technologies, and also enables us to grow our economy as a whole, nationally.

I know that if we get this right and harness the skills, capabilities, commitment, good sense and effort of people who work in the defence industries, we will be in a much, much better place. It is a win-win for all of us—not only for my hon. Friends, but for the north-east and for the nation as a whole.

Question put and agreed to.

Flooding: Planning and Developer Responsibilities

4.30 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): [R] I beg to move,

That this House has considered flooding and planning and developer responsibilities.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, and to discuss how we can help the Minister to tackle the tsunami of inland flooding that is sweeping so much of the country—not just my beautiful Mid Norfolk constituency, but many other areas. The presence of so many colleagues from different parties and counties speaks volumes about the scale of the problem.

I will start in December 2020, when I fully woke up to the scale of what was coming. It was a lovely Christmas in Mid Norfolk when the phone started ringing, as it did for many colleagues in our part of the world. Along with many people, I spent that Christmas week baling out constituents, clearing out sewage and getting Anglian Water to pump out houses. It happened in not just one village, but seven or eight across Mid Norfolk. At that point, I realised the scale of what was coming and why the issue had been becoming increasingly prevalent in the constituency letterbox. Following that, I set up the Mid Norfolk Flood Partnership with the 14 worst affected villages, as a result of which we set out 15 very practical things that we in Norfolk could do. We set up the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance with the county council, and this year we held the first Norfolk flood summit.

I want to update colleagues on some of that work and flag some of the things we have identified. I commend the Minister for the grip she has exerted on the problem since arriving in office. She is on the cusp of having the chance to do something quite significant for generations to come. I want to highlight the things we are particularly suffering from in Mid Norfolk, explain what the problem is in our part of the world—it is different in different parts of the country—and set out some suggestions that I hope the Minister will take on board in the flood review that she is leading.

To that end, I have arranged an all-party flood summit on 2 June with the four all-party parliamentary groups. It says something that four APPGs have been set up—standing room only—in order to deal with flooding. Of the 400 or so new MPs who have arrived in Parliament, I think 100 have put flooding very high on their list, so this is a big issue; it is no longer marginal. I want to say something about the importance of gripping it at scale, so that future generations do not have to experience the horrors that our constituents have. In other words, I want to put wind in the Minister's sails to do something that Whitehall often struggles with. As a veteran Minister myself, I know that the sticky-tape solution is often the tempting one to reach for, but this issue, as the Minister knows, requires a structural change in the way we think about water across our economy.

Mid Norfolk—the clue is in the name—is not a maritime constituency. I am talking today about inland flooding, although I appreciate that there is also a coastal flooding problem. One of the issues in Norfolk is that we have had so much coastal flooding that the focus has been on that, and not so much on inland flooding. My constituency is largely made up of Breckland, the glacial clays and sands—a clue: it should not be flooding. It is dry—very dry. Where there is water and sand, there is very productive agricultural land. Yes, we have some lower-lying, very beautiful areas—the chalk streams, the Wensum valley, the Yare and the Tud—where we should not be building, not least because they are sites of special scientific interest and hugely strong habitats, but they are also prone to flooding.

So why is Mid Norfolk flooding? That is the question I hear hon. Members asking, because it should not be flooding. Other areas should be, but not Mid Norfolk. There are several answers, but I will first explain the scale of what has happened in the last five years. There has been serious flooding in 22 of my villages, by which I mean sewage washing between houses, and more than five houses affected at one time. There are plenty of houses that are near a ditch or river and get some flooding; I am talking about at-scale, serious flooding, with chronic consequences for the people affected. I will give an example. At Mill Lane in Attleborough there is a culvert that was terribly designed in the 1970s. No one has taken responsibility for it, and the four houses at the entrance to the culvert have flooded every year for 10 years. Last autumn, 100 houses around Mill Lane flooded. That is when people really started to wake up and understand.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. As soon as I walked in, a colleague looked at me in astonishment and said, "Is there flooding in west Hampstead?", and I said, "Actually, there is." It takes only a heavy rainstorm to fill all the homes in my constituency with water and sewage.

I intervene at this point in the debate because we, too, have a Mill Lane—not the same one—in west Hampstead that has been flooded. The risk of surface water flooding has not been taken seriously, which is strange, because properties in danger from surface water flooding outnumber those in danger from rivers and seas by two to one. I am proud that our friends in City Hall are actually publishing their surface water strategy tomorrow, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that developers also have a role to play in managing surface water flooding? I am sure he will address that, but I want him to know that there are others in this room who agree with him about the role of developers.

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes a brilliant point; at the risk of opening the floodgate of interventions too early, I will absolutely come on to her point at pace, so that Members from across the House can pile in.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is absolutely right. One of the problems—if I can put forward the reasoning behind what he is referring to—is the old system of building houses, not just in Norfolk, but right across this whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Having the storm drain and the sewage within the one system is the way they did it 40 or 50 years ago, in the houses we grew up in. That creates a problem for the houses built around that time. Every

time there is heavy rain—rain no longer comes lightly, but comes in hurricane-like storms—it brings a deluge of water. The system is not able to cope with that, so does he have a solution for moving forward? This is about not just new developments, but the old developments and the old houses. What was okay years ago is not okay today.

George Freeman: The hon. Member—I am tempted to say my great and hon. Friend, since we have spoken in this Hall together so many times—is absolutely right. My constituency has 130 villages and three towns. At the last boundary review, I lost Wymondham because the rest of my patch has had 10,000 new houses built in the last 10 to 15 years. Very few constituencies, apart from possibly that of the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), have had as many houses built as mine.

That is part of the issue, but another part of it is that developers are tending to build on the outskirts of villages and towns, because it is the easy place to dump commuter housing, but they are not upgrading the drains. Little villages that have happily existed and been able to drain themselves for years and cope with some growth, are now finding huge problems with the existing drainage infrastructure not being able to cope, which leads to the sewerage problem.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the point about new developments, does he agree with the Liberal Democrats that making the water companies statutory consultees in the planning process would mean that developers cannot build where the infrastructure cannot account for the new houses?

George Freeman: That is a very good point, and I do agree—in fact, I will go a lot further than that, if Members will allow me to get to the radical, central elements of my Bill. However, I do agree that that is absolutely something we need to do.

