

Monday
14 July 2025

Volume 771
No. 172



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 14 July 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 771

TWENTIETH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 14 July 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leasehold Reform

1. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform the leasehold system. [905164]

8. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform the leasehold system. [905171]

11. **Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform the leasehold system. [905174]

21. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform the leasehold system. [905185]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): May I start by sending my thoughts and prayers to everyone involved in yesterday's incident at Southend airport?

We remain committed to giving leaseholders greater rights, powers and protections in respect of their homes, and bringing the feudal leasehold system to an end. We have made significant progress, implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 and, this month, launching a consultation to strengthen leaseholder protections when it comes to charges and services. We are delivering, but we will go further; we will publish a draft leasehold and commonhold Bill later this year. This week, the High Court will hear challenges to some of the enfranchisement reforms in the 2024 Act; we will defend those challenges robustly, and will await the Court's judgment.

Andrew Pakes: I have been contacted by more than 300 residents in Peterborough about problems relating to FirstPort's leasehold and management service charges. They face unfair charges, a lack of transparency, bad communication and poor services. Residents in, for example, Hammonds Drive and Manor Drive are fed up with getting a second-class service. What is my right hon. Friend doing to help residents in places like Peterborough get the peace of mind and justice that they so deserve?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Many Members from across the House have found that too many leaseholders suffer as a result of poor-quality services from managing agents. We are consulting on proposals to strengthen the regulation of managing agents, including a proposal to make minimum professional qualifications mandatory.

Kevin Bonavia: My constituent Ed, a leaseholder in Monument Court, Stevenage, has been trapped for years in an unsellable flat after the building failed its EWS1 assessment because Higgins Homes had not followed its own architectural plans. He has faced uncapped and unregulated service charges and utility billing, and the threat of disconnection, while seeing the saleable value of his property decrease by more than £70,000. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing a statutory route through which people like Ed can pursue legal action against a developer without bearing the full cost burden?

Angela Rayner: I am very sorry to hear about Ed's situation. The Building Safety Act 2022 protects qualifying leaseholders from uncapped costs relating to non-cladding remediation. When remediation is not progressing, leaseholders can apply to the tribunal for remediation orders, which can compel relevant landlords to fix relevant defects in their buildings, as well as for remediation contribution orders, which require developers to pay towards the costs of the remediation.

Sam Carling: At Fletton Quays in my constituency, managed by Gateway Properties, leasehold residents are reporting that service charges have increased by as much as 150% in the last two years. Flats are under warranty and faults should be fixed by Weston Homes, which built the property, but instead are being fixed by Gateway, which has increased the service charge and, I understand, has even been sending separate bills on top. I know that the Government have been keen to address issues relating to high service charges and the need for financial transparency for leaseholders; can the Secretary of State provide an update on that work?

Angela Rayner: Unjustified service charges are wholly unacceptable, and I strongly recommend that the homeowners obtain legal advice. The Leasehold Advisory Service, for instance, gives free legal advice to leaseholders. Developers are typically responsible for rectifying defects within the first two years of the warranty period; even if no warranty claim is made, developers are still liable, and should not pass charges on to leaseholders. Unreasonable service charges may be challenged at the first-tier tribunal.

Peter Swallow: Through the Government's landmark Renters' Rights Bill, we are doing much to address the inequities of the rental sector for constituents in Bracknell and across the country—for instance, we are extending the right to request a pet. Now the Government are turning our attention to reforming leasehold. My right hon. Friend will know that many leaseholders are also blocked from having a pet by a clause in their head lease. What can we do to deal with that?

Angela Rayner: I know that my hon. Friend has already spoken to the Minister for Housing and Planning about this issue, and that those discussions will continue. As you well know, Mr Speaker, pets bring joy, happiness and comfort to their owners, while also supporting their mental and physical wellbeing. We have strengthened the rights of private tenants to keep pets in the Renters' Rights Bill, and we will of course keep the position of leaseholders with pets under review.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Leasehold residents of Marlborough House in Maidenhead found that their developer had entered liquidation, leaving £250,000 in section 106 payments outstanding, as well as massive defects in the development. Leaseholders fear that the authorities will ask them for the section 106 money, and that the costs of finishing the development will fall on their shoulders. Given that some developers have poor track records, with dozens of companies going into liquidation, how can we strengthen leasehold legislation to ensure that future leaseholders do not have the same problems as those in Marlborough House?

