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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 23 June 2025

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Welfare Fraud: Organised Crime

1. **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle fraud in the welfare system by organised criminal groups. [904733]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Department works collaboratively across Government and law enforcement agencies to investigate welfare fraud perpetrated by organised criminal gangs. This type of criminality is complex and far-reaching, and a collaborative approach is therefore essential. I am pleased to confirm that new powers in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill will help us better tackle organised crime by taking greater control of our investigations through new powers of entry, search and seizure.

Mr Charters: Having spent my career before entering this place tackling fraud, I recognise the scale of the challenge, so I commend the Secretary of State for her leadership, with the biggest ever crackdown on benefit fraud. Given the success of whistleblower reward schemes in tax and financial crime, does my hon. Friend agree with me that there is merit in exploring similar schemes to uncover organised fraud in the benefits system, so that more funds can be recovered to support those who genuinely need support: our constituents?

Andrew Western: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We take all allegations of fraud seriously. People who suspect fraud against the Department for Work and Pensions can use existing channels to report it, including the national benefit fraud hotline. This Government are not complacent. As I mentioned in my substantive reply, we are taking action with the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which will provide a range of new powers to address fraud and error in the social security system, after the Conservative party failed to substantively update our powers to tackle ever-more complex fraud during 14 long years in office. However, I will watch with interest whether there is learning from the schemes my hon. Friend mentioned that could be applied to cases of benefit fraud.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Organised gangs operate in many spheres—sex, drugs and, as reported in the media, our welfare system. This totally undermines public confidence in the system. Will the Minister make representations to the Home Secretary to ensure that foreign nationals who are found to have abused our welfare system are removed from the country?

Andrew Western: I am very happy to raise with the Home Office the issue that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, but I would say to him, and indeed to his colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench, that what genuinely undermines confidence in the welfare system is the record of the previous Government, who allowed welfare fraud to spiral towards £10 billion a year and failed to take the powers needed, as we are doing now, to get that number down.

Child Poverty

2. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty in the Livingston constituency. [904734]

4. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty in Gloucester. [904737]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): If I may briefly say so, I am very proud that the spending review delivered the largest ever investment in employment support for sick and disabled people—quadrupling what we inherited from the last Government to over £1 billion a year, or a total of £3.5 billion over this Parliament—so that those who can work get the support they need, while we protect those who can never work.

Tackling child poverty is my personal priority, so I am proud that the Education Secretary and I are bringing in free school meals for all children in families on universal credit, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty—a down payment on our child poverty strategy. We are also delivering the first ever three-year funding settlement for the household support fund, including for holiday hunger, and we are committed to funding the holiday activities and food programme, stopping kids going hungry while they are at school and during the holidays, too.

Gregor Poynton: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. One of the best ways of reducing child poverty is helping parents into good, stable and well-paid jobs, which the SNP Scottish Government are failing abjectly to do. For example, the SNP manifesto in 2021 promised to double investment in the paternal employment fund to £15 million over two years to help low-income families get into work. However, in 2023 that pledge was scrapped. Will the Secretary of State call on the Scottish Government to put some of their record funding into employability funds, to help my Livingston constituents get into work and to provide good jobs right across Scotland?

Liz Kendall: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Economic inactivity is higher in Scotland than in the UK as a whole, and a staggering one in six young Scots are not in education, employment or training.

We have delivered an extra £9 billion for Scotland over the spending review—the biggest settlement in the history of devolution—and I hope the SNP will match our ambition to get people who can work into work by investing in employment services, not cutting them, as they have in recent years.

Alex McIntyre: The expansion of free school meals will massively help families in my constituency of Gloucester and take them out of poverty. Can the Secretary of State confirm how many more families in Gloucester will be eligible for free school meals under the Government's expansion, and what steps is she taking with the Secretary of State for Education to ensure that every child is able to access that support?

Liz Kendall: This vital step will benefit 7,560 children in my hon. Friend's constituency. It comes on top of rolling out free breakfast clubs, starting with Calton and Grange primary schools in his constituency, our new fair repayment rate in universal credit, and the first ever permanent, above-inflation increase in the standard allowance of universal credit, a vital part of our welfare reforms, putting more money into the pockets of hard-working families and helping to give all children the best start in life.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): At the lobby last week by the food banks, a number of people expressed the wish to have greater facilities to educate their clients with respect to shopping and preparing meals more effectively. They make a fair point, don't they?

Liz Kendall: As the former chair of Feeding Leicester, I know that many of our food banks offer a range of support, helping to signpost people to mental health treatment, debt advice and other measures to improve their wellbeing. They certainly do not need any advice from Conservative Members. Under their watch, we saw 900,000 more children and 200,000 more pensioners in poverty. It is time they took a lesson from this side of the House to get this issue right.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Probably the largest single driver of child poverty in my communities is the enormous cost of housing. The average house price in my community is up to 13 times average household incomes. That drives grinding poverty, particularly among children. Will the Secretary of State have a word with her right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that a disproportionate amount of housing grant goes to rural communities such as mine, in particular with the Windermere Gateway scheme?

Liz Kendall: Reducing housing costs is one of the key things we are looking at in the child poverty taskforce in advance of our strategy, which we will publish in the autumn. We are investing an additional £39 billion in building more social, affordable and other homes, but I will, of course, always raise all issues relating to housing, because kids deserve to live in good homes that are affordable. That is what this Government intend to achieve.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): As is the case for my hon. Friends the Members for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) and for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre),

a number of my constituents are affected by the two-child cap, with the latest statistics showing that 330 households in my constituency are impacted. I absolutely agree with a number of charities that removing the cap alone is not a silver bullet to tackle child poverty, but it will make a difference. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether the child poverty taskforce is considering the removal of the two-child cap?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. I can absolutely confirm that the child poverty strategy will be looking at all the levers we need to tackle this really important issue, including in relation to social security. She is impatient for change for her constituents, as am I. We have already put in place a fair repayment rate for universal credit, we are increasing the standard allowance for universal credit for the first time in its history, and we are rolling out free school meals, but I will of course take her representations forward and ensure that they are heard by the taskforce.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): When the Government's own impact assessment for the "Pathways to Work" Green Paper suggests that 50,000 children will be plunged into poverty and businesses are already slashing vacancies in the light of the Employment Rights Bill, does the Secretary of State really believe that the Government's child poverty taskforce is pushing in the same direction as the rest of the Government?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman will know that that assessment does not take into account all the steps that we are taking to get more sick and disabled people into work, with the biggest ever investment into support—support that was denied to them by Conservative Members, who wrote people off, consigned them to a life on benefit and then blamed them. We take a different approach. We believe that sick and disabled people should have the same rights, chances and choices to work as anybody else. That will be a key measure in tackling poverty.

Unemployment Levels

3. **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of recent trends in the level of unemployment. [904735]

14. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of recent trends in the level of unemployment. [904748]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): We all know the importance of work, and since the election we have seen employment rise by 500,000, but Britain is a country that has too few young adults in work or education, and where the post-pandemic employment recovery has taken too long. That is why we will continue our reforms to support more people into work.

Julia Lopez: To cut spending and balance the books, Labour has to get people off welfare, but the Chancellor's job tax and the Deputy Prime Minister's unemployment Bill mean that there are fewer jobs for them to go to. Some 285 more of my constituents are out of work than last year, and since the Budget a quarter of a million

jobs have vanished. A rise in public sector roles in the same period is probably masking a far deeper crisis going on in the private sector. There is no joined-up thinking. Has the Secretary of State warned her Cabinet colleagues that their policies are making her job impossible?

Torsten Bell: The Secretary of State inherited a labour market that was a mess under the Conservatives, with nearly 1 million young people not in education or training, and 2.8 million too sick to work. Employment is up by 500,000. Economic inactivity—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members might not like to hear it, but economic inactivity is down by 300,000 under this Government. No one on the Government Benches will take lectures on a good labour market from the Conservatives.

Sir Ashley Fox: Unemployment is now 115,000 higher than when Labour took office. The Chancellor's new jobs tax and the Employment Rights Bill make hiring a new person more expensive. The family farms and family business taxes are reducing investment. Can the Minister therefore explain how he will reduce unemployment while the Chancellor is pursuing policies that increase it?

Torsten Bell: I do not want to try the patience of the House but, as I have said, employment is up by 500,000 under this Government. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not like to talk about that. The hon. Gentleman mentions what British business wants—what British business wants is a Government who are actually fixing the public finances and the public services that mean that when a member of staff gets sick, they do not sit on a waiting list for years, as they did under the previous Government. The Conservatives like to attack the Employment Rights Bill, but stopping good employers being undercut by bad is the pro-business thing to do.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Paisley jobcentre runs a “Take a job to work” day, where work coaches look for local employment opportunities and take those suggestions into the jobcentre to match jobseekers with local jobs. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a good example of local innovation in jobcentres, and would the Government consider sharing that good practice across the rest of the country?

Torsten Bell: I thank everyone in Paisley who has been working on those practices—it is exactly the kind of innovation we like to see. Under the Conservatives, only one in six employers said they bothered to engage with their local jobcentre, which is exactly what we need to change with our reforms to Jobcentre Plus. I thank everyone in Paisley, but there is much more to do right across the UK.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The previous Government left us with one in eight young people out of work, training or education, and with 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness, not only costing the economy billions more but costing people opportunity, hope and dignity, and now the Conservatives cannot even agree a plan among themselves to address that. Does the Minister agree that the Conservative party is in chaos, while this Government are bringing forward sensible plans to give the country a way forward after the mess the Conservatives left it in?

Torsten Bell: That was a powerful and long question, and I am glad that Conservative Members listened to every word of it, because they left us 1 million young people not in education, employment or training—that is what a disgrace looks like. What is happening now? We have seen falling numbers of NEETs over the past quarter and the past year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Two weeks ago, the hon. Gentleman's Government told people they were U-turning on winter fuel payments because the economy is on a “firmer footing”. The next day, the unemployment figures were released, showing that a quarter of a million jobs have been lost since the Chancellor's job-taxing Budget. The country is now losing 100,000 jobs a month. These figures are worse than even the most pessimistic forecast. Is that what a firm footing looks like to the hon. Gentleman?

Torsten Bell: A firm footing for economic recovery looks like kicking the Conservative party out of office and growing the economy once again, and that is what we see if we look at the data. The hon. Lady likes to look at one month's data—well, let us look at it. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that vacancies rose by 27% between April and May. I know the Conservatives want to pretend that everything was wonderful a year ago, but every business and every voter in this country knows that that was not the case.

Helen Whately: Honestly, who does the Minister think he is fooling with this spiel? Growth forecasts have been slashed and inflation has surged. What world is he living in? The Government have been in office for a year and people are losing their jobs because of the decisions that they have made. How does he think his “everything's fine” mantra actually sounds to one of the people who have lost their jobs or to a business facing a tax bill that it cannot afford? Has the Secretary of State even told her Back Benchers, who will be strong-armed into voting for cuts next week, that the welfare cuts Bill that we will be debating will get a grand total of zero people into work, according to the Government's own impact assessment?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Lady asks about what is going on with the economy. What is going on is that we have had four rate cuts over the past year. What is going on is that we have signed three trade deals over the past year. What is going on is that employment has gone up and inactivity has gone down. I know that the Opposition love to latch on to one month's data, but let us look at the whole period of this Government: wages have increased by more under this party in the past 10 months than they did in the first 10 years of the Conservative Government.

Personal Independence Payment

5. **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the personal independence payment application process.
[904738]

12. **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the personal independence payment application process. [904746]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The current PIP application process is outdated and can be very difficult to follow. Alongside proposed legislative changes, the Department's health transformation programme will greatly improve the experience of applying and, I hope, increase confidence in the outcomes of the assessment as a result.

Victoria Collins: The response to my recent written question on disability benefits applications listed the 18 most common disabilities and health conditions and showed that hundreds of thousands of people were awarded fewer than four points in all living activities and will miss out on the daily living component of PIP. They include people like Jemima in Harpenden, who suffers from severe physical disabilities and thyroid cancer and finds even walking very difficult. Will the Government please commit to reforming the criteria to better reflect the full complexity of claimants' conditions?

Sir Stephen Timms: I recognise that many people who are on the PIP daily living component who did not get four points on anything at their last assessment are feeling rather anxious. However, what they need to know—I hope the hon. Member will reassure her constituents on this—is that it is the view of the Office for Budget Responsibility that most of them will nevertheless still have their PIP after their fresh assessment once the changes have been introduced. They will be introduced in November next year and an individual's assessment will take place whenever their first award review is after that date. The OBR is confident and clear that most of those people will keep their PIP.

Charlotte Cane: Over 4,500 people in Ely and East Cambridgeshire claim PIP, and they are not just anxious, as you put it; they are seriously worried that they are going to lose the payments and, with them, their independence. Contrary to what you said—sorry, contrary to what the Minister said—the Government's own data suggests that 85% of people getting standard payments and 11.5% of those getting enhanced payments will lose support under the proposed changes. What steps is the Minister taking to support those who will be affected, including to make sure that their health and eligible care needs are met and, most importantly, that they can maintain their independence?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I suggest that, in future, shorter questions might prevent mistakes such as “you”.

Sir Stephen Timms: It is really important for claimants of PIP that its funding should be sustainable into the future. The trajectory of the past few years has been unsustainable. We are taking action to put that right. The hon. Member is wrong to say that because people did not get four points last time, they will not keep their PIP. As I said, the view of the OBR, which I think is correct, is that most of them will. We are consulting on how to support those who will lose their PIP as a result of the changes that we have announced.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Ministers have highlighted that the PIP recipients who are expected to lose payments make up one in 10 of the total PIP caseload. That suggests that the impact of the cuts will be limited, but it still represents 370,000 current recipients, who are expected to lose £4,500 on average. However, those numbers rest on a set of assumptions that the OBR has described as “highly uncertain”. DWP data shows that 1.3 million people currently receiving PIP daily living payments would not meet the new criteria. Before MPs are asked to vote on imposing such appalling poverty, will the DWP or the OBR provide further evidence underpinning those claims?

Sir Stephen Timms: The OBR has published its assessment, and my hon. Friend is right that it has assessed that one in 10 of those receiving PIP in November next year will have lost it by 2029-30—one in 10; not the much larger proportion that we were hearing about earlier. Following that, we will be able to introduce the biggest ever investment in employment support for people out of work on health and disability grounds. We do not want any longer to trap people on low incomes for years and years; we want people to be able to enter work and fulfil their ambitions. That is what the investment will allow.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is it not the simple and sad truth that any MP who votes for the upcoming welfare Bill will be voting to take PIP from disabled people who need assistance to cut up their food, wash themselves and go to the toilet?

Sir Stephen Timms: No. Members will be voting for reforms to open up opportunities for people who have been denied opportunities for far too long. We are putting that right.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I respect the Minister very much, and I know that he cares deeply about people who rely on the social security system. That is why it is such a tragedy that he is presiding over these profound reforms without having consulted disabled people. Can he explain why so many benefit claimants feel that these reforms have been rushed through, not to make a fairer system but because the Treasury demanded cuts to meet the fiscal emergency created by the Chancellor's job-destroying, growth-stopping Budget? They are right to think that, are they not?

Sir Stephen Timms: We are putting in place a fairer system. Action was urgently needed. In the year before the pandemic, PIP cost the Government £12 billion at current prices, and last year it cost £22 billion. It also went up last year alone by £2.8 billion. PIP required urgent action, and that is what we are taking.

Danny Kruger: I am just sorry that there has been so little consultation with the victims of the changes that the Government are introducing. One area where the Government do not seem to be looking for savings is in the Motability scheme. It was supposed to help physically disabled people get around, but now we have 100,000 new people a year joining the scheme, many of them not physically disabled at all. One in five of all new car

purchases are bought through this scheme, and it is costing taxpayers nearly £3 billion a year. I know that the Minister will blame us for the system, but the fact is that the Government are not even looking at Motability. They have had a year, and it is their policy now. Will the Minister commit to a proper review of the Motability scheme, and if not, why not?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am not sure whether the shadow Minister wants me to go further or not so far—he seems to be facing both ways. He is right that we are not at this point proposing any changes to the Motability scheme.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Recently I met Kathryn from my constituency who had to give up a £90,000-a-year job in order to care for her husband. With 150,000 carers set to lose their allowance due to PIP eligibility reforms, some of our country's most hard-pressed households face losing £8,000 a year. Will the Minister confirm that even if the welfare reforms work out to the most optimistic expectations, there will be far more net losers than net gainers among PIP claimants?

Sir Stephen Timms: Among households as a whole, there will be more net gainers than net losers from the package. The reason for that is the increase to the standard allowance of universal credit, which according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies is the biggest increase to the headline rate of benefit since at least 1980. We are consulting on support for those who will lose carer's allowance because of the changes and considering what additional help they may need, including for health and care needs. The hon. Member will have seen in the Bill we have published that we have committed to a 13-week run-on of benefit after an assessment decision so that people have time to adjust to the new situation.

Universal Credit: Support into Work

6. **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support people on universal credit into work. [904739]

9. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support people on universal credit into work. [904742]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): We are building a new jobs and careers service for all, including those on universal credit, as the cornerstone of our Get Britain Working reforms. This new service will build towards an 80% employment rate, closing the gaps between disabled people and others and between parents and those without caring responsibilities, and dealing with the crisis in youth unemployment. We are also changing universal credit to stop people being left on the scrapheap, as per our "Pathways to Work" Green Paper.

Josh Simons: Last week, I held an emergency community meeting for 250 workers in my constituency who are about to lose their jobs following the closure of the electric fibreglass site in Hindley Green. It was heartbreaking. Some families have three generations of workers who

have powered the blast furnace and produced materials for our energy, defence and housing sectors. I am bitterly disappointed that after the hard graft of the Government, me, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the GMB union, it has come to this, and another foreign company is closing a blast furnace in our country. What is the Minister doing to get workers like those back into work, so that they can do what they want to do, which is contribute to a strong industrial future?

Alison McGovern: Specifically on the business that my hon. Friend mentioned, the Department's rapid response service has worked with those affected and is keen to do more. I will personally ensure that he is put in touch with my colleagues in the Department so that he can help facilitate that, too.

More broadly, like many industrial communities, my hon. Friend's constituency deserves more good jobs. Our industrial strategy will help lead the way on that, as will the Chancellor's investment plans set out in the recent spending review. I know that if my hon. Friend feels that we need to do more for his constituency, he will not hold back in telling us.

Katrina Murray: My constituent Tracy is living in local authority temporary accommodation after fleeing domestic violence. She is currently trapped on universal credit because the cost of her accommodation is way beyond anything she could earn locally—by a factor of about 10. As a single young person, she faces years before she is likely to be allocated a flat, and she is rightly concerned that future employers would question her years of unemployment and under-employment. She wants to work full time but has been advised not to do so. Does the Minister agree that we need to do something to address the cliff edge?

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that important case to the House. Universal credit has no fixed hours requirement, but the connection between housing costs and universal credit, as she mentioned, is still a problem. I would be keen to look at the detail of her constituent's case. Universal credit was introduced with the promise that it would move people off benefits and into work, but that clearly has not happened as we need it to happen, so considerable work is under way to deal with the inadequacies of the mess that the Conservative Government left us.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): There are 300 more people on out-of-work benefits in Basildon and Billericay than there were 12 months ago. Local businesses tell me that that is because business rates have gone up under the Labour Government, national insurance tax has gone up under the Labour Government and taxes on investment for the long term have gone up under the Labour Government. Does the Minister agree, or has she got another explanation for the fact that 300 more of my constituents are unemployed than there were 12 months ago?

Alison McGovern: Our Department is determined to serve businesses well. If the right hon. Member would like to help his local jobcentre do that and get good jobs into the jobcentre so that we can help his constituents, I am sure that I can facilitate that. However, he should be aware that employment is up and inactivity is down.

We are moving towards an 80% employment rate, and the Chancellor's investment plans, as she set out in the spending review, will help us move towards that.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Government's proposals to change benefits have a compound consequence for people wanting to stay in work. For example, the Department has said that 95,000 working-age claimants receive carer's allowance and, under the proposals, would lose the PIP they receive. Does the Minister agree that those proposals will actually make it harder for people to stay in work, rather than easier as they claim?

Alison McGovern: As the Secretary of State set out some moments ago, we are introducing the biggest improvement to employment support that the country has known. We will ensure that people receive the help they need to get into work and to stay in work.

Child Maintenance System: Economic Abuse

7. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help prevent the use of the child maintenance system to facilitate economic abuse. [904740]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The issue of economic abuse through the Child Maintenance Service is a serious one, which this Government are looking to address urgently. I am pleased to say that a response to the "Child Maintenance: Improving the collection and transfer of payments" consultation was published earlier today. We intend to reform the CMS into a single service type, where the CMS collects and transfers all payments. This reform will drastically reduce opportunities for economic abuse throughout the service and make sure that money gets to the children who need it. We estimate that this change alone could lift more than 20,000 children out of poverty.

Sarah Green: I have too many constituents whose financial abuse is effectively being perpetuated and facilitated by the Child Maintenance Service. I have secured a meeting with the relevant Minister in the other place, but it has been postponed. Could the Minister help me to secure a date for that meeting? I am sure that he would agree that if the system is at fault, it needs to change.

Andrew Western: I hope the hon. Member has heard me say that we concur with the need for change. We have announced changes in the right direction today, and I will of course pick up with my fellow Minister about securing that meeting for her. I know they have already been in protracted talks about arranging it, and I will make sure it happens.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My constituent, Deborah, should receive monthly child maintenance payments for her daughter, but her former partner withholds payments, despite my complaints and hers to the DWP Child Maintenance Service complaints team, advising them that he deliberately withholds payments for three months and then backdates them. That is a form of abuse and controlling behaviour, but the DWP complaints team have advised me today that there is

nothing they can do to prevent it, despite a deduction-from-earnings order being in place. Does the Minister agree that that is a completely inadequate response that requires a ministerial review of the system?

Andrew Western: I am sorry to hear about the case that my hon. Friend has highlighted. He will have heard the reform that I announced earlier, but I absolutely understand why he wants to raise this issue for his constituent, and if he would like to meet me to discuss it further, I would be happy to do that.

Pensions Policy: Climate and Nature Targets

8. **Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps with Cabinet colleagues to help support climate and nature targets through her Department's pensions policies. [904741]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): The short answer to that question is yes. The Department is contributing to two consultations that will shortly be published by the Business and Energy Departments. They will invite views on the new UK sustainability reporting standards and transition plans. This will help investors, including pension savers and their schemes, to understand the impact of climate and nature on investments.

Anna Gelderd: As a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on sustainable finance and on global deforestation, I remain concerned that around £388 billion in UK pension savings is still invested in fossil fuels and deforestation-related activities. Will the Minister reassure me further that undermining the long-term financial security of savers in South East Cornwall is not the Government's intention, and will he commit to reviewing this, including via the Pension Schemes Bill and the landmark pensions review?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend has been a powerful campaigner on this issue for some years, and she will know that larger pension schemes are now required to publish annual reports with climate-related disclosures. The evidence shows that around two thirds of pension funds have a net zero commitment in place, and we will be reviewing those regulations over the course of this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is very important that those who have pensions get a return, so that their pensions are beneficial. It is also important to ensure that net zero is delivered, because many people who have pensions want to see that happen. It is about getting a balance, so how will the Minister get that balance?

Torsten Bell: On the first part of the hon. Member's question, I do not want to get the balance, because we want to make sure that savers get the absolute best value they can for every buck they save. I completely endorse his sentiment on that part; that is the very purpose of the Pension Schemes Bill that is coming through. On the second part of his question, I also endorse the point that he makes. When we look at those disclosures, we see that they set out a balance of judgments about the requirements on schemes, but they also provide greater transparency so that both individuals and the schemes themselves can take a view about the investments.

Personal Independence Payment

11. Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the personal independence payment on the ability of disabled people to work. [904745]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Many disabled people want to work, but only 17% of people on personal independence payments are in employment. We believe that disabled people should have the same rights, chances and choices to work as anybody else, which is why we are delivering the biggest ever investment in employment support for sick and disabled people, quadrupling what we inherited from the Tories to over £1 billion a year, and it is why we have asked the former boss of John Lewis, Sir Charlie Mayfield, to review what more we can do to support employers to recruit and retain more disabled people.

Helen Maguire: One of my constituents, who has epilepsy, responded to the “Pathways to Work” consultation and highlighted that the questions implied that the Department views PIP as a pity payment, rather than a benefit designed to offset the extra costs of disability, such as seizure alert devices or accessible transport. Without such support, disabled people are less able to live independently. Does the Minister agree that cutting PIP payments simply pushes more disabled people further from living independently and from employment?

Liz Kendall: I do not recognise the attitude that the hon. Member describes—quite frankly, we feel precisely the opposite. This vital benefit makes a crucial contribution towards the extra costs of living with a disability. That is why we want to reform it to protect it for generations to come, because we do not think that it is sustainable to have a doubling of the number of people on PIP over this decade from 2 million to more than 4.3 million. It is also why we are putting in extra employment support, why we want to support employers to do more to recruit and retain disabled people, and why we want to reform Access to Work—a vital scheme that helps people—because disabled people should have equal rights, chances and choices to work, and that is what we seek to deliver.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): This morning, I had the pleasure of visiting PACT for Autism, a brilliant local charity in Harlow. It raised concerns about the accessibility of the PIP application process for those with autism. As the Department looks to reform the process, could that be considered?

Liz Kendall: I absolutely will consider that. In fact, I ask my hon. Friend and his constituents to feed into the work that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability is doing. We have to ensure that it is as easy and effective as possible to access that vital benefit. It is crucial for people with autism, and we want to make it work properly.

Child Poverty Taskforce

13. Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the child poverty taskforce on levels of child poverty in Stroud. [904747]

19. Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the child poverty taskforce on levels of child poverty in North Durham constituency. [904754]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): Given our objective to reduce the number of children in poverty overall, I expect the impact of the child poverty strategy on children in Stroud to be positive, as all children benefit when the whole community can rely on children enjoying a good childhood. We will publish the child poverty strategy as soon as possible, but, as we have said, we are not waiting to act. The Secretary of State has listed a number of initiatives that we have already been getting on with.

Dr Opher: In Stroud, after 14 years of austerity, over 4,000 children are living in poverty. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report stated that after removing the two-child limit, the next most effective way of reducing child poverty is to get rid of the benefit cap. Would the Minister be willing at least to review the benefit cap?

Alison McGovern: As the Secretary of State has already said, all policies that can lift children out of poverty are under consideration by the taskforce. We obviously will not commit to any policy without knowing how we will pay for it; neither, as I have said, will we wait to act if there are steps we can take immediately. I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which I will take as input to the child poverty taskforce. I also take this opportunity to thank all colleagues who have participated in the five parliamentary sessions that the taskforce has hosted since November 2024.

Luke Akehurst: Will the Minister give an update on the work the Department is doing with the North East Mayor Kim McGuinness’s child poverty reduction unit to tackle the specific drivers of that issue in our region?

Alison McGovern: Child poverty is a significant challenge in the north-east, and that is why it is right that Mayor Kim McGuinness participated in an early session of the taskforce and has shaped the agenda since then. The child poverty unit engages regularly with colleagues from the north-east and will hold a dedicated session on strategy with the north-east child poverty commission this week. Mayors have been absolutely critical to the development of the strategy, and we will continue to work closely with them.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): As in Stroud and the north-east, children in poverty rely on food banks to get by—6,617 food parcels in my constituency alone. Will the Government take the advice of the Trussell Trust and seek and follow independent advice on the universal credit standard allowance?

Alison McGovern: As Labour’s manifesto said, the emergency food parcels that we have seen are a “moral scar” on our country. That is why I am glad that, as Ministers have said, we are increasing the standard allowance for the first time in—as long as I can remember, certainly. I am also pleased that emergency food parcels were down this year.

Support into Work

15. **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage people who are out of work to accept jobs that they are offered. [904749]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): If a person is out of work and is offered a job, they are required to accept appropriate work that is offered to them. The focus of our Get Britain Working reforms is to address the current situation whereby nearly 3 million people are out of work sick and not actively looking for work, and 1.7 million people are out of work but are not getting the help they deserve from the existing jobcentre system.

Sir Julian Smith: R and J Yorkshire's Finest butchers in Kirkby Malzeard have had multiple job applications via jobcentres from people who they think never had an intention of going to interview or taking a job. May I urge the Minister to look at how incentives and penalties are matched up, to ensure that people actually turn up to interview and take a job?

Alison McGovern: The right hon. Gentleman mentions a problem that I think is central to the situation that we have inherited. That is why, as I mentioned in response to the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), we are changing the way that DWP acts, so that we serve employers better and match people who actually want to move into those jobs. If the right hon. Gentleman would allow me, I will connect him with his local jobcentre manager, so that he can link up the businesses he mentions.

Severely Disabled People: East Worthing and Shoreham

16. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support severely disabled people who will never be able to work in East Worthing and Shoreham constituency. [904750]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Protecting those who can never work is at the heart of our welfare reforms. That is why, in the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, we are ensuring that those with severe, lifelong conditions, which will never improve and which mean they will never work, and those at the end of their lives are guaranteed the higher rate of the universal credit health top-up, protecting one in 10 of all future universal credit health top-up claims. We are also going further by ensuring that those who meet the severe conditions criteria are never again reassessed, in order to stop unnecessary anxiety and stress, helping 200,000 people over this Parliament.

Tom Rutland: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I have been working with disabled constituents, our local jobcentre and employers to ensure that everyone is working together to maximise opportunities for disabled people, and that they are not just recruited but retained and thriving in jobs locally. However, some people will never be able to work or return to work, including many people with advanced progressive multiple sclerosis, and it is right that they are properly supported. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what support will be in place for people like my constituents living with this disease?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he is doing locally. As I said, those with severe lifelong conditions—progressive conditions that will never improve, and which mean they will never work—will be protected. Even more importantly, they will never again be reassessed for their benefits, removing that unnecessary and unacceptable anxiety and stress, and giving them the dignity and security they deserve.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment. A recent freedom of information request by the Royal National Institute of Blind People found that thousands of recipients whose primary health condition is listed as eye disease are set to lose out from the reforms to PIP, with referrals to the RNIB's counselling services more than doubling since the Secretary of State announced the reforms. There are over 3,500 people in Leicester with sight impairment. What is her Department doing to help those constituents, given these harmful changes to PIP?

Liz Kendall: I know the brilliant work that the RNIB does and the brilliant sight services locally in Leicester—I have visited them myself. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that nine out of 10 people who are claiming PIP when these changes come into place will be unaffected by them. We are going to see 750,000 more people claiming PIP by the end of this Parliament compared with when we are elected, and, even with these changes, spending will still be £8 billion higher.

Topical Questions

T1. [904758] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): I am proud of the steps this Labour Government are taking to tackle child poverty. Our historic expansion of free school meals to families on universal credit will lift 100,000 children out of poverty and tackle term-time hunger. That is alongside the £2.5 billion we are investing in the household support fund, and our commitment to funding the holiday activities and food programme, which will tackle holiday hunger too. Making sure that children have hungry minds, not hungry bellies, will help them to fulfil their potential in life, and that is what this Labour Government are all about.

Callum Anderson: Closing the disability employment gap is a matter of opportunity for disabled people in my constituency. I recently visited M&M Supplies, a stand-out company in Bletchley, not only for its many exporting successes but because a quarter of its workforce are adults with learning disabilities and difficulties—and that is thanks mainly to the vision of managing director Frank Purcell, who works with organisations like MK SNAP to run a work experience programme for adults with disabilities. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that this Government are committed to working with employers to ensure that no disabled people in my constituency are written off?

Liz Kendall: I congratulate, through my hon. Friend, those in his constituency on the fantastic work that he has described. I recently visited an incredible supported internship programme that helps young people with learning disabilities to get work and stay in work, including in our local NHS and with our local hotel voco in the heart of Leicester. This Government are determined to tackle the disability employment gap, which fell under the last Labour Government, although movement stalled under the Tories. We are going to turn this around with the biggest ever investment in employment support, introducing mandatory disability pay gap reporting and looking at what more we can do to support brilliant employers, like the one my hon. Friend described, to recruit and retain more disabled people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): More than half of new health and disability benefits claims are now for mental health, yet under the Government's welfare cuts Bill the personal independence payment could be stripped from three quarters of claimants with arthritis and two thirds of those with heart disease but fewer than half of those with anxiety. Does the right hon. Lady believe this is the right decision?

Liz Kendall: I have great personal respect for the hon. Lady but she really needs to make up her mind: first she says our proposals are too late, then she says they are rushed; she criticises us for being cruel, and then says the Opposition are going to vote against our Bill because it does not go far enough. But her deputy, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), has let the cat out of the bag, saying in a recent Westminster Hall debate:

"I am not able to tell...exactly what we would do."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 301WH.]

The truth is that the Conservatives are a broken party with no ideas, let alone a strategy—and, unless they change course, they have no future either.

Helen Whately: Goodness me; I asked the right hon. Lady quite a serious question, so that was a very disappointing answer. However, she and I are in agreement that the benefits bill needs to come down, and that will need real reform of the system, so why is she pressing ahead in a panic with her half-baked cuts rather than doing the job properly? We would support a proper rethink of which conditions should get what help, and a better system for people struggling with mental health or neurodiversity, who would be better off in work than parked on benefits. Why did not she make that part of her plan?

Liz Kendall: Let me tell the hon. Lady what we are doing to improve mental health support for people in this country and to make sure that it is treated with equal importance to physical health: we have made significant progress towards recruiting the additional 8,500 mental health workers we said we would recruit in our manifesto to reduce delays and provide support; we have confirmed funding to help an extra 380,000 patients get access to talking therapies; and we are investing the biggest ever amount in employment support for sick and disabled people. I say to the hon. Lady, who left

2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness and 1 million young people not in education, employment or training, that it is about time she apologised to the country and made up her mind about whether she will back our reforms.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that topical questions and answers should be brief.

T2. [904759] **Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab):** My constituent, Nicola Smith, works for NHS Fife. Like many people across the country, she is not paid on the same date each month. This leads to incorrect calculations for her husband Steven's universal credit, often leaving the family without a payment or being sanctioned before the system catches up the following month, and I am aware of thousands of others in a similar position. What reassurance can the Minister provide that he is addressing these issues, ensuring smooth and fair payment for NHS workers and their families on universal credit, and will he meet me to discuss this issue in more detail?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We are reviewing universal credit to ensure that it makes work pay and tackles poverty, and we are looking at exactly the kind of problem that my hon. Friend highlights. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it, because Nicola, Steven and all 7,000 households claiming universal credit in his constituency will benefit from the standard allowance increase proposed in the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, which we will be debating next week; it is the biggest increase in the headline rate of benefits since at least 1980.¹

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In her March Green Paper, the Secretary of State promised to provide an additional £1 billion in funding to help benefit claimants back into work, but only £400 million has actually been allocated, and even that will not come until 2028-29. We have heard some talk of efficiency savings, which is practically the definition of a magic money tree if ever there was one, so will the Minister confirm that the promised £1 billion for employment support will be all new money, and not cannibalised from other vital DWP services?

Liz Kendall: Yes. Already this year, we are rolling out £300 million of support through our Get Britain Working plan and Connect to Work. That will rise to £600 million next year and build to an additional £1 billion. This is the biggest ever investment into employment support for sick and disabled people, because we believe work is the route out of poverty. We want to build dignity and a better life for those who can work, while protecting those who cannot.

T3. [904760] **Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab):** Child poverty in my constituency grew from 12.4% in 2015 to 15.5% in 2024: huge growth under the last Government. With the child poverty taskforce due to report soon, can the Secretary of State assure me and my Dartford constituents that child poverty at the end of this Parliament will be lower than it was when it began?

Liz Kendall: Yes, I can. That is a firm commitment from me personally, and from the Prime Minister. We have made a start on that work: our expansion of free

1.[*Official Report*, 26 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

school meals to children in all households on universal credit will benefit, I think, around 6,500 children in my hon. Friend's constituency, and we are helping more people into work, which is the best way to tackle poverty in the long term. We have a long way to go, but we are absolutely committed to bringing those numbers down.

T4. [904761] Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Some 40% of people in West Dorset who are in receipt of a personal independence payment receive the highest level of support. Many are extremely anxious about PIP assessments being carried out over the phone rather than in person, particularly those with complex or fluctuating conditions. Will the Minister guarantee that anyone who wants an in-person assessment will receive one?

Liz Kendall: Yes, we absolutely want that to happen. Indeed, we want to record the assessments as standard to ensure that claimants have confidence in what is being done. This is an issue that causes huge anxiety among my constituents. Too many decisions take too long and are overturned, and we want to deal with these problems head-on.

T5. [904762] Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): When the under-25 universal credit rate was first introduced, the justification for it was that young people were more likely to be living at home, but there is a group—care-experienced young people—for whom that is often not the case. A transformational decision by this Government would be to build on and go further in the work that we are already doing with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and decisions at the spending review by making this change for that very important group of young people.

Sir Stephen Timms: I commend my hon. Friend for all his work on this issue, including his seminal 2022 independent review. He is right that care leavers need support as they move to independent living. The Department for Work and Pensions at the moment exempts care leavers from the shared accommodation rate, and provides support toward sustained employment and career progression. We will certainly consider if there is more that we can do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Andrew Rosindell—not here.

T7. [904764] Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Emma from Tring is one of my constituents who has said that these changes to disability benefits will mean that they will have to come out of a career in the NHS. What does the Secretary of State have to say to those who are terrified about losing their work after changes to disability allowance?

Liz Kendall: Nine out of 10 people who are on PIP when the changes come in will be unaffected by the end of this Parliament. Anybody who is affected will keep that benefit for three months—that is, I think, one of the longest transitional protections ever and certainly three times as long as when we move from disability living allowance to PIP. The important Access to Work fund is there precisely to help anybody who needs that sort of support to get into work. We will guarantee that

during those three months, anyone who is affected and who uses their PIP for work will get access to an adviser who will help them to apply for Access to Work, because it is so important that we support them.

T8. [904765] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): With 800,000 people not going to be in receipt of PIP by 2029-30, we have to be honest in this House. We all know, don't we, that many of those people are just not able to access the healthcare that they need, such as for mental health, neurodiversity and physical health? As a result, they will not be able to work, but they will be pushed into poverty because of these reforms. Will the Secretary of State please, please, please pause these reforms to ensure that those people, who have desperate health needs, are not forced into poverty?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend will know that this Labour Government are investing billions extra into the NHS precisely so that we can drive down waits for vital operations and increase the number of people getting mental health treatment. It is also the case that good work is good for physical and mental health. There is very clear evidence on that, and that is one of the things we know that we can achieve with the £1 billion extra a year in employment support.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Matching the Scottish child payment by raising the child element of universal credit would bring more than half a million children out of poverty. The Secretary of State has been clear that a lot of issues are being considered by the child poverty taskforce. Is raising the child element of universal credit to the level of the Scottish child payment one of those matters?

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): At the risk of boring the House, let me say that all levers are very much on the table when it comes to getting our kids out of poverty.

T9. [904767] David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): A single parent in my constituency has worked full time for more than 20 years but is now in personal crisis because universal credit is unable to reimburse the childcare costs she has paid in advance. I hope the Minister agrees that it is deeply unfair that my constituent is left short every month despite working incredibly hard. Will he set out ways in which the Government are supporting hard-working women with childcare needs?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend's constituent will benefit from the big increase in the universal credit standard allowance, which we have talked about, and from free school meals for her children. Somebody who starts work or increases their hours may also be eligible for support with up-front childcare costs. The flexible support fund can award the full cost for up to a month of fees to a childcare provider in advance of the care being delivered, so that may be an option for his constituent.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): At the weekend, Vivergo and Ensus workers learned that UK negotiators had successfully protected the UK bioethanol industry until President Trump called the Prime Minister and he sold out that industry, allowing a genetically modified bioethanol to flood the market and put all

those jobs at risk. What can the Secretary of State tell those workers who feel that they have been sold out by our Prime Minister when negotiators had successfully protected an industry of the future?

Alison McGovern: This Government will always have the backs of working people, and I believe there will be a statement shortly on our modern industrial strategy. I know that Ministers from the Department for Business and Trade will be extremely engaged in the point that the right hon. Gentleman has just raised.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Many new mothers in Plymouth are claiming maternity allowance, not because they are unemployed, but because they do not qualify for statutory maternity pay; they may be self-employed, have recently changed jobs or have had a pregnancy-related sickness. Many of them have contacted me with concerns that maternity allowance is treated as unearned income and is therefore subject to universal credit deductions, unlike statutory maternity pay. What steps is the Department taking to ensure financial security for women in Plymouth who are claiming maternity allowance?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. The treatment of maternity allowance in universal credit was subject to a judicial review, which upheld the policy of treating it as unearned income when calculating universal credit and of treating SMP paid by employers as earnings, in common with other statutory payments made by employers. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, depending on individual circumstances, additional financial support—for example, child benefit and the Sure Start maternity grant—may be available to parents.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Tirath is currently being pursued by the Child Maintenance Service for £20,000, despite having

successfully appealed the claim in 2022. He is now at risk of losing his professional status as a pharmacist because of this process. Will the Minister encourage the CMS to investigate that case urgently or to meet with me to discuss it?

Andrew Western: I am very sorry to hear about the plight of the hon. Member's constituent. If she would like a meeting with me, I am very happy to give her that, and I am also happy to look into the matter, as she suggests.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Previous changes in eligibility for disability benefits have resulted in significant adverse health impacts, including an additional 600 suicides in 2010 and 130,000 more people with new onset mental health conditions in 2017. What estimates have the Government undertaken of the impacts on health of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, which is due to have its Second Reading next week?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am looking forward to answering questions about these matters in front of the Committee on Wednesday morning. We are working very closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the health and care needs of people who lose benefits as a result of this process are met.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do Ministers agree with the Trussell Trust's recent estimate that the weekly cost of basic essentials is £120 for a single person and £205 for a couple?

Alison McGovern: Through the child poverty taskforce, we have been looking at the issue of incomes versus expenditures. We are taking steps urgently where we are able, but we will have more to say about that issue shortly.

Middle East

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, I will make a statement on the Israel-Iran conflict.

Since I last updated the House, the United States has struck three Iranian nuclear sites at Isfahan, Natanz and Fordow. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth has said that the action was “intentionally limited”. Britain was not involved in the strikes, just as it was not involved in Israel’s operations, but Britain has long had concerns about Iran’s nuclear programme. Iran can never have a nuclear weapon, and the United States has now taken action to alleviate that threat. A nuclear-armed Iran would endanger the immediate region and threaten the global community.

This is a perilous moment in the middle east. Waves of strikes between Israel and Iran have lasted for 10 days, continuing overnight. I know that the whole House will have in their thoughts the many civilians impacted by the fighting. I can confirm today that they include one British national injured in Israel. We have reached out to offer consular support.

Iran has consistently failed to reassure the world that it is not pursuing a nuclear weapon. The House will recall Prime Minister Gordon Brown calling out Iran for perpetrating “serial deception” over years after exposure of the fortified Fordow nuclear site. Today, Iran’s enriched uranium stockpile is 40 times over the limit set by the joint comprehensive plan of action. Iran is enriching at 60%, while typically, a commercial nuclear reactor such as the one at Sizewell operates with uranium enriched at between 3% and 5%. Iran lacks any civilian justification for this level of nuclear activity, and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s board of governors has declared Iran to be in breach of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

As we respond to this fast-moving situation, our first priority remains the welfare of British nationals in Iran and Israel and of our staff on the ground. Our crisis teams in London and the region have been working around the clock, and Israel has put restrictions on its airspace since Friday 13 June. The British embassy in Tel Aviv and the British consulate in Jerusalem are open. All our diplomats remain in place supporting British nationals, and we have bolstered the embassy in Tel Aviv with a rapid deployment team from the UK.