Across Mid Norfolk, the 23 villages—I will not list them all—go from Old Buckenham in the deep south east, through Wretham, Hockham, Rocklands, Thompson, Watton, Saham Toney, Cranworth, a cluster of co-adjacent villages, north Elmham, Billingford, Lyng, Elsing, Yaxham, Mattishall and right up to Weasenham in my north-west frontier, which should not be flooding. That tells us that this flooding is not just geomorphological. It is the result of housing and the lack of investment in the drainage infrastructure.

The truth is that the patient people in Mid Norfolk—they are pretty patient, given that they have had me as an MP for 14 years—are getting really impatient with this. There is a contract between the state and the citizen whereby if they pay their taxes and buy a house, while they do not expect that much these days, they do expect that their house will not flood because of systemic and structural failures of national infrastructure. When it does flood, and they call, hoping that someone will come and pump it out, they expect the water companies, to whom they are paying very high bills, to be there and to help. However, the service and the responsiveness has not been there—at least until they are able to sit on the answering machine and ring enough times that eventually a tanker arrives. People are fed up with that and with the fact that this has been coming for quite a long time, so they are very excited by the fact that the Minister is gripping this issue.

Let me spin through the problems, as I have experienced them in Norfolk. It is, of course, climate change; let us not undermine the importance of that. Last year we had the eight wettest months on record, one after another. That is not happening for any weird, strange, unexplained reason; it is happening because of climate change. The issue is also that in my part of the world we are building a lot of houses—but the country has to build them, so I do not think that not building houses is the answer. The devil is in the detail.

Another problem is that our agricultural practices have changed. In my part of the world, a proud farming county, we now have a lot of contract farming. The big landowners are often things like pension funds and are remote. The farming is not done by a local landowner, but by contract farmers on a very tight, low-margin contract, with huge bits of kit, roaring around trying to get the job done and scratch a living. In the old days, on the farm I grew up on, in a rainy month we would go and mend the fences and clear the ditches, but that work does not tend to be in the farming contracts. Our county councils have also seen their budgets hammered by the rising cost of social care and through some of austerity 1.0. There is a basic maintenance problem.

We also have a big planning problem. The point made by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) was a good one, but the real problem in my patch has been that because of the five-year land supply, good planners have said, "Well, we don't want to build here, and we shouldn't build there," as well as holding statutory consultations. Many of the big developers have then land banked—they have taken their permissions where they know they are going to get them and have not built them out—and then invoked the five-year land supply.

The five-year land supply was a sensible coalition policy designed to ensure that a 20-year plan could not be ignored, but it has been used to blow the whistle and say, "You are not building out at your five-year land supply, so we will now invoke the freedom to dump where we want." It is a win-win. They then dump 100 houses outside Yaxham and 200 outside Mattishall—they want to go near Norwich, dump on the outskirts of a village near a road, move on and not invest. That is what has driven a lot of the problem.

Statutory consultation is fine, but this is also a planning issue. Part of what my Bill addresses is that we must somehow ensure that when developers are building like that, it should not just be that they are statutorily consulted and go through the tick boxes. The only way to make them take this seriously is to say, "Look, if you build, and within five or 10 years of your building there is significant flooding that never used to happen in that area, you're going to be on the hook for upgrading the drains. You're going to be on the hook for doing the repair work." We have to create a fiduciary financial liability that makes the directors of those companies say, "I think we'd better upgrade; we'd better do the investment up front, rather than relying on consultations."

In the end, somebody has to pay. To be fair, the water companies have got to pay more, but we are also asking them to pay billions to improve pipes, build reservoirs and stop leaks. Somewhere in the system we have to find

[George Freeman]

a bit more money to do the upgrade of the traditional drains and improve the infrastructure. It behoves us all to give the Minister some solutions. Where will the money come from? Nobody in Mid Norfolk wants to pay more council tax; it is already very high and it is going on social care. One answer is from the developers.

There is another problem, however. When someone in Mid Norfolk picks up the phone and asks who is in charge, there are 36 organisations in Norfolk with responsibility for flooding prevention. In Whitehall that probably seems like a low number, but in Norfolk people only want one. We do have one: it is called the local flood authority. It is great, but it has no money and no power.

The good news is that in addition to the LFA we have the internal drainage boards, which have been looking after flooding since about 1550; they really know their ditches and dykes. Colleagues with agricultural constituencies—I can see them nodding—will know that these are the very local experts who know about hydrology and water and how it all works. The problem is that their budgets have either been cut or not maintained to keep pace with demand.

There are quite a small number of areas—I think15 to 20 districts—particularly in the east of England, such as the fens, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and other areas, that have a very high incidence of flooding. The other problem is that where they are being hit, the IDBs have to be propped up by the district councils, which means the residents in those areas are then penalised as funding is—quite properly—diverted into flooding. That is funding that they are not getting into their public services. There is a huge problem with the allocation of funding.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I am pleased that the hon. Member, my county colleague, mentioned internal drainage boards. For every pound that King's Lynn and West Norfolk borough council in my constituency collects in council tax, 43p now goes to internal drainage board levies, which is completely unsustainable. Does his draft Bill address IDB levies and call for a permanent, full-time solution to the funding issue?

George Freeman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour and good friend. Yes, my Bill absolutely does address that issue; I will take his steer and get to the guts of it. He is absolutely right; IDBs are crucial in our part of the world. When I first looked into this issue, I thought, "How come Norfolk is top of the league table for flooding?" I soon discovered—even more shockingly—that we are not; I think we are county No. 6 or 7 out of 10, which is why many hon. Members from other counties are here.

The problem is fourfold, and there are four provisions in my draft Bill—I am keen to use this debate as an opportunity to polish it. First, we need a much clearer and sharper set of responsibilities. At the top, the Environment Agency obviously has overall responsibility for flooding in the country, but this is a local problem, so we have to properly empower the strategic flood authorities locally and re-empower the IDBs. At the moment, many of them find that in dealing with flooding they come up against all sorts of environmental green tape produced by the very agencies that are there to stop flooding—as though the Environment Agency is more interested in filling our ditches and drains with mud and wild flowers than encouraging them to drain the water. People feel frustrated by well-intended green bureaucracy that is getting in the way of local solutions, so responsibilities should be put back locally.

Secondly, on funding, I strongly believe that we should be top-slicing and ringfencing some of the Environment Agency's funding and giving it to IDBs and strategic flood authorities. It would be a rounding error for the Environment Agency—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. Could I encourage the hon. Gentleman to come to an end, because it is a very short debate and many Members want to come in?

George Freeman: Certainly. Do we have 90 minutes?

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): We have 60 minutes.

George Freeman: I am sorry; I thought we had 90.

We have to put funding in the hands of people who have responsibility. Thirdly, I want to create planning liabilities for development companies so that they have a proper incentive—not just a vague instruction—to upgrade the drainage.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Earlier today, I met Thames Water and Sutton and East Surrey Water representatives to discuss that very issue. They all agreed that, as professional consultees, their contributions are not given the same weight as those of statutory consultees. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) has already mentioned this, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that some thought should be given to making them statutory consultees, as a minimum for medium to large developments?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an important point. That is all part of the planning mix and we have to get it right.

My last point is about data. When an area floods, we reach for data and ask, "How bad is it? How much worse is it than it used to be?" It is striking that there is not a properly collected dataset. I have a map with dots for all the flooding in my Norfolk patch, but it does not seem difficult to have a properly collected national flood heat map at the Cabinet Office to see where the flooding is coming. If it is coming much more quickly in Mid Norfolk and, I suspect, in many other areas, the Cabinet Office needs to be aware that that is a growing national critical infrastructure resilience issue.

Locally, we need flood maps to prepare for which places are likely to flood this winter. As the former Minister with responsibility for the Met Office, I know that it has amazing data and can now predict when, for certain areas, when it rains to such an extent over in the west, the surge will hit because of the geomorphology. We can now make predictions with AI and other tools, but they are not being done properly. There is a lot more we could do with data.

Forgive me, Mrs Hobhouse—I thought this was a 90-minute debate. I am conscious of time and how many hon. Members want to get in, so I will close. I look forward to hearing the comments from hon. Members from all parties.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should be bob if they wish to be called in the debate. I wish to call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson at 5.8 pm, so I am imposing an immediate time limit of two and a half minutes.

4.48 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on securing this important debate. I am very limited by time, but I want to raise the recent flooding at Meadow Mill in my constituency on new year's day. I thank the firefighters, police officers and council staff for supporting residents. Thankfully, none of the flats in the mill was flooded, but the electricity and water supply were lost. One of the key points that I want to raise in the limited time that I have is that the Environment Agency needs more funding for flood defences in Stockport.

Several residents have contacted me or come to see me. One told me that the repair costs for her car due to the flooding were approximately £320. Another told me that they had to pay more than £1,000 in temporary accommodation costs, which really adds up. The Meadow Mill residents association has been doing a lot of work on those issues, and Martin Doherty MBE has been contacting utility companies to support residents over electricity charges that seem to be inconsistent. Stockport council is Liberal Democrat-run, but I have been working with it and it has been making representations to the Environment Agency and the Government that it needs more funding to support residents.

My final point is on insurance costs. Many residents, whether they are tenants or own their property, face significantly higher insurance costs because of flooding. I think that experience will be replicated across the constituencies of MPs in this Chamber, and something needs to be done about it. The flooding is not caused by the residents, but they are facing much higher costs for insurance and to protect themselves.

I met the Environment Agency recently, and I thank all its staff, but I do not think that it has a plan for increasing flood defences, particularly in Stockport. I urge the Minister, who I know is hard-working and diligent, to make representations on that point.

4.50 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for securing today's wide-ranging debate. It is hard not to get stuck on flooding, developer responsibilities and planning, but I will try to focus on just two key points in the short time that I have. My criticisms of the planning system are well recorded in *Hansard*, as is my support for the Liberal Democrat amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to make water companies statutory consultees, which we need to see happen.

My constituents in Chichester know how fortunate we are to live in such a beautiful part of the UK, but we are seeing sites that have been identified as at risk of flooding still being approved for development if they are classified as strategic development sites in the local plans that were written based on an outdated flood risk methodology. That is deeply concerning for my communities, which are watching fields flood year on year and then seeing houses built on those very fields.

The situation has been worsened by historical planning failures. The previous administration at Chichester district council allowed the local plan to expire, which left developers to ride roughshod over areas such as the Manhood peninsula, a fragile, low-lying coastal region that is increasingly vulnerable to extreme flooding. Climate change is exacerbating the already serious flood and erosion risks on the English coast. In 2018, the Climate Change Committee said:

"the current approach to coastal management in England is unsustainable in the face of climate change."

The flood risk modelling fails to reflect the lived experience of many of my constituents. The Manhood peninsula has already seen numerous floods since 2012, which have displaced families from their homes and caused widespread fear that does not go away once the water has receded.

I would like to talk briefly about coastal squeeze. Natural England estimates that 58% of the salt marsh habitat in Chichester harbour has been lost since 1946, and that we are losing around three football pitches-worth of salt marsh every year. To address those concerns, I tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to make national landscapes, such as the one responsible for Chichester harbour, statutory consultees in the planning process. I hope that Bill Committee members on both sides of the House will support it, because places such as Chichester harbour are crying out for a seat at the table so that they can relay their concerns about the planning process for areas of significant scientific importance.

4.53 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for securing this important debate. As the Member for Shrewsbury, flooding is always a priority for me, as it is for my residents, businesses and local services, because our historic town is encircled by the beautiful yet powerful River Severn. Some of my residents have been flooded over 20 times since 1998, and our active Shrewsbury Business Flood Action Group is providing valuable support for them. They often struggle to find affordable insurance to cope.

On funding, I thank the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for investing over £16 million this financial year in projects that protect communities such as mine all along the River Severn catchment. As the newly elected chair of the River Severn Partnership, I am delighted to see a suite of demonstrator projects that will develop nature-based solutions upstream for longer-term resilience. DEFRA is demonstrating its understanding and commitment to the scale of this issue and rising to the challenge.