We have been working closely with the Israeli authorities to prepare flights to evacuate vulnerable British nationals and their dependants. Yesterday, we launched a booking portal for British nationals. Today, as soon as it was possible to enter Israeli airspace, I can confirm to the House that a Royal Air Force A400 has flown in to Tel Aviv and taken 63 British nationals and their dependants to Cyprus, from where they will be brought home this evening. Further flights will follow in the coming days, security allowing. We will prioritise those with greatest need and contact those allocated a seat directly. We will send updates on future flights to all British nationals registered with the Foreign Office, and I encourage all British nationals still in Israel and the occupied territories to register their presence, so that they receive our updates. These British nationals should follow instructions from the Israeli authorities. International land border crossings

to Jordan and Egypt are open, and commercial flights continue from both those countries. Consular teams are on hand to assist British nationals who have crossed the border.

In Iran, airspace remains closed and there has been a near-total internet shutdown. Due to the security situation, we took the precautionary step last Friday of temporarily withdrawing our staff from Iran. The embassy is operating remotely, though our ability to support British nationals still in Iran is extremely limited. The House will know that the Foreign Office has advised against travel to Iran since 2019. Those seeking to cross Iran’s land borders can contact the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for assistance, including with additional paperwork.

British nationals in the wider region should follow our travel advice closely. Following a US security alert for its nationals in Qatar, out of an abundance of caution we now recommend that British nationals in Qatar shelter in place until further notice.

Alongside our consular teams, our diplomats are fully engaged in trying to end this crisis. We can and we must find a negotiated solution. The window has narrowed, but the risks of further escalation are so great, and the costs so considerable for Britain and all in the region, that this is the Government’s priority. We do not yet know precisely how far the US strikes have set back Iran’s nuclear programme, but there remains the need for a durable diplomatic solution. Strikes cannot destroy the knowledge Iran has acquired over several decades, nor any regime ambition to deploy that knowledge to build a nuclear weapon. That is why we have been working so intensively with the new US Administration to reach a new agreement with Iran.

Iran and President Trump’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, held five rounds of negotiations. Britain joined France and Germany in seven rounds of engagements with Iran, too. Even after the Israeli strikes, I travelled to Washington and then Geneva last week, meeting in the White House with Secretary Rubio and Witkoff, and then sitting opposite Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi in several hours of talks, pushing for Iran to accept the diplomatic off-ramp. Directly after the US strikes, we have been at the heart of a collective drive with partners to get back to negotiations. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has spoken to President Trump. I have spoken to Marco Rubio and Israeli Foreign Minister Sa’ar. We have both been in touch with European and middle eastern partners. That is why I spoke again to Minister Araghchi yesterday.

My message for Tehran was clear: take the off-ramp, dial this thing down and negotiate with the United States seriously and immediately. The alternative is an even more destructive and far-reaching conflict, which could have unpredictable consequences.

The situation presents serious risks to British interests in the region. Following the moving in of additional assets on a precautionary basis, force protection is at its highest levels. The House should be in no doubt: we are prepared to defend our personnel, our assets, and those of our allies and partners. We are closely monitoring how energy markets are responding to the conflict, and we have been extremely clear with the Iranians: any action to blockade the strait of Hormuz would be a monumental act of economic self-harm, making a diplomatic solution even harder.

We are also maintaining a sharp focus on other conflicts in the region, first and foremost the catastrophic plight of Gazans and the ongoing ordeal of the hostages and their loved ones, all fearing that this war leaves them forgotten. Today I met Eli Sharabi, held in chains by Iranian-backed terrorists, who was released from Hamas captivity only to discover that they had murdered his family. Last week the Israel Defence Forces recovered the bodies of two hostages, as well as that of Shai Levinson, an Israeli with British family killed on 7 October, which Hamas had been cruelly keeping from their loved ones. Half a million Palestinian civilians are facing starvation and more than 400 have reportedly been killed in recent weeks trying to access food, while Gazan hospitals have had to stop services that are vital for childbirth and emergency surgeries. This is appalling, it is unacceptable, and it must finally end. The Israeli Government must lift aid restrictions, and Hamas must release all the hostages. An immediate ceasefire has never been more urgent.

The consequences of the current situation are hard to predict. History can offer us no guide after events that are unprecedented in the region. The Government have sought to react quickly to the twists and turns of recent weeks, while maintaining a focus on where British interests lie—with a lasting end to Iran's nuclear programme, a de-escalation of tensions, and security for our people across the region. We will continue to persevere with diplomacy.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.47 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Two weeks ago, the IAEA produced a report that was damning of the Iranian regime. Iran was not co-operating, and was breaching its obligations. It had more than 400 kg of uranium enriched to 60%, far beyond any level needed for a civilian nuclear programme, and enough material to create at least nine nuclear devices, while its nuclear facilities were buried deep underground to hide its programme—and all this from a despotic authoritarian regime that represses and tortures its own people, is committed to the annihilation of Israel, the world's only Jewish state, is responsible for so much of the suffering in the region through its sponsorship of terrorist proxies, is supporting Putin in his illegal war against Ukraine, and is involved in plots and activities to undermine our national security here at home on a daily basis.

It is for these reasons, and for many more, that the Iranian regime must never be allowed to have nuclear weapons. That is why we stand with those who are working to stop them—the House will know that, as His Majesty's Opposition, we will always put the defence and security of our country first—and why we will work constructively with the Government to secure the protection of the British people and our national interests. We will support the Government when they are doing the right thing, but we will also question, challenge and press Ministers to go further when we think that more needs to be done to safeguard our interests, and it is in that spirit of constructive scrutiny in the national interest that I put these questions and points to the Foreign Secretary.

First, British nationals and dual nationals continue to be stranded in Israel and the middle east owing to airspace closures. I have written to the Foreign Secretary about this matter, and note the progress being made with today's flight. I thank the Foreign Office for the work that it has been doing with many families with whom I have also been in touch, who have been able to get on to that flight today. Can the Foreign Secretary tell us how many British nationals may need to be repatriated? What resources are being deployed to support those efforts? Is there enough capacity to match the number of people who need to leave, and why does it seem that the US and other European countries were ahead of us in their operational planning to bring back their citizens? The Foreign Secretary has mentioned the US embassy's advice, and he has given advice to British nationals in Qatar today. Will there be any further notifications for other British nationals in Gulf Co-operation Council states?

Secondly, on Iran's nuclear programme, the Foreign Secretary could not say on radio this morning how effective the weekend's strikes were. I understand that it will take time to get information, but if more strikes to further degrade Iran's nuclear capacities are planned, will the Government consider supporting them? The Government have not taken a clear position on the actions that the US and Israel have taken, but we have seen reports of the apparent legal advice from the Attorney General cautioning against UK involvement.

While I appreciate that the Foreign Secretary cannot comment on any legal advice, do the Government have a position on the lawfulness of the strikes, and does he welcome the ends as well as the means? Does he share my cynicism about Iran's attempt to cloak itself in the UN charter—the same UN charter that it has undermined for decades through its brutality? Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the US will be permitted to take action from Diego Garcia should future strikes on Iran or actions to defend Israel be needed, or do the Government think that there are legal barriers to the US doing so?

Thirdly, with heightened tensions in the region, can the Foreign Secretary give an update on what further steps are being taken to safeguard British military assets in the region and our partners from any unwise military action taken by the Iranian regime? Given the reports over the weekend of a suspected Iranian spy plot targeting our base in Cyprus, are we now stepping up efforts to protect bases?

Fourthly, what steps are being taken across Government and with our police, counter-terrorism and security services to reassess the domestic threat level? The Foreign Secretary cannot go into operational details, so can he give an assurance that robust action and disruptions to any potential Iran-backed plots are under way?

He rightly mentioned the issue of Gaza and the fact that we absolutely must work together to ensure that humanitarian aid gets to people who are desperately in need of it. Can the Foreign Secretary update us on what steps he has taken to engage with Israel to get more aid into Gaza, and does he agree that Iran must be weakened to end its ability to sponsor Hamas and other terrorists in the region?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful for the co-operative tone in which the right hon. Lady has made her remarks. Quite rightly, she has a number of questions that I will

[*Mr Lammy*]

attempt to answer, but let me begin by saying that, fundamentally, we are in agreement that the regime in Iran can never have a nuclear weapon, and all our efforts are designed to ensure that that is the case. The whole House will understand that this is not just about Iran, the region and global security; we have to remain steadfast in our commitment not to see nuclear proliferation. If Iran got a nuclear weapon, others in the region would clearly seek to follow. It is, therefore, a sober commitment, beginning 80 years ago, that we must see to completion in relation to those ambitions.

The right hon. Lady asks about British nationals in Israel. Just over 4,000 British nationals have registered their interest following our appeal last week, and judging by the pattern in previous crises in Israel and the region, we estimate that between 15% and 20% of them will take up the offer of British assistance to leave. As she knows, the airspace has been closed, so that offer—until this point—has been about getting them to the border, but I am very pleased that a flight has landed and taken off, and we hope to work with the Israeli Government on further flights from the area. My understanding is that the Americans have put on a military plane from Israel for its citizens, but she will understand that the uniqueness of the relationship between the United States and Israel facilitated that opening, and I am very pleased we have been able to garner the same agreement with the Israeli Government. This is an ongoing and fast-moving situation, and she has heard what I have advised British nationals in Qatar today. Of course, we keep this under close review, and there may need to be further updates over the next few days.

It was important that I was in Washington DC to sit down with the US Administration, and in that meeting with Marco Rubio and Steve Witkoff last week, it was very clear to me that all options were on the table and that President Trump had those options in front of him. I of course discussed with them in detail the trip I would be making to Geneva, alongside my French and German counterparts and the European High Representative, and they were keen and hopeful that it might be successful. It was not successful, but we continue to press the Iranians to take the off ramp and get into negotiations with the United States and the E3 to ensure that they are in compliance.

The right hon. Lady asked about the legal advice. That must rightly be a matter for the US Government in relation to their action. I am pleased that she mentioned the ministerial code. She will know that paragraph 2.13 of the ministerial code prevents those of us in government—and she has been in government in the past—discussing legal advice so that Government can operate in the appropriate way. However, I would say to her that this was not our action. We have been clear that we were not involved. She asked whether we had any request from the US Government. We did not get such a request, but we were notified before the action took place.

The right hon. Lady also asked about state threats, and it is right to say that we have thwarted 20 such state threats in this country since 2022. She will know, including from the fact that we put Iran in the highest tier for national interference, that we take the threats from Iran very seriously. We are reviewing the gaps that Jon Hall

found in how we deal with state threats in our country, and we will come forward with legislation in the coming months.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The only way to stop Iran building a nuclear bomb is a deal, but there cannot be a deal without negotiations and there cannot be negotiations without trust. President Trump tore up the first nuclear deal and is now acting alongside Israel, and its attack last week ended the US-Iran negotiations for a new nuclear deal. The war aims of this campaign are so unclear, with an emboldened Netanyahu Government calling for regime change, and President Trump hinting at it, too. In all those circumstances, it is difficult to see how there can be negotiations based on trust. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Britain must continue to play a role in the negotiations, even though they must seem an incredibly difficult and challenging prospect?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for her question. It goes to the heart of where the UK should be at this time, and that is at the centre of the diplomatic effort. A diplomatic effort will be necessary at the end of this process because, sadly, once people have the ability to enrich uranium to 60%, that knowledge is not lost. It is the stepping stone to an advanced weapon, and therefore only a diplomatic solution and the correct framework can ensure that we keep the global community safe.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I, too, thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement.

The Liberal Democrats share in the condemnation of an Iranian regime that poses an existential threat to Israel and has terrorised its own people as surely as it has citizens from other countries around the world, including the UK. That is why we support the consensus in this House that Iran can never be allowed to have nuclear weapons.

Yet it is not clear that military action by Israel and the US can provide the necessary long-term lock on Iran's nuclear ambitions. Following this weekend's strikes, it was reported that Iran will work at pace to develop weapons with what remains of its enriched uranium supplies. That should give pause to those on the Conservative and Reform Benches who have breathlessly echoed President Trump's line that the strikes have been an unrivalled success. Instead of bringing security, Trump and Netanyahu's unilateral actions have increased uncertainty and the risk of a full-scale regional war. Their belief that might is right both further erodes the rules-based international order and undermines the prospects of containing Iran and other rogue states in the long term. This is not the UK's interest.

That is why Liberal Democrats have called consistently for the application of robust diplomacy, supported by International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring and grounded in international law, as the only sustainable

way permanently to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions. Our immediate priority must now be to ensure the safety and support of British nationals in the region, learning the lessons of unacceptable delays on previous occasions, so why has it taken over a week since the start of strikes to begin repatriating Britons from Israel? What more is being done to support those in the wider region who want to leave?

The Government have also remained silent on the legality of this conflict. Will the Foreign Secretary now commit to publishing the Attorney General's advice on whether any UK involvement in the conflict would constitute a breach of international law? Will he confirm that this House will be given a vote before any decision for the UK to enter this conflict?

Mr Lammy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and the thrust of his remarks, which are around the need for diplomacy at this time. He is absolutely right about the malign intent of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Iranian regime, whose desire is to wipe Israel off the map. We must stand up to that pernicious ideology. We are attempting to, again, de-escalate. I remind him that Vice-President Vance said just yesterday that delaying the development of a nuclear weapon was the goal. He said, "We are at war with Iran's nuclear programme. We are not at war with the Iranian people." It is important for the hon. Gentleman to keep that in his mind's eye.

The hon. Gentleman asks about British nationals. He heard what I said about the airspace being closed. I am pleased that the first flight has taken off. I remind him of successive UN resolutions—I refer him in particular to resolution 2231—in relation to this long-standing breach. He asks about the legal advice. He heard my comments on the legal advice. We were not involved. This is not our legal context. He asks about publishing the Attorney General's legal advice. That might have been appropriate if we were involved—I do not think it is—but we are not involved, so there is no such advice to publish.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's calls to move this to a negotiated solution, and his focus on UK defence and security. He is right that Iran must never acquire a nuclear weapon. However, history also teaches us, on regime change, that interventions aimed at regime change in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan have produced prolonged instability, not just in the region but far wider. What concrete lessons does he believe can be learned from this recent history in shaping Iran policy today?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but he will forgive me. I am not going to enter into a history lesson from the Dispatch Box, except to remind him that on Sunday I achieved 25 years as an elected parliamentarian. During the course of that period, there have, of course, been debates about regime change. I also remind him that the US has been clear that its intention is to target the nuclear threat. We should keep that in mind.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary now concede that the international community's unwillingness to take robust action through things like the snapback mechanism and the JCPOA is part of the reason that Israel felt the need to take the initial strikes and America to do likewise? I agree that diplomatic means will ultimately be the only long-term resolution,

but that means not just asking nicely for Iran to put its nuclear weapons away, but enforcing that and ensuring it does so through such mechanisms. Will the Foreign Secretary ensure that if we are not going to be involved in military action—I understand why we might not want to do that—we will ensure that robust action is taken, and that it is underpinned by measures that will force Iran to do the right thing, rather than just hoping that it will do the right thing?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—I know he knows how difficult it is to deal with Iran. He will remember that under the JCPOA, Iran was allowed to enrich to 3.67%; today, it is at 60%. The question is, how could that possibly be for civilian use? I challenged the Iranian Foreign Minister on that on Friday. We have had seven rounds of negotiations with the Iranians, which began under the right hon. Gentleman's Government; he was Foreign Secretary for a period of that. Iran has obfuscated and deceived—the time now is to get real.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that while we all want to see urgent de-escalation, the escalating conflict in Iran will not take focus from the UK's efforts to end the devastating war in Gaza, help the Palestinian people, free the hostages and lift restrictions on humanitarian and medical aid?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. The loss of life over the past few days—hundreds of people who lost their lives queuing for food—is appalling and should offend us all. Of course, when I spoke to Israel's Foreign Minister yesterday, I reminded him once again of my deep concerns over the new system that Israel has put in place to deliver aid and of our belief that that system cannot and will not work, and that we need to return to a much better provision.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has said that Iran must not be allowed to have a nuclear weapon. Does he therefore support the recent targeted strikes by the United States and Israel on Iranian nuclear facilities: yes or no? If not, can he explain how exactly that inaction would have curtailed Iran's nuclear ambitions?

Mr Lammy: I am afraid I am not able to give an assessment of the effectiveness of that action at this stage, and neither is the United States. The hon. Lady may think that that is a binary question, but I do not believe it is. What the UK is engaged in is diplomacy, and we are working, of course, with our closest ally, the United States.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I associate myself with the Foreign Secretary's condemnation of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, but we need to match that condemnation with accountability. Here in the UK, Jewish communities in particular are deeply concerned about what lies ahead. Last week, the Iranian ambassador acknowledged before the Foreign Affairs Committee that MI5 had identified 22 threats on British soil that had been organised by the Iranian regime. What is the Foreign Secretary's message to Jewish communities, who are in a state of high alert at the moment, wondering what will happen?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right that the Iranian regime is the world's worst sponsor of state terrorism and state threats. We have three individuals who were arrested under the National Security Act 2023 moving through our judicial system. I want to reassure those in the Jewish community in our country that we take those threats very seriously, and I and the Home Secretary will do all we can to keep them, their buildings, their institutions and their families safe.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As usual, I agree with much of what the Foreign Secretary has to say, but I have to ask him this: how many times must a terrorist-funding, fanatical regime threaten to wipe another country from the face of the earth before a Government advised by Lord Hermer of Chagos acknowledge that military action to delay and degrade its nuclear weapons programme is both ethically and legally justifiable?

Mr Lammy: I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman, with all respect, that there is a convention in our country about the very important role that Attorneys General play in our Government. They are able to give the Government advice when asked for it; that happens under all Governments. I do not really recognise the caricature that I have heard or some of the reports. I want to make it crystal clear that we were not involved in this action and therefore some of what is being said is wholly beyond the pale.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Many constituents contacted me over the weekend, fearful of the fallout from US intervention in Iran. They know, and we know, that wars do not make the world a safer place, but make it much more dangerous. Their concerns are not unwarranted. In 2002, Netanyahu offered a guarantee that regime change in Iraq would bring "enormous positive reverberations" to the region. We now know that there was no imminent threat and no evidence of weapons. The scale of the disaster, not just in Iraq but across the region, was so profound that the Chilcot inquiry insisted that any future military intervention must be met with rigorous scrutiny. Does the Foreign Secretary accept the need for such scrutiny, and will he reassure the House again that we will not enter an endless war fuelled by reckless provocateurs?

Mr Lammy: I was in the House during the period in which Chilcot was doing his work, and I reassure my hon. Friend that our Government—and, I hope, all future UK Governments—have learned from its findings.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The Foreign Secretary has confirmed that Britain was not involved in the strikes on Iran. Will he also confirm whether the US Administration sought permission to use Diego Garcia as the launch point for the strikes? If permission was sought and denied, on what basis did the Prime Minister deny permission? If it was not sought, what does it say about the UK-US relationship that America would rather fly around the world from Missouri than launch from Diego Garcia?

Mr Lammy: They did not seek that advice.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his measured approach to this crisis. In past rounds of violence, Iran has often leaned on its proxies to conduct retaliation. They include the Houthis

of Yemen, who until recently had been attacking UK and international shipping in the Red sea. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to protect UK shipping in that area and to keep safe the trade routes that are so vital for our country?

Mr Lammy: Iran's proxies, including Hezbollah and Hamas, have been considerably degraded over this period. The Houthis have been held back but are still active in the Red sea. We will do all we can, working with partners, to protect our shipping routes. We have been crystal clear to the Iranian regime about the strait of Hormuz in particular.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Foreign Affairs Committee met the Iranian ambassador twice last week, and he claimed that Iran's nuclear programme was legal and purely civil, and he said that they want to negotiate. Can the Foreign Secretary say, on the basis of the numerous meetings with the Iranian Foreign Minister that he has reported, whether he gained any impression of Iran's willingness either to dismantle its nuclear programme or to negotiate?

Mr Lammy: That is the central question. What I have found is inflexibility, as well as a failure to face the seriousness with which the international community are looking at this question and to accept both that we have moved on from the joint comprehensive plan of action, which the Iranians pulled out of back in 2019, and that the focus now is on zero enrichment. Maybe they can have a civil nuclear capability, but it would have to be heavily monitored and would need some sort of international regime in locus with it. They have to face that seriousness now at this point.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. He said that the whole House will have in their thoughts the many civilians impacted by this fighting. I have in my thoughts the many protesters who took to the streets after the brutal and tragic killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. We saw protesters come forward and stand up against the brutal regime, and we saw people being mutilated. The last 20 years of intervention have shown that war and wider escalation will not help these people; it will not help the ordinary Iranians who are suffering under this regime. I have received many emails from my constituents, one of which said:

"The priority should be to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, not supply weapons to either side of the conflict, and further, to support the facilitation of aid to civilians impacted by the war".

Can the Foreign Secretary assure me that the UK will not act immediately to follow any military action and that we will urge the US and Israel to de-escalate and avoid targeting innocent civilians?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning Mahsa Amini—a young woman who was imprisoned in Iran because of her appearance and then killed in police custody. Some 20,000 people, many of them protesters, were thrown into jail as a result, and 500 lost their lives—effectively murdered. That is the regime we are talking about, and my hon. Friend is quite right to remind the House of that. On diplomacy, I refer her to the statements I have previously made about our position on it.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): A lot of people watching and worrying over the weekend will have seen many of the hallmarks of Iraq. Despite that, the Foreign Secretary cannot tell us whether or not he believes that the strikes were the right thing to do, or whether or not he believes that the strikes were legal, and he has failed to outline today whether this House would be given a vote on any potential military action in this conflict. Is he purposely treating the public as fools?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman may just have got a soundbite, but I am afraid that I am not going to take any lectures from him on the nuclear question. He has a very sorry record on that serious matter. We have been very clear that diplomacy is the way and that de-escalation is our position. That is what a Government pursue if they are serious about foreign policy, and I would recommend our approach to him.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I join the Foreign Secretary in thanking our brave service personnel from RAF Brize Norton for repatriating British citizens from Tel Aviv. In this Armed Forces Week, we are all grateful for their courage and sacrifice.

On Iran, let us be clear about the regime: it has killed thousands upon thousands; upheld the brutal suppression of democracy, as well as the rights of women and of LGBT+ people; and demonstrated a consistent intent to sponsor terrorism and act through proxies with violence to destabilise the region. But all military action must go through the process of international law, and its execution must be based on a plan and intent to return to democracy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must do what we can to support de-escalation as soon as possible?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his service in the RAF, and I am sure that he is thinking about his former colleagues at RAF Akrotiri and across our two sovereign bases in the area, and in particular about our bilateral defence partnerships with so many countries in the region. I am pleased to make it crystal clear that the path through this is a diplomatic one: it is for Iran to return to negotiation and to recognise the power of the global community being absolutely clear that it cannot have a nuclear weapon.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is good news that, reportedly, the Home Secretary has finally decided to proscribe the treacherous terrorist group Palestine Action. Given that she has done that at great speed after the recent attack, and given that the IRGC has conducted or attempted attacks on this country multiple times, will the Foreign Secretary use his powers to persuade the Home Secretary to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The proscription question is always one for the Home Secretary. In relation to the decision that she has made today, it is important to stress that the process has involved all the relevant agencies and their assessment of the activities. I have to say that the attacking of RAF bases is disgraceful and totally unacceptable, and the force of the law must bear down on that. The Home Secretary keeps proscription under review, and I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised a long-standing issue.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the statement and acknowledge, as many constituents have this week, the intense diplomatic efforts of his teams in ever-changing and ever-challenging times. But given the intolerable situation in Gaza, my constituents will want to be reassured that we will not let up on pressing in every way we can for more aid to get through and for an immediate ceasefire. I know that the Foreign Secretary said that last week and in the statement, but will he please underline it again?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. This morning I sat in my office with Eli Sharabi, who managed to get out of a Hamas cell but lost many family members during that journey. He talked about the starvation he experienced—he went down to 44 kg, having been 70 kg when he went in. It was humbling to hear his story and to be reminded that the humanitarian catastrophe affected everyone in Gaza, but he did say that those from Hamas who were holding him ate plentifully while they watched him and others with him starve.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Given that there is a consensus, I think, across the whole House that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon, it seems that there is a lack of willingness to recognise that negotiations, after many years, have patently failed to yield results. Will the Foreign Secretary join Reform and me in thanking the United States and Israel for degrading the Iranian nuclear weapons programme?

Mr Lammy: I had two conversations with Secretary of State Rubio yesterday, and I hope that he would say that we have established a good working relationship over the period, and the hon. Gentleman will know that I have a longer-standing relationship with Vice President Vance. To be clear, the United States' position is that we are at war with Iran's nuclear programme. This was a targeted attack. It is important to understand the efforts to degrade, but we have not yet had that assessment as to their effectiveness.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Iraq showed the grave dangers of following a right-wing US President into an illegal war for regime change. The consequences were hundreds of thousands of dead, mass destruction, mass devastation, regional chaos and wasted resources. Many fear that the same thing is happening now, so will the Foreign Secretary confirm that any such war on Iran for regime change would be illegal under international law? Will he also confirm that he would oppose any UK involvement in any such intervention or any such war?

Mr Lammy: I am confident, through my engagement with the United States and the discussions that I have had, including in the White House last week, that this is not about regime change. I should remind my hon. Friend that the Israelis too have been clear that they are not attacking the civilian leadership in Iran.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It appears that the House agrees with the Government's objective that Iran should never have nuclear weapons, but the Government are prepared to will the ends but not the means. This begs the question: who is really running the Government? Why did Lord Hermer's opinion on the legality of UK involvement in military action become public last week? Was it leaked? Was it briefed?

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

Does this not demonstrate that the Government are paralysed and divided on this question instead of leading from the front?

Mr Lammy: No.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I commend the Foreign Secretary for urging calm and restraint at this troubling time. I know that he has been engaging with our European counterparts—notably with France and Germany as the E3—but as the positions of the US and Israel on Iran harden, does he agree that this is the moment when our relationship with Europe as a collective force for diplomacy and peace will be crucial?

Mr Lammy: It was important for the so-called E3—the United Kingdom, alongside Germany and France—working with the EU's high representative, to make clear our concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions to the Iranian Foreign Minister and to urge him to come back to diplomacy. All of us were on the phone to him again after the action. Of course there is an important role for Europe, particularly as the custodians of the JCPOA, and because we have a decision to make about whether we will in fact snap back and impose a heavy set of sanctions on Iran if it fails to comply.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Last week and today, the Foreign Secretary said the Government's first priority is the welfare of British nationals, and I welcome that, but my constituent who was caught in Iran with her baby unfortunately received no support from the Foreign Office and had to flee with officials at the port and to evacuate to Oman. That was not a secure route and another ferry was bombed along the way. Thankfully, she and her baby are now safe but are still making their way back to the UK without their luggage or any provisions for the baby. Can the Foreign Secretary outline what steps are being taken to ensure that British nationals like my constituent can be repatriated swiftly and safely if they so wish?

Mr Lammy: I am very sorry to hear about the position of the hon. Member's constituent and her baby. It must have been immensely stressful for them to make their way out of Iran in that way. She will know that we have been advising against travel to Iran since 2019. We are able to offer support on the border with Azerbaijan as best we can, but she will also know that the airspace is not open in Iran. If she gets in touch with the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), of course we can look at this to see what learnings there may be.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I would first like to associate myself with the condolences to all those who have lost loved ones. We are increasingly seeing foreign leaders not only flout international law but ignore our international rules-based system, which was hard-won after the second world war. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that we can get this back on track?

Mr Lammy: It was very appropriate to meet the Iranian Foreign Minister in Geneva, which in so many ways is the home, under the United Nations umbrella,

of the multilateral system and the rules-based order. We were with him as the E3 and the EU to reinforce messages that we share with the United States and to try to broker a diplomatic solution, and we will keep trying.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): This morning, the Foreign Secretary was repeatedly asked whether he considered the US's bombing of Iran to be legal. Although I am sure everyone in this House recognises the brutality of the Iranian regime, his obfuscation in reply was clear, as is the refusal to say whether Britain would get involved in any capacity if the US falls deeper into a conflict with Iran. Can we have a clear answer from the Foreign Secretary now to that question, and will he clearly state that de-escalation must mean no UK involvement?

Mr Lammy: We have UK nationals in the region. We have UK bases in the region, and force protection is at its highest level. We have several thousand troops in the region. Of course their welfare is our priority. Of course we have moved assets in a precautionary way into the area, and of course we will work alongside our allies to protect them and to protect our people. I can give the hon. Member that assurance wholeheartedly.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We all share the Foreign Secretary's concern about getting back to considering how we end the horrors we see in Gaza and about getting clarity on the dangerous risks that Iran presents, but that means asking some difficult questions about how we get the negotiations going. We have seen today that the Israeli forces have deliberately targeted the Evin prison in Tehran. It was the prison in which Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was held. What conversations has my right hon. Friend had with the Israeli Government about whether they are now moving to target non-military installations? What does he think that would mean for the ability to restart negotiations?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister yesterday. I spoke to him briefly again this morning, and he reassured me that the military targets and the nuclear facility remain their objective and their focus at this time.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Away from the headlines, as the Foreign Secretary said, hundreds of Gazans have been losing their lives. Let us be clear about what is happening. As tens of thousands of people walk miles daily to beg for food from American mercenaries, they are being shot at random in the street. I think we in this House have moved beyond asking the Foreign Secretary actually to lift a finger and beyond mouthing the words do anything about this, but I have a wider question. Does he envisage the UK playing any part in some sort of consequence in the future for these outright murders?

Mr Lammy: I know the right hon. Gentleman's strength of feeling on these issues and acknowledge the consistency with which he has pressed them from the Back Benches. I reassure him that in the White House last week we did not just discuss the situation in Israel and Iran; I also discussed the situation in Gaza, and our discussion is about the chances of a ceasefire. The prospects for that ceasefire are currently with Hamas, deep in their system and in their tunnels, but I remain hopeful that we will get a breakthrough in the coming days and weeks and that the suffering that we are seeing will be alleviated.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am aiming for 5 o'clock, so if we can speed up questions and answers, that would be very helpful. For a good example of that, I call Louise Jones.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): When there was US offensive action against Iran five years ago, we saw proxy action taken against UK and US personnel deployed in the middle east, where we sadly lost Lance Corporal Brodie Gillon. I do not expect the Foreign Secretary to give me details, but can he assure me that everything is being done to make sure there is adequate force protection for those who are still deployed on behalf of this country?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question and to be able to give that reassurance about our highest levels of force protection for all our wonderful personnel, many of whom I have met, who are in the region.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and also for emphasising the importance of restraint and de-escalation at this perilous moment. What steps is he taking to try to align and co-ordinate his diplomatic efforts with those of our European and G7 allies, in the hope of presenting a united diplomatic front?

Mr Lammy: I have of course spoken to our G7 allies over the past two weeks. I have spoken to our partners in the region, in the Levant as well as in the Gulf particularly, and I will continue to do all I can. Obviously, NATO in the coming days will be another forum in which we can reach a common path towards diplomacy.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for the largest Jewish school in Europe, may I thank the Foreign Secretary for his earlier assurances on safeguarding the community in this country? May I also commend the way in which he has diligently pursued a negotiated outcome to this destabilised situation? He knows that it used to be said that the Israeli Prime Minister jumped to the tune of America. Now that it seems to be the other way round, what action will he take against Prime Minister Netanyahu specifically, in order to stop the destabilisation of the middle east?

Mr Lammy: We do have disagreements with the Government of Israel, and my hon. Friend knows that a few weeks ago we sanctioned two members of that Government. But I remain, and the Government remain, a friend of Israel, able to work at many different levels. We recognise the contribution that has been made to the degrading of proxies working on behalf of Iran that contribute to Iran being the worst actor on state threats globally.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): If Iran chooses to close the straits of Hormuz, which the Iranian Parliament has now voted to do, what contingency options has the Foreign Secretary worked up to protect UK national interests?

Mr Lammy: I assure the hon. Member that these issues are of course under consideration in the Government. All contingencies are in place, and we are in discussion with our allies about that, but it would be wrong for me to go into operational detail.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments made across the House about the dire and despicable nature of the Iranian regime? That said, last week the Foreign Secretary told the House that attacks on Iran were not in our national interest. So does he believe that the strikes led by Trump and Netanyahu—two hard-right authoritarians with no love for a rules-based order—have made Britain or the world any safer? Or does he agree with me that, for much of the world watching, the message is chillingly clear? In a global order where rules mean little and might makes right, deterrence not diplomacy is now the only defence; and that, as he must acknowledge, makes global security more precarious than ever.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I recall that he also recognises the problems of that nuclear threat and nuclear proliferation. An assessment has not yet been made of the effectiveness of that military action, but he will have heard my remarks in relation to diplomacy. That is the way now, and it will be the way that we get beyond this current crisis.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): We have now been here for an hour, and still the Foreign Secretary appears incapable of saying whether he supports or condemns America's actions or whether he regards them as legal, and nowhere in his statement does the role of international law even merit a mention. Will the Foreign Secretary now take this opportunity to tell us whether he believes that America's unilateral action was compliant with international law?

Mr Lammy: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that I qualified and was called to the Bar in 1995 and have not practised for the past 25 years. It is not for me to comment on the United States and legality. I refer him to article 51 and article 2 of the UN charter, and he can seek his own advice.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is right to focus on de-escalation and diplomacy. However, we know that the joint comprehensive plan of action did not curtail Iran's enrichment of uranium, so what lesson will he learn as he rebuilds the architecture for diplomacy to ensure that Iran cannot rebuild its nuclear-enriched uranium?

Mr Lammy: With Iran enriching at 60% and the International Atomic Energy Agency saying that Iran has no credible civilian justification for that high enrichment level, my hon. Friend is quite right. Therefore, the debate has moved on, and it has moved on to zero enrichment.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear to the House that if the United States needs to take further action to degrade and destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and requests to use Diego Garcia, Cyprus or any other British military facility, we will make sure that that is made available?

Mr Lammy: From my discussions with the United States and with Secretary of State Rubio, that is not their intention; the right hon. Gentleman will have seen that from the thrust of the press conference held in the United States yesterday. He will also know that they are assessing now what has happened and they are hoping that it has been a targeted response and a single response. That is the thrust of what we are being told by the United States at this time.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I understand the priority to evacuate UK citizens from Israel, but advice to our constituents in Qatar to shelter in place until further notice is hardly comforting. May I press the Foreign Secretary to outline what more detail will be provided for UK citizens in the wider region and whether there is a specific threat against them?

Mr Lammy: The message I gave earlier at the Dispatch Box is in the context of a fast-moving situation and advice that was given by the US shortly before I stood up. Of course we keep our advice updated, and we are on high alert right across the region.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Is it UK Government policy to pursue regime change in Iran—yes or no?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, from talking to Secretary of State Rubio, Vice-President Vance and envoy Steve Witkoff, that is not the objective of the United States, and of course it is not our belief that it is for us to change the regime of any country. That must be for the people themselves.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): It is absolutely right to call for de-escalation at this extremely dangerous time; however, the Foreign Secretary will know that the United States' attack on Iran has raised serious questions about violation of international law, and Israel's genocide in Gaza and its occupation and settlements in the west bank are of course also illegal under international law. So can the Foreign Secretary tell me if the Government still profess to believe in the international rules-based order, or are we now admitting that we are content to support countries that act outside it?

Mr Lammy: I refer my hon. Friend to what I have said in the Chamber this afternoon. Of course we believe in the rules-based order and international law. That was precisely why I was in Geneva on Friday for seven hours attempting to get Iran to comply and get back around the negotiating table.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): On the radio this morning, the Foreign Secretary told us of his adherence to and support for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and used that as an argument for the bombardment of Iran. Has he said anything to Israel about its illegal holding of nuclear weapons, its possession of a delivery system and the obvious danger to anybody of having a nuclear-armed neighbour who may well use those weapons? What has he said to the Government of Israel about their nuclear weapons?

Mr Lammy: I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has been campaigning on these issues over many years, and has taken strong positions on nuclear proliferation. I do not want to go back to the days of Mordechai

Vanunu, but I remind the right hon. Gentleman that Israel is not threatening its neighbours with nuclear weapons—it is Iran that we must stop at this time.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the attacks on Iran are beneficial to this country or will they create more instability in the middle east and beyond? As an upholder of the rules-based international order, which he says that we still support, is there a cost to the UK if the actions of our allies—the United States and Israel—are judged to be contrary to international law?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who is learned in these matters and will have strong views. We are seeking de-escalation and pursuing diplomacy, and we are doing that according to the rules-based order and our belief in the international architecture that was set up on the backs of men and women who lost their lives and gave so much in the second world war.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has referred a number of times to the diplomatic off-ramp. Will he confirm to the House that the diplomatic off-ramp—the request of the United Kingdom to Iran—is that the regime changes its stance and finally recognises the right of our ally, Israel, to exist?

Mr Lammy: I can. Of course the regime should recognise the right of Israel to exist, and it should work with the United States and the E3, particularly, to ensure that it is putting whatever has been developed beyond use.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Over the past decades, Iran and its terrorist proxies have effectively colonised five middle eastern countries and used them as launching pads for attacks against Israel. Iran has been goading and indeed preparing for a conflict with Israel for decades, including the genocidal intent behind its nuclear weapons development. How will the UK support our many allies in the region, including Arab countries as well as Israel, who are facing similar threats from the Iranian regime?

Mr Lammy: I remind my hon. Friend that we have the strongest of bilateral defence relationships with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq and Lebanon at this time, and they can rely on us.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Forgive me, Mr Speaker, but I have to push the Foreign Secretary on this point: a lot of hon. Members have asked him specifically whether he supports the attack conducted by the United States, but he has refused to answer that question. Is that because he realises, like many of the British public, that it was an illegal attack on Iran?

Mr Lammy: As I said on the radio this morning and I will say again now, I will continue to work with our closest ally to ensure that Iran never gets a nuclear weapon.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's calls for a durable diplomatic solution: no one benefits from the continuation of this conflict. Will the Foreign Secretary outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure peace and prevent war in the region, particularly guaranteeing that the strait of Hormuz remains safe for our liquefied natural gas and oil tankers? Securing that trade route is essential for global stability and economic security, including Iran's.

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, because many members of the public beyond this Chamber will be worried about the risk of inflation and of an oil shock particularly. They will want to be reassured that the Government are doing everything they can to be clear to Iran that it cannot blockade or mine the strait of Hormuz—it must not do that. We will of course act with allies to prevent such an occurrence.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It seems that we have been going around in circles for an hour and a quarter. In answering questions, the Foreign Secretary has rightly pointed out that diplomacy has failed to stop Iran reaching 60% enriched uranium. Likewise, he has rightly acknowledged that diplomacy has failed to stop Iran spreading and sponsoring terrorism around the region, yet each time he has concluded with a hope that greater rounds of diplomacy will solve this. Hope is not a strategy. At what point will the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that there probably can be no diplomacy with a regime that is so brutal to its own people and just will not listen?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is a bright man. He knows that once a country has acquired the means to enrich to 60%, the expertise exists, and only a diplomatic solution can create the framework to eradicate and control that expertise. That is why, in the end, this can be dealt with only diplomatically. It is also why President Trump is urging Iran to return to the negotiating table.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): As well as the Iranian regime's threat to Israel, it has supported Assad to kill half a million people in Syria, including Palestinians, and it supplies Putin with the drones he is using to massacre people in Ukraine. We must also remember that the Iranian regime persecutes its own people, including human rights activists. Just as Ministers have, I am pleased to say, engaged with Syrian activists in the UK to hear their views on the future of their country, can I ask Ministers and the Foreign Secretary to assure me that they will engage with human rights activists and democracy activists here in Britain to help to guide their approach?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend's articulacy is spot on. I can give him that undertaking, between myself and the Minister for the Middle East.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): We talk weekly in this place about Russia's illegal bombing of Ukraine. Russia may not be a close ally like the US, but presumably if international law applies to that, the US bombing of Iran would likewise be illegal under international law. If not, can the Foreign Secretary explain why international law would apply differently to the US? Where does that leave us if this conflict escalates in the region?

Mr Lammy: I say gently to the hon. Lady that one should always be wary of moral equivalence. Russia invaded a sovereign country and, for the last years, has been firing rockets into that country, aided by Iran. We will continue to stand up to Putin's abysmal aggression, and of course he should be held to account.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his continued clarity that the UK has not been involved in this military action in the middle east. I also thank him and his team for all their diplomatic efforts on de-escalation. I agree with what he said about the horrific situation in Gaza, where in the last week more than 100 Palestinians have been killed while starving and waiting for aid. He says that he has pressed the US and Israel on this issue in the last week. Is he continuing to discuss it and to press for action together with France and Canada? Given his remarks about UK citizens in Qatar, what can he say about conversations with the Gulf and Jordan on protecting our citizens, assets and others there, should that be needed?

Mr Lammy: I have liaised with Jordan and with Gulf partners, and I will be speaking to the UAE later on today. We will work with them to keep them safe. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put on record our deep concerns about those who have lost their lives in Gaza over the last few days.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary and his Department for the work they are doing to protect British citizens here and abroad. What does he think needs to happen for Iran to abandon its ambitions to build and deploy a nuclear weapon?

Mr Lammy: Iran has to recognise that it has lost its air defences, and it is my belief that its friends in Russia and China will not be rushing to its aid. It has to recognise that its proxies are degraded, and that the international community is firm that it cannot have a nuclear weapon and it has now got to come back to the negotiating table. We have to put in place a framework that deals with the stockpiles, with the centrifuges, with enrichment to 60%, and with the problem of ballistic missiles.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his level-headed approach in calling for de-escalation. He has spoken about the threat of further escalation with the closure of the strait of Hormuz, through which—as he knows—a large proportion of the world's oil supply flows. Can he say more about how he will protect UK householders and businesses from a potential rise in oil prices?

Mr Lammy: It is important that we de-escalate at this time and that diplomacy prevails, and of course it is important that we work with our allies for every contingency. I am not in the business of talking up fears of an oil price shock; I am working to reassure the British people that we are doing all we can to see that that eventuality does not come to pass.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): This House has agreed that Iran must never have a nuclear weapon, but former Russian premier Dmitry Medvedev has said that

[Robin Swann]

a number of countries will now be considering supplying nuclear warheads to Iran. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of that statement, and what are the Government doing to prevent it?

Mr Lammy: It would be wrong for me to go into detail about that, but of course it has come to my attention. I also put on record my grave concerns about the reports that Iran's Parliament is preparing to withdraw from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which would further isolate Iran.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Further escalation in the middle east could have devastating consequences, not only for the region but for global stability. Given the provocative and inflammatory rhetoric from President Trump and the risk of unpredictable US action further destabilising the situation, can the Foreign Secretary set out what steps the Government are taking to work with international partners to de-escalate tensions and protect UK interests? Can he also give a definitive answer to the question of UK involvement?