In terms of datasets, which I know the hon. Gentleman is very concerned about, DEFRA already published new online data on the Government website in January that show the updated risk of flood from the combined sources of rivers, seas and surface water. For the first time, surface-water flooding is incorporated into that new national flood risk assessment, and that will help individual residents and businesses to know whether the risk is coming downstream or up through their drain gullies—or sometimes both.

[Julia Buckley]

In March, DEFRA then incorporated that dataset to update the flood zone planning maps that are often used by local authority planning officers and developers. We now have accurate risk assessments for all development sites, which I know environmental campaigners are really keen to hear. We finally have a Government who understand that we need to stop building on areas at risk of flooding, and we have delivered the data, the mapping and the intelligence to inform those local decisions and uphold that approach.

Finally, in terms of local agencies and their responsibilities, I am pleased to inform the hon. Gentleman that I have secured an inquiry through the Environmental Audit Committee to examine flood preparedness and response. It will look particularly at the fragmentation of responsibilities across many agencies, and its impact on budgets and on how we can best co-ordinate. I hope that we can provide some helpful recommendations to the Minister, and perhaps find some efficiencies and ways to work better together towards prevention rather than cure. As with the demonstrator projects along the River Severn, Shrewsbury is once again leading the way.

4.56 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on securing the debate. As in much of the country, we in North Norfolk have been told by the Government that we need to identify significantly more sites for housing. Let me be absolutely clear: we do need more homes, including homes that local people can actually afford, so that they are not stuck waiting endlessly on housing lists or left in temporary accommodation, but rushing to build homes without proper provision for flood alleviation or sustainable drainage would be a bad idea and incredibly costly. Let us imagine a young couple who, after years of saving and planning, finally moving into their first home, but it floods because corners were cut and developers were not held to account. That is not just a policy failure; it is a failure of basic fairness.

That failure does not just affect new homeowners. If we add more pressure to our creaking infrastructure without investment, we risk backed-up drains and flooding for the people who have lived in those communities for years. The previous Government promised to implement schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, which would require developers to include sustainable drainage systems, but they never delivered.

One place that would benefit hugely from such a system is Ludham where, following the Government's new mandated targets, a development proposal for 12 houses has expanded to 60 houses. That has caused significant concern for locals due to the history of flooding in the area. If it were to go ahead, it could be feasible only with real action on the surface water and drainage issues that the area faces.

Although North Norfolk district council does an excellent job of pushing developers as hard as it can, it needs the Government to provide it with the legislative teeth to achieve more. I hope that the Minister is in conversation with her counterparts at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about how we make sure that there is joined-up thinking about flooding in future planning legislation.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Hawkhurst parish council and Southern Water recently came to see me to complain about a number of developers in my constituency who have mixed surface run-off with foul water, which is illegal. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although we of course need big housing developments, if developers are proven to have illegally mixed surface run-off and foul water when building them, they should have to make good what they did?

Steff Aquarone: Unquestionably, and a slightly more sympathetic approach should be taken to historical instances in which householders' surface water drains have been connected to foul water systems, which they may not even realise. For developments that have been built since that law, it is absolutely unquestionable that developers should do that.

Finally, we must consider seriously the impact of man-made climate change on flooding. When we place responsibilities on developers, we must make sure that new developments do not deal just with the floods of the past or those of today, but with the worst floods that are yet to come. Henry Cator is chair of the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance, which my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk, mentioned. His voice is given deserved reverence in Norfolk when speaking about these issues, and he has said that climate change will create a new level of extremes that we must be ready for. Simply planning for the current levels will be wasted in years to come.

I look forward to working with hon. Members on both sides of the House on this issue. It needs proper cross-functional work from the Government if we are to ensure that the much-needed homes of tomorrow are built sustainably and that the circumstances of the communities that those houses will serve and join are protected and improved.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I will have to reduce the speaking time to two minutes. I remind hon. Members that if they take interventions, it eats into the time of those who are on the call list.

4.59 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for his excellent work in securing this debate.

I want to speak about the experience of constituents in my Reading constituency and outline the nature of local flooding, as well as some possible solutions. I endorse the work that the hon. Gentleman is doing to bring local landowners and others together and support the work that the Minister is doing on the matter.

We have two issues, or possibly three, with flooding in our area. The two major rivers, the Thames and the Kennet, have smaller streams and brooks running into them. We also have a problem with surface water flooding; I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), who mentioned that issue.

Residents face the most appalling disruption to their lives when their homes are wrecked and muddy water, often polluted by sewage, gets in. It can take months, or even more than a year, to dry out the home and clean

it properly. It is the most awful situation for any family. I have heard stories of water coming in at odd times of day or night, of people being woken in the middle of the night by flood alarms, and of water coming up through the floorboards under Victorian houses, where there is a void. All of this is truly awful.

At a recent public meeting in Southcote, serious concerns were raised about the lack of joined-up communication between major landowners, particularly private landowners in the Kennet Meadows area and the neighbouring Southcote community in Reading. Some owners are not active in clearing ditches and other watercourses or in removing branches that have fallen into the Holy Brook, which is a channel that comes back into the Kennet. It needs much more attention, and I would like to see more joined-up working.

Finally, I thank neighbouring MPs, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey), for their work on the matter.

5.1 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for securing this important debate.

I wish to speak about the effect on the residents of South West Hertfordshire. In the five and half years I have been a Member of Parliament, I have been distressed by how many residents come to me about this issue. A problem that starts as a trickle very quickly has a massive impact on their life. Flooding now has real, lived effects; it is not just a remote risk. Residents face home damage, traffic disruption, economic loss and, increasingly, mental health impacts.

Rickmansworth lies at the confluence of three rivers: the Colne, the Chess and the Gade. It has a historic canal network, including the Grand Union and Batchworth canals, and surrounding waterways. In recent years, we have increasingly seen the overtopping of canals and a fast-rising water table during heavy rainfall. Problem hotspots include Church Street, the aquadrome and Ebury Road in Rickmansworth. Surface water flooding is worsened by urban development, inadequate historical infrastructure and bad planning. Unfortunately, we do not have an up-to-date local plan, so design guidance is not yet being adhered to by developers, because there is no requirement to do so.

Planning must begin with flood resilience. Bad planning does not just affect us; some of the structures we build today will last for decades, if not hundreds of years. If we get it wrong now, it is very difficult to retrofit and correct with a developer, who typically makes a profit and leaves.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): In places such as Maulden in Mid Bedfordshire, we too often see inappropriate or poorly maintained sustainable drainage, which contributes to worsening flooding. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's plans for 1.5 million homes can be considered a success only if they can tackle such problems so that everyone can live in a dry home?

Mr Mohindra: I agree 100%.

I commend my parish councillors, the volunteer flood wardens and the residents of Croxley Green, Rickmansworth and Batchworth who step up during these difficult times. Flooding is now a structural challenge, not an anomaly. We must act now by embedding resilience in planning, forcing developer responsibilities and investing in essential infrastructure.

5.4 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I have two quick points to make. When I was first elected to Norfolk county council in 2013, social care was about 40% of the total budget. When I left 12 years later, a few months ago, it was more like 60% and was rapidly increasing towards 70%. That means less money for maintenance. The highways maintenance backlog in Norfolk is about £70 million. That is drains, gullies, ditches and dykes. Frankly, far too many flooding incidents are preventable. I strongly urge the Minister, in the great work she is doing, to look for a cross-departmental solution. Local council funding is crucial.

I referred earlier to the operational aspects of internal drainage boards. We must not underestimate the role that IDBs play. They are very cost-efficient, they are incredibly experienced and they know their area. When I visit the IDBs in my patch, and there are dozens of them, I find that the staff have 10, 20 or 30 years' experience. Their costs are increasing, mainly because of electricity; it is expensive to make the pumps run. More importantly, the pumps are old. Walking into some pumping stations is like walking into a museum: they are 50 years old.

There is a huge risk of failure, at the very time when we need pumps working because of the increase in rainfall and flooding incidents. I strongly urge the Minister to look at capital funding for IDB pumps. It may only be when IDBs are gone that we realise how crucial they are. They exist in a relatively small number of areas, but in those areas they are critical pieces of infrastructure.

5.6 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I commend the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for his excellent speech. I have several points to make in the short time that I have, so here goes.

I agree with the hon. Member that when people are flooded either by surface or river water, the response is often chaotic. In Gobowen in my constituency, it is not clear who is responsible for closing the road. When vehicles drive through, there is a big bow wave, and the flooding in shops and homes becomes much worse. I fully endorse his point about better co-ordinating the response for people who have been flooded.

Insurance is hard to get. Homes built since 2009 are not covered by Flood Re's remit. The remit ends in 2030, leaving people stuck in potentially unsaleable and unmortgageable homes. I know that the Minister is looking at Flood Re and its remit, so I would be grateful if she gave us a bit of an update. I should have declared at the start that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flooding and flooded communities, so I have an interest.

After people have been flooded, it is often hard to get help. The "frequently flooded" criteria do not catch all homes in rural communities, because the density is not there. I know that the Minister is looking at that; I would be grateful for an update.

[Helen Morgan]

Farms are hit very badly, and they are storing an enormous amount of water upstream. Will the Minister be working with her colleagues in the Department to consider how the sustainable farming incentive and similar plans might be used to help people to store water upstream and prevent flooding downstream?

Finally, in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the Government are not taking the once-in-a-generation opportunity to deal with the increased likelihood of flooding. We have talked about having water companies as statutory consultees in planning; about implementing schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 so that SuDS have statutory guidance and are properly maintained; and about ensuring that houses are not being built in inappropriate places. The current guidelines do not achieve those objectives. I hope that the Minister will work with her colleagues to make those requirements statutory.

5.8 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. In the village of Playhatch, my constituent Suzzanne wakes up most days to flooding on her doorstep. Afraid that her children will touch sewage, she carries them, wearing wellington boots, to the bus stop. The area should not flood, and she was reassured of that point by the previous occupiers of her property. In this case, the cause is not increased rainfall; it is development.

Development is not supposed to put additional burdens on the drainage system, yet all too often the lived experience of residents is different from what is in the plans. Local knowledge is insufficiently valued. When that happens, can we expect anything less from our residents than dogged resistance to new housing?

I welcome new clause 7, which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) has tabled as an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. It would require the Secretary of State to bring into force the sustainable drainage provisions of the Flood and Water Management Act. It is an important step in requiring flood risk to be taken into account ex ante.

Ex post, my new clause 89 would require developers to assess the real-world impact of development five years after completion. Where a review recommends that action be taken to improve a development's drainage performance, the developer must implement such recommendations. I urge all hon. Members to review my new clause and sponsor it. It would give residents security over the future of their homes when development is taking place.

5.10 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and follow all the wonderful speeches in this important debate. I say a massive thank you to the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for securing the debate and for introducing it with great style and knowledge, as always.

I think that my constituency is the wettest represented in this Chamber, certainly in England, although there is possible competition from the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns).

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Tim Farron: Go for it—contest the space.

Ms Minns: Carlisle floods, as the hon. Member knows all too well, but it is not beyond the wit of responsible developers to build in a way that reduces the trauma of flooding. There is an excellent example in Carlisle, where Story Homes built townhouses with garages underneath that are designed to flood, but in a way that protects the residents. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to do more to encourage developers to be responsible and innovative in their design?

Tim Farron: The hon. Member is 100% correct. It is interesting that some of the older properties in my constituency are the ones that are most resilient. In many cases, they were built hundreds of years ago to resist flooding, or for it not to be the end of the world when it does flood. The design of the new buildings in Carlisle absolutely measures up, and we should do more of that.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I must contest my hon. Friend's suggestion that he represents the wettest part of the country. Somerset is always at the forefront of flooding. Part of my constituency lies in the levels and moors site of special scientific interest. The area is increasingly threatened by inappropriate planning applications. Locally elected officials are crucial to good decision making for local communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that they play an important role in making sure that the right decisions are made for local communities and our environment?

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that his time is limited?

Tim Farron: I shall take no more interventions. I appear to have opened a very soggy can of worms, but my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) is absolutely correct.