Mr Lammy: We were not involved. Over the weekend, I spoke to my Cypriot and Lebanese counterparts, and in the days before that, I spoke to all counterparts in the Gulf. Of course we are working to de-escalate at this time.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In the event that Iran does launch a retaliatory military strike against the US, what do the Government believe our article 5 obligations would be with regards to military support for the US, and how would that change if the location of the attack were in the region?

Mr Lammy: I refer the hon. Gentleman to paragraph 2.13 of the ministerial code.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): With his 25 years of parliamentary service, the Foreign Secretary will no doubt remember when Tony Blair told us that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was a grave threat to international security. Of course, we then followed America into an illegal war in the middle east, and if the Prime Minister were to go down that same road, he would be wrong too. Is it not overdue that the Government follow an independent and, as Robin Cook memorably said, ethical foreign policy—one created here and not in Washington DC?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend allows me to put on record what a privilege it has been to serve and work as Foreign Secretary alongside a Prime Minister of such tremendous principle and legal learning, who entirely understands his obligations and what good government looks like, and is absolutely steadfast in his belief in the international rules-based order.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the gravity with which he is treating this important topic. One week ago, he told me that he had "huge confidence" in our ability to defend our middle eastern assets from Iranian strikes, but within two days, two strategic assets were vandalised by a

couple of civilians on e-scooters at RAF Brize Norton. Does he recognise that the UK must not follow Trump into Netanyahu's war with Iran, when force protection is inadequately resourced at home?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his service in the RAF. I refer him to the statement that the Armed Forces Minister will make to the House shortly about the security of our sovereign bases.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Just a week ago, we were here calling for de-escalation because there were so many civilian deaths, but in the past week we have seen an escalation and so many more civilian deaths in Israel, Gaza and Iran. We know that it is much easier to get into a conflict than to conclude it. If the justification for military action is now a nuclear weapons programme and being a threat to neighbours, how many other nations fit that category? Is North Korea not another example, but with an even more advanced nuclear weapons programme? Where are we in terms of justification and article 51 of the UN charter?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend's question goes to the heart of why it would be a travesty for Iran to withdraw from the non-proliferation treaty and why we must work to ensure that it does not become a North Korea. It must never have a nuclear weapons programme, and we will do everything to stop that happening.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The family of my constituent, Katie Solomon, have been in touch to share their fears about her as she shelters from Iranian attacks in Israel. My constituent Mehdi Moslehi has told me about how his life in the UK started as a refugee from the Iranian regime. Can the Foreign Secretary tell my constituents and the House why, given Iran's record, he is finding it so difficult to follow the Prime Minister in welcoming the actions of our allies in seeking to reduce the risks posed by the Iranian nuclear programme?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman will recall that in my Tottenham constituency, I represent the Stamford Hill area of London, which is the home of many in our orthodox Jewish community, many of whom are in Israel as we speak, sheltering in their bunkers. The picture he paints is one that I recognise, and that is why I will do everything I can to work with them and protect them.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Dozens of people from my Hendon constituency have been stranded in Israel and Iran. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his hard work on this issue, and it is good news that the first flight has already occurred. Can he say more about the timeframes for potential future flights and what is being done to support those looking to leave Israel over land borders or by sea?

Mr Lammy: I updated the House about our rapid response teams who are working in Israel and at its borders for those who can journey to the land borders with Jordan and Egypt to leave. We have a flight in the

air as we speak. I expect that there will be further fights in the coming days, but it depends on airspace and on how those days look.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement in which he says that he has been crystal clear with the regime in Tehran. I hope he has been a lot clearer with them than he has been with the House today, but I will give it one more go, because I genuinely do not understand why he cannot answer this question. Does His Majesty's Government support or oppose the US military action against Iran at the weekend?

Mr Lammy: His Majesty's Government will continue to work with our closest ally, as I did last week in Washington DC.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the energy he has invested in de-escalation, because it is the only moral route out of this conflict. I thank him also for reassuring us that UK forces are not involved and that we have not given up on the plight facing ordinary Gazans. There are 90 million people in Iran, just under 10 million of whom are in Tehran. There are reports of many of them trying to leave the country, and that will be made worse by the reports and speculation on regime change. There are also reports that Turkey and Pakistan might be closing their borders to refugees. Is he keeping a watchful eye on that, and has he discussed it with our international partners?

Mr Lammy: I spoke to our ambassadors and teams across the region this morning, because I recognise that this is a worrying and stressful time in all those areas. That is why my central message and task is to de-escalate. We need more light and less heat.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): If I heard the Foreign Secretary correctly, he said that the UK would act if Iran sought to block the strait of Hormuz. Did he mean "act militarily"? In what other conditions would he consider military action, and what would he say if the Americans turned to this Government and asked them for support in any military adventure to do with this conflict?

Mr Lammy: It would be quite wrong for me to go into eventualities and operational matters at this Dispatch Box at this time, but the hon. Gentleman should be reassured that all contingency arrangements are in place to keep our people safe and to work with our allies to keep the region safe.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The most in-depth study ever conducted of the casualties of the so-called war on terror was carried out by Brown University in America, which found that, directly or indirectly, more than 4.5 million people lost their lives partly because of what was voted for in this House. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the only way in which this conflict can be resolved is through diplomacy, and can he assure the House that he will not follow the last Labour Government and the mantra of the former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair when it comes to America's bombing a middle eastern country—"with you, whatever"—and lead this country and the world into the abyss?

Mr Lammy: I can state again, as I have stated throughout the afternoon, that diplomacy is the way, and I remind the hon. Gentleman that our Government, and successive Governments, have learned from the Chilcot inquiry.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Why should the House of Commons, and those in the country that we represent, not be entitled to know whether their Government support or regret the American action? Does not equivocation on that issue bring succour to those who we say must be robbed, quite properly, of their nuclear potential?

Mr Lammy: I think that the people of Britain are entitled to know that we were not involved in this action, and that we work for diplomacy and de-escalation. That is why I was sitting in the White House last week, it is why I was in Geneva on Friday, and it is why I was at a Cobra meeting and making a round of calls to allies and partners to de-escalate at this time yesterday.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Can the Foreign Secretary explain to the House whether the United States felt unable to use the Diego Garcia base and had to refuel three times, in a highly dangerous operation, because of the deal that the Government did with the Mauritians, who would then tell the Chinese, who would then tell the Iranians?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady has to get off social media, and she has to get some help. She is swallowing conspiracy theories that should not be repeated in this House.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Iranian regime has long been a threat to peace, democracy and human rights, and the unilateral, illegal and dangerously provocative Israeli and, now, American attacks have made a tense situation extremely perilous and are completely outside international law. It is therefore deeply concerning to hear the Foreign Secretary echo the talking points of Netanyahu and Trump instead of standing up for those principles, clearly condemning the illegality of these bombings, and unequivocally ruling out the UK's being dragged into any military action to support such illegal action. Why will he not do so?

Mr Lammy: I am focused on Iran's desire for a nuclear weapon, I am focused on the UK's solemn obligation to stop that happening, and I am focused on the diplomacy that is required to bring that about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I have often spoken in this Chamber about the Iranian regime and the horrific human rights abuses that take place under the IRGC. I have nothing but admiration for the steps taken to destroy Iranian nuclear armaments by our American and Israeli allies—steps that we must support. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with the US and Israel as they do what needs to be done? We must send a message to Iran that retaliation in any form will not be acceptable, and that it would face the might of the best armed forces in the world—the British armed forces.

Mr Lammy: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that of course we stand with our allies in the United States and Israel in facing down the repeated threats from Iran. The threat to Israel is existential, and the Iranians are destabilising the neighbourhood. Of course we will stand up to them.

UK Modern Industrial Strategy

5.11 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With permission, I will make a statement on how this Government are backing British business and British workers through the launch of the UK's modern industrial strategy. At the outset, I wish to thank Dame Clare Barclay, all members of the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and my officials for their outstanding work in preparing for the launch of the strategy today.

In an uncertain world, stability, clarity and consistency are needed more than ever. The challenges we face require nothing less than a Government who are on the pitch and clearing the way for private enterprise, and doing so in the best interests of working people. That is what this pro-business, pro-worker Government are going to deliver.

Today I launch a strategy to make Britain the best place in the world to start and grow a business, based on a fundamentally new economic approach from what we have had in the past—a break from the declinism, the dither and the disinterest that defined the last Conservative Government. The strategy speaks to the strength and breadth of our economy, be it building strong industrial foundations, powering frontier technologies, or supporting our world-leading services sector to innovate and thrive. It brings together every bit of Government to drive investment, improving the total business environment by drawing on every Department's expertise. It is a plan to rebuild Britain through new jobs, new industries and new investments; a plan to launch thousands of new careers in engineering, life sciences, professional services and more; and a plan in which Britain's future is designed and built in Britain.

I accept that until this Government came to power, British business was treated to a merry-go-round of policy changes that was matched only by the shuffling of successive Business Secretaries. We are now providing the stability that is at such a premium across the world. Make UK has long called for

“a funded and joined-up long-term vision as a matter of urgency for stability and investment”—

I could not have put it better myself. From the moment we took office, we said that we would pursue a new economic approach in which industrial policy would be done with business, not to business, and we are fulfilling that commitment today. I place on record my thanks to the thousands of businesses that engaged in the process and designed the strategy with us. It is not a document that will be printed and then forgotten; we will put the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and the industrial strategy on a statutory footing to hardwire the changes for the long term.

This Government have brought stability, openness and a pro-growth agenda, but as I have told the House previously, working people must feel the benefits of economic growth. We must go further and faster if we want to achieve the kind of economic growth that the public should expect, see in their public services and feel in their pay packets. Business leaders have provided a wealth of testimony and evidence on the areas that they see as holding them back, and there are no surprises on the list. It starts with energy, because we have among the highest industrial electricity prices in the developed

world at present. They went up 50% in real terms under the previous Government. Second on the list is skills, because when we have vacancies at the same time as one in eight young people are not in education, employment or training, and net immigration is at 1 million, as it was when we took office, something has gone badly wrong. Thirdly, there is place, because too much of the country has been held back by crumbling infrastructure and a lack of investment due to the north-south divide—and that ends now. We will make the bold choices to ensure every region and every nation can play to their strengths. Finally, there is access to finance, because without access to capital we will always have a ceiling on ambition. Today, we have smashed through these barriers.

Let me take each of those four in turn, starting with energy. Today, we have announced that we will slash electricity costs by between 20% and 25% through a new British industrial competitiveness scheme. This will bring our prices more closely in line with those in Europe, and it will be a game changer. We will also put in place the reforms we need for businesses to get the much faster connections to the grid that they need. That means companies in sectors such as car making and chemicals will see their electricity costs cut. The scheme could benefit over 7,000 businesses with high electricity usage in industrial strategy foundational industries and high-growth manufacturing sectors, which collectively employ over 300,000 skilled workers.

We will also launch an expanded version of the supercharger scheme, so that some of our largest companies in electricity-intensive sectors—including investments of the future such as the new steelworks' electric arc furnace at Port Talbot and the Agratas gigafactory in Somerset—will see their network charging exemptions rise from 60% to 90%, cutting their electricity bills and again making them more competitive than our European neighbours. Although the previous Government promised that to business, they again failed to deliver. I confirm that this will all be done without adding a penny to consumer bills or those of any other business.

Secondly, we are shaking up the skills system to prioritise digital, engineering and defence skills, so British workers can secure good, secure jobs in tomorrow's economy. Our industrial strategy sectors are already on track to create 1.1 million new good, well-paying jobs with the help of this industrial strategy, and we want those opportunities to benefit all our constituents. That is why we are investing over £275 million in our engineering skills package and the skills mission fund to deliver training and new technical excellence colleges as part of our wider skills offer. Through our global talent visa reforms and the global talent taskforce, we are also ensuring that UK businesses can recruit the best of the best from here and abroad.

Thirdly, the issue of place—the economic geography of the UK—means a great deal to me and many of my colleagues, who listened to the grand plans to level up that turned into a few extra flowerpots and empty promises. I want to be clear that this strategy is unashamedly ambitious. It chooses to back places where there are clusters of high-growth sectors, and it will work with devolved Governments, Mayors and local leaders to boost that growth.

We are making it easier to get money to places and turn investment into spades in the ground and cranes in the sky through industrial strategy zones, which will bring

together our existing network of freeports and investment zones. We will also, for the first time, include a new programme identifying investible sites where we will fast-track development, similar to the approach taken in France. However, our infrastructure must match our ambition, so we will strengthen connections between city regions and clusters through the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, the growth corridor across our northern city regions, the Edinburgh-Glasgow central belt and rail enhancements in Wales.

Finally, we will unlock billions of pounds in business finance, with the National Wealth Fund supporting our growth sectors, an expanded role for UK Export Finance and £4 billion growth capital for start-ups and scale-ups through a larger British Business Bank, addressing at scale the key stage that we know is the most challenging. This growth capital will catalyse £12 billion of private capital across the eight growth-driving sectors and deliver around £30 billion of additional gross value added to the UK economy.

These measures, alongside our transformative sector plans, are how we can realise the untapped potential in key parts of our economy. For instance, by 2035 we aim to double business investment in advanced manufacturing, increasing the volume of vehicles produced in the UK to 1.3 million, while creating the first European market for self-driving vehicles. We are turbocharging our clean energy mission with investment in offshore wind, small modular reactors, carbon capture, green hydrogen, gigafactories, ports and green steel. We will make our United Kingdom one of the top three places in the world for creating and scaling digital and technology business. That means training 1 million young people in tech skills and expanding our AI research resource by at least twentyfold by 2030. We will significantly increase business investment in our world-leading creative industries sector to £31 billion, cementing our position as one of the great creative exporters in the world. For our life sciences sector, our ambition is that the UK will be, by 2030, the leading life sciences economy in Europe, and, by 2035, the third most important life sciences economy globally, after the US and China.

At the same time, we plan to double business investment in professional and business services to £61 billion, ensuring the continued growth in a powerhouse industry that accounts for millions of jobs in the UK, the vast majority outside London. We have already announced the largest increase in defence spending since the cold war and will use this to transform the UK into a defence industrial superpower by 2035, leading Europe in defence exports and closing the gap with the US by half in venture capital investment in defence. For our financial services, the heart of business investment and stability, we will harness opportunities as markets digitise and adopt new technologies, and ensure the whole economy feels the benefits of increased investment.

The industrial strategy also ensures that places and sectors can take full advantage of the UK's position as a global hub for trade. The UK has long been and will remain a champion of free trade, which is why, under this Government, we have delivered trade agreements with our biggest trading partner in the world, the biggest economy in the world and the fastest growing economy in the world, making the UK the best connected market in the world. Through this industrial strategy, we are reaffirming our commitment to free and fair resilient trade,

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while shielding businesses from supply chain disruption and market-distorting practices. We will leverage our relationships with Europe, the US, China, the Gulf and beyond, so that businesses can make the UK their base to connect with global markets. It will work hand-in-glove with the trade strategy, which my Department will publish later this week, to help British companies break into new markets, export more and grow more.

This is a watershed moment. For too long, Governments have been a source of problems for British business, not a path to solutions. The result, in parts of the country where I and many of us here grew up, was that we watched yards and factories close, along with the door to opportunity. There was a sense that we were losing the past, but we had no bridge to the future. That also ends now, because our plan for change is backing this country's greatest assets and frontier industries to put more money into people's pockets, raise living standards and unleash a decade of national renewal. I welcome Make UK's comments that

"Today is one of the most important days for British industry in a generation."

We are creating a prosperous, proud and outward-facing but self-reliant, independent and high-skilled nation; a country where opportunity, skills and wealth are spread fairly, and where every person and every business have the chance to flourish. That is what our modern industrial strategy will deliver. Our future, in our hands, built in Britain: that is what the strategy will achieve. I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Please be seated. The Secretary of State is very diligent, but could he let his officials know that if the opening statement is to go beyond 10 minutes, they should inform the Speaker's Office? As the statement went a little bit longer, I will allow the Opposition and the Liberal Democrats to have an extra one minute each. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.23 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

It is always a good day when we can talk about our wonderful and innovative British businesses, but, sad to say, this strategy has taken the best part of 12 months to appear. That is how long British industry has had to wait for this cut and paste industrial strategy; 158 pages mostly copied and pasted from previous sector strategies and the science and technology framework, which do nothing to alleviate the pain and turmoil that Labour has already inflicted. In those 12 months, Labour has crashed the economy—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members are laughing, but unemployment has been up in every one of the nine months of this Government, with hiring and investment down. I understand that this document is printed on 40% recycled paper—very much like its content.

Yet there is no respite for businesses from the decisions that have been taken. The Secretary of State talks about restoring stability, and that may well be what was written for him, but he, like me, listens to businesses, so he cannot

possibly believe that. The Government have hiked taxes by £40 billion when they promised not to, and gilt rates are higher today than after the mini-Budget; they fiddled the fiscal rules and are now running out of headroom, all while setting up state investment banks in a repeat of the previous Labour Government's private finance initiative. Higher taxes, higher energy costs and more red tape on employment—the proposals set out in this document are simply insufficient at a time when businesses need far greater measures to defend them from the minefield that Labour has left out.

There are many elements of this strategy that we do welcome. I am pleased that the Government have continued the work the former Chancellor and I undertook on access to capital, and it is good to see an emphasis on trade and international co-operation, particularly with the document's focus on Japan and Saudi Arabia. I am glad that the Government are implementing the O'Shaughnessy reforms and turning the NHS into a global platform health data research service.

It is encouraging to see the weight given to autonomous cars, although it is curious that there is no mention of the opportunity of driverless trains. I am disappointed that the life sciences and engineering biology receive relatively modest mentions. There is a minor mention of skills reform, but there is no mention of real deregulation to our labour market and a near absence of references to small businesses, which account for the majority of businesses and employment in this country.

The big miss, however, is on energy. We welcomed the Prime Minister's epiphany this weekend when he announced he would slash green levies on a certain number of businesses. However, the industrial strategy still talks about accelerating to net zero at a time when British business needs the opposite. It is simply mad. Rather than the Business and Trade Secretary—sitting next to the Energy Secretary on the Front Bench—addressing the root causes of high energy costs, this Government seem intent on adding to the web of complexity of taxes, levies and subsidies. There is nothing in the strategy about reopening the North sea—the energy reserves that lie under our own secure feet. It even compounds the problem by imposing further self-harm through a carbon border adjustment mechanism—a tariff by another name—which will cost businesses and consumers in this country dear.

How can anyone outside this postcode running a business believe that Labour intends to cut the regulatory burden when it has set up new quangos at the rate of one every two weeks, including in the Business Secretary's own Department? How can anyone outside Whitehall looking at the regulations take seriously the commitments in this document, when the Secretary of State's own Department is guiding through the House 300 pages of trade union-written employment law, which will force employers to cut hiring and jobs?

I will conclude with a number of questions. If the Secretary of State cannot answer today, perhaps he would be so kind as to write with a reply. The small business strategy was promised for the spring, but the summer solstice is now behind us. Can he tell the millions of businesses when it is coming?

There are a number of live situations that the Secretary of State will be aware of, including the bioethanol plan in Saltend Chemicals Park in Hull, Syngenta moving its precision wheat breeding programme to France, and the

Government equivocating over supporting the stake in the vital low Earth orbit satellite operator OneWeb. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is actions, not words, that count, and will he impress that on his Treasury colleagues?

Finally, the strategy does talk about reducing the number of regulators, which is wholly welcome, as we need a marked cull in the number of regulators and their scope and size. Will the Secretary of State commit to publishing an annual statement showing the progress his Government are making on that, and will he start today by agreeing not to create any new ones?

Jonathan Reynolds: So fuelled by optimism am I today that even the shadow Secretary of State cannot bring me down. Having been in opposition for some time, I can say that, “This document is all rubbish and I welcome most of it,” is quite an exciting take on a response. The Conservative party has managed to oppose almost everything that the Government have done in their first year, including, in my Department, the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, which the previous Government were planning to introduce had they remained in office, and the India trade deal, which they were negotiating but could not get across the line, so I welcome the small bits of positivity in his response.

Everyone across the House should support the strategy. It is based on things that will not be secrets to hon. Members who spend time with businesses on constituency Fridays and at weekends. They will be told about skills, energy, access to finance and how local areas should have the powers to address the needs in their local economies. I hope that the shadow Secretary of State would recognise, in good spirit, that many of the problems that need to be addressed grew under the Conservative Government. For example, the fact that energy bills became so uncompetitive was a result of actions and decisions of the Conservative Government. We are fixing that problem, in order to make a difference.

On skills, one in eight young people are not in education, employment or training, while net immigration is at 1 million. That is not a policy success. It needed to be addressed. We needed to address, too, the failures on the funding of courses such as engineering. That was such an obvious need for our sectors. Finance is one of the longest-running problems; we are all familiar with it.

The shadow Secretary of State asked a number of questions, and I am more than happy to answer them. On small businesses, if he reads more of the detail when he has a bit more time, he will see that small and medium-sized enterprises play a vital role in the creative industries and defence sector plans. To anyone who asks, “What’s the message to businesses that are not in sectors covered by the industrial strategy?” I say that they will benefit from people having good jobs and high incomes. Whether they are in hospitality, retail or leisure, they will see a direct benefit from the strategy. The small business plan will come out in July, and it will deal with issues such as late payment, business support and access to the kinds of tools—rental auctions and so forth—that will make a difference on the high street.

The shadow Secretary of State attacked net zero. That is a mistake. Why would we turn our back on billions of pounds of investment and all the benefits it could bring? In particular, becoming a country that is not so reliant on volatile foreign gas prices is an obvious

thing that we would not want to turn our back on. He seemed to announce a new Conservative position of opposing CBAMs, which deal with carbon leakage and create a level playing field. I am surprised by that, because the previous Conservative Government were strong advocates of them.

On the bioethanol industry, talks continue with the two plants most directly affected. Of course, they were in a challenging position before the US trade deal; the deal was not in itself the cause of that. They were losing money. If I intervene, I must have a route to profitability, and that is the basis of those conversations. We are committed to precision breeding. Businesses that moved to France would find a more restrictive environment there because of EU regulation, so I would not recommend that.

On OneWeb, there are some specific issues, about which I would be more than happy to talk to the shadow Secretary of State. On regulation, we have already taken decisive action, for example with a strategic steer to the Competition and Markets Authority, which has been warmly welcomed by businesspeople. They ask me for more of that, and that is exactly what we intend to bring forward.

Finally, let me say, because I know that this is so important to colleagues, that I am more than happy to offer a briefing to any Front-Bench spokesperson or group of colleagues across the House. There is so much in the strategy that will make a difference and so much detail worth sharing, and I would be more than happy to do so with colleagues. Let us all get behind the strategy and get behind British industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the biggest remaking of the relationship between the public and private sectors for a generation. The business community in this country will be stronger and better for the measures that he has announced today. Business will welcome in particular the huge investment in skills, access to research and development, and access to capital, but the game changer is the investment in energy that he has announced. Cutting industrial energy prices is a way to get rid of the albatross around the neck of British business. It is a big promise; can he assure the House that there is both the plan and the pound notes to deliver on it?

Jonathan Reynolds: I warmly welcome those words from the Chair of the Select Committee. I absolutely agree with him. There is so much in the strategy, but we were so uncompetitive on energy that whether action could be taken had become a test of credibility from business. The kinds of changes we are talking about—a reduction of £35 to £40 per megawatt-hour by exempting eligible businesses from payments for the renewables obligation, feed-in tariffs and the capacity market—will make a real difference. We are talking about going from being the absolute outlier to, today, being cheaper than Italy and the Czech Republic and on a par with Germany. That is a game changer, and it has been welcomed. We will obviously have to consult; we can make the changes to the supercharger more quickly than we can introduce

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that support. Of course, we will have to set a threshold intensity test and make sure it goes to the sectors in most need of it, but we expect those to include the core foundational sectors as well as aerospace, automotive and all the areas where the competitive pressure is most acute. I am incredibly excited by that.

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

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have long been champions of the industrial strategy. We are proud that the strategy we introduced in government set out the Green Investment Bank, the British Business Bank and the regional growth fund, and we strongly opposed the Conservative Government's damaging decision to scrap our country's industrial plan. We therefore welcome the re-establishment of the industrial strategy and the fact that it focuses on many of the sectors we prioritised in government, including life sciences, professional services and clean energy.

On energy, measures to bring down some of the highest industrial prices in the world will be welcome news for our manufacturers and energy-intensive firms, but we cannot forget that businesses across our entire economy struggle with high energy prices, not least our hospitality businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that small businesses across sectors have access to better energy deals? Will he look to bring forward the industrial competitiveness scheme from its current two-year horizon?

On skills, while today's announcement comes with a welcome funding boost, it stops well short of the fundamental reform that we need, so will the Secretary of State accelerate the reform of apprenticeships and empower Skills England to act as a properly independent body with employers at its heart? One key omission from the strategy is our world-leading agrifood industry, which has been relegated from being a priority sector to receiving only a handful of mentions in the entire document. I hope that the Secretary of State will admit that our farmers and rural communities deserve far better. On trade, if the Government are truly serious about backing British business and going for growth, will they show more ambition on trade with Europe and look to negotiate a new UK-EU customs union, which could put rocket boosters under UK plc?

In the extra time that you have kindly granted me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to ask the Secretary of State about access to finance and about addressing inequalities in particular. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on ethnic minority business owners, I have seen for myself the data on how much more difficult it is for those businesses to access finance, and similar data exists for women entrepreneurs. Addressing those inequalities would add a great deal to growth. Finally, when will we see more details about the National Wealth Fund?

Jonathan Reynolds: I warmly welcome the hon. Lady's support. That section of the Liberal Democrat manifesto was very well written, whoever was responsible for it. There was much that we can all get behind, and it very much made the case.

The hon. Lady is right to say that the Liberal Democrats in government supported the approach we are taking. By the way, I have talked to nearly every one of my living predecessors across the political divide—not all of them, but the ones who have done this kind of work and made a difference. There are some new things in the sectors that we have picked. The creative industries are a brilliant economic, soft power and cultural strength of this country, so it is great to see them included.

On the timescale for energy policy changes, I know that the people who recognise the burden want to see action quickly. I want to see action as quickly as possible. I can make changes to the supercharger scheme and the generosity of it more quickly because it is an existing scheme and the intensity threshold is already in place, but the industrial competitiveness scheme will require legislation to implement it, and that will take more time, depending on how co-operative colleagues are across the House.

I welcome what the hon. Lady said on skills. Skills will always be the No. 1 issue that any business raises with its Member of Parliament. I recognise the case she makes about a fundamental reform. Since the apprenticeship levy was introduced, employer investment in skills has gone down, and that is not what any of us want to see. We will ask Skills England and the industrial strategy council to work more closely on what businesses need to invest in more, and we will ask them to report by the Budget to see whether we can take forward a more comprehensive set of changes. The Department for Education owns that part of the policy, of course, but this is a cross-Government industrial strategy, as it should be. On agrifood, it is a subsector of advanced manufacturing, so the hon. Lady should not worry, because it is included.

The only item of disagreement is trade. I would say that this Government are managing the pressures of international trade better than any other country in the world. The customs union that the hon. Lady proposes would mean that we could not have the trade deal with India, which has brought down tariffs on salmon, Scotch whisky and automotive vehicles. It would mean that we could not have the agreement with the US, which has saved tens of thousands of jobs, so I cannot agree with her on that point. I think we should have closer trade with Europe, the US and the rest of the world.

Finally, I thoroughly agree with the hon. Lady on access to finance, and I appreciate that point. This is a core business and economic issue for the UK, not a minor issue. The level of finance that is going to female entrepreneurs, for instance, is not sufficient. We have already explicitly backed some significant campaigns through the British Business Bank and I stand ready to do more. I recognise the important case she makes.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I welcome this incredibly positive industrial strategy that will help us to harness Britain's potential. The strategy rightly recognises that Stoke-on-Trent has been at the heart of the ceramics industry for centuries. Therefore, will the Secretary of State outline what the industrial strategy means for both our traditional ceramics companies, which produce the finest tableware, and for advanced ceramics with a view to the future?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's comments in welcoming the strategy. There is a great deal that I could go through. I would get in trouble with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I mentioned the benefits for every sector in the document, but I think we would all recognise the pressure on the ceramics sector through energy prices—much of the industry is gas-intensive, and there are not policy tools for dealing with that in the same way. Only a small number of ceramics businesses currently benefit from the supercharger—I think only eight in total—which is why the test for the British industrial competitiveness programme is a different one. There will be a proper process to assess thresholds and eligibility, but it is designed in such a way that foundation sectors—ceramics is very much included in the material side of that—would get the benefit of the programme.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Belated though it is, the announcement about energy costs is obviously vital to the steel sector. The Secretary of State is well aware of the situation in Scunthorpe. Will he give an assurance that, for the foreseeable future, production of virgin steel will continue in Scunthorpe? Will he work with North Lincolnshire council, which has plans for redeveloping the redundant parts of the site, particularly in respect of an AI growth zone?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Member very much for his work. I think the whole House knows of my personal interest in steel and the measures we have taken, including the recall of Parliament and the passing of the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025 that was required to save his constituents' jobs. He is right that the investment required in some of the most electricity-intensive opportunities of the future—electric arc furnaces, for instance, were we to go down that route at Scunthorpe—requires the kind of programme that the enhanced supercharger level will get to because of the measures outlined in the strategy.

There is not yet a plan for transition at Scunthorpe. As the hon. Member knows, we have taken control, but we need to resolve the issue of ownership. We continue to run the plant in a way that minimises losses to the taxpayer. That has meant putting more money in up front to run it at full capacity, which I think he will very much support. We will continue to work with anyone in the local area, including him and my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), to ensure that there is a bright future for the steel sector. I believe that will be possible based on the policy environment we are putting in place.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): As Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, I really welcome this modern industrial strategy because it delivers on the promise Labour made in opposition to put science, innovation and technology and the skills they require at the heart of the drive for growth and industrialisation. I also welcome the strategy as a north-east MP because of the emphasis on regional growth and regional strengths.

My Committee found that one of the major barriers to regional growth and innovation was access to capital. The industrial strategy commits to doubling business investment by 2035. Will the Secretary of State say a little about how the north-east—just for example—might benefit from that?

Jonathan Reynolds: First, let me congratulate my hon. Friend on her recent honour. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I know that she is not one for a fuss, but it is inspiring, and it is great to see that recognition.

My hon. Friend is right that access to finance is a pillar of the industrial strategy. For instance, in the spending review, the British Business Bank's capacity was increased to up to £4 billion, and the maximum ticket it could write was increased to £60 million as part of that. We also had a huge increase in the capacity of UK Export Finance in the spending review—as my hon. Friend knows, the north-east is a huge exporting region and has the most positive balance of payments of any English region—and its direct lending capacity has increased as well.

We now have a story on finance from UKRI and Innovate UK for innovative start-ups, to the British Business Bank for scale up and maturity, going to the National Wealth Fund, and UK Export Finance supporting every part of that journey. That comprehensive offer is detailed in this strategy document, and it will benefit all parts of the UK, including of course the north-east of England.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I welcome the announcement of Plymouth's defence cluster and the national centre for marine autonomy. I am proud that much of this work is being done in my constituency at Turnchapel Wharf and soon at Langage in the Plymouth and South Devon freeport, and that it includes Smart Sound, all of which were supported by the last Conservative Government. Indeed, this did not really need a special name as it was already happening. The Chancellor's spending review speech initially included mention of £4 billion for autonomous systems split between three locations including Plymouth yet, when checked against delivery, this element was missing. Please can the Minister clarify what funding is available for these autonomous systems' development in the strategy, in addition to the money announced for the submarine and continuous at sea deterrence programme at His Majesty's naval base Devonport?

Jonathan Reynolds: Well, I think that was a positive response to the industrial strategy. It certainly sounded like there were some positive themes there. The hon. Member asks a reasonable, specific question about her constituency, and I will check that with officials and write to her so that she has the correct information. If she has had a chance to look at it, she will see that the strategy includes big commitments to the advanced manufacturing R&D budget for a whole range of sectors. We are putting in the money that perhaps was not as firm as it is now in the national finances, but we also have long-term plans in many of those sectors around quantum, advanced manufacturing and aerospace 10-year settlements, for example, to give the kind of assurance and consistency we really need, but I will get her the specific answer she needs.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Representing Tipton, the birthplace of the first industrial revolution, I hugely welcome this industrial strategy and its 1.1 million good jobs. I am particularly pleased to see the Black Country singled out as a centre of clean-energy industries. We recently welcomed £45 million of investment in Eku Energy's new battery energy storage

[*Antonia Bance*]

system at Ocker Hill in my constituency. The action on high energy prices is especially welcome, and I wonder if my right hon. Friend could give us more details about how soon we can expect it to make a difference to businesses in our constituencies.

Jonathan Reynolds: The birthplace of the industrial revolution is somewhat contested by several of us Labour MPs, but we do not need a vote on that. My hon. Friend's constituency certainly has a rich history and a great future for her constituents, who have been well represented by her since the election. On energy prices, we all want action sooner rather than later. There are some parts of the programme that I can implement more quickly than others, and I have to do this in the proper way and let people consult on the threshold. In my Department, we are often dealing with big inward investment decisions or existing domestic business investment decisions, and if they can have certainty as to where they will get to in a short space of time—many of these are investments that pay back over not just years but decades—that will make the difference. I believe that the benefits can be felt even sooner than the programme can be put in place, but I promise I will stretch every sinew to get it in place as soon as we can.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Businesses have told me how important it is to have a front door for public finance. The strategy references Innovate UK, the British Business Bank, the National Wealth Fund, UK Export Finance, Invest Northern Ireland, the Scottish National Investment Bank, the Development Bank of Wales, Great British Energy and the Office for Investment, so does the Secretary State believe that businesses know where public finance's front door is, and that this is as simple as it could possibly be?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the question from my honourable namesake. I hope he is not still getting my emails; I get a few of his, and I try and help out where I can on those local issues. He is right: we have inherited a lot, and there is a devolved landscape to this as well. People often ask—we had a conversation in the Select Committee about this—why we do not bring them all into one organisation. It is important to understand that they play key different roles. I cannot remember what page of the industrial strategy it is on, but the different parts of the journey those different organisations represent are specifically addressed. They are there to do different things.

Of huge interest to me is the scale-up point—the serious business-to-consumer point. I think people recognise that there is a lot of capital in the world, but the question is whether it matches the risk profile and opportunities of businesses in the UK. We all recognise the tremendous innovation in this country, but do we always get the long-term benefits of that scale-up happening in the UK rather than going abroad? We do not, and that is what we are seeking to fix. That is the fundamental mission that we are all united behind.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) and I have published a report highlighting the persistent scale-up gap for defence SMEs. I welcome the increase in funds

for NSSIF—the national security strategic investment fund—but red tape is holding back investment in British single-use military technology, so will my right hon. Friend look at clearing up some of that red tape in order to supercharge investment in British defence SMEs?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much welcome the question and the work that my hon. Friend has done. He has been an ally in ensuring that there are no problems around the defence sector being seen as a legitimate source of business investment and economic activity. We recognise why we need that in the national interest, but we should not in any way be squeamish about the contribution that defence makes because the deterrence value is a fundamental contribution to peace, as well as to economic security.

I can tell my hon. Friend that the strategy commits us to double the amount of the defence budget that goes specifically to SMEs, rising to £2.5 billion a year. SMEs, in diversifying the defence supply chain and creating those opportunities, are absolutely a part of this strategy, and if he has any red tape to show me that we need to get rid of, let's work together to get rid of it.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. This is the sixth industrial strategy announced from that Dispatch Box since "New Industry, New Jobs" by Gordon Brown in 2009. While they have all been filled with a box of chocolates selected by the Secretary of State, with his or her preference often underpinned by a huge subsidy, not a single one of them has made any significant difference to the UK's growth rate, and that is because they all miss a particular piece of the jigsaw. I urge the Secretary of State to recognise that the Government can build as many roads and bridges as they want, train as many young people as they like, pump as much money into the British Business Bank as they want, but unless they can find individuals to take a risk with their own capital, they will not get any investment. Unless these individuals can see a return on that capital, they will not invest. I urge him, as we move towards a Budget in November, to work with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to increase entrepreneurs' relief, cut capital gains tax, and reduce the taxation on dividends so investors can see a return on their risk.

Jonathan Reynolds: I hesitate to say this, but I think the right hon. Gentleman underestimates the number of strategies there have been in recent years. It is certainly more than six; we are at 11 in the past decade, or something like that. There have been six Business Secretaries in five years, which is certainly far too many. I think we can all agree that we need some long-term consistency in that area alone.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's point on risk. That is one of the more thoughtful contributions I have heard on the low economic growth, mainly under a Conservative Government, since the financial crisis. We have to consider that attitude to risk in terms of regulation. Maybe our role as parliamentarians, when we ask regulators to fix every problem and stop every bad thing happening, is to ask ourselves whether that is the right balance, whether that is a reasonable request, or should it be—of course, with that in mind—proportionate to the performance of the economy.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions some specific measures. We have the lowest corporation tax in the G7 and a competitive tax rate overall, but we are always seeking to improve that. We need supply side tools, fiscal changes and a consistent long-term environment. That is what we seek to put in place.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): This morning, I visited Horiba Mira, which employs thousands of people across the west midlands. It was a privilege to visit with the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Chancellor. I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that one of the highlights of that visit was the excitement on the apprentices' faces. After 14 years of low investment in the west midlands under the Conservatives, does he agree that this industrial strategy will deliver opportunities for young people and the manufacturing industries in North Warwickshire and Bedworth?

Jonathan Reynolds: It was a pleasure to see my hon. Friend this morning with my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. I was absolutely blown away by that facility, not just by the obvious "big name" investment from the companies there, but by the young people in particular. Of course, we are trying to deliver a strategy for business, and that requires businesses to have access to the pipeline of people, talent and skills that they need. Within that story, there are so many opportunities and careers for young people. I find that absolutely inspiring. Having an offer for the kind of apprentices and advanced manufacturing we saw today, alongside pride in our service and creative sectors and what we are doing on defence, is all key to ensuring that there are not just the things we need as an economy, but equities and opportunities for young people, as there should be in every part of the UK, to get the lives that they deserve.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): While the UK Government announced a strategy that, as usual, barely gives Scotland any news, the Scottish Government under the SNP have just secured Scotland's position as the highest ranking destination for foreign investment outside of London and the south-east for the 10th year in a row. While the UK Government refuse to see Scotland's potential, the rest of the world are lining up to invest in us—think of what we will achieve when we are independent. Does the Minister accept that the only obstacle to Scotland's success is the continuing devastation of a Brexit that we did not vote for and a UK Government that stubbornly refuse to see Scotland's potential?

Jonathan Reynolds: Well, you can't please everyone, can you? I am depressed just from listening to that question.

On the substance of the hon. Member's question, he is categorically wrong. Look at what we are proposing for clean energy and what that means for Scotland. Look at the new supercomputer in Edinburgh and what that means for tech and digital. Look at the creative industries and the brilliant opportunities there. Look at the ambition on net zero and all the opportunities for investment in Scotland while cutting industrial energy bills.

Of course, there are parts of the strategy that respect the devolution settlement, as we would expect. Skills is something we can only address in England. The money

has gone to the Scottish Government for whatever they want to do to take that forward. That is just the nature of a national industrial strategy that respects the devolved settlement. Independence would be ruinous for the economy. It would shed Scotland's renewable energy potential from the customer base in England. I believe that at the time of the independence referendum, the SNP wanted a UK energy market anyway. If the hon. Member was being honest and candid, he would recognise that there are things that come from the massive strengths of the Union, come what may. This is a strategy that speaks to building on those opportunities for every bit of the United Kingdom, especially Scotland. Scotland's economy could be described by the eight high-potential industrial strategy sectors in this document, so let's have a bit of optimism and hope for Scotland.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the doubling of business investment by 2035. I particularly welcome the £4.3 billion of funding for the advanced manufacturing sector, which will directly benefit the AMIDS—advanced manufacturing innovation district Scotland—factory in Renfrewshire, which is in Scotland. Can the Minister say more about how he will work hand in hand with the devolved Administration in Holyrood to ensure that the delivery of the strategy is tailored to local strengths?

Jonathan Reynolds: There is the true voice of Scotland—it is fantastic to hear that optimism and pride for the future.

My hon. Friend is right that there are huge advantages for her constituents in this strategy, which commits the kind of quantum of funding on a long-term, committed basis on R&D, which cuts industrial energy prices and does things across the board. There is so much that is part of the strategy. If I were to break down each of those sectors, I could be here for hours. You would probably get upset with me, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I read out each of the measures that are part of the strategy.

As I said in answer to the previous question, when we are doing a national industrial strategy, we—entirely rightly—have to respect the devolution settlement, and there are some supply-side areas of industrial strategy that I as the UK Secretary of State do not have control over. It is right to reflect that, to build on that where we can and to work in partnership where we can. There are things I would like of the Scottish Government. If we think of Scotland's tremendous pedigree in civil nuclear power, all that investment is denied to Scotland because of the policies of the Scottish Government. I have my frustrations, but I will work together where we are able to do so to produce the best outcome for Scotland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Select Committee Member Charlie Maynard.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): The Secretary of State said,

"The UK has long been and will remain a champion of free trade"

—if only! It is not on the big stuff or the important stuff. Leaving the EU's customs union and single market has reduced UK GDP by between 2% and 4%. The deal

[Charlie Maynard]

with India is good news, but according to the UK Government's own estimate, it adds 0.1% in the long term—that is, 20 to 40 times smaller. UK exports are down 13% since the trading co-operation agreement took effect. That impacts people in my constituency and all hon. Members' constituencies. When will the Government move faster to repair the enormous economic damage of a hard Brexit?

Jonathan Reynolds: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. This was the question that faced the nation at the time of the referendum. If a country leaves a single market and customs union, there will of course be economic consequences, particularly when there is the free movement of people, but that is the decision the country took. Let's look to the future, not the past. We could have this argument forever. We would have a situation where the business uncertainty created by never fundamentally coming to a settlement on Brexit would in itself become as big a problem as the impact of leaving the single market that he talks about.

Of course, if we were in a customs union without being part of the EU, could a G7 economy subcontract that area of policy entirely to other countries and not have control of a key aspect of our economy? Honestly, I do not think that is reasonable. I appreciate the Liberal position is almost certainly to go back into the European Union—there is consistency there—but I say again that doing so would mean, for instance, denying us the benefits of the India trade deal and services access to India, the reduction of tariffs on agriculture, whisky and cars, and the benefits of the US agreement, which has saved tens of thousands of jobs.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the ambition behind the Government's industrial strategy, a bold 10-year plan to unlock Britain's potential. Will the Minister outline how the strategy will align skills provision, particularly vocational and technical training, with the needs of our high-growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing and clean energy?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am getting the impression that you would like more brevity from the Front Bench, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will just say that the skills packages will put more funding into courses, and the flexibilities required on those courses that matter, with more capital funding for technical excellence colleges, while ensuring that that is available to every part of the UK.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I was glad to hear defence running through the Business Secretary's statement. Will he tell us how much equity the authors of the strategic defence review had in the compilation of the UK modern industrial strategy?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much welcome that question. The Ministry of Defence has been a partner in the defence industrial strategy, which mirrors and is closely aligned with, as one would expect, the strategic defence review and the big increase in spending under this Government.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I warmly welcome the statement. Will the Secretary of State outline what measures are being taken to ensure that towns like Dudley—which is actually the birthplace of the industrial revolution—receive their fair share of economic regeneration and job creation, and that the current infrastructure in cities is further invested in to generate growth?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much appreciate my hon. Friend's question. She will see a whole range of tools in the place section that are available to both mayoral and non-mayoral areas, which will help to shape local economic plans. She will also see measures to attract inward investment and to strengthen its voice in all the regions, and a whole range of policies that speak directly to business. We are building on the tremendous history and expertise in her area; it will be good news across the board.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the future towns funds, one of which is in Coleraine in my constituency. I want to see many more apprenticeships created through that fund. Will the modern industrial strategy that he has unveiled today be flexible enough to allow funds like that to utilise it to get additional resources, to make them even more successful than they have been so far?