Looking at the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and at the attitude of this Government and the previous Government towards planning, they seem to be seeking to centralise control of planning at a national level, yet to relax planning rules at a local level to give local planners, local councillors and national parks less power than they currently have. That is very dangerous. In the last Parliament, I served on the Bill Committee considering the very lengthy Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Among the amendments proposed was one that we referred to as the infrastructure-first amendment. It would have given local authorities and national parks the power to say no to developments unless the infrastructure —including drainage, correct sewage provision and sufficient capacity—was there in advance. That power is so important, and it is missing today.

Many hon. Members, on both sides of the Chamber, have talked about the severe housing crisis. Some 7,000 people in my district are on the council house waiting list. We need to build, yet we know that there are a million properties in this country with planning permission,

so it is not that the rules are too tough; it is that the developers are not building. We need to make sure that we point the finger of responsibility in the right direction.

New clause 7 of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), would bring into force the sustainable drainage provisions of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. Shamefully, I must admit that I was the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for environment, food and rural affairs on the Bill that became that Act, 15 flippin' years ago; I have been our EFRA spokesperson under every leader since Nick Clegg, including under myself, because there were only eight of us and someone had to do it. I remember the Bill very well. What a tragedy, and what an outrage, that schedule 3 to the Act has still not been brought into force, 15 years on. We aim to ensure that it is.

I am mindful of time, but this is a timely debate. Last week, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the deeply concerning issue of flood defence spending. At the Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that there would be a review after the 2025-26 financial year. We are into that financial year now, so we are getting close. It is deeply troubling. My communities in Cumbria were massively affected by Storm Desmond nearly 10 years ago. The cost of that flooding incident was £500 million.

I am watching the clock, so I will simply say this: cutting flood defence spending and taking shortcuts in development that allow flooding to happen are catastrophic false economies—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I call the shadow Minister.

5.15 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Hobhouse.I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on securing a really important debate. There is no better champion on this issue in Parliament. He is bringing together many all-party parliamentary groups to specifically tackle and bring to the Minister's attention the important issue of flooding and is setting up his own flood caucus, not only among parliamentary colleagues, but prominently within the county of Norfolk—which is invaluable. My hon. Friend mentioned the 22 villages that have been flooded in his constituency, and all of us have referenced our own impacted communities, so I know just how important this issue is.

I want to address some of my remarks by echoing some of the concerns that have been raised in this debate, because flooding devastates communities, families and the health and wellbeing of individuals who experience the trauma of flooding. It devastates our farmers and our economy at all levels and it represents a threat to life. What is worse, for some it is not a one-off event but a frequent occurrence. Far too many people are impacted. I am proud to say that the previous Government took robust action on flooding. Since 2010, more than 600,000 properties and 900,000 acres of farmland have been better protected by Government-backed schemes. In 2020, the Government announced a doubling of the flood defences budget, including £100 million for the frequently flooded allowance.

While those statistics represent vital progress, we must recognise, as has been indicated, that there is always much more to do. I will just canter through some of the points that have been made, because it is quite right that when dealing with water and with flooding, a catchment approach is always the focus. That deals with not only our farmers, but with our housing developers and our infrastructure providers. It starts right at the top, upstream, dealing with our moorland restoration projects and ensuring that our farmers have the funding to deal with environmental mitigation. That is why it is deeply frustrating that the Government have stopped sustainable farming incentive applications. While there is an acknowledgment that they have opened it up to an additional 303,000 applications on the back of our calls, it is nevertheless worrying to many of our farming community. That is exacerbated by issues such as the family farm tax, which is creating uncertainty in our agricultural sector.

The role of developers has been mentioned by all in this room and I agree that water companies need to be statutory consultees as part of that process. I also agree that planning considerations such as SuDS ponds and the design of houses—as has been illustrated by the hon. Member for Carlisle (Julie Minns)—need to be taken into account when new developments are built. Financial contributions must be considered too, because far too often flood alleviation schemes are not established at speed to deal with the amount of development that is coming down the line. That impacts not only settlements further downstream, but agricultural businesses. Therefore, when looking at flood alleviation schemes, it is right that those schemes are attractive enough for a landowner to enter into such an arrangement, and therefore the remuneration that is associated with those flood alleviation schemes needs to be properly addressed.

The Environment Agency, internal drainage boards and land managers were also discussed. We very strongly advocate a loosening up of the relationship between the Environment Agency, our IDBs, who do a fantastic job recognised by many in this room, and the land managers—who sometimes just want to get on and clean the ditches, but are unfortunately penalised for doing so at the moment. I am sure the Minister will be aware that the advice from officials in the Environment Agency is "do not dredge" and "do not remove that vegetation from those EA-managed assets". I would encourage the Minister to push back on that advice and say that dredging is an option further downstream and that removing vegetation from EA assets should be a consideration.

I also address the issue of insurance, because that is vitally important, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). Flood Re is incredibly important if we are able to provide reassurance for those developments that have been built after the kick-in date. We would advocate the Government going stronger and faster with the recommendations that have been made in this debate.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Could I remind the Minister to leave a couple of minutes for the Member in charge of the debate to wind up?

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much, Mrs Hobhouse. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

[Emma Hardy]

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate and especially the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for calling the debate and providing an opportunity for us to hear about and discuss how the planning system can best manage and mitigate flood risk. I am delighted to be here, obviously, as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, but I recognise that some of the points made were about amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, so apologies if I cannot speak about amendments under a different brief. I will of course make sure that any points made are heard by the relevant Minister.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq) for raising the issue of surface water flooding. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) talked about internal drainage boards, and I will address that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) talked about flooding and insurance and made important points. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) talked about flood action groups, and I want to take a moment to say thank you to all the flood action groups, wardens and volunteers in communities up and down our country for the work that they do. Helpfully, my hon. Friend addressed some of the concerns and questions around maps, so she saved a chunk of my speech, which is great, because I have not got much time to speak on that, although I will talk a little more about maps.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) said, when I arrived, "You will see the same faces as we do in all these debates." But that is good, because it shows what a tireless champion he is, along with our hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), in every flooding debate. It would not be the same without them—that is all I can say—so I thank them very much for coming here and, along with our hon. Friend the Member for Stockport, raising their concerns.

I met the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk back in April to discuss his proposals, and it was a really informative and helpful discussion. He raises important topics, which I have taken incredibly seriously and gone away and had a look at, because as he rightly said, climate change is bringing more extreme rainfall and rising sea levels, and it is a priority for this Government to protect communities from the increased risk of flooding.

I am not sure where the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), got the idea that we were cutting funding for flooding. That is not the case. We have invested a record £2.65 billion over two years—2024-25 and 2025-26—for the construction of new flood schemes and the repair and maintenance of existing ones.

Tim Farron: I am asking the question because the Government and Chancellor have said that there is no commitment beyond the end of this financial year. We do not know whether the Government are cutting or increasing spending, and we want to know. Many flood-hit communities are desperate to hear what the Chancellor's plans are beyond this financial year.

Emma Hardy: Okay, I take the point. We have just invested a record amount over two years; it is the greatest amount that has ever been invested in flood defences. Of course, any future announcements are part of the spending review. The hon. Member has been in this place a very long time and understands that very well, but I hope that he can see that there are deeds, not words, in the fact that we have invested that record amount.

I pay tribute to the flood partnership of the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk. I think that is a great example of the vital role that partnerships have in bringing together all parties with an interest in flood resilience. I think it is a really good model for other people to take away.

The comments from Opposition Members about the personal experience of flooding, the impact on mental health and the impact on communities were very well made.

It was good again to hear about natural flood management and some of the work that we are doing to alleviate flooding. That is a positive way of doing it for nature as well as for flood alleviation.

I would like to talk a little bit about planning and flood risk, although I am of course mindful that I am speaking on a slightly different brief from my own. We are committed to building the homes that the country needs, while maintaining the highest levels of flood protection. The national planning policy framework is clear that inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk. Where development is necessary and where no suitable sites are available in areas with a lower risk of flooding, local planning authorities and developers should ensure that development is appropriately flood resilient and resistant. Development must also be safe for its lifetime—a point made by hon. Members—should not increase flood risk overall and should provide wider sustainability benefits.

The Government, through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, published the revised NPPF in December 2024. That clarified how the sequential test should be applied to development in areas of flood risk and encouraged the use of sustainable drainage systems in new developments. The Government are considering whether further changes are necessary to manage flood risk when we consult on planning reform, including national policy relating to decision making, later this year. I will ensure that all the contributions regarding amendments are heard by Ministers in the relevant Department.

We are strongly committed to requiring standardised SuDS in new developments. These should be designed to cope with changing climatic conditions, as well as delivering wider water infrastructure benefits, reducing run-off, and helping to improve water quality, amenity and biodiversity. It is important to ensure appropriate adoption and maintenance arrangements are in place—that was another point that was raised.

We believe that those outcomes can be achieved through either improving the current planning-led approach using powers now available or commencing schedule 3 to the Water and Flood Management Act 2010. A final decision on the way forward will be made in the coming months. As mentioned, there have been changes to the

national planning policy framework to support increasing SuDS. The NPPF now requires all developments to use SuDS where they could have a drainage impact. These systems should be appropriate to the nature and scale of the proposed developments.

I will briefly mention the flood maps. The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk and I have discussed some of the mapping, which is called NaFRA2. Hon. Members can put in their postcode, and it will show their flood risk now and up to the mid-century for streets and areas. The information has been collected by the Environment Agency from around the country. It is really impressive. It is the first time that we can see surface water risk; before, flood maps showed only coastal water or river flooding. They are important maps. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury mentioned, they need to be used by developers and local authorities. They are free and available for anybody who wants to see where there is risk and where there are concerns.

Internal drainage board funding is an important issue that was mentioned by a few hon. Members. We recognise the essential work of the IDBs in supporting greater resilience for farmers and rural communities, so I was pleased to announce an additional £16 million boost to the IDB drainage fund in March this year, bringing the total funding that we have announced since being in government to £91 million from the previously allocated £75 million. That was only in March this year, so they have just had that extra £16 million.

That important investment will allow IDBs to modernise and upgrade assets and waterways to ensure they are fit for the future. When I was in opposition I went to see some of the pumping stations myself, so I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) that some of them are in desperate need of upgrading. IDBs can apply for that £91 million to ensure they can get the needed upgrades.

We are working with MHCLG, the IDB sector and local authorities on a new research project. The project is looking to review IDB costs and funding, including, importantly, whether any changes are needed to the IDB funding model. I hear the point that some hon. Members made about how it feels unfair that some communities face increased council tax because of this issue. The review is expected to start this summer, and will last around a year. We will consider the findings carefully.

Through our plan for change, the Government will deliver a decade of national renewal and economic growth. We will maintain the highest levels of flood protection while taking decisive action to fix our broken planning system and deliver 1.5 million homes. I thank everyone for their contributions.

5.28 pm

George Freeman: Thank you, Mrs Hobhouse, for guiding us this afternoon. I thank the Minister, the Opposition spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), and the—I think—16 colleagues from across the House who have spoken; the rule of 10 normally applies in this place, so there are many others who would have wanted to come. That shows the Minister how much interest there is in this issue.

This is a serious national problem that can only be solved locally, and the local solution is the key. It is getting worse fast. In Norfolk, 1,000 houses have been flooded and 200 have had internal floodwater in the past 18 months. That did not happen five or six years ago. It is getting bad, and it is costing the county and the country a fortune. This quarter—Q1—there was £200 million-worth of approved claims, which is up by £67 million on the previous quarter. This is getting a lot worse very fast.

On behalf of all those people who are very nervous and worried—one constituent was so worried about this that they took their own life—I urge the Minister to be bold and brave. I urge her to strike a blow for local communities and local experts, and give them the power and funding to do what they know how to do best.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered flooding and planning and developer responsibilities.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 13 May 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Groceries Code Adjudicator: Statutory Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): As part of the fourth statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, the Department for Business and Trade will today publish a consultation seeking the views of stakeholders on the performance of the GCA.

The GCA was established by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013. Its role is to monitor and enforce the groceries supply code of practice, which the UK's designated large grocery retailers must comply with when dealing with their direct suppliers.