Jonathan Reynolds: There are parts of the skills package that allow for short courses, more flexibility and more foundational apprenticeships, which I think speaks exactly to the challenge the hon. Gentleman puts. If he writes to me on any specific issues relating to the towns fund in his constituency, I will get those answers.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my right hon. Friend's determination to reduce energy costs. He has heard about the need for that from me, from many other colleagues and from industry, and he has acted. The previous Government did not act; he has gripped on to this. I welcome that, because it will level the playing field for UK automotive, including for BMW Cowley. Of course, we also need action to incentivise domestic electric vehicle production, rather than the purchase of foreign-made electric vehicles. Will that be included in the ZEV—zero emission vehicle—mandate refresh that is referred to in the strategy?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thoroughly welcome my right hon. Friend's question and thank her for all her support for our determination to make sure we have the competitive automotive sector that we all want. She is right that the changes to the ZEV mandate are part of this. They were brought forward because of the pressing urgency—I was not happy with the situation that I inherited from the Conservative party. We closely review the level of consumer demand in the sector and are always willing to work with her and the tremendous businesses in her constituency to make sure we are getting this country's markets to where they need to be.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Consort Frozen Foods, which is based partly in Burgess Hill in my constituency, distribute ice creams across the UK. It does some distribution overseas as well, but I met its representatives recently because they really wanted to

understand how best to access more markets. What advice does the Secretary of State have for Consort Frozen Foods?

Given the comments of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), I also wonder whether the Secretary of State would like to reflect on the fact that the hon. Member's first role after being elected was as Boris Johnson's net zero business champion.

Jonathan Reynolds: Well, I think there is no comment I can make on that.

I would say, first, that I imagine that that business has been doing very well in the last few days—anyone selling ice creams has probably seen a pretty solid demand for their products. The hon. Member makes a really good point, though; there is a lot of support for exporting, and businesses do not always know where to find it. The business growth service, which will be part of the small business plan, is an attempt by Government to bring together a single portal of information—to digitise, with a single digital login ideally, all the interactions that businesses have with the UK state. I want to bring together our considerable export offer, along with the export academy and the expertise that we have in markets, to make things very clear, so that a Member of Parliament like her visiting a business can simply say, “This is where you need to go. This is all the resource available, and I can raise any other issues with the Secretary of State.”

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for semiconductors, I welcome the formal recognition of this valuable sector in the new industrial strategy. I also welcome the plans for the future development of the sector, but as always the devil will be in the detail. I look forward to working with the Secretary of State to ensure that the UK semiconductor sector develops to its maximum potential in the next few years, as the essential foundation of so many of our vital industries, like automotive, aviation and cyber-security. Will he commit to regular, ongoing discussions with the leaders of the semiconductor sector?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her championing of that sector, which is significant for her constituency. Part of the approach in the industrial strategy is to recognise eight sectors that are very important—those that have an analytical base—and focusing some attention on them, but it covers those foundational sectors as well. As she has said, other sectors would include steel, chemicals, critical minerals, composite materials, electricity networks, ports and construction. We need the foundations in place if we are to have the kind of success that we are looking at, and I look forward to continuing to work with her on that.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): This 138-page industrial strategy highlights the key problem facing British industry: high energy prices. The Secretary of State is putting in place some measures to reduce them, but surely he could do that earlier than 2027 by removing some of the green levies of net stupid zero sooner. When will energy prices come down for all of British industry?

Jonathan Reynolds: I almost thought the hon. Gentleman welcomed part of the strategy there. That took me a little by surprise. Yes, we are going to take decisive actions to reduce the cost of industrial energy prices. As I said earlier, there are some things I can do quicker than others—the supercharger scheme can be made more generous in the short term—but others require a longer process. I will work as hard as I can to deliver that, but I hope he recognises that the core reason why we are such an outlier is our exposure to fossil fuel prices, including gas, for both heating and electricity prices. To be frank, instead of us going down a route where we will be exposed to that in the long term, without the kind of ambition we need to make sure we have secure, clean supplies of energy in the UK, I think the hon. Gentleman should listen to businesses a bit more. They would tell him everything he needs to address this problem.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency are heavily reliant on great connections and making sure that our young people can access the skills they need, so I really welcome this industrial strategy, which recognises the many different aspects that go into supporting our local economy. Can the Secretary of State expand further on what we can do to support better transport connections and a better skills pipeline for the young people in my constituency?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome my hon. Friend's question, which speaks directly to the challenges we are facing. As well as the action on energy bills, we will make sure there is a priority service for businesses to get the grid connections they need—one of the biggest barriers to investment—along with investment in skills. Something that I am particularly excited about is that we are going to spend £41 million to make sure that there is decent wi-fi on every mainline train service by using the latest satellite technology. If I was coming to Parliament just to announce that, I would be quite happy, if I am being honest.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Hopefully the rail line that takes me into my constituency will be the first on the list.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): There is much to like in the statement. I particularly like the reduction in energy costs of between 20% and 25%, but I would like to push the Secretary of State a little on that; so that industry can plan, when does he think those 25% reductions are going to happen?

Jonathan Reynolds: Madam Deputy Speaker, my hon. Friend the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms has just told me that it is £141 million, not £41 million, to put wi-fi on the trains. It has been quite an exciting day, but it is important that I put that on the record.

Energy prices are one of the fundamental parts of the strategy. As I say, the supercharger can be put in place by the financial year 2026-27; the British industrial competitiveness scheme will have to follow a longer process, including a legislative process, so that would happen in the financial year after that. I know how important this is, but once those plans are in place, businesses will have the certainty that that is the cost that they will face, and they can make their business plans and any investment decisions based on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Business and Trade Committee member, Rosie Wrighting.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I welcome the Government's ambition to double business investment by 2035, but on the Business and Trade Committee we have heard time and again from businesses that they face barriers in unlocking the investment they need to scale up. Can the Minister set out how the Government intend to support access to scale-up finance so that our economy benefits from our innovation?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on the Business and Trade Committee; I always enjoy my sessions there, as do my ministerial team. She is right that finance is a huge issue and scale-up finance is a particular challenge. We intend to use the British Business Bank, as I have said, with much greater financial capacity to work directly with fund managers focused on the scale-up part of the finance journey. I know how big a problem this is. There is a lot of capital in the world and we have got to address this particular stage, and these are real measures that seek to do that.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I welcome that we finally have an industrial strategy for this country; that is very exciting. On driving innovation, I absolutely support that larger British Business Bank and making sure we invest in scale-ups, although we need to make sure that it is about long-term investment and that there are incentives to de-risk investment. I really want to focus, though, on digital and technology businesses. As much as I welcome training 1 million young people, it is not just about young people. I have businesses like BT, Sage and Xero saying they work with small businesses that need to improve their AI and tech adoption, so what are the Government doing to support them and people of all ages?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thoroughly agree. It is an exciting day and the challenge is long-term consistency and reliability—which, frankly, this Parliament and previous Governments have not supplied. There is a key voice from business to us that we need to address. Digital and tech skills are one of the prominent features of the skills interventions in the industrial strategy in order to do what the hon. Lady says. It is a significant funding package and a significant partnership with businesses, who are telling us they want to work with Government and with young people and that they want to reskill people. I think there is more we can do, but this is the start. I am keen to work with the hon. Lady and any colleague who sees the urgency of this work and the benefits it could bring.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Questions are far too long and the Secretary of State is far too generous with his responses. Let's try to nip that in the bud.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York Central, our biggest brownfield site, will release 12,500 new jobs in advanced and digital rail and the digital creative sector, as well as in the bio-economy mentioned in my right hon. Friend's brilliant industrial strategy. Will he, however, ensure that innovation hubs at the centre of these cluster developments are able to come on-stream and get the funding they need to unlock these sites?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am tremendously excited by the opportunity my hon. Friend outlines. There are many tools she will recognise in the strategy, including the funding for innovation and for local economic development, and particularly the new strategic sites accelerator—for the first time, land assembly, getting the grid and planning in place—so we have these opportunities for the kind of inward investment offers that we receive. My hon. Friend has a very exciting local proposition, and I am looking forward to working with her on it, but we need more of them.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I welcome the investment in skills announced today. What seems to be missing, though, is a commitment to give wraparound support to the 3 million workers in the UK currently in high-carbon industries, who will need reskilling and retraining in order to make the most of the green jobs boom. Can the Secretary of State give us any information on what is planned for those workers specifically, and does he agree that the fossil fuel giants should be the ones shouldering the cost of that support?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Lady for the slightly positive tone of her question. I believe that the skills challenge for the UK is about not just making sure that there are opportunities for young people, but reskilling people too. We have taken forward some interesting measures inherited from the previous Government that will allow us to do it.

I would just say to the hon. Lady that when she condemns people who work in what she calls fossil fuel industries—[*Interruption.*] Well, perhaps “condemns” is too strong a word, but I ask her to recognise that we have sectors of our own economy that are, relative to other parts of our own economy, high-emissions industries, but on an international basis they are very competitive. It would not be appropriate to simply outsource those emissions to other parts of the world and import those products. There is a lot of Green policy that, frankly, does propose that we do that, but that is not the approach that the Government are taking. We are ambitious about those sectors for the transition and this industrial strategy is key to making it happen.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carlisle) (Lab): I warmly welcome this ambitious and exciting industrial strategy from my right hon. Friend. Aligning vocational and technical training to the skills our industries need is plain common sense. However, in my constituency businesses often tell me that they cannot access the skills and workers they need, and young people and those retraining tell me that they cannot access the courses they need. Has the Department spoken with the Scottish Government in preparation for launching the strategy today?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes, our officials are in close contact with all our partners in all the devolved Governments. We respect policy differences through devolution, but the kinds of things we are addressing are of interest to every part of the UK.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I congratulate the Business Secretary, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Minister for AI and Digital, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark),

on listening to me over the last 11 and a half months and including in the sector plan for digital and technologies the Golden Valley development at west Cheltenham. It will unlock £1 billion-worth of investment in cyber-security and defence, which is crucial to our nation. Will Ministers monitor progress in planning and make sure that if a little extra support is needed to get the infrastructure over the line to deliver that growth, it will happen?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support and the contribution his local area can make. In some areas, we have a lot of good things going on, but it needs to happen faster and we have to make sure that we execute the plans we have in place. That sounds like exactly the sort of challenge in this area that we should commit to.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Ceramics UK has described today's modern industrial strategy as disappointing and, candidly, I share the sector's disappointment. The one reference to ceramics in the strategy is historical and geographic, with nothing about industry. For months, I and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) have been pointing out the immediate needs of a sector that employs thousands of people in our city, yet today there is nothing on gas pricing, nothing on electricity pricing and no access to the supercharger scheme. Instead, we are given an IOU for 2027. What message can I take home to those in Stoke-on-Trent this week about what in this industrial strategy will give them the help and the support that they need today, rather than having to wait for an IOU post-dated to the year after next?

Jonathan Reynolds: I say to my hon. Friend that I think Ceramics UK is misplaced in that criticism. Ceramics is recognised as a foundational sector: it is part of the materials foundational sector in the strategy. Its principal request is about energy prices. There are some ceramics businesses—I accept not that many—that get the supercharger and that will get the more generous rate. But fundamentally, the costs of a lot of those businesses do not match the intensity test, which the supercharger is based on—a sectoral and then an individual business test. That is exactly why the British industrial competitiveness scheme has been designed in such a way that they will benefit from it, and that will be a game-changer for them. There are not the same policy tools around gas prices, but of course we can see that gas prices are projected to fall from the very significant level that they have been at for future financial years.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): The industrial strategy has a commitment to increase R&D to drive growth. However, Wales has consistently missed out on its population share of UK R&D funding for years, receiving around 2% rather than the 5% we should be receiving. What are the Government doing to ensure that Wales gets its fair share under this strategy, given that research and development is vital for Welsh business to grow?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely recognise that, in all the initiatives we are putting forward today that apply across the UK, every area deserves its fair share of the funding. Of course, many of the policies that I and the Department are responsible for disproportionately benefit Wales. Under the clean steel fund, the money going to

Port Talbot is much more than would be allocated to it by population share. That is because there are brilliant strengths in Wales that I want to support. In this strategy—whether around aerospace and Airbus, or automotive and Toyota, or the creative industries, professional and business services, or financial services—there is so much that will benefit Wales because of the brilliant strengths in Wales. That is something to be very optimistic about, and I would be very confident about what this strategy means for Wales, while, of course, respecting the devolution settlement.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. With over 5,000 Macclesfield jobs dependent on AstraZeneca, I welcome the health data research centre, the slashing of trial times and the focus on life sciences. Will he set out how he is supporting Department of Health and Social Care colleagues to further deliver for life sciences by finalising a realistic settlement on the commercial agreement over the pricing of medicine, and VPAG—the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth—in particular, as that is very important to my constituents?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome my hon. Friend's question; he is right that VPAG is significant to the life sciences sector plan and that the industry is looking for resolution on it. The life sciences sector plan will be formally launched by Cabinet colleagues to coincide with the anniversary of the foundation of the NHS. Talks with industry are ongoing and we are trying to find a settlement, which I believe is possible. We should all recognise the economic benefits of the sector for his constituency, which he carefully outlined.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the industrial strategy, but I want to push the Secretary of State on skills. Harrogate college often tells me that it struggles to access funding for technical and vocational training that meets the needs of local business. In the next academic year—in just a couple of months—it will face a £90,000 reduction in the devolved adult skills budget from the new Labour mayor. Will the Secretary of State clarify how the skills mission fund will work in practice for towns like mine, and whether it will be genuinely led by local economic need, not Westminster targets?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise the case that the hon. Gentleman makes. Some of the courses that we need and that are central to our economy—engineering is a good example—are more expensive to put on and need greater capacity. When I talk about a funding package, it is to deliver the business-led, needs-led courses to which he refers, and I would expect Harrogate college to feel the benefits of that.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale Training provides local apprenticeships in engineering and other skills that we desperately need, and works with local employers to deliver that. Its chief executive, Jill Nagy, told me that today's announcement of £1.2 billion in extra funding for training is warmly welcomed, as are the new foundation apprenticeships. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising the work of Rochdale Training? May I urge him to look closely at Hopwood Hall college's bid to be one of the north-west's technical colleges of excellence for construction?

Jonathan Reynolds: Further education has had a difficult time over the past few years and we are starting to see the kind of investment that will make a difference. We need more business input into skills' policy, which I think is the kind of work that my hon. Friend was talking about. I am more than happy to come up the road from Stalybridge to Rochdale one Friday, and we can have that conversation in person. There will be many bids from Greater Manchester for the capital that we are putting forward, and I look forward to looking at the bid that he mentions.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I commend the Government on reintroducing an industrial strategy, which is crucial for spreading out good jobs across the United Kingdom. In my constituency, the hospitality industry is crucial to our local economy as it boosts tourism, creates jobs and helps with rural regeneration, but it is struggling with sky-high energy costs. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that SMEs in all sectors of our economy, particularly pubs and restaurants, receive better support with their energy costs?

Jonathan Reynolds: This industrial strategy seeks to deliver more inward investment. For example, Universal is making an incredible investment in Bedfordshire, where it seeks to deliver the biggest theme park in Europe, creating 8,000 jobs in hospitality. People should recognise that there is a direct relationship between what we are doing here, what we are trying to get more of and the kind of benefits that the hon. Gentleman talks about. We have set a target of 50 million visitors by 2030, so such issues are represented in the strategy and, as I say, some of the issues that are not covered will be in the small business plan, which will come out imminently next month.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on critical minerals, I have an interest that I know you share, Madam Deputy Speaker, in critical minerals. I welcome the strategy's recognition of the role that regional clusters, like that in Cornwall, can play. Given Cornwall's resurgent critical minerals ecosystem, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the region is at the forefront of secure domestic supply chains, and that we benefit directly from that growth in green industrial jobs?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is a great question. I remember our conversations about critical minerals, Madam Deputy Speaker. They are a key enabler and they will be even more important in the future. My hon. Friend will know that some of the National Wealth Fund's initial investments have been into different critical minerals businesses in his region, because of the importance of that part of the UK to this strategy. We need more international co-operation on critical minerals as well, but he should rest assured that the British Business Bank and the National Wealth Fund are focused on this area because it is so important, and there will be big benefits to his area from that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): As the founder of Labour: Women in Tech, I wholeheartedly welcome the industrial strategy's ambitious goals to scale

our tech sector and workforce. On 15 July in Parliament, I am hosting WeAreTechWomen and Oliver Wyman for the launch of the Lovelace report. The report has identified that between 40,000 and 60,000 female professionals are leaving the tech sector annually or seeking advancement opportunities elsewhere, which represents well over £1 billion of economic opportunity that could be unlocked by better supporting our existing skilled workforce. Does the Secretary of State agree that both inspiring new talent and supporting great existing talent and diverse teams, across all demographics, is fundamental to maximising returns on our industrial strategy investments and securing the UK's position as a world-leading technology nation?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend. It is brilliant to see her in Parliament as she has been a trailblazer on these issues, and I recognise the case that she has put forward extremely well. I recognise that this is a core economic priority for the United Kingdom, and it is great to see her as an advocate for that on the Government Benches.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Tom Hayes.

Jim Shannon: My bronchitis is starting to get to me a little, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The CBI says that our net zero economy grew by 9% in 2023, and that it was 40% more productive and wages in the sector were 15% higher than the UK average, so I am pleased to say that this industrial strategy is betting on a winner with clean energy. I am also pleased to hear the announcement that the Government will be slashing the cost of energy for industry, but will the Secretary of State tell me, my constituents in Bournemouth and people across the south-west what the industrial strategy will do for the south-west?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am more than happy to tell my hon. Friend. We have breakdowns for every region going to every colleague; there is so much for each part of the UK that I could not possibly do it justice from the Dispatch Box. On his point about clean energy, there is so much money coming into the UK—and more in future—that it would be crazy to turn our backs on that. This is a major economic opportunity, as well as being about a safe, reliable, clean supply of energy for the UK, which is the basis of all economic activity. We can provide that while reducing energy bills for industry, so that is exactly the kind of consistent approach that this country has needed for some time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With my apologies for not calling him earlier, I now call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: You are very kind, Madam Deputy Speaker—we got there in the end.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which is full of positivity. Everyone here welcomes it deep down, and if they do not, then they should: well done, Minister, and well done this Government. While I welcome the news that more than 7,000 British businesses are set to see their electricity bills slashed by up to 25% by 2027, it is clear that much more support is needed,

such as a reduction in corporation tax, especially for businesses in Northern Ireland, which borders the Republic of Ireland where the corporation tax rate is half of our rate at 12.5%. Will the Secretary of State discuss that with his Cabinet colleagues in order to provide greater support for our industries in Northern Ireland?

Jonathan Reynolds: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's support and kind words. There is a great deal in the strategy that will benefit every part of the UK. He knows that I take my responsibilities for Northern Ireland very seriously, particularly given the complexities of trade policy, the Windsor agreement and how that has to work for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. He will know that the UK has the lowest corporation tax of any G7 country, so it is quite an ask to reduce it still further. However, I understand the genuine competitive pressures of being in business in Northern Ireland for people who are close to the border, and how they are affected by the mobility of capital and talent. We all have a responsibility to work with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure UK Government policy works to the maximum, and provides consistent and co-ordinated benefits. I am regularly in touch with my colleagues in Northern Ireland and regularly visit. I am planning a visit right now—I might even look up the hon. Gentleman and make a visit to his constituency to address some of these issues.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the focus in this industrial strategy on the Tees Valley region and, in particular, our clean energy sector, which represents some 8,800 jobs today and will scale up dramatically into the future. As I said in September, this will only work if we have alignment on skills. When do we expect to see the clean energy workforce strategy? What steps will the Government take to align skills into the future?

Jonathan Reynolds: It is important for colleagues to understand that the modern industrial strategy published today provides a tool through which other non-economic Government Departments can filter their own policy decisions, in a way that is consistent and to the benefit of UK business. For instance, the Home Office will publish its exemptions to the more restrictive skilled worker visa in relation to what the sectors set out in the strategy need and, for the first time, decisions will be made through that lens. My hon. Friend mentions a specific piece of work by colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on the workforce strategy, to which they are committed. I do not have a timescale for that, so I will ensure that I or colleagues write to him about it. The prize here is genuinely joined-up Government. To be frank, the preparation of the strategy has not always been easy, but it is the kind of consistent approach to policy, competition and competitiveness in the UK that is very important.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I welcome this ambitious industrial strategy and commend the Secretary of State on the long-term thinking, which is something we did not see under the previous Government. East Kilbride in my constituency, Scotland's first new town, was born out of an effective post-war industrial strategy, but over recent years my constituents have been given false hope by both the SNP and Tory Governments,

with big promises and little delivery. Will the Secretary of State give my constituents reassurance that this time, the strategy will deliver and we will get growth and jobs?

Jonathan Reynolds: I will be frank with my hon. Friend's constituents. In the past, Governments have produced documents that do not have much longevity but have a lot of analysis without necessarily having real measures behind them. That is why we have launched this strategy on energy, finance and skills, on the powers that local areas need and how those programmes will work consistently across Government. This is always about creating the conditions for the private sector to thrive in, but anyone looking at the big challenges facing UK industry will see them addressed in this document.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Worryingly, only 9% of secondary vocational learners are studying engineering, manufacturing and construction compared with the OECD average of 32%, so I warmly welcome that this industrial strategy confirms a £100 million investment to support engineering skills in England. Will the Secretary of State outline how that funding will help to meet skills shortages and deliver growth across the country, including in engineering cities such as Derby?

Jonathan Reynolds: Derby has an incredible pedigree in engineering skills. I agree with the case that my hon. Friend has made so strongly. I have added some funding from my own Department to that from the Department for Education around engineering, because the shortages are so acute and the opportunities so great. These are great jobs, careers and lives for young people or anyone transferring into that sector, with more funding for the courses, more flexibility in the courses that can be run and more capacity in technical excellence colleges. Although it is also about availability in all parts of the country, we could not get a better pedigree than my hon. Friend has in Derby, which is a great success story for this country and for her local area.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the comprehensive and business-friendly UK modern industrial strategy; it is an investment in Britain, British people and British businesses. As home to the world-class and innovative defence cluster, Portsmouth has strength in maritime, space, drones, autonomous systems and assets such as QinetiQ, Airbus, His Majesty's Royal Navy base, Griffon Marine, Portsmouth Aviation and Solent freeport. I could continue the list with many more brilliant businesses in my city, but time does not allow. Will my right hon. Friend say how "Invest 2035" can work alongside future devolution and local government reorganisation to help unlock growth, investment, skills and jobs for Portsmouth businesses and residents?

Jonathan Reynolds: It is very important that we show the British people that the added investment and huge increase in defence spending from this Government will see real economic benefits for them and opportunities for their families, as well as fulfilling the core function of national security. My hon. Friend mentions devolution. We have measures in the strategy for local areas, whether or not they have mayoral leads on innovation and mayoral growth funds, many of which build on the very successful work of Andy Burnham, my Labour mayor in Greater Manchester, and Richard Parker in the west midlands, who have done brilliant things. Those are the

[Jonathan Reynolds]

most developed and mature mayoral areas. We can see what has worked in those places, and it really is starting to work. Let us have more of that across every bit of the UK, tailored for local needs and with the right tools that those political leaders need.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I welcome this incredibly ambitious industrial strategy. I will ask specifically about our high-tech SMEs. At NETPark in Sedgefield, we have a cluster of more than 40 businesses making satellite components, medical imaging equipment and other high-tech products. However, as the Secretary of State knows, too often they struggle to get private finance, and they have struggled in the past to get Government innovation funding. How will this strategy really put the rocket boosters behind high-tech SMEs in regions such as the north-east?

Jonathan Reynolds: I always take a close interest in success stories from the north-east of England, and what my hon. Friend outlines is incredibly exciting. The high-tech SME cluster that he talks about will benefit in many ways from each of the sector plans, whether they are in advanced manufacturing, creative industries or defence. There are provisions on access to finance for them in this strategy and the dedication of resources from the defence budget, for instance, for that sector. Those businesses are set to fly, and with this industrial strategy my hon. Friend has a real chance to build and communicate the opportunities for them over the next few years.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I really warmly welcome the modern industrial strategy, particularly all that it has to offer for Scotland. I also welcome the Business Secretary's personal enthusiasm and energy about the potential for growth in Scotland—what a contrast with the SNP, which cannot help but talk Scotland down. I particularly welcome the good news for skills and innovation, which will benefit Scotland, and for reduced energy costs, particularly electricity costs, for our key manufacturing sites in Scotland. As I have discussed with my right hon. Friend, the ethylene plant at Mossmorran is a large employer in my constituency, supporting hundreds of high-skilled, well-paid jobs in Fife. Will the Business Secretary outline how this industrial strategy and other Government action will back the chemicals industry and the jobs it supports?

Jonathan Reynolds: I think it was about a year ago when my hon. Friend and I were on the campaign trail in her constituency and visited businesses with the message that we would implement a strategy of this kind. I think that the Scottish economy, when mapped against our eight industrial strategy sectors, could be a description of Scottish success, and we should be excited about that. The ethylene cracker at Mossmorran is a very important facility. As my hon. Friend will know, high gas prices across Europe mean that all the crackers across Europe are under some degree of distress. I have been in conversations with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland about that and other crackers in Scotland that are affected by those high gas prices, and we continue that work. More generally, the chemicals sector is recognised as a key foundational

sector in this strategy. It has had a lot of pressure in recent years, and we are seeking to improve that business environment.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): This is mint for British industry. In my region, we have a proud history of making world-class products and exports. We make trains, and this Government have secured the future of Hitachi at Aycliffe. We make cars, and this Government have negotiated a tariff deal to protect the Nissan plant in Sunderland. We make hugely advanced bioindustry products, such as the covid-19 vaccine, at the Centre for Process Innovation in my constituency in Darlington. As the chair of the APPG on industrial strategy, I know that the finance solutions and energy subsidies will be roundly welcomed by business up and down the country. Will the Secretary of State outline how this strategy will lead to more highly paid, highly skilled job opportunities for workers in constituencies such as mine who have seen more plants shut than saved over the last 14 years?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thoroughly thank my hon. Friend for her question and for all her work in her role in Parliament advocating for these issues. There is a huge amount in this strategy for the sectors that she outlines. I was very proud of the work that we did with Hitachi. On cars, it is about the tariffs, the Drive 35 programme, energy costs and the ZEV mandate, and we will make any changes that we need for a competitive position. This is fundamentally about what business needs, but it is also about better-paying jobs in every part of the UK. My hon. Friend's part of the world in particular will stand to benefit considerably from this programme.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the ambition of this industrial strategy and invite him to visit Cody technology park in Farnborough, which is home to world-class defence and aerospace innovation, from QinetiQ's development of DragonFire to one of only two commercial wind tunnels in the world. What role does he see for places such as Cody, which are already contributing but have the potential to do even more to help to create jobs and fire up our industrial base?

Jonathan Reynolds: It is brilliant to hear from my hon. Friend; she has so much to be proud of in her constituency. I have visited Farnborough on several occasions, and it has a range of things that are directly represented in this strategy. I also thank her for being a huge ally on the work that we have done on access to finance for the defence sector, which has been an important message for us to send out about national security and the huge economic opportunities that rightly should come from the increase in defence spending that this Government have committed to already.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): The Black Country has been an industrial powerhouse for hundreds of years; it is famous for making everything from the glass in the White House to the Big Ben clocktower and the chemical odorant that people will smell when they turn on the gas hob. Will the Secretary of State set out how this 10-year plan for industry will support Black Country manufacturing businesses with lower energy prices and upskill the next generation of people for these highly skilled, well-paid jobs? Would he like to visit one of my brilliant businesses in West Bromwich?

Jonathan Reynolds: I certainly would love to visit—I am happy to commit to that. I am surprised that my hon. Friend did not claim her constituency to be the birthplace of the industrial revolution, because I think a few colleagues have gone there, and she has a claim to it as well. Whether it is funding for lower energy costs, skills in the pipeline for young people, access to finance, a regulatory environment that fosters growth or expanding Made Smarter, which is a fantastic programme that we will have more of, there is so much in this strategy that will make a difference to her area. Perhaps we will go and visit some businesses together and take that message to them.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The industrial strategy rightly recognises the role of ceramics as a key foundational industry and, of course, the central role of Stoke-on-Trent not just historically but in the exciting new world of advanced ceramics—providing parts for wind turbines and even small modular reactors, if we get the investment our way. As the Secretary of State has mentioned, ceramics has the additional challenge of being a gas-intensive industry. As such, I welcome the Government's commitment to the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme—a snappier name would be nicer—particularly in supporting decarbonisation and technological innovation. May I ask the Secretary of State what specific support is planned to aid the ceramics industry, not only in managing its energy costs but in supporting its decarbonisation?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She has already heard me outline the eligibility, and the foundational role that ceramics plays in the strategy and the support it can receive. She is also right that we have committed to the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme review that the industry wanted. We should all recognise that the ceramics sector faces more challenges with decarbonisation than some other sectors, and we have to be a supportive partner in that, particularly by recognising some of the technological limitations that currently exist. As I said in answer to a previous question, we have to look at where we are—perhaps we have higher emissions from a sector, but where is that sector internationally? Would it be in our interest to see those emissions exported abroad and emissions as a whole go up? I do not think it would. That is the approach I will always take to the ceramics sector or any other sector to ensure that we are doing the right thing, both for the climate and for British jobs and British industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jacob Collier. [*Interruption.*] I call Scott Arthur.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member and I must look alike.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Not that long ago, we had a Scottish Government in which some Cabinet members did not even believe in economic growth, so the contrast with what we have heard today could not be starker. There are 16 mentions of Scotland's capital city in the industrial strategy, and a key one for Edinburgh South West is Heriot-Watt University's national robotarium—the birthplace of robotics, as far as I am concerned—but it

would be interesting to understand where the Secretary of State thinks universities fit into the industrial strategy, given the pressures that they face in England and the many universities in crisis in Scotland.

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend raises some very important and serious questions. Universities play a huge role in innovation and are a vital part of the clusters we are creating, but in themselves, they are something of which we should be incredibly proud. We have a world-class university sector, and every parliamentarian should be prouder of that. I do not have time to go into the detail that I would like, but universities are at the heart of our approach to innovation and economic success across the UK.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): My constituency boasts some of the nation's most energy-intensive industries, from manufacturing to being the home of UK brewing. As such, I welcome the news that there will be energy subsidies for energy-intensive industries, which will support those industries and local jobs in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State say more about how he will work across Government to ensure that manufacturers and brewers will not be paying champagne prices for power?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise that there are some regulatory issues that my hon. Friend was probably asking about, particularly in relation to the lead that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would have on extended producer responsibility and some other aspects. I am always keen to work with colleagues across Government, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets the answers to his questions that he needs, but he is right to say that there are many opportunities for businesses—big and small—and for his constituents in this plan.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): As an engineer, I am incredibly excited by the vision of engineering, industrial and innovation renewal that the Secretary of State is describing. In Worcester, we have a mission to make ourselves the best city in the best country in the world to start and grow a business. Time and again, though, the funds and research facilities intended to support innovation have not worked for our local businesses, and there has been a lack of support for mid-technology readiness level technologies. How will this strategy help businesses across the country to bridge the valley of death and grow in this decade of renewal?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which I greatly appreciate. Worcester plays a wonderful role in our economy, and it is great to hear about that level of local ambition from him and other local leaders. There are specific funds to support innovation: £500 million has been allocated for innovation, which will be split among areas up and down the country. The access to finance provisions will also apply to his constituency, whether that is the British Business Bank having more firepower and more ability to support the kind of items that he has in his constituency, the beefed-up capacity for UK export finance, or the National Wealth Fund working hand in hand with the private sector. The brilliance that my hon. Friend has in Worcester is exactly the kind of platform that stands to benefit greatly from the measures in the industrial strategy.

UK Military Base Protection

6.44 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): Members will be aware of the news breaking in Qatar, with reports of explosions at 19.35 pm local time. This is a fast-changing situation, and we are monitoring it closely. Members will also understand that I will not be able to give details at this stage, but the UK Government utterly condemn any escalation. We have put force protection measures at their highest level to safeguard our personnel in the region. We have robust measures in place to protect our armed forces personnel, and their safety is our top priority. That is why we have been calling for de-escalation and diplomacy. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will understand that I will try to keep this statement short, so that I can return to the Department to be fully briefed. However, there are a number of developments that I wish to update the House about in the meantime.

Earlier today, the Foreign Secretary made a statement updating the House on the military action undertaken by the United States, which conducted airstrikes against three Iranian nuclear facilities: Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan. No British forces were involved in those US strikes, but the UK and the US share an ambition that Iran can never be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, and the US has taken action to alleviate that threat. America is the UK's closest defence and security ally, and our militaries will continue to work in lockstep every day. As the Foreign Secretary said, this is a critical moment for the middle east. It follows a period of escalating conflict in an already volatile region. Yesterday, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister urged Iran to return to the negotiating table and reach a diplomatic solution to end this crisis, and I echo that call. There is no route of Iranian military retaliation that brings this crisis to an end; the only off-ramp for Iran is to get serious and return to diplomacy.

The Ministry of Defence's No.1 priority has been the protection of our people and our bases in the region. Working alongside the Chief of the Defence Staff, Ministers have directed commanders to take all necessary measures to protect our servicemen and women. Force protection is now at its highest state across all deployed units in the middle east. The additional RAF Typhoon jets announced by the Prime Minister have now arrived in the region to reinforce our posture, deter threats, and reassure our partners. I want to be clear that we will not rule out sending further capabilities if they are required, and that we will take all steps necessary to protect our people and our assets. As we recognised in the strategic defence review, we must always put our people at the heart of our defence plans, which is why we have acted swiftly to bolster our defences and ensure our forces are supported and protected. I thank all our outstanding personnel who have worked tirelessly over the past few days—often with little sleep—to support the UK's response, both at home and abroad.

Further to media reporting over the weekend, I can confirm that we are in contact with the authorities in Cyprus regarding the arrest of a British man. Due to the ongoing police investigation, I am limited in what I can say, but I can tell the House that RAF Akrotiri was

not breached. We are continually monitoring this fast-changing situation, and stand ready to respond to any threats.

I now turn to the protection of our bases at home. Last week's illegal entry and criminal vandalism by the group Palestine Action at RAF Brize Norton was disgraceful. I can confirm that two RAF Voyager aircraft were damaged by paint, but there was no further damage to infrastructure or assets, nor has there been any impact on planned operations from Brize Norton. Not only was this action epically stupid; it was a direct attack on our national security. Our personnel stationed at RAF Brize Norton serve with total dedication and professionalism. They work tirelessly to support our armed forces deployed across the world and to deliver military assistance to Ukraine, and have been formally recognised for their contribution in flying humanitarian aid into Gaza. As such, this action does nothing to further the path to peace. It does nothing to further the Palestinian cause—it does nothing to further any cause—and everyone across the House is united in condemning it. This must never happen again.

I spoke earlier today with the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff about this incident. Enhanced security measures across the whole of defence have been put in place since Friday, including on aircraft and airfield-operating surfaces. RAF patrols have increased, physical security has been improved at the suspected point of entry at Brize Norton and the Defence Secretary has ordered that a full security review be conducted at pace, not only at Brize, but across the defence estate. Counter Terrorism Policing South East and Thames Valley police are leading the investigation to establish the exact circumstances of the events and to identify those responsible. We will continue to work with the police and pursue those responsible for this unacceptable act of vandalism. This incident is subject to a live counter-terrorism investigation, so I hope the House will understand that I cannot provide any further details at this time.

This is more than just disruption. Palestine Action's activity has increased in frequency and severity. Its methods have become more aggressive, with its members demonstrating a willingness to use violence. Its activities meet the threshold set out in the statutory tests established under the Terrorism Act 2000, and that is why the Home Secretary is today announcing that she intends to proscribe Palestine Action.

The instability in the middle east and the continued war in Ukraine show why this week's NATO leaders' summit in the Hague matters. We are living in a more dangerous and unpredictable world. This summit is a moment where NATO allies will pledge to step up on defence spending to boost our collective security. President Trump and NATO chief Mark Rutte are right that the current NATO spending pledge of at least 2% of GDP on defence is a relic of an old era. We are in a new era of threat, which demands a new era for defence and defence spending. That is why the Government announced the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. It is why this week at NATO we will discuss a new, higher spending target with our allies. The United Kingdom is up for that discussion. We will make Britain safer—secure at home and strong abroad. I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. As is the custom, the Minister's statement will be circulated to both sides of the House, but before we proceed, Members will notice that it will not be complete, in the sense that the Minister delivered a preamble prior to going into what will be circulated. That was to try to reflect the fast-moving nature of the situation. I understand that, courteously and properly, the Front Benchers have been informed of that. I hope that everybody understands that and will make allowances for it. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

6.52 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and I entirely understand that it is a fast-moving situation in relation to Qatar. I am grateful for the limited update that he could provide. We join him in condemning any escalation and look forward to further updates in due course.

On Brize Norton, let me say what the Minister was unable to: the attack on RAF Brize Norton was not vandalism; this was sabotage, undertaken without regard to the consequences for our Royal Air Force and our ability to defend our nation. As a result, there must be consequences for those responsible. Can the Minister explain how on earth these saboteurs were able not only to break through the perimeter fence, but to cover a considerable distance to reach the precious airfield tarmac, inflict damage to our airframes and then get out of the base, all without being intercepted? What steps is he taking to ensure rapid reinforcement of perimeter and internal fencing, not just at the specific point of incursion at Brize Norton, as he describes, but throughout the base and at all other UK bases? What is he doing to ensure sufficient military policing personnel are in place to enforce security and that they have access to effective countermeasure technology?

On the drone threat, which is relevant, the Minister knows how quickly military technology is moving. In December, I asked him in a written question about the protection of UK bases, and asked whether he would accelerate testing of directed energy weapons, such as lasers, for drone interception on our military bases. He said that work was in development. What progress has he made in the six months since?

The protection of our bases is not just a priority on the UK mainland. Given the confirmation of reports that a man allegedly linked to Iran has been arrested on suspicion of espionage and terrorism offences in Cyprus, can the Minister confirm that all measures being taken to reinforce UK bases will be replicated with the same urgency throughout our overseas basing, Akrotiri in particular?

Can the Minister confirm what will be the financial cost and impact of this attack on the RAF? In particular, can he explain the immediate operational impact on the RAF? He says there has been no impact on planned operations from Brize Norton, but he will know that it could still mean that task lines are unintentionally reallocated to cover for the damaged aircraft. How long will the two aircraft in question be out of action for, if at all, and what has been the wider operational impact?

Turning to the perpetrators, what progress has been made on catching those responsible and have there been any arrests? Does the Minister agree that one way to

defend our bases is to deter future incursion by ensuring that the full force of the law is felt by the individual saboteurs in question? Will he ensure that everything is done to work with the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that the offenders receive an appropriately robust response? I note, for example, that section 1 of the Aviation and Maritime Security Act 1990 provides for an offence of action that can "endanger the safe operation" of aircraft, carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Section 12 of the National Security Act 2023 relates to sabotage, and again the offence carries a penalty of up to life imprisonment.

The review is welcome, but it needs to report urgently. Can the Minister confirm who will lead it and how quickly it will report? On the important issue of personnel, will the review consider how responsibility for the security of RAF bases is divided between RAF police, the RAF regiment, military provost guard service and private contractors?

I join the Minister in condemning Palestine Action without reservation. Its role in this attack on the Royal Air Force was totally unacceptable, and we welcome the steps taken to proscribe that organisation today. I also welcome the Minister's commitment to strengthening force protection more widely in the middle east, including through the deployment of RAF Typhoons, and particularly in light of the breaking news in Qatar.

To conclude, the Minister is entirely right that the MOD's priority at this time must be the protection of our people and bases in the region. In his opening remarks about the airstrikes against three Iranian nuclear facilities and, indeed, throughout multiple questioning in his media round today, it was totally unclear whether the Government support or oppose those US airstrikes. The Minister was asked seven times on LBC whether the Government support or oppose US military action. He failed to answer once. He is now in front of Parliament. These are matters of the utmost importance to the security of our nation, and he is the Minister for the Armed Forces being asked about the action of the armed forces of our closest military ally. I will conclude with a straight question: does he support the US bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities—yes or no?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone in which he has asked his questions and for his support for armed forces personnel. It is important at this time that this House sends a united message that we will protect our people wherever they are in the world, but especially those serving to keep us safe and to keep our allies safe in the middle east.

On the hon. Gentleman's questions, I agree with him. I expect strong consequences for those responsible for the damage to our RAF Voyager aircraft at Brize Norton. The investigation is proceeding. A number of investigations are under way, including the one commissioned by the Defence Secretary to look into what happened at Brize Norton and to learn the lessons. I can already report that improvements at the point of entry have been made at Brize Norton. There are also investigations to look at what lessons can be applied across UK military estates in the UK and overseas.

I know that the hon. Gentleman, like me, has a strong interest in drones, and he is right to pursue questions around our counter-unmanned aircraft system activities. Since he asked me that question a number of months ago,

[*Luke Pollard*]

we have published the strategic defence review, within which we outlined how we are looking to expand and roll out faster the deployment of the DragonFire directed energy weapon system. It will now feature in a funded programme on four of the Royal Navy destroyers. That will be a testbed for the technology, which we believe has wider applications, including against drones elsewhere across the defence estate.

I can confirm that in relation to the RAF Voyagers, the activities of the RAF were unaffected, because we were able to move assets to backfill those roles. One of the key things about having an agile air force is that we can do that. The investigation of the damage done to the aircraft by the people who penetrated the security is ongoing, and I will report when it has been firmed up more. It is right that we give Counter Terrorism Policing the space that will allow them to conduct their investigation of the incident at Brize Norton, and the hon. Gentleman will understand why I will not be able to provide a running commentary on that. As for the deployment of RAF Typhoons to the region, we currently have about 14 at RAF Akrotiri, and the Prime Minister has made it very clear that should further resources be required, we will not hesitate to roll them forward.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the position regarding the United States strikes. The United Kingdom did not participate in them, and the UK and the US have a shared ambition that a nuclear bomb should not be held by the Iranian regime.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all recognise that events are moving very quickly, but may I ask the Minister about two issues that concern many of us? First, we know that the Qataris were notified, and were able to notify the Americans, of the planned attack on their base. Is the Minister in a position to tell us whether any notification of the escalation of attacks was given to this country? Secondly, can he say a bit more about his plans for the NATO summit and our co-operation with our European counterparts? The events of this week showed very clearly that we need, in Europe, to be able to act strategically to defend our interests, and to work together and step up that work.