Section 15 of the Act requires the Government to review periodically the performance of the GCA. The first review covered the period from the creation of the GCA in June 2013 to 31 March 2016. The second review covered the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019 and the third statutory review covered the period from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2022.

The statutory review is not a review of the code nor of the remit of the GCA. The code is a competition measure owned by the Competition and Markets Authority as the UK's independent competition authority.

The fourth review will look back over the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025 and seek views and evidence which will allow the Secretary of State to make an assessment of the performance of the GCA against the measures set out in the Act. These measures are explained in the terms of reference.

As part of the consultation, the Government are interested in seeking views on how the GCA is operating following the establishment of the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator and any evidence of unfair contractual practices that may have a negative impact on parts of the supply chain not covered by the code or the fair dealings regulations made under the Agriculture Act 2020.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator Act requires the Government to consult with the following:

the GCA;

the Competition and Markets Authority;

the retailers subject to the code;

one or more persons representing the interests of suppliers;

one or more persons representing the interests of consumers; and

any other appropriate person—the Secretary of State has not identified any specific person or persons here and welcomes contributions from any interested person.

The invitation to submit comments and evidence can be accessed at
https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/groceries-code-adjudicator-gca-statutory-review-2022-to-2025

and stakeholders have until 5 August 2025 to respond. Following this, the Secretary of State will analyse the responses. A report on the Secretary of State's findings will then be published and laid before Parliament.

The terms of reference for the GCA review have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS629]

TREASURY

Notification of Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The independent Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stocks of UK Government bonds and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the asset purchase facility by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities. The Bank ceased reinvestment of assets in this portfolio in February 2022 and commenced sales of corporate bonds on 28 September 2022, and sales of gilts acquired for monetary policy purposes on 1 November 2022. The sales of corporate bonds ceased on 6 June 2023, with a small number of outstanding corporate bonds reaching maturity on 5 April 2024. Therefore, the APF is now comprised solely of gilts.

The Chancellor at the time agreed a joint approach with the Governor of the Bank of England in an exchange of letters on 3 February 2022 to reduce the maximum authorised size of the APF for asset purchases every six months, as the size of APF holdings reduces.

Since 12 November 2024, when the maximum authorised size of the APF was last reduced, the total stock of assets held by the APF for monetary policy purposes has fallen further from £654.5 billion to £619.7 billion. In line with the approach agreed with the Governor, the authorised maximum total size of the APF has therefore been reduced to £619.7 billion, comprising entirely of gilts.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and His Majesty's Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, the APF and its directors from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. Provision for any payment due under the liability will continue to be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS630]

Petition

Tuesday 13 May 2025

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Reading Football Club

The petition of residents of Reading and supporters of Reading Football Club

Declares that:

(i) Since 29 May 2012, ownership of Reading Football Club ("RFC") and its material assets has passed through a number of different owners, following a period of sustained success under the custodianship of Sir John Madejski.

(ii) The ownership changes culminated in the ultimate beneficial owners of RFC becoming Mr Dai Yongge and Ms Dai Xiu Li in May 2017. The Dais have overseen a deterioration in all material affairs of RFC, prejudicing the sustainability of RFC.

(iii) The Dais expressed openness to selling RFC in September 2023 but no sale, or commitment to such a sale, has yet taken place, despite numerous well-publicised expressions of interest.

(iv) The circumstances surrounding RFC's deterioration, and the lengthy, unsuccessful sale process conducted by the Dais are unclear, with limited information made available to stakeholders in RFC and misinformation rife.

(v) Under the Football Governance Bill, an "Independent Football Regulator" ("IFR") will assume responsibility for regulation of professional football in England, including in relation to financial sustainability and fan engagement matters.

(vi) An inquiry into the circumstances referenced in paragraph (iv) above would likely identify areas for consideration by the IFR which ought to be taken into account in designing the framework under which the IFR will operate. It will also help identify which stakeholders, past and present, are ultimately responsible for the deterioration of RFC, provide supporters of RFC and other stakeholders with a much-needed explanation for the same, and contribute towards a successful outcome to RFC's current sustainability crisis. An inquiry can also help us know how to avoid this ever happening again to any other club.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and the Business and Trade Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the ownership and governance affairs of Reading Football Club since 29 May 2012 on grounds of public interest, with a particular focus on the governance of Reading Football Club since May 2017.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Yuan Yang, Official Report,* 10 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 770.]

[P003051]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):

I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for raising this issue on behalf of her constituents and the wider supporter base of Reading Football Club. I would also like to thank the Supporters' Trust At Reading for its continued engagement with the Government on these important matters.

The Government understand and share concerns about the future of Reading FC. Despite the fantastic global success of English football in recent years, we know that irresponsible owners, unsustainable financial models and inadequate regulation have cast a shadow over too many of our clubs. This has significant impacts on the lives of fans and communities. We are pleased that a sale of the club, including its stadium and training ground, appears to be imminent. Any sale needs to be the right one, to the right custodians for that team. It needs to draw a line under what came before and offer a better, more secure future for the club, its fans and the wider community. Until such a sale happens, the situation remains extremely concerning and we urge the current ownership to bring this to an end as quickly as possible.

By introducing the Football Governance Bill and a new independent football regulator we will ensure that issues around financial sustainability within football more generally are addressed for the benefit of fans and local communities. The Bill will introduce new financial regulation to improve the financial resilience of clubs across the football pyramid, as well as put in place statutory owners' and directors' tests to make sure a club's custodians are suitable and protect fans from irresponsible owners.

In the meantime, a shadow regulator has been established and is currently doing the preparatory work required to ensure the regulator is in place as quickly as possible once legislation is passed. Part of this preparatory work has included meeting with fan groups from Reading FC and local MPs to hear their views and to help ensure that lessons are learned ahead of the full implementation of the regulatory regime, as it is set out in the Football Governance Bill.

Written Correction

Tuesday 13 May 2025

Ministerial Correction

TREASURY

Fiscal Rules

The following extract is from the statement on fiscal rules on 28 October 2024.

Darren Jones: 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.

[*Official Report*, 28 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 562.]

Written correction submitted by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones):

Darren Jones: 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 **sustained** surplus under the last Labour Government, and this Labour Government will return the public finances to that position.

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Tuesday 20 May 2025

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