Luke Pollard: In relation to the events in the middle east, my hon. Friend will appreciate that I will need to be briefed further before I can give the House an accurate update. In relation to the NATO summit, she will be pleased to know that thanks to the European Union reset deal secured by the Prime Minister, we now have an opportunity to participate further in EU defence programmes. The strategic defence review makes it very clear that our priority for our security is the Euratlantic area, and that the largest threat facing us at the moment is Russia; but, of course, Russia works in collaboration with a number of countries around the world, and collectively they pose a threat to the rules-based order. We will continue to work with our European allies, and indeed our American friends, to ensure that we have peace and security across the continent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and, of course, understand the update that we have just received on developments in Qatar. In this Armed Forces Week, I want to begin by expressing my thanks to all those brave and committed personnel who serve in the defence of our nation. They deserve not only our thanks and praise, but the knowledge that just as they keep us safe, the Government have invested to keep them safe through adequate force protection.

I wish to address briefly the statement on those developments in Qatar, and the breaking news that Bahrain has also sounded alerts pending a potential attack there. Of course I welcome the commitment to the protection of our forces and assets, which is the first duty of Government. However, this development reflects our fears, following the US action on Saturday, that this may be turning into a protracted, full-scale conflict. What is the Minister's current assessment of the risk to US allies in the region? Will he confirm that UK jets will be used only to protect UK assets and personnel? Can he tell the House what steps are being taken to signal to Iran that the UK's operations are limited to this protective operation, so that it is clear that we are not being drawn into the offensive operations launched by Israel and the US?

The Minister also said in his update that Akrotiri had not been breached, but can he confirm that none of the other bases in Cyprus were breached in incidents over the weekend?

The authors of last month's strategic defence review explicitly highlighted the need to bolster the security of our air force, yet, not even 20 days later, we have already witnessed an egregious breach of security at Brize Norton and the damage of RAF planes. This was a brazen and illegal act of vandalism, which raises alarming questions about the level of security at armed forces bases across the country. The Minister referred to the Home Secretary's decision today to proscribe Palestine Action. Can he give the House a clear understanding of the evidence used to judge that it has crossed the threshold set out in the Terrorism Act 2000?

Returning to the subject of force protection, I would welcome the Minister's response to the following questions. What initial assessment can the Government provide of how it was possible for the breach at Brize Norton to occur? When do the Government believe the damaged planes will be able to return to service? And is the Minister satisfied that he can sustain the immediate improvements that he described in order to insure the physical integrity of military bases across the rest of the country, including at Army and naval bases, against the full spectrum of threats?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, and for his words in support of our personnel. Armed Forces Week gives us an opportunity to thank all the men and women who serve in our armed forces, to celebrate their service and to make the case that a strong armed forces is good not only for ensuring our security, but as an engine for growth and something in which we can all take pride. I look forward to attending the Armed Forces Day events in Plymouth, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will be doing the same in their constituencies.

Let me now respond to the hon. Gentleman's questions. In his seven hours of negotiations in Geneva this weekend, the Foreign Secretary was very clear with the Iranian Foreign Minister about the purpose of UK military assets in the region, and also about the importance of de-escalation and of Iran's returning to the negotiating table to getting serious, negotiating in good faith and reaching a diplomatic conclusion to this crisis. There is not a military retaliation option that delivers a solution to the crisis; we have made that very clear to Iran, as have our European E3 allies and our Gulf partners, and we will continue to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked about proscription. May I direct him to the written ministerial statement made by the Home Secretary today, which will deal with a number of his concerns? In the Home Secretary's view, a threshold at which action would become necessary has now been passed, which is why she intends to take the decision to proscribe Palestine Action, as she has announced today.

In relation to the breach at Brize Norton, the hon. Gentleman asked about the strategic defence review. On page 115, the authors note:

"RAF Brize Norton should be a high priority for investment and improvement"—

a statement that we adopted in full when we adopted the strategic defence review and its recommendations. When the investigation has been fully concluded, we will be able to give the House further details of improvements that we wish to make, not just at Brize Norton but elsewhere on the defence estate.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I am concerned by the Government's kneejerk reaction in proscribing Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation. This country has a long history of protest, as I mentioned in the Chamber last week; some of the protests have taken place at British military sites, and none of those protesters have been branded terrorists. Last Friday, Palestine Action spray-painted two aircraft at Brize Norton—the first time that the group had taken action on British military land. Yes, they were guilty of criminal damage, but not of terrorism. Even the former Justice Secretary Lord Falconer said that this action would not justify proscription. If there is evidence, show it. Can the Minister set out what steps his Department will take to ensure that peaceful protest activity is not wrongly categorised as a national security threat?

Luke Pollard: As there is an ongoing counter-terrorism inquiry into the activities of Palestine Action, which conducted a direct attack on UK military assets at a time of heightened tensions, it would be inappropriate for me to go into the full details. I will say to my hon. Friend, though, that the proscription of Palestine Action has been considered for a long time by my colleagues in the Home Office. It is a decision that they have taken after considering the facts—those in the public domain and those, perhaps, held privately. We are certain that this is the right course of action to keep our country safe in these difficult times.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My constituents in military establishments around Salisbury plain will not see this as an act of vandalism. They will see it as criminal damage. They will see it as sabotage. They will see it as terrorism. The Minister, who I respect, does himself no good by trying to downplay its seriousness.

There are 2,900 Ministry of Defence policemen in the country. In recent years, they have been employed largely in investigating relatively low-level fraud within the Ministry of Defence and in military establishments across the country, with a relatively low conviction rate. Does the Minister agree that they would be much better employed looking after our critical national infrastructure and military bases up and down the land, including those in my constituency, and will he consider ensuring that warranted officers are able to do a job of work for the MOD that cannot be done by regional forces? I am very confident that they would welcome the challenge.

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Member, who I also have a lot of time for. At no point have I sought to downplay the activities of Palestine Action. Indeed, today the Government have taken the strong step of proscribing Palestine Action, precisely because its activities are a threat to our national security. It is for that reason that the Home Secretary has made her decision.

In relation to the military bases near the right hon. Member's constituency in Salisbury plain, and indeed to those in the constituency that I represent in Plymouth, the review of our security arrangements covers all military bases. From the Defence Secretary to the Chief of the Defence Staff and others in the Ministry of Defence, we are looking carefully at what lessons can be learned, what improvements can be put in place and—noting the conclusion of the strategic defence review that we need to invest more in this area—how we can implement the findings of the SDR as quickly as we can.

In relation to the right hon. Member's points about policing, I would be very happy to discuss them further with him, because I know he is an expert in this area.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): As I am taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme with the RAF, I have had the greatest pleasure and incredible privilege of visiting many RAF bases over the last year, and I am in absolute awe of those who put their lives on the line to defend us. The events of last week were not only a breach of our defences; they were a massive demonstration of disrespect for service personnel who will have been delivering aid to people in Gaza. Does the Minister agree that we should thank them for their service and that it was right to proscribe Palestine Action?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the disrespect shown to our forces and their personnel. The threat to our national security posed by breaching the security of a military base and approaching military assets is something that we take incredibly seriously. The British public want to know that the full force of the law is being used to locate those responsible and bring them to justice, and I can confirm that the investigation is ongoing. The steps that the Home Secretary has taken today to proscribe Palestine Action are entirely consistent with the severity and seriousness of its activities.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): The actions of Palestine Action at Brize Norton last week were utterly reprehensible and will have caused fear and alarm for military personnel and their families across the country, including in my own constituency, which has three substantial military bases. At the same time,

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

though, the UK Government are not ruling out engaging in further military conflict in the middle east. The Minister mentioned the importance of the international rules-based order. How can the UK Government seriously be considering engaging in further military intervention abroad, given that years of under-investment has diminished security at bases right here in the UK, which causes concern for our armed forces personnel and their families?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member for his question, and for his obvious concern for our armed forces. The statement that I made today and the statements made by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary over the past few days clearly underline that the deployment of UK military force in the middle east is to defend our people and our bases. It is worth reminding ourselves why we have a UK military presence in the middle east: to support regional stability and to undertake counter-Daesh operations in Iraq and Syria. They are the same operations that help keep the streets of Britain safe from terrorists. That is the reason we have a presence in the middle east—securing our allies—and it is why the Prime Minister flowed forward additional jets to provide cover and support for our armed forces personnel. As we assess what is taking place currently, we reserve the right to make further military changes to ensure that our people are kept safe.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I pay tribute to Standing Joint Command, based in Aldershot, for its contribution to UK resilience. In Armed Forces Week, I also pay tribute to the more than 3,000 serving personnel in my constituency, the home of the British Army. The Minister has been really clear about what force protection looks like when it comes to bases, but what will it look like for garrison towns like mine?

Luke Pollard: In my hon. Friend's short time in this House, she has become a real champion of our armed forces—not just in her constituency, but across the country. She is right to pay tribute to SJC in Aldershot; General Charlie Collins is a superb leader of that part of our armed forces. The SDR makes it very clear that we wish to further enhance and upgrade the capabilities of UK homeland defence, and we will do so.

In relation to the security improvements that the review will seek to identify, that work will be based on the incident at Brize Norton, but it will also look at the threats that we face not just at that particular RAF base, but at all UK military establishments. I am certain that I will be back in the House to report on progress in due course.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Given the manner of infiltration at RAF Brize Norton, I am concerned that the MPGS across the defence estate is neither resourced sufficiently nor given the authorisation to engage potential saboteurs. The scope of its role allows lethal force to be used only if there is a direct threat to life. RAF Wyton in my constituency, which has the same issue, is protected by the MPGS and augmented by serving personnel. Given the sensitive information that it provides as the home of defence intelligence, can the Minister offer a guarantee that security levels there will be ramped up? Furthermore, RAF Molesworth and RAF Alconbury are both in my constituency.

As USAFE—US air forces in Europe—bases, they operate under US rules of engagement, so lethal force is permitted at a far lower level. Why are US bases in the UK defended to a higher level?

Luke Pollard: In the spirit of cross-party consensus, I praise the hon. Gentleman for making a huge contribution to the way in which we look at defence in his short time here. We have made no cuts to the MPGS since taking office; indeed, the opposite is true: we seek to enhance and further support it. The review that the Defence Secretary has commissioned will look at all military bases, at what lessons can be learned from this incident and at how we can improve. To date, there has been a lot of focus on article 5 of the NATO treaty and how we will come to the aid of others if attacked, but we should have an equal focus on article 3 and how we ensure our own homeland defence. That is something that the SDR makes very clear, and this Government take implementing it very seriously.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): The Minister will know from my earlier question about force protection how important it is to take that issue seriously, and it is right that that is the main focus today. But if I may, I want to address an issue that reared its head over the weekend, given that I am one of the only female veterans in this Parliament. Unfortunately, certain pathetic little people took the incident at Brize Norton and decided to come out of the woodwork to criticise people for doing their job while being female. As a woman serving in the armed forces, I know that every opportunity that has been given to women has been earned through our serving on operations and proving time and again that we are worthy to be there. When I was serving, I was very conscious that I had to be perfect, because any fault or flaw that I showed would be held not just against me, but against all the women I was serving with. Will the Minister stand up and say to every woman serving in the armed forces that we respect and recognise their service?

Luke Pollard: I commend my hon. Friend for her words and for her service. The comments that were made at the weekend about our serving military personnel are outrageous, and I notice that there is not a single Reform MP here for this statement. Let me be absolutely clear: I believe that all parties present in the Chamber today back our forces. We do not take to Twitter to mock them. We respect service on a cross-party basis. We do not belittle senior officers based on their gender or experience. We need to be better than that. Just as we ask our armed forces to address cultural concerns, we need to be alive to that in our politics as well, and to call out misogyny wherever it rears its ugly head. Let us send a united message from all the parties present today that we back our armed forces, that we want to see a change in culture in our armed forces, and that we value the contribution of everyone who serves, especially those brave women who have done so much to secure our national security in recent years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As it is Armed Forces Week, it is entirely appropriate for the Chair to have allowed the Minister to respond to that question, even though it was not strictly in line with the statement. But from now on, given the time that we have available, we have to come back to the statement itself.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I am not sure that this question is appropriate any more, Mr Deputy Speaker. Ironically, on Saturday the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) demonstrated his ignorance of RAF force protection by tweeting that Group Captain Louise Henton's background in human resources led to last week's infiltration of RAF Brize Norton. It was a disgusting attack on a senior officer—my previous squadron commander—who has dedicated her career to armed forces service and to bettering the lives and lived experience of our personnel. Will the Minister therefore join me in thanking all members of the armed forces and in condemning the remarks of the deputy leader of Reform?

Luke Pollard: Alive to your words, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me just say that I agree with the hon. Gentleman, as I agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones).

It is so important that, when we make the case for respecting our armed forces, we recognise that those who serve are not able to respond to comments made in the political arena. They are prevented from doing so, and Members of this House must therefore have our armed forces' back. We must be able to call out behaviour that is not acceptable, just as we back our forces. I hope that all serving members of our armed forces will be able to see today the full-throated and full-throttle support of this House for those who serve.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I commend the Government for the swift action they took to proscribe Palestine Action after its brazen actions at Brize Norton. I would like to raise concerns about another related group called the Islamic Human Rights Commission. It has expressed support for proscribed terrorist groups and used UK platforms to spread anti-British propaganda. There is strong evidence that it is directly linked to the Iranian regime. Indeed, placards celebrating the ayatollah and talking of being on "the right side of history" were seen at protests at the weekend. What assessment have the Government made of threats to national security beyond Palestine Action, including from this group?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am afraid that a Government Minister's usual line about proscription is that we do not comment on it except when, as today, I have been able to confirm that a group has been proscribed following the Home Secretary's decision. I encourage my hon. Friend to have a conversation with the Security Minister, who is sitting next to me.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I must say that I am very surprised that the Home Secretary chose to put out a written statement, rather than making an oral statement, when we could have put to her some of these points about what exactly qualifies a group to be proscribed as a terrorist organisation.

I entirely agree with the sentiment in the House that Palestine Action sabotaged these planes, caused criminal damage and could be liable to a charge of criminal conspiracy, and that the people who did the damage should be pursued for remuneration to the point of bankruptcy. However, it would do the country and the Government no favours if they were to lose in court a challenge to the process of proscription, because whereas

the secret sabotage of planes would certainly have been an act of terrorism leading to proscription, the fact is that this was a performative act that these people announced they had done. My advice to the Government is to make sure, when these people are prosecuted, that it is not solely on the grounds of committing terrorist acts, rather than committing treasonous acts of sabotage.

Luke Pollard: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that there will be a full debate in this House in the coming days as part of the proscription process, so in due course he and all Members will have an opportunity to debate in full the proscription decision the Home Secretary has taken. I can tell him that the decision to proscribe has not been made without considerable thought, or without reflecting on the information in the public domain and information that perhaps is not, and that it was underpinned by a very serious legal process. I would agree with his concern, but I seek to reassure him that those matters have been considered as part of the process.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I have a substantial military footprint in my constituency, not least Redford and Dreghorn barracks, so I welcome the statement. I have two questions. The first is on the situation overseas. I really welcome the comments about force protection, but it would be good to hear whether the families back home are being kept up to date, because I am sure they are worried about our service personnel—their relatives—overseas.

On Brize Norton, this was an ill-informed and ill-advised attack by a group that, frankly, revels in lawbreaking, as we can see on its website. The irony is that all of us here oppose the humanitarian consequences of what Netanyahu is doing in Gaza; all of us are united in that. All of us are here to protect and respect people's right to protest, but that cannot extend to leaving our armed forces personnel feeling threatened or equipment being put out of use, even temporarily. I welcome the base review, and no doubt that will include the bases in my constituency, but it would be good to hear about what is happening for families who are off-base. Will there be fresh advice for families, and when it comes to upgrading their military homes, will we be looking at security to make sure they are kept safe?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for the support he provides to the armed forces in his constituency. The force protection measures we have introduced as a Government are there to keep our people safe. We are at the highest level of force protection for deployed forces in the middle east. As part of that, we have sought to draw down non-essential personnel to make sure that the footprint is as appropriate as possible. That includes families, but they are very limited in number given the theatre we are talking about. The investment in military housing that he mentioned is certainly a priority for this Government because, frankly, the state of the homes we inherited was not good enough, which is why we are investing £1.5 billion extra in this Parliament to provide homes that really are fit for heroes.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Direct action at military bases is nothing new, and we remember with respect the women who marched from Wales to Greenham Common and the thousands of women who

[*Liz Saville Roberts*]

joined them. They did not just march; they pulled down fences and criminally damaged infrastructure. So does the Minister recognise the risk implicit in proscribing as terrorist organisations protest groups calling out war?

Luke Pollard: I say to the right hon. Member that this is not a protest group, but people who have undertaken severe criminal damage to military assets and who are increasingly using violence as part of their *modus operandi*. The decision by the Home Secretary has not been taken lightly, and it reflects the seriousness of the intent of that organisation. I welcome free speech and I welcome debate and challenge, but vandalising RAF jets is not free speech; it is criminal damage. That intervention on a military base is, as I said in my statement, not only epically stupid, but a threat to our national security, and the Home Secretary was right to proscribe the group.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for the urgent review he has launched, and the Minister for the leadership he is showing. I join Members from across the House in condemning the appalling attack at Brize Norton, which I was privileged to visit earlier this year with the RAF parliamentary scheme.

As well as attacking military installations, Palestine Action has launched violent assaults on defence businesses, including in my constituency. As well as rightly holding a review of military base protection, will Defence and Home Office Ministers review what additional security measures and advice—through the MOD, the police and other bodies—our defence manufacturers may need in the coming years as we ramp up defence production?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for championing defence as the Member of Parliament for his constituency. He is exactly right in highlighting that Palestine Action has targeted not just military bases, but defence businesses—businesses employing people up and down the country and contributing to our national defence. He is right to do so, and I can reassure him that conversations between the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, police forces and those in our defence supply chain happen regularly, and we will continue to keep them abreast of developments and the concerns we may have.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Given that a female officer commands Blandford Camp, I totally echo the comments made by the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones).

There will be a lot of concern among personnel in the camp and those who live in the communities around it that they are now targets for either home-grown domestic terror or those who may be described as “sleepers” in our country from countries and regimes that do not wish us well. Could I invite the Minister to find a way to confidentially ensure that Members of Parliament across the House who have military bases in their constituencies, as I do in North Dorset, are advised as to whether those installations pass the test of security or whether work needs to be done, and if it does, to what timeframe it will happen and what work is involved? There will be a

lot of anxiety in those communities, and MPs across the House can play an important part in allaying those concerns in their communities.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way he approached his question. I share his concerns to ensure that Members of Parliament are adequately informed about defence. Indeed, it was the Defence Secretary’s intent, when we took office, to renew and refresh the relationship between the Ministry of Defence and Parliament with a more open conversation. We are endeavouring to do that with further briefings and I will take his suggestion on board as we look at how we implement the review.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): First, on Armed Forces Day, I want to thank all who serve and have served, including my own son, and recognise the huge contribution made by our armed forces, alongside all service families in Portsmouth, the very proud home of the Royal Navy. Secondly, I would like to say a huge “Thank you” for Armed Forces Day on Saturday, and for being able to take part in the flag raising in my city to show my gratitude and respect to all those serving.

Given the fast-changing landscape alongside the recent disrespectful incident at RAF Brize Norton, with so many armed forces personnel based in Portsmouth and personnel from Portsmouth based around the globe, can the Minister confirm whether wider action is being taken to review and strengthen security across all our military bases, in both the UK and abroad, and what force protection measures are in place to keep our personnel and their families safe here, abroad and in my city?

Luke Pollard: As the MP for Devonport, can I say to my hon. Friend, the MP for one of the Portsmouth seats, just how proud we are of our Royal Navy, no matter where those ships or capabilities are based? It is certainly true that the review commissioned by the Defence Secretary looks not just at what happened at RAF Brize Norton, but at the application of that lesson across the defence estate. The force protection of our people, both home and abroad, is a priority for this Government. We will be undertaking the review at pace and I suspect I will be back in front of the House in due course to announce further measures.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): On the proscription of Palestine Action, I remind the Minister that there are number of recent examples of juries finding defendants, in cases similar to the Brize Norton incident, not guilty based on a necessity defence, as people believed they were acting from a desire to prevent war crimes. Given those juries were clearly able to draw a proportionate line between direct action protest and serious crime, does the Minister agree that the use of the Terrorism Act in this case sets a dangerous and worrying precedent?

Luke Pollard: The dangerous and worrying precedent was set by Palestine Action when it breached an RAF base and vandalised Royal Air Force planes. I entirely respect those who wish to protest, raise arguments and use freedom of speech, but let me be entirely clear: vandalising and attacking RAF planes is not the way to do that. Indeed, it poses a direct threat to our national security. That—and for many other reasons that you will appreciate I may not be able to go into in this House,

Mr Deputy Speaker—is the reason the Home Secretary has taken that decision. When the debate on proscription comes forward, as it will in coming days, I hope the hon. Lady will be able to contribute to that debate and further understand why the decision was taken by the Home Secretary.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Given the gravity of the emerging situation, I do not think there is anyone in this House who would begrudge the Minister for needing to return to be fully briefed on what is happening. But while he is here, will he confirm whether wider action will be taken to review security across all our bases in the UK from extremist threats in the light of last week's incident?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for the encouragement to head back to the Ministry of Defence; I will be hightailing it back there as soon as this statement is over. The review commissioned by the Defence Secretary will look at what happened at RAF Brize Norton, but also at what lessons can be applied to our military bases, the defence estate across the UK, and our overseas bases. Keeping our people safe and keeping our ability to protect our country, safe and free from interference, is vital for this country. That is why we have undertaken the review.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): When organisations such as Palestine Action break into military bases, damage secure facilities and put our personnel at risk, they are not just protesting but sabotaging. With that in mind, if any other extremists had carried out those tasks they would rightly be described as domestic terrorists. Does the Minister agree that this is not legitimate protest, it is domestic terrorism and that any attack on our armed forces' infrastructure should be seen thus?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments. I often find the phrase “Flip it to see it” is useful to identify whether there is inbuilt bias in how we approach a topic. As he suggests, if we were to flip Palestine Action to a number of other groups, it would clearly be regarded with the same seriousness with which the Government are approaching it. I am very glad that the strong message, on a cross-party basis, has gone out today that what we saw in Brize Norton is unacceptable and that it is right that we take measures to keep our national security safe.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Could I ask the Minister to think carefully about the contributions made today by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) and the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) concerning naming somebody as a terrorist, when they are in fact protesting about the appalling events in Gaza and the treatment of children by Israeli forces? It is surprising that in the Minister's statement, which described a lot about the military situation all over the middle east, he said not one word about the illegal occupation of the west bank, the illegal occupation of Gaza and the deliberate starvation, contrary to all aspects of international law, of the civilian population of Gaza. Can we not deal with the fundamental issue, which is the illegal activities of the Israeli Defence Forces in those scenarios?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman speaks passionately for the Palestinian people and has done so for a very long time. This statement was about not Gaza but the force protection of our military units in the middle east. But as he has given me the opportunity to do so, let me say very clearly that it is this Government's position that what we see in Gaza is intolerable. We need to see a restoration of the ceasefire, we need to see Hamas release all the remaining hostages, and we need to see aid at scale delivered to the Palestinian people and a step towards the lasting peace that comes with a two-state solution. There is a lot of work to do in that respect.

On the word “terrorist”, I was very careful with the language that I used in the statement. It is powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 that are being used. When the Home Secretary issued the written ministerial statement, she was also very careful about the language she used. The actions of Palestine Action have now crossed the threshold under provisions in that Act. That is why she has taken action today.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Armed Forces Minister was asked a direct question by the shadow Secretary of State for Defence. It was simply this: do the Government support the United States' actions in Iran over the weekend? The answer he gave was that he agreed that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon. That is not the answer to the question he was asked. What is the answer? Do the Government actually know whether they support the US action? If they do know their own mind, why will he not tell us?

Luke Pollard: The Foreign Secretary was very clear, when he was at the Dispatch Box for his statement earlier, that the UK and the US share the same long-term ambition to ensure that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Let me associate myself with the remarks about Armed Forces Week from Members across the House and the condemnation of the escalation of the situation in the middle east. Is the Minister able to explain to me if there will be any additional security measures at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, given the unique nature of what is happening there?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the college at Harrogate. It is a really important part of the defence family and I know that the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is sat next to me on the Front Bench, takes an especially keen interest in the affairs of Harrogate. As the review is conducted and we see what lessons can be learnt from the incident at Brize Norton, we will be taking measures possibly at all military installations, including training establishments across the country if that is suitable. But I am certain that the Minister for Veterans would welcome a further conversation with the hon. Gentleman in relation to Harrogate in particular.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, you will remember that Willie Whitelaw famously offered his resignation after an intruder made his way into Buckingham Palace. Has the Minister considered his own position?

Luke Pollard: Given the seriousness of the issues we are discussing, my focus, and the focus of every Defence Minister, is on ensuring the protection of our people. I understand that the hon. Gentleman is looking for a soundbite, but I believe he may have wasted a question where he should have been talking about how we can protect our people in the middle east and back home in a secure way.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I join with all Members of this House in thanking everyone who works so hard at RAF Brize Norton in my constituency, led very effectively by Group Captain Lou Henton, who is an example to us all. I very much respect and admire how the community in Carterton, right next to RAF Brize Norton, has pulled together at this stressful time—they have done a fantastic job. We have really underinvested in security at the base for a long time. Like many Carterton residents, I have walked the perimeter quite a few times, and know that that fence is not formidable. What assurances can the Minister give that this airbase and other defence facilities around the country and internationally will have their defences strengthened for air, sea and land attack?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the concerns of the local community around Brize Norton, and I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the details of what occurred from our point of view and the measures that can be put in place. The initial actions taken by the Defence Secretary have identified a number of immediate steps that we are taking to further secure the base, but I would be happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman about that further.

The hon. Gentleman is right that much of our armed forces estate and our armed forces have been hollowed out and underfunded for far too long, which is precisely the reason that I welcome the increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by April 2027. Our armed forces are brilliant, and it is time they had first-class facilities.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Humza Yousaf, the former First Minister of Scotland, has invited those in this place to check their moral compass over the proscription of Palestine Action, but I think we have heard here today that no one is seriously suggesting that these people are anything other than saboteurs, and that anyone who expresses sympathy for them has their moral compass spinning like a peerie, as we would say in Scotland. Mr Yousaf further suggested that American aircraft using Prestwick airport in Scotland could leave us open to charges of war crimes, and I wonder whether the Minister agrees with me that that is absolute nonsense. Prestwick airport is owned by the Scottish Government—in fact, it is a civilian airport, although it is heavily used by our allies, in particular America and Canada. What can we do to protect those aircraft at that civilian airbase?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that airfield in question. Civil-military co-operation—using civilian infrastructure for military purposes—is a model that we may look to develop further, especially as we look to increase our warfighting readiness in the future, so the lessons about security need to be applied. Luckily, many of our European allies operate civil-military airfields, so there are good models that we can look to on how to do that.

On the accusation that the hon. Gentleman raises on behalf of a Member of the Scottish Parliament, let me say clearly that the UK military operates only in compliance with international humanitarian law. That is absolutely vital. If an order is given that is contrary to international humanitarian law, our armed forces are not required to follow it. It is that high standard that means our armed forces are respected worldwide.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The statement speaks of enhanced security measures across the whole of defence, so will the Minister review the recent decision to downgrade some of the security measures at Northern Ireland bases, including removal from the permanent base? On the strategic defence review, to allow our RAF personnel to respond quickly and effectively, are we looking at further utilisation of Aldergrove in my constituency?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the security changes that we have introduced at bases and reserve centres in Northern Ireland. It is certainly true that we had reservists guarding largely empty buildings, which is something we have addressed with increasing physical security measures to ensure that they are safe. We are looking across the defence estate as part of the review the Defence Secretary has commissioned, but I would be happy to have a further conversation with the hon. Gentleman about Northern Ireland, should he want to.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): When an extremist minority spreads division and intimidation and now has even attacked our military, prioritising foreign regions and their interests above our own, it is an attack on our country. It is treason. The primary job of our Government is to protect the UK, so I welcome the announcement today that the Government are taking action to do just that.

I was proud to celebrate Armed Forces Week at the flag raising ceremony in Runnymede this morning. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to all our armed forces staff and the work they do for us all?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the support he has provided to our armed forces in Armed Forces Week—a week to thank those who serve and celebrate their service. It seems only appropriate, on a day where I am at the Dispatch Box talking about the necessary force protection of our people, that we take that responsibility doubly seriously today and all this week. While there may be party political differences between Members across the House, I believe there are British values that we all share. One of those is respect for the rule of law, and another is respect for our armed forces. The pride in our armed forces that I have as Minister for the Armed Forces is the same pride that I see on a cross-party basis—pride in all the men and women who serve in our forces. Let us hope that across the country, in Armed Forces Week, we can all join in thanking everyone who serves and the families who stand behind those in uniform.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): As the MP for Surrey Heath, I am proudly the MP for all the recruits, cadets, staff and officers at Army Training Centre Pirbright and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, a privilege that I share with the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow).

I am sure everyone on those bases will be reassured to hear of the work that is being done to look at security; I think that is particularly the case where bases are highly integrated into local communities. I wonder whether the Minister might also be able to offer some reassurance to local cadet forces, who wear uniform on our behalf.

I want to focus my question on our forces in Cyprus. The Minister mentioned that Akrotiri had not in any way been infiltrated. Can he offer the same assurance of Dhekelia, as well as our other sites on Cyprus? What are the Government doing to ensure that all those in uniform on Cyprus, whether or not they wear blue berets, are being properly briefed and secured on our behalf?

Luke Pollard: Again, in the spirit of cross-party support, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the support he offers to those at the training establishments in his constituency. We have some truly remarkable people in our armed forces, and it is good to see cross-party support for their work.

On our sovereign base areas in Cyprus, it is essential that we look not only at how we can protect them, but at how we can protect them from the risk of Iranian retaliation, why is why we have enhanced the force protection measures on our bases in Cyprus. It is also why the Prime Minister has ordered the further deployment of Typhoons at our base at RAF Akrotiri, and why we are investing in ground-based air defence there. We will be looking at further measures in the months ahead as we seek to implement the strategic defence review, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the work looking at security will affect not just those at our UK bases, but our overseas personnel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Last but by no means least, I call the ever-patient Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement today and for his clear commitment. I want to describe Armed Forces Week in Newtownards in my constituency. On Saturday, 60,000 people came to pay their respects to those who serve in uniform. Whether they serve in the Army, the Air Force or the Royal Navy, they are part of our community, and the community showed its solidarity with them for their courage, bravery and dedication. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) was right, by the way. I met

the lady who will take over at Thiepval Barracks in Lisburn at the end of this year—again, an indication of the commitment of those women and ladies, who can do the job equally well as anybody else.

The actions of those criminals at Brize Norton may cause up to £30 million in damage, as well as the security measures that will have to put in place. However, the true cost of their actions cannot just be measured in money; it is the anger that right-thinking people have towards those pro-Palestine activists who would attack our military to make their political point. They are a threat to those of us who live in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This terrorism cannot be accepted. It reminds so many of us—especially those from Northern Ireland—of dark days gone by. Will the Minister acknowledge the righteous anger of the good people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and what steps will the Minister take to ensure there is not a repeat in Aldergrove, or indeed any other military base with British personnel here or abroad? Some of my Strangford constituents are stationed at these military bases, not just in the United Kingdom but across the whole world.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving an update on Armed Forces Day in his constituency. Across the entire United Kingdom, there is real pride in the men and women who serve in our armed forces. Although this may be a difficult week for international affairs and we may be looking at more debates about force protection than we might ordinarily have, let us all take a moment out to make sure that we thank those people who serve, thank their families for the support that they offer, thank those people who work in the defence industries that equip our people with the cutting-edge gear that they need, and thank the society that stands behind them—because our armed forces are only as strong as the industry and the nation that stand behind them. I hope that everyone watching the debate will have been able to see the strong cross-party support for our armed forces and the strong sense of support as we seek to improve security measures to ensure that we protect our people, at home and abroad.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I am sure that the whole House, on both sides, will concur with the Minister's final remarks. I thank him and the Opposition Front Benchers for their attendance.

Points of Order

7.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The grave situation in the middle east is developing, with further reports from Qatar, and I will return from the Chamber to be briefed further, but my wider accountability to this House is important.

On 12 June, the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), tabled a written question about the Defence Command Paper 2023, pursuing the exchange that we had had on a point of order before the strategic defence review statement that I made to the House on 2 June. As we prepared to publish our SDR, it became clear that there were no established departmental procedures for sharing major defence publications with the Opposition Front Bench ahead of publication. I asked defence officials before 2 June and have done so since the shadow Defence Secretary's question, but they have still been unable to find any departmental record of a copy of DCP '23 being shared with me as shadow Defence Secretary.

However, having now checked my Opposition staff records from July 2023, I can confirm that an embargoed copy of DCP '23 was dropped off at my office, along with the conventional "check against delivery" advance copy of the Defence Secretary's statement. We took a similar approach with the SDR: the shadow Defence Secretary received a hand-delivered, embargoed copy of the SDR with my draft statement around 90 minutes before the statement began. However, unlike 2023, we also offered the shadow Defence Secretary an advance ministerial briefing on the SDR, which he declined.

I welcome the chance today to correct the record from my point of order on 2 June. The House will also wish to know that I have now established a formal procedure for sharing defence strategies in advance of publication with the Opposition, the Select Committee and other key parliamentarians—something that I have also discussed with Mr Speaker. [*Official Report*, 2 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 40.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the Secretary of State for his point of order and for placing that on the record.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to the Secretary of State, and I am grateful for advance notice that he would be giving a point of order, although not of the exact detail.

This is extremely important, because while there is no set process, there is a ministerial code, which clearly states that commercially sensitive information should not be given out to the media prior to being given to Parliament. To reiterate, on that day, yes, we were given a hard copy of the SDR 90 minutes before the statement, but I was already in the Chamber for the urgent questions arising from that situation—officials would have known that we were in the Chamber—and was unable to read it. However, at 8 o'clock that morning, senior people from the biggest defence companies in the land received a hard copy of the SDR.

The key thing is that, on the point of order on 2 June, I said to the Secretary of State that the situation was unacceptable, and he justified the procedure on the fact that, at the time when I was a Minister—I quote him—

"We had no advance copy of the defence review."—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 40.]

His justification was something that is not the case, and I said that in my immediate response to him. I am glad that, three weeks later, he has corrected the record.

We have war in Ukraine and all the instability in the middle east; there should be consensus on matters of national security, and we should not play games on the most important strategic defence review for many years. I hope that we can now draw a line under this, but to enable that, I hope that the Secretary of State will say to his special advisers and officials that they must be as transparent as possible in all pursuant written questions on this matter to which we still await answers and in responses to freedom of information requests.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The shadow Secretary of State has placed his view on the record. He will understand that that is not a matter for the Chair any further, but I hope that whatever lessons need to be learned will have been learned, and I am sure that, on both sides of the House, that is correct.

Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the statement on the middle east earlier today, I asked the Foreign Secretary:

"In the event that Iran does launch a retaliatory military strike against the US, what do the Government believe our article 5 obligations would be with regards to military support for the US, and how would that change if the location of the attack were in the region?"

Just a few minutes after I asked that question, Iran launched an air attack against US bases in Qatar and Iraq.

The Foreign Secretary evaded providing a coherent response by referring me to 2.13 of the ministerial code. In the current version of the ministerial code, published on 6 November 2024, there is no 2.13; chapter 2 finishes at 2.7. I seek your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, in understanding why the Foreign Secretary is misleading the House by quoting made-up references to the ministerial code to avoid scrutiny. Should he, as one of the great officers of state, return to this place and clarify why he is not on top of his brief?

Mr Deputy Speaker: First, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman did not wish to imply that the Foreign Secretary was deliberately misleading the House. [*Interruption.*] That said—

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Look, he just—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. [*Interruption.*] Order!

That said, I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has given the Foreign Secretary notice of his intended point of order, but I think that that is a matter that he will have to raise with the Foreign Secretary himself. The hon. Gentleman will understand that the Chair cannot answer for Ministers, but he has made his point.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Friday, many colleagues in this House spoke of compassion, sympathy and understanding. Unfortunately, the same compassion, sympathy and understanding were not extended to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). His father-in-law, my constituent Mr Adrian Lawther, was nearing the end of a very full life, and he rightly wanted to be with his wife and her family at that time. He sought a pair for Third Reading of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill from the promoter of the Bill and the Government Chief Whip, as well as seeking advice and support from the Speaker's Office.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I was with the hon. Member at the departure gate waiting to return to Northern Ireland when his wife called to tell him of her father's passing. It now appears that other Members were able to avail themselves of proxies in the hands of Government Whips. The hon. Member should not have been forced to travel to this place to have his vote recorded. I seek your advice, Sir, on the best approach to seek a remedy to ensure that we in this place can support each other to the best of our ability and at times of great personal need.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. May I first express my sympathy to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and his family? I take it that the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) notified the hon. Member that he intended to raise the matter in the Chamber today.

Robin Swann indicated assent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

As the hon. Member will know, pairing is not a matter for the Chair; it is an arrangement between hon. Members individually and their Whips—and of course I could not possibly comment any further on that. However, the circumstances under which a Member is eligible for a proxy vote do not at present include family bereavement. If it wished to do so, the House could change that, but I am not able to do so on my own account. I understand, however, that the Procedure Committee has been conducting a review of these arrangements, which might include matters such as pairing.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Speaking at the Labour party conference in Liverpool in 2022, the Prime Minister said:

“one of my first acts as Prime Minister will be to put the Hillsborough law on the statute book”.

The Prime Minister said “the Hillsborough law”, not “a Hillsborough law”. This was an actual Bill that had its First Reading in March 2017, tabled by Andy Burnham and written by expert lawyers.

As the parliamentary lead for the “Hillsborough Law Now” campaign and a Hillsborough survivor, I want to put on record the campaign's grave concern about the status of the Hillsborough law. The Prime Minister missed his 15 April deadline after a replacement Bill was shown to lawyers involved in the campaign, who made it clear that it contained none of the key provisions of the Hillsborough law and did not deserve the name, and it was rejected out of hand.

It is rumoured that the Government could be about to table another replacement Bill, still without any of the key provisions of the Hillsborough law and without allowing Hillsborough lawyers, families or survivors to see it. Government officials have even suggested that parliamentary procedure means that they are not permitted to first share it, despite the fact that that is what they did with the previous draft in March. Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask for your guidance on whether the draft can be first shared, as it was before, to give us a chance to raise any concerns before there is another betrayal of Hillsborough families and survivors, and all victims of state cover-ups.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. It will not surprise him to know that I did not attend the Labour party conference in 2022. The King's Speech announced that the Government would deliver their manifesto commitment to implement a Hillsborough law by introducing legislation to introduce a duty of candour for public servants. It is, as the hon. Gentleman will understand, up to the Government to decide how they go about preparing legislation, and that includes whom they consult and when. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will play a major part in the scrutiny of the legislation when it is presented to Parliament.

Pride Month

8.1 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Secretary of State to move the motion.

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Not Secretary of State, Mr Deputy Speaker—well, I don't think so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should say, I do not know anything that the hon. Gentleman does not know.

Chris Bryant: And the things you do not know, Mr Deputy Speaker—anyway.

I beg to move,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

I should start by declaring an interest in this Pride debate. The *Daily Mail* once referred to me as an “ex-gay vicar”. I am an ex-vicar, but the other stuff is coming along quite nicely. In fact, I am a practising homosexual—one day I will be quite good at it.

People ask me, “Why on earth do you need a Pride Month? Do you really need LGBT History Month? What's the point of Pride marches and Pride flags? Hasn't the world changed? Haven't you already got same-sex marriage and adoption, gays in the police and the military, and laws that protect people from discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender reassignment? What more do you want?” That is what I hear all the time, even from really well-meaning, liberal souls.

But we have always needed Pride. We needed it when people lazily assumed that a short haircut meant that you were a lesbian or a lisp meant that you were gay. We needed it when people laughed at Larry Grayson and John Inman but forced them to hide their sexuality. We needed it when people said that we should be harassed, arrested and locked up for loving who we wanted. We needed it when the police wore rubber gloves to arrest us, just in case we gave them AIDS. We needed it when we were called queer, faggot and arse bandit at school. We needed it when we were sneered at, spat at, punched, kicked and beaten up.

And we need Pride now—when kids are still bullied because they are camp or butch; when families still throw their LGBT children out of the home; when many are so worn down by abuse that they take their own lives; when so many are so terrified of coming out that they live lives of terrible, crushing loneliness; when people are abused for wanting to transition; when our cousins in Hungary are denied the right to demonstrate; when the state police in many countries deliberately entrap homosexuals; when trans people are treated as less than human; and when homosexuality is still illegal in 63 countries, including 38 that apply those rules to women, and including more than half the Commonwealth. Yes, we still need Pride.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt such a magnificent speech. The first Pride march in London was in 1972, and I have met many people who were on that first Pride march who thought that they would never need to march again, but they still need to march now. Does my hon. Friend feel sorry that Pride

organisations have now said that no political parties are allowed to march because of how the LGBTQI+ community has been treated? I will still be marching, because I march with other groups, but does my hon. Friend agree that this is a sad state of affairs?

Chris Bryant: I think we should be proud of the fact that politics has changed the law in this country, and political parties were absolutely essential to that. I pay tribute to everybody in my political party who for many generations fought for equality—but that is true for the Conservative party as well, where people in many cases had to be even braver than they did in the Labour movement, and of course in many other parties as well. I do agree with my hon. Friend; I think it is an entirely retrograde step to ban people from political parties from taking part in Pride marches.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): In contrast to the Minister, I fully support the decision that has been made by the major Pride organisations to tell us that as political parties we are not welcome this year on parades or marches. Is the Minister not as sad as I am at the absolute state of political policy and discourse around trans rights that has directly led to this action?

Chris Bryant: I will come on in a moment to some of the problems that I think we have, but when I was first elected as a Member of Parliament, there were still many laws in this country that drastically affected the rights of LGBTQ people in this country, and it is because of political parties that we changed the law. We should not discard the democratic process; it is absolutely essential to being able to secure our rights.

We need to remember that in this country we used to hang men for having sex together and imprison them just for meeting or sending each other a love note. This is a serious business, but we also need to celebrate. I remember that on one of the Pride marches I went on, we shouted all the way, “We're here, we're queer and we've not gone shopping!” We chanted it all the way down Oxford Street, which is ironic in itself.

We have to celebrate, because not every LGBT story is a tragedy, and I wish the film and television industry would learn this. We are extraordinarily normal. That is a terrible word, really, but we are phenomenally normal. We bleed when we are cut and we laugh when we are tickled, and we can defy every stereotype going. I hate to break it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but not all gay men like musicals—I don't understand that, but I have met a few—and apparently not all lesbians enjoy tennis or smoke cigars. *[Interruption.]* I do not know what is going on behind me.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I would like to put on record that I have never enjoyed a cigar, although I would dispute the fact that most lesbians do not enjoy tennis.

Chris Bryant: I am not sure whether it is tennis or tennis players—a bit like rugby and rugby players.

We can laugh at ourselves—of course we can—and it is a really important part of this that we are able to do so. A Member of the House of Lords told a colleague the other day that I was too macho. *[Laughter.]* That was not meant to be funny, actually. I replied, “What? As in the song that goes ‘Macho, macho man’?”—perhaps the campest song ever written.

People also still ask me why we need to come out. They say, “Can’t you just keep it to yourselves?” Let me explain. The rest of the world will always assume that most of us are straight—heterosexual—so it is a complex process when we learn that we are not like others. Unless you are very famous, Mr Deputy Speaker, you have to come out time and again, every time that somebody presumes that you are heterosexual.

We need to need to celebrate what LGBT people have given us. That includes Alan Turing, Ivor Novello, George Michael, John Gielgud, Alec Guinness, Wilfred Owen, Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, Anne Lister, Maureen Colquhoun, Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf, Clare Balding, Jess Glynne, Alex Scott, Jane Hill, Skin, Nicola Adams and Sandi Toksvig—and, from the Rhondda, I would add Daniel Evans, H from Steps and Callum Scott Howells, who go to prove that I am not the only gay in the village.

Coming out, Mr Deputy Speaker—I do not know why I keep on addressing this to you, as if you should suddenly leap forward—matters.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I think the Minister has been here long enough to understand that, actually, matters have to be directed through the Chair; he is entirely correct.

Chris Bryant: Yes, I thought there was a reason.

Coming out matters for our personal pride and our collective pride, so that every boy and girl growing up does not internalise hatred, scorn and shame as used to be the case but learns cheerful happiness and opportunity, and so that every family can take pride in their LGBT child, sister, cousin or aunt. From the first bricks thrown at Stonewall to this month’s marches, Pride is a movement rooted in resistance and the refusal to be silenced, sidelined or shamed. It is about visibility in the face of erasure—and, talking of Erasure, it is about a little respect.

There is one final reason that we need to celebrate Pride. The safest place in the 20th century for gay men was Germany in 1930, where men danced together and loved one another with impunity. But, within a decade, the Nazis were carting them off to Dachau and demanding they inform on others. When the war was over—perhaps equally shockingly—nobody wanted to memorialise them; we were erased, and erased from history. Our hard-won freedoms are never won in perpetuity; we need to secure them again and again in every generation. Progress is never inevitable; it must be defended, deepened and delivered to every generation.

Today, we speak against a backdrop of heightened tension. In the last decade, we have seen the consensus around LGBT+ rights begin to fray, we have seen public debate grow increasingly toxic and we have seen trans people in particular subjected to fear, misinformation and ridicule. Pastors in the United States today are calling for the death penalty for homosexuals. Jonathan Shelley in Arlington said that

“we should hate Pride, not celebrate it”.

On the shooting of LGBT people in the Pulse nightclub in 2016, Donnie Romero, who is also a pastor in Arlington, said that those who were killed were

“all pervers...they’re the scum of the Earth and the Earth is a better place now”.

That is what we are still facing today.

That is why the Government will not tolerate about a rolling back of rights, nor a politics of division that pits one group against another. That is why we are delivering a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Those so-called therapies are nothing less than abuse. They do not work, they cause deep, lasting harm, and their continued existence is a stain on any society that claims to be inclusive. Draft legislation will be published in this Session, informed by wide-ranging engagement and guided by the need to protect, not punish—to prevent harm, not criminalise care.

We are also working with the Home Office to equalise all hate crime strands. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), who raised the matter last week. No one should face abuse, violence or discrimination because of who they are or who they love, yet across the country LGBT people—especially trans people—are being targeted with growing intensity. In too many cases, the law does not yet offer equal protection. That is not justice; the Government will act.

We are also improving access to fertility services for lesbian and bisexual women. As of November, same-sex couples are no longer subject to unnecessary additional screening costs for IVF, and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently reviewing its fertility guidelines, which will help to ensure more equitable access to NHS-funded treatment, regardless of sexuality or relationship status. This Government recognise that building a family is a human aspiration, not anyone’s privilege.

We are also strengthening healthcare services for trans people. We are launching a review of gender identity services to ensure they meet modern standards of equality, safety and accessibility. That includes reducing waiting times, expanding service capacity and improving mental health support throughout the transition journey.

We are investing in housing solutions for young LGBT+ people at risk of homelessness, too. Far too many are pushed out of their homes or fall through the cracks in mainstream services. We will soon establish an inter-ministerial taskforce on this, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, to co-ordinate efforts across all Departments.

Our commitment to dignity and equality does not end at our borders. Right now, 63 countries criminalise same-sex activity, and in 13 of those countries the death penalty can be applied. At least 49 countries actively target trans and gender-diverse people with discriminatory laws. In many of those countries, shamefully, that is a direct legacy of British colonial rule: legislation that we imposed continues to harm people. We cannot undo the past, but we must take responsibility for the future, which is why the UK is a proud member of the Equal Rights Coalition, why we have invested over £40 million to support global LGBT rights, and why our diplomatic missions work every day behind the scenes to support local advocates, challenge repressive laws and offer hope to those facing persecution. If there were any Reform Members in the Chamber, I would point out that that sometimes means putting up a Pride flag.

We are seeing a backlash, as the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) said, but we are also seeing breakthroughs. This year, Thailand became the first south-east Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage—hurrah! In Namibia and Dominica, consensual

[Chris Bryant]

same-sex acts were decriminalised. In India, the Supreme Court is reviewing discriminatory blood donation policies. There is light in this tunnel.

I want to address the recent Supreme Court ruling, because I know it matters to a large number of people. It was, of course, a significant legal judgment, and one that has understandably prompted discussion and—in some cases—fear. Let me be absolutely clear: the rights and protections for trans people under the Equality Act 2010 remain firmly in place. The protected characteristic of gender reassignment still applies. Discrimination, harassment or victimisation of trans people is unlawful and will remain so under this Government.

The ruling has offered important clarity for service providers—particularly those offering single-sex spaces—and we respect the Court's decision. We reject any attempts to weaponise the ruling to roll back the hard-won dignity and inclusion of trans people. This is not and must never become a zero-sum debate. We can protect single-sex spaces based on clear, lawful criteria while also protecting the fundamental rights and dignity of trans people who—let us not forget—are among the most marginalised and misunderstood in our society.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I welcome the tone with which the Minister has approached this really important point. Will he touch on the proposed guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which he will know is out for consultation? One section that really concerns trans constituents is about disclosures and requiring trans people to disclose their identity. I have to be honest: that seems to be nothing short of outing trans people. Will he provide reassurance that we will not see a situation in this country where trans people end up being compelled to out themselves?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a good point; that is very important. Indeed, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 lays down clearly the privacy responsibilities of other Government Departments. In fact, one of my anxieties when we were considering the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 was that we seemed to be getting to a place where people would have to present their passport or a document to prove whether they could access a single-sex space. I honestly think that the rights of both these groups can be respected fully. We surely must be the kind of society that can achieve that.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister is rightly pointing out where progress has been made nationally and internationally, but when he was cantering through those points of light nationally, he missed out one group: the men and women serving in our armed forces. I am particularly mindful of that because Saturday is Armed Forces Day and, sadly, one of the chief advocates for LGBT people in the armed forces, Lord Etherton, died in May. Will the Minister pay tribute to Terence Etherton and comment on his 2023 report into the shameful way in which gay people were treated in the armed forces between 1967 and 2000?

Chris Bryant: I am really grateful that the right hon. Gentleman has raised that point, and it is good that it is a point of agreement across the whole House. There was a time when large numbers of people in this House would have thought that having gay men, lesbians or

trans people in the armed forces was anathema, and I am so glad that we have changed. The shields on the wall up there are dedicated to Members of Parliament who were killed in the second world war, and at least five, if not six, of them were gay men who gave their lives in defence of this country. Bravery is available to people regardless of their sexuality or their identity. The right hon. Gentleman is also absolutely right to refer to Terence. His report was an essential part of changing the landscape in this country and making sure that compensation was available to the individuals who were affected.¹

We should acknowledge the fundamental truth that trans people have always been at the forefront of our movement. From Marsha P. Johnson in New York to Mark Ashton here in the UK, trans people and gender non-conforming people have led protests, shaped policy and built community, often with little recognition or safety in return. At Stonewall, at section 28 protests, in the founding of support services and HIV charities, and at the heart of every movement that pushed us forward, trans people were there and they led. We owe them a debt of gratitude, so to treat them now as a threat to the very movement they helped build is wrong. We will not forget their role, and we will not leave them behind. Trans people deserve safety, dignity and the same freedom to live their lives as anyone else, and under this Government they will have it.

On 29 August 1924, Edward Carpenter had his 80th birthday. He had famously campaigned for our rights and lived with his lover, George Merrill. Indeed, he was probably the model for E. M. Forster's novel "Maurice", which I think was published only after E. M. Forster's death. Carpenter was a brave campaigner at a time when it was impossible to be brave. Men were still being imprisoned with hard labour for homosexuality in 1924, when he came to his 80th birthday, so it was a phenomenal act of bravery when every single member of the Labour Cabinet—there was a Labour Government in 1924—signed a letter to Carpenter wishing him a happy birthday.

That kind of magnanimity should be the hallmark of our politics today. We are not yet the country that we could be, but in all we do in our hospitals and our schools, in our laws and our language, in our foreign policy and our public services, this Government will uphold one principle: a little respect for all. Let that be the legacy of this House.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I have finished.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I am sure the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to intervene later on.

8.23 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the Minister and to speak in this important debate. I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone in the House, across my Daventry constituency and across the country a very happy Pride Month.

The Minister is absolutely right to say that Pride is still needed. I have certainly seen significant changes over my lifetime, including things that I never thought would be possible when I was growing up as a young gay man in Anglesey, but he is right to say that these are important issues that we should continue to discuss.

1.[Official Report, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 1WC.](Correction)

On the whole, I have been privileged to have a life in which I have been accepted pretty much everywhere I have lived, but I have had those difficult occasions that I have spoken about before, not least being badly beaten up and my father coming to my rescue and being beaten up too, trying to protect his son. Those are the things that we need to remember.

We also need to remember people like the young man that I heard about in Manchester a few years ago who had been kicked out of his home because his parents could not accept his sexuality. His life took a nosedive and, sadly, he ended up selling himself for sex to survive. He was eventually murdered by someone who he was supposedly trying to get some money off. These are the disgusting consequences that may happen if we do not remind ourselves of the journey that we have been on as a country.

I have to say that things are pretty good for me. Most of the time, most people do not care that I am a gay man—

Chris Bryant: Are you?

Stuart Andrew: Yeah—but I am butch like you! *[Laughter.]*

As I was saying, most people do not really comment on the fact that I live with a man. They are more interested in the fact that he works for Marks & Spencer and gets 20% off. But it is important that we have these conversations because there are still people around the world, and in communities in this country, who cannot come out. There are people in communities in our country who live a different life from the one that they want to live, and there are people around the world, as the Minister rightly says, who will be put to death if they love the person they really want to love.

That is why Pride Month is important, and its theme of activism and social change emphasises a reflection on the contributions of LGBT individuals and communities in creating a better world for us all. We are lucky in this country that we have a host of people in our history who have been at the forefront of fighting for equality. Yes, there are the famous people—Dame Kelly Holmes, Tom Daley and Sir Ian McKellen, to name but a few—but there are so many inspiring LGBT people from right across the decades, as the Minister mentioned.

I would like to mention Sophia Jex-Blake, Scotland's first female doctor, who fought for so many women to be allowed to train as doctors and founded medical schools up in Scotland, where she eventually met her life partner, whom she lived with until her death in 1912. I also want to mention Patrick Trevor-Roper, who was one of only three witnesses who could be convinced to appear before the Wolfenden committee. His evidence helped to start the journey to decriminalisation. Those people, in my view, are incredibly brave.

Given that we have commemorated the 80th anniversary of VE Day this year, I think we should also remember one of my personal heroes, Dr Alan Turing, a man whose brilliance cracked the Nazis' Enigma code. This was an incredible feat, given that Enigma had 159 million million settings. He played a crucial role in cracking the intercepted messages that enabled the allies to defeat the enemy in the Atlantic and in other engagements. We owe him so much, but his treatment later, when he was prosecuted for being gay, is a shame that I know we all

find abhorrent. The Government rightly apologised and he was later posthumously pardoned. In my view, he is a true hero of our nation.

Of course, we have had champions in this place, too—people like Chris Smith, who bravely became the first openly gay MP; Edwina Currie, who led a debate on changing the age of consent; and too many other hon. and right hon. Members to name. I do want to name one or two from the Conservative side because I know everyone will do their own pitches. There are people like our former colleague Eric Ollerenshaw, who was on that first Gay Pride march in 1972. He recalled to me that he was actually spat at by the police—that is how bad it was. There are people like Mike Freer, who campaigned hard on issues like PrEP, and our former colleague Elliot Colburn.

I would like to take this opportunity to say happy birthday to LGBT+ Conservatives, which celebrates its 50th birthday this year, making it one of the oldest LGBT-affiliated groups for a political party in the world—a title it shares with LGBT+ Labour. I wish LGBT+ Labour a happy birthday as well. In 1975, the LGBT Conservatives were established by Professor Peter Walter Campbell. I am that old that I have seen LGBT Conservatives go through several guises over the 30 years since I first joined. Back then, it was known as TORCHE—Tory Campaign for Homosexual Equality. I pay tribute to the work it has done over those 50 years.

Little did those founders and that first generation of our LGBT Conservatives and Labour know it, but they were merely years away from a global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Around the world, hundreds of thousands of people would lose their lives, including people here in the UK. Gay and bisexual men lived in fear, and many felt powerless and hopeless. If we fast forward to 2025, we find ourselves in a truly different world, and I want to thank all those who have made that change possible. I recognise that those contributions have come from parties across this Chamber, and I thank them all for it.

I am proud of our record as a party over the last 14 years for the lives of LGBT people, not least the rolling out of highly active antiretroviral therapy treatment for HIV in England and funding the first ever HIV testing week. In 2013, we introduced same-sex couples' marriage in England and Wales, which was one of the most memorable debates in my time in the House and one of my proudest moments here. We introduced the legalisation of self-testing kits for HIV, as well as a host of other things that we are proud to have done.

I also want to remark on the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who is no longer here, about people in the armed forces and to pay tribute to Lord Ehterton. When I was the Equalities Minister, I had the privilege of meeting him several times as he went through that report. He did not just get evidence from thousands of people; he personally read every single testament because he wanted to know those stories inside out, and thank goodness he did that. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done.

Thinking about all these achievements and those of former MPs and other inspirational figures, I find it appalling and deeply disappointing that some Prides across the country have banned our political parties from this year's parades. LGBT Conservatives, LGBT Labour, LGBT Lib Dems and all others are not allowed

[Stuart Andrew]

to attend. Like the Minister, I also remind the organisers that it was these groups and so many MPs in this House that brought about the changes we enjoy today. As Jo Cox said, there is more that unites us than divides us. Them causing this divide is a retrograde step, and I pay tribute to the likes of Owen Meredith and others who have taken up this fight. I call on the organisers to think again, especially as two parties celebrate their 50th birthday in terms of LGBT issues.

I am aware that many colleagues want to contribute, but I have a couple of questions for the answering Minister. I would like an update on the HIV programme. It touched me that people across the House want to embark on that ambition of having no new HIV infections in this country by 2030; of course, we have only one Parliament left to get that done. Could the Minister set out where the Government are up to on that and what plans they have to ensure that we meet that ambitious target? Will the Government ensure that they are working with our devolved regions to ensure a UK approach to eradicating new HIV cases—not just England, but Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, too? We can end new HIV cases without a vaccine or cure, and wouldn't it be great for the UK to be the first place to do so? We want the Government to succeed on this issue, building on a lot of the work that we did in office and working with great organisations like the Terrence Higgins Trust. Let us make that an ambition for all of us. Let us remember why we have Pride in the first place, and make this Pride count.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am imposing an immediate three-minute time limit, with the exception of the Front Benchers.

8.34 pm

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism for opening this important debate and giving us this opportunity, and for doing it in such a poignant yet joyful way. I am also honoured to be sharing the Chamber with both of my predecessors; I think that shows that this is an area where we do have more in common.

From boxing champion and sporting legend Nicola Adams to beloved playwright Alan Bennett and award-winning composer Angela Morley, Leeds has produced countless trailblazers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. In true Yorkshire fashion, we don't do things by halves. Leeds boasts one of the biggest LGBTQ+ communities in the UK. From The Bookish Type, an independent bookshop, to the Leeds Queer Film Festival in our city centre, represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), Leeds has so much to offer, thanks to our vibrant community.

In my constituency of Leeds North West, many local businesses are celebrating and showing their support with vibrant rainbow flags and Pride-themed window displays, such as Courtyard Creativities in Horsforth. There is so much to celebrate, but there is still work to be done. The community, as we have discussed already—

I am sure more will come—still faces discrimination and last year, sadly, 10,000 hate crimes were reported to West Yorkshire police. I am proud that we are leading the charge, committing to strengthening our hate crimes legislation until everyone is free to live and express themselves without fear.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

8.36 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; happy Pride Month to you, the whole House, my North Cornwall constituency and, indeed, the whole country.

Pride Month is a celebration, but it is also a protest and a call to action—a reminder that the hard-fought rights we won must be defended and that the injustices still endured by many must be tackled, both here and abroad. We have already heard that around 64 countries still criminalise LGBTQ+ plus citizens. As a Liberal Democrat, I am extremely proud to belong to a party that has been at the forefront of the fight for LGBTQ+ equality for decades. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) moved the amendment that repealed the appalling section 28 in 2003, and the Liberal Democrats introduced same-sex marriage while in government, which enabled me and thousands of others to get married on the same basis as everyone else.

But today we face a new wave of hostility, aimed particularly, it seems, at the trans community, which I will come back to. First, I want to focus on one group that is often overlooked: LGBTQ+ veterans. I have been supporting campaigners fighting for recognition, justice and dignity for those who were dismissed from our armed forces simply for being who they are. One of them, Adrian Radford-Shute, lives in my North Cornwall constituency. He was forced out of the Intelligence Corps in 1996 because of his sexuality, and he suffered horrific physical and sexual abuse. The trauma of that experience still lives with him and thousands of others—severe post-traumatic stress disorder and a lifetime of silence, without the recognition of the huge sacrifices that they made for this country.

Adrian and others campaigned relentlessly, and finally, in December, the Government launched the LGBT veterans financial recognition scheme, finally offering some redress to those who are dismissed under the ban. Some, if not most, of those veterans also faced the most horrific cases of rape, abuse and other forms of unforgivable violence and coercion. Few were believed, and many were told that it was their own fault. I fought hard alongside Adrian to ensure that no veteran was left behind, regardless of rank or the circumstances of their dismissal.

After direct engagement with the Ministry of Defence, I was assured that officers forced to resign would be treated equally to those administratively discharged, but the progress in reviewing cases has been abysmally slow. Of around 1,300 applications to the scheme, just 24 have been paid out. At this snail's pace, it will take up to 17 years for all those brave veterans to finally receive their compensation and their closure. This is a national scandal. While other military compensation schemes quite rightly award up to £650,000, the LGBTQ+ veterans

compensation scheme is capped at just 10% of that. As a country we are currently asking ourselves how we can attract more recruits to our armed forces, but we do not treat our veterans with the dignity and respect they deserve. In this Armed Forces Week, I urge the Government to take action immediately to speed up these payments.

Today, two thirds of LGBTQ+ people in the UK still report experiencing abuse or violence because of their sexuality or identity. Trans people in particular face constant attacks. Just a few weeks ago, I witnessed a vile incident with abuse hurled at a trans person walking down a high street in my North Cornwall constituency. In 2023, a Home Office report found that comments by politicians and the media over the previous year could have led to a huge spike in such offences. That brings shame on this House and our entire country.

Ms Creasy: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly powerful and important point. One word we have not yet used in this debate is allyship. One challenge is that too often it falls on to the shoulders of our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers to fight these fights because those of us who would consider ourselves allies maybe have not been as vocal as we have needed to be. Let all of us pledge, allies alike, to join the fight to make sure we live in a country where everybody can be who they want to be without fear.

Ben Maguire: I warmly welcome the hon. Lady's offer of being an ally, and I agree that it is so important to the LGBTQ+ community to have that alliance.

As well as politicians, public figures desperate for attention and relevance such as J. K. Rowling have poisoned the public discourse with attacks on our trans community, all under the false dichotomy that it is not possible to be a true feminist and protect women's rights without attacking and abusing the trans community, a phoney culture war which has left trans people fearful just to be themselves. The tone of this debate has been so un-British. It is much more like the US, where everything is dealt with in extreme absolutes: black and white; right and wrong; no compromise; no respect or compassion for one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. It is horrible to see how hate has been weaponised for political gain.

I know how it feels to think of yourself as broken, to feel like society will never accept you, and to feel ashamed to admit to friends and family who you really are, and that things might be better if you just did not exist at all. Surely in 2025 we can do so much better and make sure that trans people are seen and valued for who they truly are.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to provide this House with an update on what steps he is taking to reassure the trans community that it will continue to receive protections and safe spaces following the Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance, which has left many trans people confused and anxious. When will this Government ban conversion therapy in full? We have heard it from the Minister again, but no specific timetable has been given for both sexuality and gender.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Ben Maguire: I invite the Minister to give way if he can tell us the timetable for that.

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Gentleman is giving way to me, but, yes, I said that it would be in this Session of Parliament, which is a pretty clear timeline.

Ben Maguire: I thank the Minister for the intervention, but that is rather vague considering that we have many years left of this Parliament.

Chris Bryant: I said it would be in this Session of Parliament, not this Parliament.

Ben Maguire: Moving on then, as that has answered my question—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it was an excellent answer.

What steps are the Government taking to reduce the time that LGBTQ+ veterans are having to wait for their financial redress applications? I look forward to hearing an update on that later on. Finally, what action are the Government taking to address disproportionate rates of mental ill health and homelessness among the LGBTQ+ community? The Minister referred to a review, which I believe is to be chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, but we really do need urgent action now.

Let's celebrate Pride Month while remembering that the fight for LGBTQ+ rights is far from over. The Liberal Democrats will continue to lead it, and we will not stop until everyone is free to live as their true selves, without fear and without apology.

8.44 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): Picking up from what the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) said about delays in the process of payments to those dismissed from the armed forces, that experience of delay has been raised with me by my constituent, Paul, who I thank for giving me permission to discuss his story today.

Paul loved music from an early age and, at 15, he auditioned to join the Army as a bandsman and passed with flying colours. Later that year, still not yet 16, he did his three-month basic Army training in Aberdeen. It was at that time that he realised he was gay, and his time in the Army became unnecessarily complex and stressful for him as he had to hide his true self.

In the summer of 1988, while rehearsing for the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, he was taken aside by the military police. Paul was arrested in front of the entire regimental band and the other bands on parade. He was taken to Edinburgh castle, where the special investigation branch interrogated him for hours. He did not know what to do, so he just denied everything. He was then imprisoned for a week. During that time, he was humiliated and called degrading names. He was hosed down instead of being allowed to wash, and made to do push-ups while a corporal pushed on his back so hard with his drill boots that blood seeped through Paul's vest. His meals were spat on and defecated in, and when he refused to eat them, they were thrown at him. He was repeatedly asked intrusive, aggressive and detailed questions about his sexual activity. During his time in jail, he was allowed one phone call, which he used to call his mother, who told him to admit that he was gay. Under the sustained pressure from the interrogation and with the advice of his mother, he admitted he was gay and he was dismissed from the Army.

[*Martin Rhodes*]

In 2017, Paul suffered a mental breakdown. His therapist believed that Paul's Army experience and flashbacks contributed to that breakdown. Paul has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his Army experiences. We owe it to Paul and all the other LGBT+ veterans that applications for financial payments are processed as quickly as possible and with as little intrusion as possible.

My constituent and many other veterans are waiting for justice. I urge colleagues across the House to give their support to the Fighting With Pride campaign on this issue. In Armed Forces Week, let us remember the thousands of military personnel whose service was cut short by dismissal because of their sexuality. Finally, I call on the Government to redouble their efforts to rectify this historic injustice by delivering financial reparations in as timely and considerate a manner as possible.

8.47 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I am proud to speak in today's debate on Pride Month; it is the first time I have done so. I also enjoy the distinction of being the first straight man to become a member of LGBT Conservatives, which involved a special resolution to approve my membership. Hopefully that will be the first and last constitutional conundrum for which I am responsible in my political career.

Today, I want to speak of my incredible pride that, more than 10 years ago, a Conservative coalition Government passed legislation to legalise same-sex marriage. Today, around 167,000 people are living in same-sex marriages, with all the happiness, challenges and life-enriching complexity that involves. I am proud of that because the Conservative party is the party of family, and the party of rights and duties, freedoms and responsibilities—the freedom for people to love whoever they choose, and the freedom to honour that love by making a lifelong commitment to another person, with all the responsibilities for mutual care, support and home building that entails.

Children enjoy the best outcomes when they are raised in stable, loving homes. While marriage is not always a guarantee of stability, it is a good indicator and supporter of it. Data from the UK longitudinal household survey shows that cohabiting parents were 3.4 times more likely to split up during any given one-year period compared with married parents, across income groups. The benefits of making a commitment and raising a family are not just for the children of those families. Taking on family responsibilities gives people meaning and purpose, making them more productive as they work to put the people they have taken responsibility for ahead of themselves.

In saying this, I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the single parents and cohabiting couples, both same sex and heterosexual, who do a heroic job every day for their families. Quite frankly, as a married parent myself, I do not know how single parents manage it and I pay tribute to them. All parents should be acknowledged and appreciated for the daily acts of care and sacrifice that they make for their children—our future. Just because other models can and do work, we should not stop striving to support the institution of marriage as

the foundational building block of our society. Society benefits from stable families where children can be supported to thrive and become citizens who contribute to not only their family lives, but their communities.

I am pleased and proud to belong to a party that championed the rights of same-sex marriage and brought it into law. Our laws and policies should incentivise commitment to family life for all couples, regardless of sexuality. I am proud that because of decisions in this place, so many people can marry the person they love today.

8.50 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Minister—I had no idea that he was a practising vicar or that he liked musicals, so I have finally found that out.

I am proud to rise to contribute to this important and timely debate on Pride Month. I associate myself with comments made by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), and others from across different parties in this House to reflect on and celebrate the contributions of LGBT+ people throughout our history. The community is rich and contributes to every part of our society, from the sciences to the arts and from fashion, of course, to technology, media and often politics. We uphold the principle that a truly fair and open society is one in which everyone can thrive, regardless of who they are or who they love. That openness, creativity, innovation and justice are a part of our country—the very fabric of our country—and this month is a celebration of some of the key talent within it.

Every June, we come together to celebrate Pride Month. That has not come in a world without challenges and remembrance for those who have come before us. We have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go, especially as local councils in some areas are banning flags. Prides are being denied support across the country, and some elected representatives, many of whom sadly are not here, oppose equal marriages and come out with sometimes questionable remarks.

I believe that all of us are better when we celebrate each other's successes, and I want to give special recognition to my local Medway Pride, run by Hilary Cooke, which has been a force for good in our local community and which has supported local businesses through its activities in securing thousands of people to visit Rochester castle. I will also contribute and celebrate the fact that local councils can do so much to improve our vibrant spaces, including our local Medway council.

Pride began as a protest, and that spirit of resistance still matters. I completely agree with colleagues that we need to continue to challenge whatever Government, be it my own Labour Government or a Government from across the aisle, on whether we will get trans conversion practices banned. I am really glad to hear and welcome the statement today that that is happening over the course of this Parliament.

Let us recommit as lawmakers, neighbours and allies not just in words, but in policy, investment and principle to building a country where every person feels seen, safe and supported—a country where love is never criminalised, identity is never erased and no one is ever made to feel ashamed about who they are. Happy Pride, Medway, and happy Pride, Parliament.

8.53 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I will be brief, given the time limit that has been set. I must say I was slightly disappointed that there were not more musical numbers and puns from the Minister in his speech at the start—I am sure we will get some later.

I am really proud to represent Harrogate and Knaresborough. At the moment, Knaresborough High Street is adorned with flags celebrating Pride, and I know that our towns are incredibly tolerant and open places. Earlier this year, we had a particular incident with a candidate from the Conservatives standing in the local elections who posted really quite grim and disgusting tweets. I am really pleased that our towns rejected that at the ballot box. Harrogate used to have a Pride parade, but it stopped when the pandemic came along. I really hope that me and the Harrogate Pride organisation can get that up and running in due course.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I did not plan on intervening, but we had a hustings during the election, and one of the questions was about the upcoming Sherborne Pride. Unfortunately, I was amazed that even in this day and age there was not unanimous support for a Sherborne Pride. My first act as an MP was to go to the inaugural Sherborne Pride, and we have the second one coming up in a couple of weeks. Does my hon. Friend believe that the importance of Pride is showing inclusion for everybody?

Tom Gordon: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I completely agree with him. I am amazed that in this day and age, there are still places in which we dispute whether or not we should fly flags or have Pride celebrations. In my view, that is not British.

I want to briefly mention that in the days following the Supreme Court ruling, I had a trans constituent come into my office. She impressed upon me that her situation had fundamentally changed: she was worried about her rights, about being challenged in toilets, and that the Supreme Court's decision ushered in a new era of uncertainty for trans people. I put on the record my support for the trans community, as Members from across this House who are present in the Chamber today have already done. However, we are in uncertain times, and it is incumbent on us all to make sure we stand up for the entire LGBT community. While I, too, was disappointed that political parties were banned from attending Pride in many cities this year, I understand why organisers have come to that conclusion. It is incumbent on all political parties to do better, and if we are honest, all parties have issues when it comes to LGBT rights. We should all try to make sure that we do much better.

As the Minister said, coming out is not a one-off event. I was fortunate enough that when I was at school, I never got bullied—my friend James might have punched anyone if they had taken issue with it.

Chris Bryant: We are not in favour of that, either.

Tom Gordon: We are not in favour of it, no, but it does help to have the rugby boys on your side. One comment was made after I actually did come out in the last year of high school. I can remember someone chuntering from the back of the classroom, going, “Oh,

Tom's gay!” I turned around and went, “Yes, and?” That was the end of it, so even in an ex-mining town such as the one I am originally from, people are much more tolerant than you would perhaps expect.

A disproportionate number of people who are LGBT are still impacted by hate crime, which is something that worries me in light of the hostility and, in particular, the rhetoric online. The most online abuse I have received has been when I have spoken up for trans constituents, which I am sure is an experience that many people across this House share. That is a damning reflection of how people seek to whip up hate and divide people, when we should be looking to come together.

The final thing I wanted to do was to plug the charity of the constituent who came to me to speak about being a trans woman. I had not heard of it before, but it is called Nutshell, and it offers talking therapies and counselling—not for trans people themselves, but for the families of trans people, who can often feel particular frustrations with finding out that one of their loved ones is trans. It is a holistic approach, and I endorse what that charity does.

I think I came out in this place in my maiden speech when I mentioned Eurovision. I will continue our campaign to make sure we get Eurovision back in Harrogate, and I hope the Minister will join me in that campaign.

8.57 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I rise with personal pride as Macclesfield's first openly gay Member of Parliament, and with real pride at how far Macclesfield and the country have come over the years. I grew up in the Macclesfield constituency, and if anyone had told me back then that we would have our own Pride, I would never have believed them. People lining the streets in celebration and solidarity is a wonderful thing to see, and I know Members across the House have the same experience in their area. It is joyful and defiant, but as the Minister and others have said, it is also political. It is a protest as much as it is a party—a refusal to accept that anyone should be ashamed of who they are.

That matters because, as Members have said—or, I am sure, will say—we have seen a shocking rise in homophobic and transphobic hate crimes over past years. That is why I was proud to support the amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), to make those hate crimes aggravated offences treated with the seriousness they deserve. Hate has no place on our streets, in our schools or in our politics, but we have seen that hate even in Macclesfield. Just recently, anti-LGBT posters appeared around the town—nasty, cowardly attempts to intimidate and divide—but just as quickly as they went up, they were taken down. They were taken down by neighbours, by volunteers, and by people who simply refused to let that kind of poison define our community. In their place came messages of love, solidarity and inclusion. That is the Macclesfield I know and am incredibly proud to represent.

We cannot ignore the wider context. The UK has dropped dramatically in the ILGA-Europe rankings for LGBT+ rights, which is a signal that we are no longer the standard bearer we once were. The recent Supreme Court decision has created confusion and concern among

[Tim Roca]

the trans community. People are left asking what rights they can rely on and whether the protections they thought they had still apply. That uncertainty feeds fear, and fear is something that no one should have to live with simply because of who they are. We must all redouble our efforts to uphold equality in law and in life. I welcome the statement earlier about trans conversion practices and the ban on it coming soon.

Progress is not permanent; it has to be protected, nurtured and renewed. The same is true with equality. When we stop fighting for it, we risk losing it. These can be difficult times, but I am an optimist and I remain hopeful, because I have seen the resilience of our community. I have seen it in Macclesfield with the rainbow flags flying from shop windows, and I know that people across this House will stand with the LGBT+ community to say loudly and clearly that nobody should be made to feel afraid, ashamed or excluded because of who they are or who they love.

9 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Happy Pride to everyone in Aberdeen, in Scotland and in every part of these islands. The world is a pretty scary place right now in a huge number of ways. As the Minister said, LGBT people are normal just like the rest of us, and they are similarly feeling scared about the state of the world, not least in the wake of the Supreme Court decision and the impact that is having on trans people. The Minister said:

“Our hard-won freedoms are never won in perpetuity”,

and it is the case that trans people’s rights—their right to a private life, and their right to human rights—have been rolled back as a result of this reinterpretation of the Equality Act 2010. People are less able to live their lives with the freedom they should be able to have, and the Government need to do something about that.

People keep using the word “clarity” about the EHRC guidance, but there is no way that it provides that. It requires trans people regularly to out themselves. They may still have protection on the basis of gender reassignment, but trans women no longer have protection as women as a result of this reinterpretation of the Equality Act, and that is not the way it should be. All I can say to my trans constituents and people across the United Kingdom is that I am sorry; we need to get this sorted and we need to keep fighting.

On the decision taken by a number of Pride organisations, we have no entitlement to be there. There is no entitlement for political parties to be allowed to take part in Pride. For all that that we have done great things 50 years ago, 25 years ago, five years ago or two years ago—for example, there were the changes with the recourse provided to LGBT veterans—that does not mean that we should not be held to account for our lack of action, for failing to protect trans people properly or for the increase in hate crimes that we are seeing. It is absolutely right that Pride organisations should be able to use their voice to say to every one of us in this House, “You are not doing good enough. You need to do better. We need you to do more in order to protect the community.” If that is the way they choose to use their voice, they should absolutely go for it.

I took part in our Pride in Aberdeen, as I have done on many occasions, including the first one 25 years ago. I marched with the crowd, as I always do in the Pride parade—not with Out for Independence, but with all the people I represent. It is the case that every one of us in this place needs to do better. We need to improve lives for our trans constituents. We need to fight this rolling back of rights, because people are terrified, and they are right to be pretty scared right now.

9.3 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Today we raise a toast to Pride, and in so doing, we raise a toast to nothing less than life. We also recommit to liberation—the liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. There is a particular quotation that I like, which is this:

“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality...for another world.”

José Muñoz wrote that, and right now we should be insisting on that new world harder than ever.

When Pride is about liberation, it is not merely about the liberation of LGBT+ people; it is about the liberation of all. Although Pride is primarily of, by and for the people who dance under the same rainbow, it is also about liberation from prejudice. When LGBT+ people are safe, society is safe.

My life as a gay man was enhanced by the last Labour Government sweeping away the 1980s and early 1990s—the discriminatory legislation that fostered a hostile environment for LGBT+ people—but that progress has stalled. The introduction of equal marriage feels a very long time ago. Right now, in this place, we must pass the laws that LGBT+ people are demanding and that they need, so that no one is punished for being who they are or harmed for loving who they love.

We know the harms of inaction, and we know the harms of a slowness to act. Even if people are not physically attacked or verbally insulted—but they will be—younger people may grow up with the feeling that they are unworthy of love. They may grow up with the expectation never to love, nor to trust it when it appears. They may grow up without the ability to form relationships. As ever, 1980s pop music says it best:

“When I look back upon my life
It’s always with a sense of shame
I’ve always been the one to blame
For everything I long to do
No matter when or where or who
Has one thing in common too
It’s a sin.”

That speaks so beautifully about the ugliness of the shame that LGBT+ people are made to feel.

I commend our Government for taking significant steps to support LGBT+ veterans, and for announcing that they would make strands of hate crime targeted at disabled and LGBT+ people an aggravated offence. I was proud to sponsor an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), and I was pleased to hear the Minister speak about the progress of our Government in implementing our manifesto commitment to bring forward a truly trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban and to modernise, simplify and reform the intrusive and outdated gender recognition law and introduce a new process.

I only have a few seconds left, so I will close by saying this: let this Pride month be the spur that drives us on, not in another decade but in the rest of this decade, and not in another Parliament but in what I hope will be the first moments of a new, progressive Parliament.

9.7 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Let me start by wishing a happy Pride Month to members of the LGBTQ+ community on Ynys Môn and beyond.

Pride Month is, of course, a time for celebration, a time to reflect on the vital contributions of members of the LGBTQ+ community to our society, and a time to renew our conviction that everyone deserves to love and live freely and openly, without the threat of bigotry. But this Pride Month is also a time of deep unease for many members of the community; in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling on sex and gender in the Equality Act 2010 and the ensuing interim guidance published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, many trans people are living in fear of what the future holds.

The words of the trailblazing Welsh trans author Jan Morris seem particularly pertinent today. She found fame in 1953 as the sole reporter on the successful British Everest expedition, and became a prolific historian and travel writer. In her groundbreaking 1974 autobiography, she wrote:

"I never did think that my own conundrum was a matter either of science or of social convention...What was important was the liberty of us all to live as we wished to live, to love however we wanted to love, and to know ourselves, however peculiar, disconcerting or unclassifiable, at one with the gods and angels."

It is, of course, in this place that many of the landmark decisions on allowing people to live and love freely have taken place, but work remains to create a society that is fairer and more inclusive for all. One of my constituents is an LGBTQ+ veteran, discharged from the military owing to his sexuality—before 2000, when the ban on open service of LGBTQ+ people was lifted. The late Lord Etherton reported on a number of recommendations in 2023 to provide redress for the injustice, but shockingly, in response to more than 1,000 applications, only 24 payments had been made as at 21 May this year. I urge the Government to do all they can to expedite the process, and to apologise formally for this historic wrong.

This month we rightly reflect on the huge strides forward that have made our society a more open and inclusive place for the LGBTQ+ community, but as the injustices facing the trans community and LGBT veterans demonstrate, we must redouble our efforts to build a society in which everyone has the liberty to live as they wish. Let us all recommit ourselves to that work together.

9.10 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I draw Members to my declarations of interest.

As many of us know, the Pride movement started with the Stonewall riots in 1969, but some people now see Pride as a party. It certainly did not start that way, and for many of us it is still a protest and will continue to be so until we genuinely do not need Pride anymore. My Pride journey started as a bystander, until I became a councillor in 2018, when somebody decided to post literature all around the town of Basildon, telling the LGBT community to repent. Instead of getting angry, we organised Basildon mini-Pride within two weeks and

showed that we were here to stay. It turned into a full-on Pride that is still going strong, with a programme of events throughout the year as part of the Basildon Pride Everyday programme. I am proud to still be chair of trustees for that Pride, and thank all its members and the volunteers who contribute to its work.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): May I celebrate my wonderful hon. Friend for his role in founding Basildon Pride? Will he join me in commending York Pride and its 17,000 visitors for celebrating the wonderful LGBTQ+ community that we have in York? Will he also join me in condemning any abuse, harassment or intimidation—at any Pride event—that is driven by who someone is, who they love or what they believe?

David Burton-Sampson: Absolutely. I celebrate York Pride, and I thank its organisers for what they contribute. We stand up against discrimination at Pride events and outside; it is unacceptable.

I have to mention my team at Southend Pride, which came into being the year before Basildon Pride. They, too, put on an annual festival and events throughout the year, including a winter Pride. I try to work closely with Southend Pride, and today I recommit my dedication to supporting it and the LGBTQ+ community in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea. I thank the whole team for their dedication: Cath, Sam, Louis, Yvonne, Amber and everyone else involved.

We have to face some uncomfortable truths. Prides around the country are folding and cancelling this year, and many are struggling to get the funding that they usually have, from big events like Liverpool Pride to those in Southampton and Plymouth. The challenges around diversity, equity and inclusion, and the changing attitudes of companies—especially those with American parents—do not help. The attitude that "Prides are no longer needed, because it's all sorted" also does not help. I can tell the House that Prides are needed now more than ever. Personally, I know that I am not equal: I cannot comfortably walk along the street holding my partner's hand or giving my partner a kiss. In the best case, I will get stares; in the worst case, I will get verbal or physical abuse. That is a fact—it is how it is today—so I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) has brought forward measures to make LGBT hate crime an aggravated offence.

We have heard all about the impact that the Supreme Court ruling has had on trans people, who need our allyship more than ever. They need guidance issued that truly supports the fact that they, too, are covered by the protections in the Equality Act 2010. In recent years I have been working closely with an organisation called TransLucent, whose chief executive officer, Steph, is in the Gallery today. It is a great organisation that positively advocates for the trans community, and it is trying to take the heat out of the debate and make sure that trans people are looked after and respected.

I will continue to stand as a trans ally, and I know many of my Labour colleagues will, too. I encourage Prides across the movement to keep engaging with us and challenging us, but do not shut us out. Challenge us, and we are here to help. They have our commitment that we will make sure that trans people and the LGBTQ+ community are going to be treated as equals in this country.

9.14 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): As a straight man, I cannot speak from personal experience about the prejudice that LGBTQIA+ people have been the victim of, nor have I been a coalminer and experienced the feeling of having the source of my livelihood snatched away. However, in this Pride Month debate, I wish to share with the House a collaboration that emphasises the importance of allyship and—something this House does not hear nearly enough about—class solidarity.

This collaboration was between the London-based activist group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners and the mining community of the Dulais valley in south Wales during the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985. Co-founders of the LGSM, Mark Ashton and Mike Jackson, were inspired to combine gay rights activism with the labour movement after attending a talk by a striking miner. This duo brought collection buckets to the London Lesbian and Gay Pride march in June 1984 to support the miners and their families who were affected by the financial hardship caused by the strike.

The LGSM was subsequently set up to officially declare that members of the gay rights movement supported the striking miners, because the LGSM strongly believed that solidarity between the working classes was essential, as all of them would be suppressed if the Thatcher Government succeeded in weakening the National Union of Mineworkers and the wider trade union movement. Indeed, the miners and the LGSM shared very similar experiences and common ground, as both were targeted and vilified by a right-wing media, police brutality and the Government of the day. Attitudes towards the gay community soon began to change in the mining community. The LGSM visited south Wales, with the mining communities reciprocating the solidarity and friendship shown to them by the LGSM.

Chris Bryant: I just want to correct one thing in the film “Pride”, which is the plot my hon. Friend is referring to. The south Wales valley mining community—I represent the Rhondda and Ogmore—is portrayed as openly hostile to the lesbians and gays and, in fact, bisexuals who came down to support their cause. That was far from true; there was almost unanimous support for them.

Brian Leishman: I very much thank the Minister for that correction—I appreciate the intervention—and for subtly dropping in my mispronunciation of south Wales.

By the end of the strike, the LGSM had raised over £20,000. As the Welsh mining communities had made the Londoners feel so welcome, the LGSM organised a return visit, with a fundraiser called “Pits and Perverts” held at the Electric Ballroom in Camden. Despite the defeat of the mining industry, south Wales miners and their families marched alongside the LGSM at a Pride march in London the following year. At the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, this allyship was much needed. On 11 February 1987, LGSM founder Mark Ashton died of an AIDS-related illness, and his funeral was attended by many of the miners whom he had supported through the LGSM.

In a wider context, the NUM acknowledged the support shown by the gay community during the strike when the union called for gay equality at the 1985 Labour

party conference and Trades Union Congress. In addition, the NUM backed the campaign against the hateful and harmful section 28, which was passed in 1988 by the Conservative Government. Altogether, the collaboration of those in the gay rights movement and the labour movement highlights the shared struggle and solidarity across communities bounded by oppressions and class interests.

Our labour movement must therefore show unwavering support to those in the LGBTQIA+ community, many of whom will march this summer to demand equality and protest against the rise in homophobia and transphobia. As the gays and lesbians and the miners showed in the 1980s, when two very different communities come under attack from prejudice and form an unlikely alliance to fight for what is right in the face of persecution, then understanding, kindness, respect and solidarity happen, and those emotions always win.

9.19 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): In 1986, I went to my first ever Pride. It is hard to believe, but that was nearly 40 years ago. I remember being struck by how much of a celebration and a protest it was. I remember how important it was to be visible. I felt proud of who I was for the first time. I hope people feel that this year when they attend their first Pride event. I could not have predicted what was to happen just two years later.

In 1988, section 28 was enacted. That year, I attended Pride alongside many angry and distraught friends. I remember section 28 vividly. It was more than a law: it was an attack on the right of people like me to live openly. It stigmatised lesbians, gays and bisexual people. It pushed us out of public life. I got into politics to fight that cruel law and everything it represented. The 1988 Pride was a protest. It was a reminder that LGBT people have always and will always exist, and we deserve to live our lives publicly and with dignity. My friends and I walked down the streets of London and made sure we were heard. We refused to be silent.

This Labour Government have pledged to ban conversion therapy. Last week in the House, I encouraged the Government to fulfil their manifesto commitment. I made the case for aggravated offences to be treated the same for all people, regardless of what kind of hate it is. All hate should be treated the same. I was proud to see our Government reaffirm that that would be the case. Britain is a country that will not tolerate hate. All hatred is equal and all those who commit vile acts of hatred will face the same grave consequences.

Today, I am concerned that the progress made by previous Labour Governments has been eroded. We are seeing rising transphobia everywhere and I, for one, will not stand for it. Pride flags are being taken down at county halls, and only last year an advertisement for my local Pride on social media was met with the response, “Gas the lot of them.” It is a reminder to all of us this Pride Month that we must stand together with trans people and reject transphobia with the same anger and passion that we rejected homophobia all those years ago. I will continue to stand proudly with all members of the LGBT community and our allies this Pride Month as we celebrate and protest.

9.22 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): In the words of the organisation Stonewall:

“Pride Month 2025 is grounded in this year’s powerful theme, activism and social change. It’s a reminder of how far the LGBTIQ+ community has come and how much work still needs to be done.”

I would like to thank Stonewall, Trans+ Solidarity Alliance and Rainbow Migration for their vital work, which I have relied on in understanding the challenging issues facing the LGBT+ community. Rainbow Migration in particular supports LGBT+ people through the asylum and immigration system. Its work is pivotal to a number of constituents of mine who have fled their country and identify as LGBT+. They are seeking support in the UK, where they can feel like their true selves.

Rainbow Migration has asked Home Office Ministers to remove blanket inadmissibility provisions for so-called “safe states” such as Albania, Georgia and India. For example, Noah, a gay Georgian and former service user of Rainbow Migration, had the following lived experience of a “safe state”. Noah fled homophobic persecution in Georgia. He was extremely fearful of being sent back there, saying that he would rather take his own life than go back and face persecution. He said:

“No one can know that you are gay in Georgia. If people do, homophobic people will try to attack you. Either with words, or they’ll try to beat you.”

Noah was physically attacked by family members. He was forced to stay in a hospital for people with mental health issues and had an exorcism performed on him at church. Thankfully, he was granted refugee status due to the risk of harm, but he is deeply concerned about Georgia’s designation as safe. He says:

“Georgia cannot be considered a safe country. They don’t know what is going on in Georgia—how the LGBT people are living there. They cannot understand. The last time that Pride took place, the television operator was killed. Who will come and say Georgia is a safe country after that? If you’re gay, your two options are either hospital or exorcism.”

How can we in this country describe Georgia as safe for LGBT people?

In 1997, under the last Labour Government, the first positive recognition of same-sex relationships in UK law was introduced for migrants. The unmarried partners concession made it possible for same-sex couples to make an application for a partner of a British citizen to remain in the UK if they had lived together for four years. It paved the way for greater legislative equality for same-sex couples, and it was the first time same-sex relationships were recognised positively in British law.

Being an ally is about reflecting on how to contribute to lasting social change and acting on that reflection, so I agree with Rainbow Migration in calling for an asylum and immigration system that treats LGBT people with dignity.

Unfortunately, the UK’s current legal framework for dealing with inequality and discrimination is creaking under the weight of the culture wars. Legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998, which were designed to protect the most marginal and vulnerable in society, have been weaponised by those who seek to promote exclusion and social division, with this year’s Supreme Court ruling and the subsequent guidance by the EHRC causing widespread fear among the trans community.

At a time of rising discrimination, the UK should reassert its commitment to the value of equality, instead of creating a set of contested rights that dehumanise the most marginalised. It can do this in a powerful way by signing and ratifying protocol 12 to the European convention on human rights, which creates a general prohibition on discrimination. The UK is one of only nine countries in the Council of Europe not to have signed protocol 12. Everyone in the UK would benefit from access to the human right of the general prohibition on discrimination, including LGBTIQ+ people.

9.25 pm

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): I will start by answering the question that is so often asked, first under the breath, and then in the dark corners of the internet, and now, in some places, in the unfortunate mainstream: why do we have Pride? Why do we need Pride? The answer is that for far too many people, even in the Britain of 2025—one of the greatest places in the world to be LGBT, I believe—being yourself and being who you are feels like a trial and a struggle, and it is just not good enough. We need it because too many LGBT people are attacked, abused or dismissed because of their sexuality, and because even in our free country, too many LGBT people have to constantly check that they are not behaving in too gay a fashion in order to avoid inciting anyone or giving too much away for their own safety, or even due to fears of being othered. We need it because too many LGBT people are homeless and too many LGBT adults are experiencing mental health conditions or suffering from drug or alcohol abuse or poverty as a result of their sexuality. It looks like a parade and a party on the street, but Pride is about acknowledging that struggle—the struggle for respect and equality, and to breathe as freely as everyone else.

The history of Pride is always a reminder that so many have come before us, and that they endured not just the harassment, but, in this country, the criminalisation, the chemical castration, the shaming, the ostracisation, the bullying and names and the punching and spitting—as I was spat at once, on Manchester’s Canal Street. It is a reminder of those who were killed or not cared for during the AIDS epidemic—those who were left to die, considered diseased or crazed. It is on those brave shoulders that openly gay LGB and T people like me stand in 2025. I will say now that transgender people deserve our respect and support, and that I believe in LGB with the T.

Sure, we have come a long way. Some places let people marry who they love, and lots more folks understand the beautiful umbrella that exists within our community. However, the truth is that it is not the same everywhere, and it can change fast, as the Minister said. There are still many countries where someone being who they are can land them in jail or condemn them to death.

Even here in the UK, both the Conservative candidate for my constituency and I had our sexuality paraded around, commented on and weaponised by other candidates at last year’s election, as if it were a slight on our character. I said to my now constituents at the election, “I am who I am. Dislike me for my politics and my opinions, but do not disengage because of who I love. By the way, as much as I am going door to door, I’m not trying to convert anyone, although we are a very broad church.” I am proud that in all the communities in my

[*Oliver Ryan*]

constituency, respect and tolerance found more of a home than hate. I say to my constituents in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, from all creeds and castes, I am here to represent you as much as anyone else.

Tim Roca: My hon. Friend has worked very hard on the issue of compensation for LGBT veterans because of the disgraceful way they were treated by the British state, which has been raised at various points this evening. I wonder whether he would comment more on that and on Lord Etherton's landmark report.

Oliver Ryan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely will. One of the first experiences I had as an MP was being approached by a constituent, Steven, whom I had not met during the election campaign, and who has now received compensation for his disgraceful treatment when he was a member of the armed forces. I met Lord Etherton during that time and we had an Adjournment debate. It was a much longer story, and I came in right at the end of it, as so many MPs do, but I was proud to have met him and experienced the work he had put into representing those men and women who had served our country so valiantly and had been so harshly let down.

This month is the chance for us to be with our people—the people who accept us, who welcome us and who care. Wearing a lanyard is not a political statement; it is a statement of respect. Raising a rainbow flag on a building is not a political statement—

Rachel Taylor: I just want to say how proud I am that my hon. Friend is here in this Chamber as an LGBT MP. Does he share my pride in everyone who is here taking part in the debate this evening?

Oliver Ryan: Absolutely. I am so proud of my hon. Friend and everybody else who has contributed to the debate, whether LGBT or an ally. I stand here as an openly gay man, but allies have talked about films—“Pride” and things—that they have seen. It is important for us all to be here and to recognise Pride, and I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

Wearing a lanyard or putting a flag on a building is not a political statement; it is a sign of respect. Saying that you are an ally or that you just plain do not care either way, but you support people to live how they want to live, is not a political statement; it is a statement of respect. Respect is what we should be about in this country. It is a very British thing, whatever our side or our politics, and I quite like that about the country that we live in.

Life is more than black and white; it is filled with wonderful colours. Above all, there is something quite powerful in saying, “This is me and I am proud of it.” That joy pushes back against all the shame and silence that we have faced over the years, and that we still face now. As long as anyone feels the need to hide who they are, this month will be needed. Happy Pride month to people in the Chamber and people in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield.

9.31 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I had not intended to say what I am about to say, before the bit that I did intend to say, but, inspired by the Minister's comment that coming out matters, I thought I would use this very public forum to say that I am a bisexual woman. Some people know; some do not. I do not wear it like a badge any more than I would expect a heterosexual person to walk around saying, “Hey, guess what, I'm attracted to men”—or women, depending what gender they are, or otherwise.

The reason that I feel compelled to mention that publicly, before I get on to the good bit of my speech—please, somebody, intervene on me—is that I held back on showing my support for the LGBTQ+ community on my Facebook page for fear of retribution ahead of the local elections, when a certain party got into power at Derbyshire county council. Trying to appease that kind of support did not win any votes, so after that happened, I doubled down on what I believe in and who I am. I posted in support of the Day Against Transphobia, Biphobia and Homophobia, and I said, “If you dare make a negative comment, or anything alluding to one, such as, ‘What is a woman?’, you will be blocked from my page, because there's falling on the right side of history and there's falling on the wrong side of history, and you are wrong.”

Kirsty Blackman: I congratulate the hon. Member on taking this opportunity to say what she has said. It is not easy to say something like that in a Chamber like this. Having done something similar not that long ago, I absolutely respect her, and I join her in celebrating Pride month.

Chris Bryant: And have an extra minute.

Samantha Niblett: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention—and for giving me an extra minute, in which I would like to talk about my community.

I have one main hope about saying what I have just said and being openly bisexual. My daughter is so straight—it is so disappointing—[*Laughter.*] But if there are girls and women in South Derbyshire and across the country who think, “Oh God, it is okay to love a woman, to kiss a woman, to be intimate with a woman—and she's said it, so it's okay that I do,” then good. I say to them: take that comfort, and if you want to talk to me about it, please feel free to reach out.

Now I am going to talk about my constituency. It is an honour to speak in this important debate on Pride, not just as the Member of Parliament for South Derbyshire but as someone who has seen at first hand the power of community when it chooses inclusion over exclusion and love over fear. This past Saturday, I had the privilege of attending a truly fantastic Pride event at the Collective Hub in Swadlincote. The Collective Hub is a brilliant community space that fosters creativity, belonging and support for people of all ages. The Pride celebration it hosted was testament to everything that makes our community proud: diversity, resilience and joy. I want to pay particular tribute to Mikey, who leads the hub with passion, care and unwavering dedication. His work does not go unnoticed. He and all those who supported the event created a safe and welcoming space.

Tom Gordon: On the point the hon. Lady makes about her constituents, the length and breadth of this country is filled by people who do their bit and go above and beyond. Will the hon. Lady join me in congratulating the people in my constituency who do exactly that?

Samantha Niblett: I absolutely join the hon. Member in thanking the people in his constituency who do the same.

Mikey's work does not go unnoticed. He and all those who supported the event created a safe, welcoming space for LGBTQ+ people in South Derbyshire to be visible, celebrated and, perhaps most importantly, to be themselves.

Amid the colour and celebration, we must recognise a deeper undercurrent of concern, particularly among our transgender constituents. I have heard directly from individuals who are frightened about the tone of national conversations surrounding their rights, safety and dignity. These are not abstract issues; these are people in our towns and villages—our neighbours, friends and family members. They deserve the same rights, respect and freedoms as anyone else.

David Burton-Sampson: I agree with what my hon. Friend is saying; these are normal people in our communities. Does she agree that it is really important that we are allies of these people and that we stand with them?

Samantha Niblett: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that allyship is important. I am the proud mum to a very disappointingly straight daughter, and she is a brilliant ally. I hope that the next generation will continue to be exactly like that and will create the atmosphere that is needed to support those who we stand side-by-side with.

In South Derbyshire, I believe the message is clear: we want inclusion, not exclusion. We want a society where someone being themselves is not a political act but simply a human one. Pride is not just about celebration; it is about commitment—commitment to equality, justice and standing up for those whose voices have too often been marginalised.

Let us remember that Pride began as a protest. It is a reminder that the freedoms we now celebrate were hard-won and must be protected, not rolled back. In the face of rising hostility and misinformation, we in this House have a duty to lead with compassion and courage. To the LGBTQ+ community in South Derbyshire, we see you, we hear you, and we stand with you.

9.37 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in celebration of Pride Month and to have listened to all hon. Members. I want to recognise the outstanding contributions of individuals and organisations in Portsmouth North who work tirelessly to support our LGBTQ+ community and who worked hard to ensure that we had a UK Pride this year. I thank the dedicated team at Pompey Pride, whose vibrant events and year-round advocacy promote inclusivity and visibility; the incredible support provided by the Portsmouth LGBTQ+ community forum; TransLucent, which my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) has already praised;

the YOU Trust, which offers specialist help to LGBT people facing homelessness or domestic abuse; and the fantastic Fight with Pride, a military charity leading a great campaign.

Our city should stand proud of our LGBT community, as I stand in this place a proud ally of them. Schools and institutions such as the University of Portsmouth and Portsmouth college proudly continue to foster inclusivity, and local businesses, trade unions and the city council are demonstrating leadership by championing equality in the workplace. Pride is not just a celebration but a commitment to dignity, respect and human rights, which in a sometimes hostile world we must continue to push for all.

I am proud of the actions of this Government and other Governments, both historically and currently. I am proud of the changes to bring about the equal age of consent, the repeal of section 28, the Civil Partnership Act 2004, the commitment to banning conversion therapy and strengthening hate crime protections, and the commitment to implementing Lord Etherton's report.

I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their combined and positive words in speaking up on behalf of our trans community, who are at this moment feeling very fragile and facing a very difficult world. I commend and want to thank all in Portsmouth North who through their actions are seeking to make our city of Portsmouth more open, compassionate, equal and a beautiful place for all to live. When we think about Pride and the need to still have Pride in 2025 in the UK, we must remember that love should not be a limitation but our greatest freedom, because in embracing who we are, we help the world become more authentic and more compassionate. In a world where this is not always possible, we must all continue to stand together, speak up and speak out until we are all truly free to love who we want.

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

9.39 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I thank the many hon. Members in the Chamber for their swift and heartfelt contributions; everybody contributed brilliantly. I also wish everyone a very happy Pride Month, including my constituents in East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages.

The ethos of the Conservatives is exactly about meaningful change and putting the individual at the centre of policymaking. It is the Conservative party that is about freedom to be who you are. We are here to campaign for you and to support you, for a better future for you and everyone. As we have heard this evening, it is about respect, love and care for all that matters.

I have quoted before—this has stuck with me—the words of my friend and former colleague Elliot Colburn. In a previous debate, he said:

“LGBT+ people have always existed; we did not just pop out of the ground in the 1960s and 1970s and start marching through the streets of London and other cities.”—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 393WH.]

His and Jed's wedding is back in my diary. They have much to do to top what was a great engagement night.

[Mims Davies]

The changes that we have heard about across the globe, including in Thailand and India, are absolutely welcome. It is just as vital that we have righted the wrongs done to our service personnel. On Saturday, I will be in East Grinstead for an Armed Forces Day event with constituents and thinking of those who have told and shared with me their terrible, abhorrent experiences in the forces, like some of those bravely retold this evening. I agree with the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) about the fantastic contribution made by Fighting with Pride.

We have heard about families coming in all shapes and sizes and how important that is. In 2022, the Conservative Government rightly and vitally removed the barriers to IVF for lesbian couples, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). He also talked about the importance of family life for all couples. It is vital to recognise that parents and families come in different shapes and forms, including single parents. I have always loved to highlight that single parents can do this job.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) talked about the importance of local Pride campaigns. That point was echoed across the Chamber—I could not keep up—about campaigns in York, Basildon and Southend, and a winter Pride event where it sounds like there would be far too many clothes! I very much enjoyed the geography lesson on where to go.

It was also important to reflect on politicians, what we do and how we have made a difference. The Minister of State reminded us that there is always more to do and that we should take nothing for granted.

Tom Gordon: We have had a lovely, light-hearted debate for the most part. Does the hon. Lady agree that leaders of political parties have power through their words? Would she push for her party in particular to ensure that, when it comes to LGBT rights, we consider the humanity that we are talking about and do not whip up hate?

Mims Davies: I think that hon. Members heard from the Conservative Front Bench a young man from Anglesey—my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew)—speaking very much about what the challenges were for him living in an isolated, rural area, just as we heard from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi). It is right that we should put safety, dignity and the freedom to live your life at the heart of everything we do. My right hon. Friend was right that we are all leaders in our own ways. That is why I am so proud that we Conservatives set the ambitious and absolutely right goal of ending all new HIV cases by 2030. My right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry put that challenge to the Front-Bench team for this Parliament. Perhaps if the Minister's party had not been quite so successful at the election, we would have even more of my gay and lesbian colleagues left on my Benches to keep championing that cause.

Rachel Taylor: It is unfortunate that there are not more Conservative Members here this evening taking part in this debate. That speaks volumes. I welcome the hon. Lady's warm words and the warm words of her

colleague in his opening remarks, but those words will sound hollow unless they start challenging their leader to do what is right for LGBT people up and down this country.

Mims Davies: I think the same goes for all parties. Obviously, MPs' diaries have different challenges and commitments. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry made it—he was stuck on a train for most of this evening. He mentioned that we do not want Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland to fall behind when it comes to striving for no new cases of HIV by 2030 in all parts of the United Kingdom.

I am delighted to be deejaying at the LGBT Tories event at the Conservative party conference. As we have heard, the conferences can come alive, apparently. The Deputy Speaker earlier pointed out he had not recently been to a Labour one. Maybe he will come to my DJ night. I will be following the guest turn from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), and hoping that some of my colleagues, such as Chris Clarkson, formerly of this parish, will be there. I also want to pay tribute to Luke Robert Black, who got his MBE in December 2024 for his work with LGBT Conservatives. As we heard tonight, it is 50 years since both Labour and the Conservatives started those really important groups.

Oliver Ryan: There has been quite a nice cross-party feeling to the debate tonight, and that has been encouraging. There has also been some mention of trailblazers. I realise this is probably a little bit embarrassing for those on our Front Bench, but the Minister who opened the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), has been through quite a lot and written quite extensively about the role of LGBT people in public life, about the role of Parliament and about his own role as a Minister and an MP. Will the shadow Minister join me in praising him as one of those trailblazers in this place?

Mims Davies: I am always happy to praise the hon. Gentleman. The last time we had a chat he called me a very rude woman, so I have some making up to do—I hope that is exactly what he is pleased about. Of course, it is really important to have trailblazers, and as we have heard, being an ally is absolutely vital. I was going to mention the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) showcasing just how much that matters.

I must also mention my former colleague, Maria Caulfield, now CBE. Her passion and commitment to better HIV treatment and her focus on tackling the stigma around HIV and mental health were really important. I also want to mention the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), who spoke up about being openly bisexual and proud of it. That will help others who watch this debate in relation to being out and being who they are. I too have daughters who are not as diverse as I was hoping for, but we live in hope. It is me that is the challenge, not them.

This debate shows exactly why we need Pride Month and why we need to make it count. We need the humour and humanity. Pride Month emphasises reflection on all the contributions, both historically and now, that LGBT+ individuals and communities make towards creating a better world, and we as politicians in this

House can continue to be part of this story and help all LGBT people to thrive, not just in their sexuality but in every part of their life—their community, their career and whatever they want life to look like.

I thank all Members for their contributions and hope that we can work together actively and positively across the Chamber to continue to make positive changes for LGBT people. Of course, as we reflect on Pride and its theme of activism and social change, we must continue to challenge stigma, including views in my own party, and prejudice. We need to be clear that all political parties are here for you no matter who you are, where you live and who you love, and that you should never feel unsafe or worried about who you are. We will always work together to strive for dignity, inclusion and compassion. After all, love is love.

9.50 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Dame Nia Griffith): I hope the House will forgive me if I do not have time to mention everybody, because we have had such a wide-ranging debate with so many people taking part. I thank Members from across the House for their heartfelt and thoughtful contributions, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) for coming out in the Chamber about her sexuality, which is a difficult and emotional thing to do.

The tone of the debate was very much one of celebration. Members said how they perhaps never would have expected to have the celebrations in their home towns, like in Macclesfield, that they see now. Members celebrated political achievements and noted the 50th anniversary of both the Conservative and Labour LGBT+ societies. We celebrated that progress has been made, but the real tone was that we have to renew our efforts and that we cannot be complacent or let any backsliding happen.

Pride Month is a time not only for celebration but for reflection. Today we have heard stories of struggle, progress and hope. This debate has reminded us that LGBT+ equality is not a single milestone to be passed, but an ongoing commitment—one that must be renewed and reinforced by each generation. It has underscored the principle that has guided this Government from day one: every person, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, deserves dignity, safety and respect.

I will now address some of the serious issues that Members have raised. The Opposition spokesman who opened the debate and former Equalities Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), asked in particular about the HIV prevention programme. I can tell him—if he were here—and hon. Members that only last week I was at the Terrence Higgins Trust on what would have been Terrence's 80th birthday. I congratulate the trust on its excellent work, particularly in the HIV Prevention England programme, which we are funding to the tune of some £4.5 million. We are in the process of producing an action plan, which will be published this year. Of course, we absolutely stick to our commitment of trying to end new transmissions of HIV within England by 2030. I have also visited Fast Track Cymru, which is working innovatively across Wales, including in rural areas, so hopefully we will make considerable progress.

Several colleagues mentioned veterans. As they will know, the Government acknowledge the hurt caused by the historic ban on LGBT personnel serving in the

armed forces between 1967 and 2000. Last year, we launched the LGBT financial recognition scheme with a budget of up to £75 million—50% higher than the previously agreed amount. The scheme intends to provide recognition to those impacted by the ban, and we recognise the need to work quickly through the 1,000-plus applications we have received. We understand the need for timeliness in delivering the scheme and are working closely with stakeholders. Applicants can receive updates on gov.uk.

Many Members have raised the implications of the Supreme Court judgment. I acknowledge the deep concern and anxiety that many people feel following the recent Supreme Court ruling and its potential implications for trans people. I know that for many, this decision has raised serious questions about rights, safety and belonging. I want those people to know that we hear those concerns and recognise the very real impact this moment is having on members of the trans community, their families and allies. But let me be clear: the rights and protections of trans people under the Equality Act remain firmly in place. The protected characteristic of gender reassignment still applies. Discrimination, harassment or victimisation of trans people is unlawful and will remain so.

The independent Equality and Human Rights Commission, Britain's equality watchdog, is currently consulting on its draft updated code of practice for services, public functions and associations to reflect the judgment and to provide guidance for service providers and employers. We expect the EHRC to seek and listen to a wide range of views through its consultation, which closes on 30 June, and I encourage people to ensure that their views are heard by submitting a response. The consultation will inform the EHRC's final draft; the Government will then consider that draft. We will review the guidance carefully, ensuring that it reflects both the legal clarity of the Court and our enduring values of inclusion, safety and respect for all, and it will be subject to full parliamentary scrutiny.

I would like to pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) for her determined campaigning to introduce measures to tackle LGBT+ hate crime. This Government are absolutely committed to tackling all forms of hate crime, and we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to equalise all existing strands of hate crime and make them aggravated offences in the Crime and Policing Bill as it progresses through the other place. This will ensure parity of protection for LGBT+ and disabled people.

Rachel Taylor: I want to take the time to pay tribute to the Minister for her unwavering support throughout what has been a very difficult year so far for LGBT people, and for the trailblazing work that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who is sitting next to her, have done for our community.

Dame Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for those kind comments, and I pay tribute to all the Members who have taken part today. On this side of the House, we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Leeds North West (Katie White), for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson),

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), for North Warwickshire and Bedworth, for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), for South Derbyshire, and for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel)—to respond to his point about asylum seekers, the Home Office proceeds on a case-by-case basis and tries to deal sensitively with each case.

From the Opposition Benches, we have heard from the Front Benchers, including the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), who spoke for the Lib Dems, and from the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) from the Conservatives, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) from the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) from the SNP and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) from Plaid Cymru, who mentioned Jan Morris. I thank all hon. Members for their contribution; I hope I have not missed anybody out.

As this debate draws to a close, let us return to the spirit that Pride has always embodied: not only visibility, but solidarity; not only protest, but progress; not only celebration, but courage. Let us remember that the rights we defend today were won by those who stood up, often at great personal risk, so that others might live freely. Let us recommit to building a society where no one is made to feel invisible, unsafe or alone because of who they are, who they love or how they live their truth. This Government will continue to stand with LGBT+ people here in the UK and around the world. We will continue to deliver on the promises that we have made. Above all, we will continue to defend the values that uplift us all: dignity and respect for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

Access to GPs

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

9.58 pm

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): The ability to access GPs and maintain face-to-face appointments is a pressing issue that affects not just my constituency of North Down but constituencies across the UK. Across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, considerable inequalities exist in access to GP services. Evidence indicates that Northern Ireland receives the lowest investment in GP services among the four regions of the UK.

I acknowledge that we live in an era of high-tech advancements and rapid changes in healthcare delivery. I am intrigued by the potential of electronic prescribing and artificial intelligence to enhance our healthcare system. However, amid these innovations, access to GP services remains as crucial as ever. Access to GP services is a cornerstone of the NHS, providing a fundamental element that allows the health service to operate effectively. However, when comparing the data, I find it concerning that during the same period, 70% of GP appointments in England were conducted face to face compared with only 45% in Northern Ireland.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Alex Easton: Although the figure in Northern Ireland has recently increased to 57%, the disparity remains worrying. I am confident that every MP aspires to see good access to GP services throughout the UK and to preserve the essential interactions within GP care that are vital to the health and wellbeing of our nation.

GPs are often the first point of contact for medical attention and their role is vital. I commend their comprehensive efforts in tackling acute illnesses, managing chronic diseases and providing preventive care, among other crucial responsibilities. However, as the MP for North Down, I share the concerns of many regarding the growing demand for GP healthcare services and the accessibility of these essential services for my constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton). He is my neighbour and has been my friend for many years. We served in the Assembly before we ever came here. It is a pleasure to see him secure what I understand is his first Adjournment debate; it will be the first of many, no doubt.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that trust in some GP surgeries has diminished due to the lack of face-to-face contact? While sending photographs and having discussions over the phone suits some working constituents, for others the lack of face-to-face interaction can mean that symptoms are missed that can only be seen face to face. Does he also agree that GP surgeries are struggling due to the lack of support, and that surgeries throughout the UK must be given more help and assistance so that they can thereby provide more access for their patients?

Alex Easton: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and I totally agree with everything he said. People across Northern Ireland are not able to see their GP as much as those in other parts of the UK. That is leading to big frustrations for our constituents. The lack of support and funding for GPs is adding to the frustration that is felt across the board.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): This is a debate about GP access across the United Kingdom, but one issue in Northern Ireland is GPs' ability to access indemnity insurance, whereas in England and Wales there is a Government-provided scheme. Does the hon. Member agree that if the Government worked with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to allow our GPs to access that indemnity insurance scheme on a national level, it would ease some of the burden on our GPs?

Alex Easton: I agree, and perhaps the Minister will take that point on board in looking at how we can improve our GP services.

One of the significant challenges across the UK is the shortage of GPs, which inevitably leads to longer waiting times and, unfortunately, sometimes to a compromised quality of care.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): On that point, 4,000 residents in Westvale Park, a new housing development in my constituency, were promised a GP, and they had legally binding section 106 agreements in place. The construction money is there for a GP surgery, but the NHS has not provided the operational funding required for a GP. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the NHS should be providing the operational funding for new GP services on housing developments, and that the entire Government case for new housing developments is undermined if this infrastructure is not provided?

Alex Easton: I totally agree. There is no point in building new houses if we are not going to put in the infrastructure, including health infrastructure and GPs.

While I welcome initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining GPs, it is concerning that in Northern Ireland we have recruited only 121 GPs when we need 161 merely to restore the levels we had in 2014. The growing UK population, coupled with increasingly complex health needs, is exerting significant pressure on existing resources. In Northern Ireland alone, the population has risen by 70,000 over a decade, while 38 GP practices have closed—a reduction of 11%. It seems clear that as the population grows, funding should increase. We must also recognise that since April 2023, there have been 17 GP contract hand-backs, resulting in a decrease of 12 GP practices, leaving us with a total of 305.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that we need to address the disparity he mentioned—the inequality in GP funding allocations—across the United Kingdom? Despite having some of the most deprived areas with a higher demand, the funding Wolverhampton receives is, on average, 10% less than more affluent areas. The ratio of GPs to patients is therefore lower, which increases the length of time people have to wait to get an appointment with the GP. Does he also agree that the experiences of patients differ? When I speak to my constituents in Wolverhampton

West, they give me different accounts of the experiences they have had and the level of service they have received from their GP, depending on the surgery that they use. We need to achieve greater consistency in access to GP surgeries.

Alex Easton: I totally agree with everything the hon. Member says. There are areas across the UK where there are inequalities in people's access to GPs, and there needs to be a level playing field across the board.

We must consider value for money. Evidence indicates that every £1 invested in GP services yields a £14 return for the local economy. Let me revisit the crucial role of face-to-face appointments. In an increasingly digital world, it is pertinent to ask just how important in-person consultations truly are. While the question is valid, what remains crucial is that face-to-face interactions allow GPs to deliver holistic care that surpasses what is achievable in the virtual environment.

Face-to-face appointments facilitate physical examinations, which are indispensable for accurate diagnosis and treatment planning. While the advances in telemedicine are certainly welcome, physical examinations remain essential for certain symptoms and conditions. In-person consultations are key to effective communication, as they enable GPs to observe non-verbal cues and facial expressions that are crucial in understanding a patient's needs. Such interactions foster trust, empathy and understanding, greatly enhancing personalised care. This trust encourages patients to be more honest and forthcoming, directly contributing to improved health outcomes. For many vulnerable groups, such as the elderly or individuals living with poor mental health, face-to-face appointments serve as a lifeline. They offer reassurance and a sense of connection, helping to combat isolation and ensure comprehensive care.

In 2022, as we emerged from the covid pandemic, there were 9.7 million GP consultations in Northern Ireland. In 2023, that number increased to 10.1 million. However, we must face the reality that one third of GP practices need the support of the practice improvement crisis response team. I am troubled that with private GP services, we risk creating a two-tier system that exacerbates health inequalities, both in North Down and across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. We must have a GP service that is accessible to all, not just a service reserved for those who can afford it.

We need to invest in our GP workforce and develop effective retention strategies. I direct the House's attention to the 17 recommendations made by the Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland in its document "A Workforce Fit for the Future", which warrants thorough consideration followed by decisive action. Other solutions, such as the Pharmacy First programme, deserve detailed consideration. That practice, enabled across the UK, has been shown to effectively serve deprived communities and has real potential to alleviate the workload on our GPs. Therefore, this challenge is not a matter of choosing one over the other, but rather of finding a balance where digital and face-to-face services complement each other in delivering optimal healthcare.

Patients are becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to speak to or see their GP. GPs are becoming increasingly frustrated at the ever-increasing workload, which has a knock-on effect, with many people having

[Alex Easton]

to go to their nearest accident and emergency unit. Those have some very long waiting times, and that adds more pressure to the health system. I emphasise and underline that access to GP services and face-to-face appointments are vital to maintaining a robust health system across the UK.

As I finish, allow me to pose some questions informed by the Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland. Is it not true that Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of its healthcare budget allocated to GP services, compared with the rest of the UK? Can anyone point to anywhere that spends less? Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland deserves better?

10.10 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) for raising GP access, which is a vital matter for so many of our constituents. I congratulate him on securing his first Westminster Hall debate—well done on that. [Interruption.] His first Adjournment debate—sorry. We are not in Westminster Hall right now. It has been a long day; I thank hon. Members for their forbearance.

When we ask people what their top priority for the NHS is, the chances are that they will say it is to fix general practice, because GPs are the front door to our national health service. They are the first port of call for millions of people, and they perform a vital service by delivering care in communities right across our country. Of course, health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, and decisions about GP services there rightly sit with the Northern Ireland Executive and at Stormont. Nevertheless, this Government are committed to being an active partner in helping to deliver better public service outcomes across the UK while respecting the devolution settlement. I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), is here with me on the Front Bench this evening, showing how important the teamwork between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive is.

Ultimately, the underlying challenges are the same. Whether it is access, capacity or workforce pressures, we recognise those issues across the UK. Our manifesto pledged to reset our relationship with the devolved Administrations, to put country before party, and to work with them on issues from trade and tackling child poverty to a whole range of issues around the economy and growth that affect all of us. I welcome this chance to hear the perspective of the hon. Member for North Down and to exchange ideas across the Floor of the Chamber. Access to timely GP appointments is at the heart of a strong and responsive healthcare system.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): On that point, I will raise the issue of a resident who lives in my constituency. She needs to give blood every three months for a long-term condition she has, but she can never get an appointment in Bramhall, where she lives; instead, she has to travel 3 miles to Shaw Heath. That happens every three months. Does the Minister agree that that should not be happening in our country and that access to GPs should be not only easier, but available to all our residents?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely with the points that the hon. Gentleman makes. We will very shortly publish our 10-year plan for the NHS. As I will say a little later in my speech, a big part of that is about the shift to a neighbourhood health service and shifting from hospital to community so that the front door of the NHS is fixed, and access is a vital part of that.

Chris Coghlan: The big issue in my constituency is that I have constituents who are on the point of qualifying as GPs, but they do not have jobs as GPs to go into. What do the Government plan to do as part of their 10-year plan to fix the issue that we have people qualifying as GPs who do not have GP jobs to go into?

Stephen Kinnock: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that we secured a record £889 million increase in the GP contract. That is a first step in digging us out of the very deep hole that the previous Government left for us. When I look across my portfolio, whether it is GPs, mental health, dentistry or pharmacy—you name it—it is a car crash right across the piece. I was frankly shocked by what I saw when I first went into the Department back in July. We are, I hope, beginning to get things back on an even keel. The hon. Gentleman is right, though: we do not have a shortage of people coming through GP training, but supply and demand are not matching up. That has to change.

I am sure that the hon. Member for North Down will welcome the fact that we secured £82 million of additional funding through the additional roles reimbursement scheme, leading to the recruitment of an additional 1,700 GPs. The challenge is more about getting GPs in the places where they are most needed, which is something we need to work on—other colleagues have talked about the geographical imbalance. We need to look at the formula for the way that funding is allocated across the country, as it is an important part of the access issue that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I have been working with Lib Dem councillor Hannah Gostlow to tackle some of the issues that local health services and GP surgeries in Knaresborough are facing. I recently visited a surgery and was told that it had the staff that it wanted to get in place, but did not have the consulting rooms. The problem that surgery faces is that the money from the community infrastructure levy and other sources of funding will not come until further down the line, so it cannot take on those staff because the consulting rooms cannot be built. Does the Minister agree that we need to get funding into those GP services, so that we can provide the services that local people deserve and need?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is right; one challenge we face is that, where we are developing new centres of housing, we are not getting the social infrastructure wrapping around them. We need to use things such as section 106 agreements and the CIL, as he mentioned. That process is not always working—the developers are not always coming forward with real, concrete commitments—so the integrated care boards do not commission because they are not sure that the infrastructure will be there, and we end up in a chicken-and-egg situation. We are working closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to break through some of that and attach

stronger strings to the deals being done with developers. We also have the £102 million capital infrastructure scheme for primary care, which will go some way towards addressing the issue, but this is fundamentally about getting much clearer and stronger commitments from developers.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his responses, which have been incredibly helpful. When I think of GP access, I think of two things; the first is Strangford and the villages along the Ards peninsula, where I have lived for most of my life and where I represent. There, the best way of contacting a GP is by phone—that is the nature of the situation there—but one of the things that helps in Newtownards, which is the biggest nucleus of people in the area, is for people to go down to the surgery at 8 o'clock or half-past 8, join the queue and get their appointment there and then. That is another way of trying to access the GP; there is nothing as frustrating as being on the phone from 8 o'clock to half-past 8 or 9 o'clock and not being able to get an appointment. At least when people can see their doctor, they can definitely get one.

Stephen Kinnock: We have to have a mixture of access channels. The telephone is very important, as is being able to turn up in person, but we also need to shift more to online booking. I am really pleased that the new contract that we have with GPs is based on an £889 million investment that came with a lot of strings attached around reform. One of those strings is that every GP surgery—in England, at least—must have online booking facilities by 1 October. I hope that will improve access, and will make more space in the reception process for people who cannot use the internet.

We have to ensure that we get the balance right. That is why, as I mentioned, we took decisive action in October 2024. We invested £82 million in the additional roles reimbursement scheme, which was a targeted move to strengthen our frontline services and ease the pressure on practices across the country. That funding has directly supported the recruitment of over 1,700 GPs across England. Those GPs are now in place, helping to increase appointment availability and—most importantly—improving care for thousands of patients who have been struggling to get the help they need when they need it. We have also seen a rise in the number of GPs employed directly by practices over the past 12 months, which is a positive sign that general practice is stabilising and beginning to rebuild capacity on the ground. Together, these developments are making it easier for patients to access care and for practices to deliver it.

Robin Swann: As the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) mentioned, there are contracts that have been handed back to the Department. We have people coming forward who want to be GPs, but it is getting harder to find those partners who want to run and manage practices. Does the Minister agree that in any training scheme and any course that comes forward, that side of general practice—how to run a business and how to run a practice—needs to be reinforced in training? There are people who want to be GPs and medics, but we need that skills mix, too.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member speaks with great knowledge and expertise in this area, so I am pleased that he is here for this debate. He is right that it is about

the skills mix. Many GPs really enjoy the management, administration and leadership role at partnership level. He raises an interesting and important point about the training for that. My impression is that many go into managing a practice having just learned on the job and gone through the process in an ad hoc way. Perhaps training is a matter for further discussion with the Royal College of General Practitioners. It is also about learning to run a business. Could we look at that in respect of universities and MBAs or whatever it might be, given that business administration is an important part of the equation?

I also wanted to say a word about bureaucracy. Too much red tape is holding GPs back. On 4 October, the Secretary of State launched the red tape challenge, with a clear goal to identify and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens, freeing up GPs to see more patients and focus on delivering high-quality care. Improving access is not just about cutting bureaucracy; it is also about transforming how care is delivered. That is why we have committed to moving towards a neighbourhood health service. That model of care will bring a range of services together, breaking down barriers and silos between services and streamlining support for patients. That integrated approach will mean that patients are seen sooner by the right person in the right setting.

We will require all practices to ensure that patients can go online to request an appointment at any point during core opening hours. That is about not just adding a digital option, but transforming how general practice works for the modern world. By making online access standard, we are giving patients more control and greater flexibility over how they engage with their GP. It will mean no longer having to call at 8 am sharp or waiting in a phone queue. That is especially important for those juggling work, childcare or other responsibilities. This change also helps those who prefer to call or go to the surgery in person; by enabling more people to use online routes, we reduce pressure on phone lines and reception desks, meaning shorter waits and faster service for everyone.

We are also taking action to improve access for those who need it most by incentivising better continuity of care, particularly for patients with chronic or complex conditions. They benefit significantly from seeing the same practitioner over time. Continuity does not just improve the patient experience; it improves outcomes. When patients see a familiar clinician, issues are identified earlier, care is more personalised and time is not lost repeating history or re-explaining symptoms. Our manifesto pledge is to bring back the family doctor, and that is what we will do.

Physical infrastructure has also been mentioned by hon. Members. Our new £102 million primary care utilisation and modernisation fund will create additional clinical space in more than 1,000 GP practices across England. This investment will deliver more appointments and improve patient care.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Stratton surgery in my constituency has long been trying to get access to two rooms on the third floor of the surgery that could be used for clinical space, but the ICB seems to be dragging its feet. The rooms were previously used by Cornwall's ICB for maternity services. They are no longer in use, so can the Minister please help in working with the ICB to help Stratton surgery to get access to those much-needed clinical spaces?

Stephen Kinnock: If the hon. Member could write to me on that issue, I would be more than happy to look into it. I am always keen to help hon. Members to get their ICBs to move in the right direction.

We have directly provided £61 million to assist the expansion of the multidisciplinary team approach across Northern Ireland, which will help to stabilise primary care, focus on the prevention and management of conditions away from hospital settings, and better utilise the skills of the community and voluntary sector. We will provide additional funding by 2028-29 to bring back the family doctor by supporting the training of thousands more GPs and delivering millions more appointments over the spending review period, and will build further on the 1,700 additional GPs who have already been recruited. Through these improvements, we are making a difference to patient satisfaction: the latest health insight survey shows a sustained improvement in satisfaction, with 72.5% of patients who contacted their general practices in the past 28 days reporting a good overall experience—up from 67.4% in July 2024.

This Government are delivering concrete results, because we believe that everyone deserves access to high-quality care closer to home. I am delighted that general practitioners committee England voted in favour of this year's GP contract in March. This is the first time the contract has been accepted in four years. The agreement resets our relationship and marks a turning point—a shared commitment to work together on behalf of patients and practitioners alike. The changes in the contract will streamline targets for GPs, incentivise improved continuity of care, make progress towards our health mission and, crucially, require practices to make it possible for patients to go online to request an appointment throughout the duration of core opening hours. Those changes are backed by an extra £889 million, representing cash growth of more than 7% in overall contract investment.

The NHS belongs to the people. Those are not just my words; they are in the NHS constitution. Everything that this Government have done since the election has been geared towards saving the NHS, giving it back to the people and getting it back on its feet. We are putting power back into the hands of patients, where it rightly belongs, because this is their health service and it must work for them. Ensuring that every patient has access to the care that they need is not just a priority, but a promise.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for indulging me again. Will he join me in congratulating the many fantastic GPs in my constituency and throughout the country? It is not an easy job; we hear of the flak that they get from patients day in, day out when they are working to tight timeframes. One such GP in my area is Dr Viv Poskitt, who has been elected as a Liberal Democrat town councillor. Will the Minister share my thanks to Viv and to all the GPs across our country?

Stephen Kinnock: I will certainly congratulate Dr Viv Poskitt—I think I have got the name right—on being a GP, although I will probably not congratulate her on being a Liberal Democrat town councillor. The hon. Gentleman is right: GPs are the backbone, or the beating heart, of our NHS. They represent the front door, and we must fix that front door, which is currently creaking on its hinges. This Government are absolutely committed to fixing it, and to moving on from there to fix our NHS, get it back on its feet and make it fit for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 23 June 2025

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

Geo-engineering and the Environment

4.30 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 701963 relating to geo-engineering and the environment.

The petition was started by Antoinette Taylor and opened on 23 December 2024. As of 12 June 2025, it had gathered more than 159,000 signatures. Just two of those signatures were from my South Cotswolds constituency, so I clearly did not step up to lead this debate in an effort to win votes.¹ I am here because I believe this issue matters deeply for our future and for the future of the planet on which we rely for life.

Geo-engineering is a broad term used to describe a range of large-scale interventions in Earth's climate system, so I will start by clarifying a couple of definitions. Geo-engineering falls into two main categories: carbon dioxide removal and solar radiation management. The petition calls for a pre-emptive ban on both. CDR is about drawing carbon out of the atmosphere and can involve technology such as carbon capture, or nature-based solutions such as restoring forests, peatlands and grasslands. I have absolutely no problem with the latter. Trees do not need subsidies, peatlands do not break, and healthy soils not only store carbon but improve water quality, mitigate flooding and support biodiversity. They are our natural allies in the fight against climate change.

SRM is a different matter. It aims to reflect sunlight back into space by various means, such as using aerosols sprayed into the stratosphere, whitening clouds or even placing mirrors in orbit. SRM does not remove carbon. It does not stop ocean acidification. It does not reduce fossil fuel use. It masks the symptoms while the root cause, our fossil fuel carbon emissions, goes unchecked. Whatever options we consider as we confront the climate crisis, we must not be distracted from our overriding mission to tackle the key cause of climate change: our reliance on fossil fuels.

Let us talk about the risks of SRM. First, there is the issue of unintended consequences. Humanity does not have a good track record on this. Our weather systems are immensely complex, interconnected and not well understood. Altering sunlight could potentially disrupt monsoons or shift jet streams, or trigger droughts in some regions while causing floods in others. According to a report by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, SRM could delay ozone recovery by decades. It could disrupt rainfall patterns, and would do nothing to stop our oceans absorbing carbon dioxide and forming the carbonic acid that is affecting the viability of phytoplankton, which are essential for life on Earth, generating half the oxygen we breathe.

There is also the problem of scientific control. We cannot conduct a controlled experiment with SRM. We do not have two planets, one on which we conduct SRM and one on which we do not. There is no planet B to test

it on. Once SRM is deployed, we are in effect launching a planetary experiment, with no ability to reverse it if things go wrong. As the petitioners have highlighted, even if SRM “works” in the short term, there is a risk that our climate will become dependent on continual injections. If the injections stopped for any reason, which in our turbulent geopolitical world is entirely possible, we would risk a phenomenon known as termination shock: a sudden extreme spike in global temperatures, which would be potentially catastrophic for life on Earth.

As for the chemicals used in SRM, the aerosols under consideration include sulphates and even aluminium. The matter is still being researched, and there is no definitive link between aluminium and conditions such as Alzheimer's, but many scientists remain cautious about prolonged exposure. Sulphates are precisely the chemicals that we worked so hard to eliminate under the Montreal protocol, because of their role in depleting the ozone layer. We should consider carefully the possibility that deploying SRM could put us in direct violation of the protocol, which is one of the most successful international environmental agreements ever forged.

We must consider the human cost of climate change and any measures that we might take to mitigate it. Who decides the thermostat setting? Who gets more rain, and who goes without? Can we even control these things? The risks of failing to invest in technology to tackle the root causes of climate change threaten serious regional disruption. As always, it will almost certainly be the poorest and least responsible for the crisis who bear the brunt of the fallout.

Some will argue that we are still doing too little, too late to mitigate climate change, and I agree with them, but that does not mean that SRM is the right answer. SRM could take us out of the frying pan and into the fire. Instead of reaching for techno fixes, we need to do what we already know works: cut fossil fuel use, restore nature and—gosh—maybe even look at changing our behaviour, because at some point, sooner or later, behaviour change must be part of the picture. If we are honest, none of the technologies yet available to us—not even the most advanced forms of carbon removal—can keep pace with our current levels of consumption.

Globally, we are still emitting about 40 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. If we continue on our current path—as an environmental campaigner for more than two decades, I very much hope we do not—we are headed for about 2.7° of warming by the end of the century. We know that the consequences of that level of warming include rising seas, more intense storms, loss of crop yields, the mass displacement of humans, accelerating biodiversity loss and heatwaves that will put many, many lives at risk.

Although carbon capture is often talked about as a solution, the reality is sobering. It is, for sure, less perilous than SRM, but the vast majority of carbon capture projects are still very small in scale, and many use almost as much energy to capture carbon dioxide as was emitted in the first place. To scale carbon capture up to a level at which we could even begin to think about continuing business as usual would require enormous amounts of infrastructure, energy and funding.

Meanwhile, it is increasingly clear that we have to transition away from fossil fuels. I am talking not ideologically but economically. The energy return on fossil fuels is falling. In the early days of oil, when we

1.[*Official Report*, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

[Dr Roz Savage]

could just stick a nodding donkey in the ground anywhere in Texas and hit oil, we got about 100 barrels out for every barrel-worth of energy invested; today, the figure is down to close to 20 and still falling. At some point, the economics will simply stop making sense. Fossil fuels are finite, and the cost of extraction is rising, so given that we know we will have to make the transition at some point, sooner or later, why not do it sooner? The question is not whether we will move on, but whether we will do it on our own terms or wait until crisis forces our hand.

Some argue that we live on a planet on which the climate has always changed, but historically it has changed slowly, giving species time to adapt. The most dramatic climatic shifts took place before humans came on the scene. Our western civilisation has evolved during an unusually stable climatic period—the Holocene. Our infrastructure, food systems and settlements were all built around that stability. Shake the foundations and the whole structure becomes precarious. The rate of change we are now seeing is unprecedented in human history. Ironically, that puts us, in many ways the most adaptable of species, among the most vulnerable species on the planet.

I want to end on a positive note. This is not a story of despair. Yes, the situation is urgent, but it is not hopeless. If we act boldly and act now, we can still turn it around. Let us redirect investment away from planetary-scale experiments of dubious feasibility. I am not saying we are currently investing in such work; I am saying we should shift our focus away from technologies that may or may not deliver benefits and may or may not deliver catastrophic side effects. Let us instead focus on realistic, viable solutions that we already know work. Let us prioritise emissions cuts, the restoration of nature and behavioural shifts. Let us resist the easy temptation of silver bullets and choose instead the hard but honest work of transition. What is at stake is not just the climate, but our shared future. It is about not just statistics but the stories of people, places and ecosystems that deserve to survive and thrive.

I will finish by quoting the American farmer, poet and activist Wendell Berry, who said that the

“care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope.”

4.41 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss.

It is important to set the debate and the e-petition in the context of the last couple of weeks. Last weekend saw another hottest day of the year on record, triggering an official heatwave and accompanied by an amber heat health warning, which means that because of high temperatures significant impacts are likely across health and social care services, including a rise in deaths, particularly among those aged 65 and over and people with health conditions. The Met Office puts the chance of us seeing another 40° weather event at 50:50, with a 45° day on the cards in the current climate. That is like an average summer day in Death Valley. I cannot imagine how the people and the natural environment in my constituency or the rest of the UK could cope with that.

As well as record-breaking temperatures, the weekend brought an increase in the threat of greater destabilisation in the middle east, with escalating conflict between Israel and the US and Iran. Unsurprisingly, on Sunday night oil prices soared to their highest since President Trump's return to office, as the energy markets digested the news of the attacks on nuclear facilities in Iran. We do not yet know whether the situation in the middle east will lead to an oil supply shock. The Iranian Parliament has threatened to close the strait of Hormuz, which would choke the flow of oil from the region. Ordinary people will once again face volatile prices, hitting their pockets, as energy becomes more expensive and the cost of living is exacerbated.

Over just one weekend, we have seen our vulnerability to extreme weather conditions as a result of our failure to tackle climate change, and our vulnerability as a result of our dependence on global fossil fuels supply and prices. That underlines, once again, our need to strengthen our home-grown energy security and reduce our polluting emissions by accelerating investment in renewables and clean, green energy. Our emissions are not falling fast enough, and we are not on track to meet our legally binding climate targets. The world is set to surpass 1.5° of warming in the next decade. That is the context in which the petition was brought forward.

We need to address the root causes of climate breakdown, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) said. The Climate Change Committee was clear last year that only a third of the emissions reductions required to achieve the country's climate targets are currently covered by credible plans. Although it is true that our emissions are now less than half the levels they were in 1990, largely due to the phase-out of coal and the ramping up of renewables, we will now need ambitious action not just in the energy sector but across transport, buildings, industry and agriculture. The plans left by the previous Government did not deliver enough action, so we must do more. Nevertheless, even with aggressive investment in renewables and actions to decarbonise key sectors, we will still have to deal with residual emissions from heavy industries, particularly aviation, shipping and steel.

The balanced pathway, developed in the Climate Change Committee's seventh carbon budget, tries to reduce emissions across all sectors of the economy as far as credibly possible, in line with cost effectiveness and feasibility constraints, minimising the use of engineered removals. However, even the committee recognises that we need to go beyond cutting emissions and to start work on the engineered removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. That is why removals are part of the Government's net zero strategy.

As we have heard, geo-engineering refers to deliberate, large-scale projects to reduce carbon and cool the Earth's climate system to address climate change. In greenhouse gas removal terms, that also includes direct air carbon capture and storage and bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, some of which we are already using. We have seen sizeable investments from the Government into carbon capture storage. That could accommodate large-scale BECCS and DACCS, which clearly will be dependent on carbon capture and storage, but that is a measure of last resort for those hard-to-decarbonise sectors.

Living in South Cambridgeshire, I am close to the border with Cambridge. Since 2019, under climate expert Professor Sir David King, the University of Cambridge has been undertaking some important research into greenhouse gases at the Centre for Climate Repair. Among other things, it has been looking at something that brings climate and nature approaches together into balance again, such as marine biomass regeneration, which aims to restore whale populations, and ocean biomass to boost nutrient recycling and phytoplankton growth, because healthier oceans can naturally absorb more carbon dioxide and support global climate goals.

The centre has also been looking at the role of giant kelp, which grows rapidly and captures large amounts of carbon dioxide. When it sinks to the ocean floor, it stores carbon for the long term, offering a powerful, nature-based carbon removal method. Those are just two of the types of approaches that are being investigated. Quite rightly, the Government funded an independent review of greenhouse gas removal approaches, led by former MP Dr Alan Whitehead, covering nature-based solutions and engineered removals, such as direct air capture.

We saw in the Government's response to the e-petition that they are currently working with the British Standards Institution to develop greenhouse gas removal methodologies, some of which may use sustainable biomass and require coming up with biomass sustainability criteria. There are some ways in which we could see greenhouse gas removal as a kind of guardrail for helping to decarbonise the atmosphere.

The e-petition also makes reference to solar radiation modification, which is an area that causes more concern. The Government have announced that they are not in favour of using SRM and have no plans for its full deployment. That position was made clear by the Minister in January, who said that the ongoing SRM research is for modelling only. The Government's views on SRM are in accordance with those of the Liberal Democrats; we think it should not go to full deployment. We also think that the money invested in SRM research could have been better allocated to other measures for dealing with nature-based removal. I agree with Professor Mike Hulme that the cost of the research is an extraordinary amount of taxpayer money to invest in speculative technology. He is right to say, as I have already said, that the money could be better spent on reducing our dependence on fossil fuels or removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Geo-engineering is not a silver bullet. It must never be used as an excuse to delay decarbonisation through embracing and investing in renewables. We must remember that the first stop in our fight against climate change and securing energy security is investment in the transition to renewable and clean energy. Any amount of greenhouse gas removal will ultimately compromise the fight against climate change. As Dr Vaughan from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change said:

"SRM methods do not address the causes of climate change".

However, a blanket ban on geo-engineering, as the motion proposes, would be short-sighted and self-defeating as we explore the other methods that I have discussed. Let us therefore champion governance built on transparency for any kind of research and standards in geo-engineering and climate action, which is ambitious and grounded in our transition to home-grown clean, green energy.

4.51 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I am pleased to respond to this brief debate on geo-engineering and the environment, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on starting the debate. I agree that solar radiation management would be a reckless experiment that risks all our futures.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) used the opportunity to speak about climate change. Although she and I probably disagree profoundly about the wisdom of the net zero target and the plan to decarbonise the whole grid by 2030, I am sure she opposes, as I do, the giant solar and battery farms that the Government want to impose on both our constituencies and most of the east of England.

My party's position on SRM is clear. We oppose any attempts to seed the sky, and every effort must be made to be respectful of nature and our planet. Chasing such hare-brained scientific schemes to interfere with the climate and the atmosphere will not give us answers to any live public policy dilemmas. The Met Office has confirmed that we do not have enough evidence to understand how effective geo-engineering like SRM might be, and we do not know what unintended consequences might occur for human and environmental health.

Ministers have said there are no plans to fund experimentation with solar radiation modification, but public concern was prompted by the Advanced Research and Innovation Agency offering £56.8 million of public money to examine climate cooling theory. It is important to say that the research does not, as far as I am aware, include any practical attempts to manipulate the climate, but was a study in relation to the theory of these methods.

Having been very clear about the Conservative position, I invite the Minister to provide a clear statement that the Government will not support SRM. Given the concern expressed by the public through the petition and the members of the public attending today, I am sure she will want to give everybody an unambiguous reassurance that that is indeed the case and that the Government will not come forward with such methods.

4.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on leading the debate and on showing respect for the notion behind the petition, because that is not always the case when people come and present views. I hope the petitioners feel that she has done justice to their stance.

I will set out what we are doing to tackle the issues highlighted in the petition. A lot of the concerns that have been raised today and over the last few weeks have been driven by recent research proposals to explore climate cooling technologies, as well as the media coverage that that has caused, and I will come on to those concerns in a moment.

Geo-engineering is a term commonly used to refer to two groups of technologies, as has been mentioned: greenhouse gas removals and solar radiation modification. Those are two very separate, very different approaches to addressing climate change, and the UK has two very separate, very different positions on their use. Greenhouse gas removals

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

actively remove greenhouse gases—predominantly carbon dioxide—from the atmosphere for highly durable storage, resulting in negative emissions. They are vital to achieving net zero, and we support their deployment. Solar radiation modification, on the other hand, describes a set of interventions that aim to cool the earth, largely by reflecting some of the sun's energy back into space.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I receive regular communication from constituents asking me for my opinion on the UK's involvement in chemtrails and geo-engineering. Will the Minister reassure us that chemtrails are actually condensation trails and nothing to do with solar radiation management, and that the UK Government have not deployed SRM techniques and have no plans to do so?

Kerry McCarthy: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend. I have received quite a lot of correspondence on that, which MPs have passed on from their constituents. I have answered written questions—which are in the public domain—and replied to queries on both those points. I will try to express as clearly and vehemently as I can that we have no plans for SRM.

On the supposed chemtrails issue, that is a term used by some people who claim that the white trails seen behind high-altitude aircraft on clear days contain undisclosed chemical agents intended for a covert atmospheric spraying programme. They are, in fact, as my hon. Friend said, contrails, which form when warm, moist aircraft exhaust fumes mix with cold air at altitude. Under certain atmospheric conditions, contrails can persist and spread out to form cirrus-like clouds before disappearing. There is no deliberate spraying of chemicals in the skies over the UK for climate modification. We are not in favour of SRM and have no plans to change that position; I will say more on that in a moment, but first I want to add a little more on greenhouse gas removals.

Making Britain a clean energy superpower is one of the five missions of this Government, delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating progress towards net zero across the economy by 2050. I note the comments from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) about the UK being off track to do that. We will be publishing our carbon budget delivery plan by October; as she said, the previous Government were taken to court for failing to produce adequate policies to match the ambition. Obviously, there is no point in setting targets unless they can be delivered. We will set out our plan in due course, and then talk about the seventh carbon budget and meeting our nationally determined contributions.

We must do everything we can to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—that is our starting point. We need that effort to be shared across all Government Departments, and we need everyone to play a role.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I hope this is not too much of a diversion, but the Minister will know that mains gas is 6p per kWh, largely imported and certainly a carbon fuel, while renewable energy is selling at 24p per kWh.

We cannot get the public behind us as long as the environmental tariffs are on the renewable energy and not on the carbon fuel. May I have her opinion on that?

Kerry McCarthy: I will not be tempted too far down that path, other than to say that it is very much on our radar. We know that renewables are the cheaper option, but that needs to be reflected in the prices that people are charged. Today, we announced measures in our industrial strategy to bring down energy prices for industry as part of industrial decarbonisation, but on the consumer side it is a work in progress, and the hon. Gentleman can expect to hear more soon.

The starting point is reducing emissions. We know that emissions are hard to abate in some sectors, and that we will not be able to do it fully. Greenhouse gas removal technologies will therefore be important to balance those residual emissions. That is recognised internationally by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and by our independent Climate Change Committee, whose latest advice to Government for setting the seventh carbon budget modelled around 36 megatonnes a year of engineered removals by 2050 to help us reach net zero.

Greenhouse gas removal approaches fall broadly into two categories: nature-based approaches, such as afforestation; and engineering-based approaches, such as direct air carbon capture and storage, bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, biochar, and enhanced rock weathering.

I know that both the hon. Members for South Cotswolds and for South Cambridgeshire are passionate about nature-based approaches, which can play an important role in removing and storing carbon dioxide at scale, while delivering a range of additional environmental improvements, such as improvements in biodiversity, air quality and soil health. Those co-benefits are important, too.

We are acting on nature-based approaches. In March, we announced the creation of the Western forest, the first new national forest in over 30 years. It will see 20 million trees planted across the west of England in the coming years, which I very much welcome as a Bristol MP. We also plan to expand nature-rich habitats, such as wetlands and peat bogs, including restoring hundreds of thousands of hectares of peatland—we also seek to promote such work internationally.

We are in the middle of London Climate Action Week, and many visitors from Brazil are talking about what they seek to do for their tropical forests' "forever facility" at COP30. I was excited to hear what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said about whales and giant kelp, as I have been talking to my officials about the role they play—it is good to have scientific back-up for my views. During London Climate Action Week, we are focusing on the important role of the voluntary carbon and nature markets in securing investment for blue carbon and our forests.

However, we know that nature-based approaches need to be complemented by engineered solutions to remove carbon dioxide at the speed and scale necessary for us to meet our targets. Many countries agree with us on the important role that GGRs will play, and large-scale removal projects are currently operating or being planned around the world. We are also committed to supporting the deployment of engineered GGRs.

Access to carbon capture, usage and storage infrastructure is vital for many GGR technologies, and the Government are supporting the development of the CCUS network by allocating £9.4 billion in capital budgets over the spending review period. The network needs regulation, and we have an established environmental regulatory regime, with several regulators evaluating the environmental impact of GGR and CCUS projects.

Any GGR project deployed in the UK must comply with the relevant regulations and planning processes to ensure it is managed responsibly and that any environmental impacts are addressed, including impacts on biodiversity, pollution and local communities. We will continue to work with the necessary Departments, regulators and other public bodies to ensure that the UK's regulatory environment is well placed to support the deployment of GGRs without causing environmental harm.

We take the integrity of removals very seriously. A robust GGR standard, including monitoring, reporting and verification, will be crucial in instilling public and investor confidence that removals through engineered GGR projects are genuine and verifiable. In other words, when someone says they have removed 1 tonne of CO₂, at least 1 net tonne of CO₂ must have been removed from the atmosphere once emissions relating to the entire process are taken into account, and we have commissioned the British Standards Institution to develop those assessment methodologies.

Although the petition refers to geo-engineering in a broader sense, solar radiation modification is possibly why it has attracted so many signatures. As I have said, SRM is a set of technologies that could cool the Earth, largely by reflecting some of the sun's energy back into space. However, the consequences of SRM are currently poorly understood, with significant uncertainty about the possible risks and impacts of deployment.

I make it clear for the record that the Government are not deploying solar radiation modification and have no plans to do so. There will be no spraying of chemicals in the skies over the UK for SRM, geo-engineering or climate remediation. Our priority is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from human activities and to adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

However, we do need to understand the potential risks and impacts of SRM. We have a very clear commitment not to deploy it, but we need to understand what would happen if other people chose to. That includes engaging with the Met Office Hadley Centre climate programme, the Natural Environment Research Council and the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, the coverage of whose climate cooling research programme has triggered some of the concerns we are talking about today.

ARIA is an independent research body that was set up by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Although it is sponsored by that Government Department, it has complete autonomy on its project choices, which goes to the point about whether that is the best use of public money, as ARIA is responsible for its own choices. It is conducting cautious, controlled

research aimed at improving the understanding of SRM risks and impacts, but it is not deploying SRM technologies. I say again that its research will not release any toxic materials, nor will it alleviate the urgent need for increased decarbonisation efforts. There is no substitute for decarbonisation, which is why we are pressing on with our missions for clean power and net zero.

The science is clear that, without rapid action, we risk irreversible damage to the planet's biosphere. To halt global warming, the world needs to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions, which includes the UK's emissions. I hope I have reassured the hon. Members present, and the constituents they represent, that the Government are not deploying SRM technologies and have no plans to do so, and that the environmental impacts of greenhouse gas removal technologies—the other wing of geo-engineering—will continue to be monitored as those technologies scale up in the UK.

5.6 pm

Dr Savage: I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) for highlighting possible solutions, particularly the ocean-based solutions that are very dear to my heart.

This debate seems to be one of those rare occasions where we find multi-party consensus. I am tremendously reassured to hear that the Government have no plans to deploy SRM in this country. It was interesting to hear a bit more about the work of ARIA, and I trust that its work will not open a door. Humanity has form, and once we know that something is possible, we are not always very good at holding ourselves back from deploying it. I trust that there will always be the utmost transparency, and I am very reassured to hear about the Government's work with the British Standards Institution to ensure full transparency and accountability in the work done in that domain.

I will wrap up with a personal reflection. During my years of rowing solo across oceans to raise awareness of our climate and nature issues, I learned the hard way that we cannot fight mother nature. We cannot flout her laws and expect to win. Ultimately, she always has the final word, and the wiser path is to work with her. I hope that we will continue to emphasise nature-based solutions, as we can never go wrong with those. I fully appreciate that this is a climate emergency and that urgent action is needed, but let us not forget that mother nature can also be our greatest ally. We urgently need to act, not with hubris, but with humility, courage and care for the wellbeing of future generations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 701963 relating to geo-engineering and the environment.

5.9 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 23 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK Modern Industrial Strategy

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Today the Government have published and laid before Parliament their industrial strategy.

The UK's modern industrial strategy sets out our 10-year plan to transform business investment, grow the industries of the future, deliver economic growth and put more money in people's pockets to deliver our plan for change.

The strategy focuses on the high-growth potential sectors that will drive prosperity now and in the future: advanced manufacturing; professional and business services; clean energy; creative industries; digital and technology; financial services; life sciences; and defence. In tandem with the industrial strategy, the Government are today publishing on www.gov.uk sector plans covering the first five of these sectors, with others to follow in the coming months.

The industrial strategy follows on from the publication in November 2024 of our Green Paper entitled "Invest 2035: the UK's modern Industrial Strategy". Following publication of the Green Paper, the Government have considered the views of thousands of stakeholders from business, industry, academia, unions, local leaders and the public.

Today's publication sets out how we will tackle barriers to investment and growth and make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business.

[HCWS725]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Industrial Strategy: Creative Industries Sector Plan

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I am delighted to update the House on the publication of the Government's Creative Industries Sector Plan. This is a central part of our industrial strategy and our plan for change to drive long-term economic growth across the United Kingdom.

The creative industries are a dynamic growth engine for the UK economy. They contributed 2.4 million jobs and £124 billion in gross value added in 2023 and generate knowledge spillovers that drive innovation and activity across the economy, while our creative clusters boost regional economic growth and create high-quality jobs.

This sector generates substantial economic output with strong potential for continued growth over the coming decades. Data, content, and creative services and experiences are the fastest growing areas of consumption, while new

technologies, audience behaviours and international competition are transforming business models. Our world-class creative industries are uniquely placed to capitalise on these opportunities and our long-standing international comparative advantage.

This is why today we are publishing our sector plan that sets out how we will support the sector to grow over the next decade. By 2035, our goal is to make the UK the No. 1 destination for creativity and innovation in the world. We will boost the UK's position as a global creative superpower and deliver new, high-quality jobs and regional growth.

For too long, the sector has not been given the recognition or backing it deserves. Investments have been seen as too risky, talent has been overlooked and policies and programmes have not reflected the ambition in the sector. Today, we are changing this, announcing £380 million in funding for the sector, including more than doubling my Department's funding for the creative industries over the next spending review period. This includes £200 million for regions outside London and bespoke regional creative clusters to help businesses grow and talent thrive in every part of the UK; £25 million for new "CreaTech" research and development labs; plus screen, music and video games growth packages totalling up to £135 million.

We will champion the unique role of public service media for both growth and democracy. And we will ensure creators, entrepreneurs and innovators are at the heart of our future economy. In doing so, we will ensure the UK is recognised as the best place in the world to make and invest in film and TV, music, performing and visual arts, video games, advertising and beyond.

We are taking action to back our creators and are committed to ensuring they benefit from technological change. That means a copyright regime that values and protects human creativity, builds trust, and opens the door to innovation across the creative sector. We also need to explore other ways to support the creators to license their content. A new creative content exchange, a trusted marketplace for selling, buying, licensing, and enabling permitted access to digitised cultural and creative assets could be part of the solution here.

The Government, working together with industry, is making clear choices to back our regions and back talent everywhere. This is just the beginning of a 10-year journey and our commitment to ensure that we maximise the opportunities and tackle the issues that have long held the sector back from reaching its full potential.

A copy of the "Creative Industries Sector Plan" will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Key Policies

Accelerate Innovation-led growth

UK Research and Innovation will lead efforts to significantly increase public funding for the creative industries, including support for commercialisation and tech adoption.

A £100 million investment in an ambitious next wave of creative clusters to accelerate R&D in new sub-sectors and locations across the UK.

A new creative content exchange as a marketplace for selling, buying, licensing and enabling permitted access to digitised cultural and creative assets.

Growth finance

A significant increase in support from the British Business Bank for the creative industries with debt and equity finance.

A new working group to tackle barriers to IP-backed lending in the creative industries.

An industry-led “single front door” for creative firms to access information on how to unlock private investment, alongside improved Government signposting to resources.

Skilled workforce

Greater flexibility for employers and learners via the new growth and Skills offer, continuing to consider the needs of small businesses.

Deliver a curriculum in England that readies young people for life and work, including in creative subjects and skills, following the independent curriculum and assessment review.

A Government and industry partnership to deliver a refreshed UK-wide £9 million creative careers service.

Trade and export

As committed to at the UK-EU Summit in May, we will support travel and cultural exchange, including the activities of touring artists.

UK Export Finance has up to £80 billion in financing capacity to support UK exports for industrial strategy sectors, including the creative industries.

Increase the number of creative trade missions and markets we target, building on traditional markets like the EU and the United States with fast-growing markets such as Asia-Pacific.

Frontier industries

New £75 million screen, and £30 million video games growth packages over the spending review period to develop and showcase UK screen content and support inward investment.

Up to £10 million per year for a music growth package to support emerging artists, alongside a new industry-led ticket levy on arena gigs to support the grassroots sector.

Co-funding, by Government and private investors including the Walt Disney Company, the Dana and Albert R. Broccoli Foundation and Sky, for the expansion of the National Film and Television School.

Taking action to support public service media, including through BBC Charter Review, to ensure a vibrant domestic screen sector and a BBC that continues to act as an engine of Creative Industries growth across the country.

City regions and clusters

The Government have identified 12 creative clusters across the UK where we will work with local leaders and devolved governments to drive growth.

A new £150 million creative places growth fund devolved to six mayoral strategic authorities to deliver tailored investment readiness support.

Champion London as a “creative industries supercluster”, with the Mayor investing over £10 million over the next four years alongside significant investments including East Bank and Smithfield sites.

[HCWS730]

TREASURY

London Coalition on Sustainable Sovereign Debt

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): Today marks the launch of the London Coalition on Sustainable Sovereign Debt. The coalition, convened by the Sustainable Sovereign Debt Hub and funded by the Children’s investment Fund Foundation, will bring together private sector stakeholders and Government to find pragmatic solutions to more sustainable sovereign debt financing in developing economies. This will include progressing work on debt contract innovations for bonds and loans to promote transparency, orderly

restructurings and more resilient borrowing. Jose Vinals and I will be co-chairs for the coalition. Jose, who will serve in his personal capacity, will be able to draw on his vast experience in both the public and private sectors, most recently as chairperson of Standard Chartered.

The coalition seeks to provide a more formal avenue to engage with private lenders on issues affecting both bonded and non-bonded lending, in order to develop and implement solutions that will ensure that developing economies can access steady, long-term investment from the private sector.

Recognising that the various industry bodies that represent private lenders are not mandated by their memberships to take forward many issues that arise on the global policy agenda, the London coalition seeks to bring together new collaborations among high-ambition private sector market participants to achieve its mission. It has been pleasing to see such interest from our private sector colleagues thus far.

The coalition’s main priorities include making debt contracts clearer and more transparent, improving the way loan terms respond to natural disasters, and addressing problems with group lending practices. In bringing together a wide range of private sector stakeholders, the coalition will tackle broader co-ordination challenges that often arise when restructuring non-bonded debt, with the aim of delivering better outcomes for both borrowers and lenders.

Encouraging fair and open debt restructuring, alongside more resilient borrowing practices, will enable emerging economies to make meaningful progress towards their climate and development goals. The coalition leverages the UK’s strengths in financial services, helping to reinforce its status as a global hub for development finance and supporting economic activity and investment across the country. Direct investment in emerging markets can also drive UK growth by opening new opportunities for British businesses—particularly in financial services—and strengthening trade relationships with rapidly expanding economies in an increasingly uncertain global landscape.

Tackling international sovereign debt challenges is aligned with the UK Government’s plan for change, driving global financial stability while fuelling economic growth and safeguarding national security. By supporting developing countries in managing their debts more sustainably, the UK helps unlock new opportunities for trade, innovation and investment—benefiting British businesses. This leadership not only opens doors to new markets, but helps prevent the kinds of crises that threaten peace and prosperity worldwide, reinforcing the UK’s standing as a champion of responsible finance and a trusted partner.

Looking ahead, the coalition will continue to work collaboratively to develop practical solutions and drive meaningful reform in how countries manage their debts. To achieve this, it will engage closely with a wide range of stakeholders across the official sector, the private sector and the third sector, ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented.

Through ongoing dialogue and partnership, the coalition aims to deliver tangible progress on sustainable sovereign debt financing and support the broader development and climate ambitions of emerging economies.

[HCWS728]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Maternity and Neonatal Services

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I am today announcing that I will be launching a national, independent investigation into maternity and neonatal care.

Although pregnancy and childbirth should be a time of joy, for some people this time can bring anxiety, harm or trauma and, in some cases, profound loss. I have listened to families who shared their experiences of unacceptable care, and they have shared with me the multitude of issues that exist across the system. It is clear that we are not listening as much as we should to women and their partners when they raise concerns—and for some women this is even worse, depending on their skin colour or language. We are not always identifying when things are going wrong in maternity and neonatal units quickly enough, and nor are we tackling these failings at the core. The system as a whole is then not supporting harmed or bereaved families when they rightly seek answers and accountability. Ultimately, we are not providing the care that families deserve. This is not the case across the board as many women receive excellent care. However, it is unacceptable that this is not the experience that all women have. We must urgently reset our approach to maternity and neonatal care.

That is why we are announcing this independent investigation: to understand the systemic issues behind why so many women, babies and families experience unacceptable care, and to rapidly put in place solutions to improve maternity safety and quality.

This will be a rapid investigation and will have two core roles. It will conduct urgent reviews, by the end of this year, of up to 10 trusts where there are specific issues. We will work with families and the NHS to develop criteria for selecting trusts.

Secondly, it will undertake a rapid, systemic investigation into maternity and neonatal care in England, reporting by December 2025. This will synthesise the findings and recommendations from all other reviews to recommend one set of national actions to drive the improvements needed to ensure high-quality care and that women are listened to. I will be engaging with families in determining the membership of the investigation team and its terms of reference.

I am also establishing a national maternity and neonatal taskforce, which I will chair. It will be made up of a breadth of independent clinical and international expertise, with family and charity representatives. It is imperative that this includes the voices of families who have experienced harm or loss, so I will also be continuing to meet families throughout the year. I will also ensure that membership is representative of those who can speak to the inequalities within maternal health.

The recommendations will inform the development of a new, national maternity and neonatal action plan, which we will develop with families. The action plan will lead to rapid improvement of maternity and neonatal quality and safety, and ensure that any families in the future who are harmed or bereaved will get answers about what happened, see that lessons are learnt and that there is accountability where appropriate.

In relation to calls for local reviews, I have informed families that this work will include a review into nine specific cases at University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust. I am currently discussing with Leeds families the best way to grip the challenges brought to light in that trust by their campaigning, reports in the media, and the latest Care Quality Commission report.

We must also act now to resolve the issues we know exist. Repeated inquiries have identified significant issues across services, from a lack of compassionate care, concerns over safety, and issues in culture and leadership, and there remain stark inequalities faced by women in deprived areas or of black and Asian ethnicity.

This is why, alongside the independent investigation, I am taking immediate measures to start changes so desperately needed. We are introducing measures to hold the system to greater account and improve transparency. The worst-performing trusts will be held to account by the NHS chief executive, to ensure that the necessary improvements are made faster and deeper. This year we will introduce a new early warning system, powered by a real-time data tool, to detect safety issues earlier and allow action to be taken more swiftly to improve outcomes.

To improve safety, we will roll out new best practice standards to tackle the leading causes of maternal mortality and morbidity. We are also taking action to reduce the stark and completely unacceptable inequalities in maternity care. We will deliver an anti-discrimination programme to support trust leadership, ensuring that all families and staff will experience an environment free from discrimination and racism, and benefit ethnic minority mothers. These actions will support our manifesto commitment to set a target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gap.

Through the investigation, and these immediate actions, I want to challenge and support maternity and neonatal services to provide compassionate, high-quality care to all families at their most vulnerable and life-changing moments.

[HCWS726]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Legislation: Codes of Practice

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): On 17 March 2025, the Government initiated a consultation on the codes of practice related to schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000 and schedule 3 to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. This consultation proposed several changes aimed at clarifying the use of these powers and the rights and protections of individuals subject to them. Additionally, where appropriate, it suggested additional safeguards to ensure the appropriate use of these powers. The consultation concluded on 27 April 2025.

The consultation process included a public consultation, made available on www.gov.uk, that invited comments from police forces, interest groups and the general public on the proposed changes. It also involved virtual events with frontline police officers who are trained and accredited to use schedules 7 and 3, ensuring that the codes, which detail how these powers should be used, are well understood by those who operate them.

The Government have meticulously reviewed the responses received and have today published their response. A copy of the response to the consultation has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available on www.gov.uk.

I am grateful to everyone who participated in this consultation, particularly the frontline officers who attended the Home Office's events. With the publication of the response, we will proceed to amend the codes through secondary legislation at the next available opportunity.

[HCWS727]

Palestine Action: Proscription

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): I have decided to proscribe Palestine Action under section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000. A draft proscription order will be laid in Parliament on Monday 30 June. If passed, it will make it illegal to be a member of, or to invite support for, Palestine Action.

This decision is specific to Palestine Action and does not affect lawful protest groups and other organisations campaigning on issues around Palestine or the middle east.

The disgraceful attack on Brize Norton in the early hours of the morning on Friday 20 June is the latest in a long history of unacceptable criminal damage committed by Palestine Action. The UK's defence enterprise is vital to the nation's national security and this Government will not tolerate those who put that security at risk. Counter Terrorism Policing is leading the criminal investigation into this attack. It is important that this process is free from interference and that the police are allowed to carry out their important work gathering evidence and working to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Since its inception in 2020, Palestine Action has orchestrated a nationwide campaign of direct criminal action against businesses and institutions, including key national infrastructure and defence firms that provide services and supplies to support Ukraine, NATO, Five Eyes allies and the UK defence enterprise. Its activity has increased in frequency and severity since the start of 2024 and its methods have become more aggressive, with its members demonstrating a willingness to use violence. Palestine Action has also broadened its targets from the defence industry to include financial firms, charities, universities and Government buildings. Its activities meet the threshold set out in the statutory tests established under the Terrorism Act 2000. This has been assessed through a robust, evidence-based process, by a wide range of experts from across Government, the police and the security services.

In several attacks, Palestine Action has committed acts of serious damage to property with the aim of progressing its political cause and influencing the Government. These include attacks at Thales in Glasgow in 2022; and last year at Instro Precision in Kent and Elbit Systems UK in Bristol. The seriousness of these attacks includes the extent and nature of damage caused, including to targets affecting UK national security, and the impact on innocent members of the public fleeing for safety and subjected to violence. The extent of damage across these three attacks alone, spreading the length and breadth of the UK, runs into the millions of pounds.

During Palestine Action's attack against the Thales defence factory in Glasgow in 2022, the group caused over a million pounds-worth of damage, including to parts essential to submarines. The sheriff, in passing custodial sentences for the attackers' violent crimes, spoke of the panic among staff, who feared for their safety as pyrotechnics and smoke bombs were thrown in the area where they were evacuating. He further recorded the extent of damage to legitimate business activities, which included "matters of nationwide security" and disputed the group's claims that its actions were non-violent. The attacks at Elbit Systems in Bristol and Instro Precision in Kent remain sub judice. To avoid prejudicing future criminal trials, the Government will not comment on the specifics of these incidents.

Palestine Action has provided practical advice to assist its members with conducting attacks that have resulted in serious damage to property. In late 2023, Palestine Action released "The Underground Manual". The document encourages the creation of cells; provides practical guidance on how to carry out activity against private companies and Government buildings on behalf of Palestine Action; and provides a link to a website that contains a map of specific targets across the UK. The manual encourages members to undertake operational security measures to protect the covert nature of their activity.

Through its media output, Palestine Action publicises and promotes its attacks involving serious property damage, as well as celebrating the perpetrators.

Palestine Action's online presence has enabled the organisation to galvanise support, recruit and train members across the UK to take part in criminal activity and raise considerable funds through online donations. The group has a footprint in all 45 policing regions in the UK and has pledged to escalate its campaign.

It is vitally important that those seeking to protest peacefully, including pro-Palestinian groups, those opposing the actions of the Israeli Government, and those demanding changes in the UK's foreign policy, can continue to do so. The right to peaceful protest is a cornerstone of our democracy. Should Parliament vote to proscribe, that right will be unaffected.

What it will do is to enable law enforcement to effectively disrupt the escalating actions of this serious group. Only last month, Palestine Action claimed responsibility for an attack against a Jewish-owned business in north London, where the glass front of the building was smashed and the building and floor defaced with red-paint, including the slogan "drop Elbit". Such incidents do not represent legitimate or peaceful protest. Regardless of whether this incident itself amounts to terrorism, such activity is clearly intimidatory and unacceptable. It is one that has been repeated many times by this organisation, at sites the length and breadth of the UK.

I have considered carefully the nature and scale of Palestine Action's activity. Proscription represents a legitimate response to the threat posed by Palestine Action. The first duty of Government is to keep our country safe, which is the foundation of our plan for change.

Given significant public concern over recent activities by this group, including the incident in Brize Norton last week, and balancing the relevant considerations, I have decided to confirm this decision to proscribe to the House in advance of laying the relevant order.

[HCWS729]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Authority Governance

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Today, I am updating Parliament on the Government's plans to review governance arrangements for local authorities in England. Our goal is to ensure that local communities have the right mechanisms to engage effectively with their councils.

In the English Devolution White Paper, the Government committed to establishing consistent and accountable structures across local government. We are considering which governance models available to local authorities will best support their decision-making processes and will provide more detail on this shortly.

The English Devolution White Paper also committed to creating new opportunities for communities to have a say in the future of their area and to play a part in improving it. To support this, we will review how local authorities can integrate community engagement into their core functions. We are keen to work with the sector to co-design an approach which balances the need for consistent structures with local flexibility.

This programme of reform will create fewer but more empowered councils, frontline councillors and partners working hand in glove with the communities they serve, and support preventative and early intervention approaches, which are critical to the sustainability of local government and in driving better outcomes in the neighbourhoods where local people are invested. Local people will know exactly where to take local problems and solutions, and can work with their frontline councillors to drive visible improvements in the places they are invested in.

When these reforms are implemented, alongside devolution to new regional mayors and strategic authorities, and local government reorganisation, they will ensure that the right powers are in the right places. Locally, they will mean that people across England, regardless of where they live, will be able to take issues or concerns to empowered frontline local councillors. These councillors will have a clear and accountable route to act on them, either through neighbourhood structures or by taking them to the cabinet member responsible for the issue.

Every place will benefit from our agenda to decentralise power from Whitehall to local leaders. People will see the impact in more regular bus services, more affordable housing, and the presence of local champions with regional influence or frontline councillors championing their neighbourhoods.

[HCWS731]

Written Correction

Monday 23 June 2025

Ministerial Correction

TRANSPORT

HS2 Reset

The following extract is from the statement on the HS2 Reset on 18 June 2025.

Ruth Cadbury: I also thank the Secretary of State for the decisive action she has taken to address the causes of HS2's cost overruns. We look forward to having Mark Wild and the Rail Minister at our Committee very shortly.

I actually want to celebrate something that HS2's leadership should be proud of: the work they have done on skills and workforce innovation. They have provided best-practice work that the construction industry and transport projects can learn from, and in fact are learning from. However, I urge the Secretary of State to get her Department to learn from countries such as France and

Spain, which have managed to deliver extensive high-speed rail projects to time and at a fraction of the cost of HS2 here in the UK.

Heidi Alexander: I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for her comments. She is right to recognise the excellent work that HS2 has done on skills and the workforce. We have over 300,000 people working on this project at the moment, and I think that HS2 has done good work on opening up opportunities, whether through apprenticeships for the next generation or through the supply chain. I will heed my hon. Friend's advice about learning from the speed and ease with which other countries deliver infrastructure projects.

[*Official Report*, 18 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 382.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander):

Heidi Alexander: I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for her comments. She is right to recognise the excellent work that HS2 has done on skills and the workforce. We have over **30,000** people working on this project at the moment, and I think that HS2 has done good work on opening up opportunities, whether through apprenticeships for the next generation or through the supply chain. I will heed my hon. Friend's advice about learning from the speed and ease with which other countries deliver infrastructure projects.

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