Angela Rayner: It is frustrating when we hear of situations like this, which is why it is our intention to publish the draft leasehold and commonhold reform Bill in the second half of this year. I hope the hon. Member will contribute his views on it, so that we can build on the proposals that the previous Government brought forward. They needed extra work, as I mentioned in my opening answer, but hopefully we can start to deal with this issue, so that leaseholders get the protection that they deserve.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): At a recent surgery, a constituent brought to me the leasehold problems that she is experiencing with her housing association. Despite paying a considerable amount in service charges, leaseholders have been whacked with a £7,000 bill for improvements to the property's roof, with the expectation that they will pay within 30 days of completion. There was limited consultation, and leaseholders had no choice in who carried out the works. What does the Secretary of State advise my constituent to do?

Angela Rayner: Again, the consultation exercise that we are undertaking is about how we deal with such matters. I hope the hon. Member will work with us during the consultation period, so that we can bring forward the draft legislation and get this matter right. We hear these stories time and again, and we need to fix this problem and protect leaseholders.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers. The issues with the leasehold system, and the need for legal protection for everyone, have been set out in debates in Westminster Hall and this Chamber, and I very much welcome the Government's commitment to changes. The leasehold system here is slightly different from that in Northern Ireland, but the legal protections need to be the same. I have a very simple question for the Secretary of State: will she have discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that what happens here can happen for us in Northern Ireland, and that we will be given the same protection?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We do work with the devolved nations, not just to show them what we are doing, but to learn from them. We have seen that the housing situation is not an England-only situation; the issues affect the whole of the UK, and we all need to learn from each other. Hopefully, the reforms that we are bringing through will be informed by the devolved nations, but we will also have some learnings for them. We need to work together in lockstep to protect people, wherever they are in the United Kingdom.

Housing Associations: Repairs

2. **Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to help support housing associations in the timely remediation of unsafe properties. [905165]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): In June, we announced over £1 billion of investment to accelerate cladding remediation by giving social landlords the same access to Government remediation schemes as

that afforded to private building owners. We will shortly publish revised guidelines on how to access the funding, and a joint plan with social landlords and regulators, in order to accelerate remediation and improve resident experience.

Tulip Siddiq: May I thank the Minister and his Department for pushing forward Awaab's law? It cannot come soon enough, especially the 24-hour deadline for dealing with mould and damp, and especially for my constituent Yasmin, who has been living in an unacceptable situation with very young children for four years. However, I have real concerns about how ready housing associations are to implement the regulations, which are coming in very soon, in October. I have raised this issue with the National Housing Federation, but what assessment has the Minister made of housing associations' ability to fully comply with all the regulations under Awaab's law by October, so that we can ensure that all my constituents can live in a safe and healthy environment?

Alex Norris: First of all, may I say how sorry I am to hear that my hon. Friend's constituent Yasmin has been living in those conditions for so long? We have published draft guidance for social landlords to make sure that they understand the requirements under Awaab's law. As my hon. Friend would expect, we are working very closely with them to support their operational readiness. We took a phased approach, but we are encouraging social landlords to act now. They should raise any concerns with us now, so that we can consider how to best support them. In the meantime, they must meet their existing legal obligations.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On the importance of enforcing Awaab's law, there are homes in my constituency that are damp, mouldy and publicly owned, but not by housing associations; they are owned by the hospitals trust, and include accommodation for nurses and their families. Can the Minister clarify the remit of this law, and the extent of his power and control in this area? Will he urge all public sector landlords to make sure that they comply with Awaab's law, so that our nurses can bring up their families in places that are safe, clean and decent?

Alex Norris: I do not think it is any secret that I, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Housing Minister are very hard on all our partners, including the public sector, in order to make sure that they do their job. The hon. Gentleman raises a very important concern, and the Housing Minister will write to him on it.

Housing Delivery

3. **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase housing delivery. [905166]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government's plan for change includes a hugely ambitious target of building 1.5 million new homes in England in this Parliament. In the 12 months we have been in office, we have taken decisive steps to boost housing supply, including overhauling the national planning policy framework and introducing the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which will further streamline the delivery of new homes, as well as critical infrastructure.

Danny Beales: It is welcome to once again have a Government who believe in house building. I thank the Minister for his comments. When I speak to house builders, one of the issues they raise with me is the performance of the Building Safety Regulator. Shovel-ready projects that have planning permission are delayed at gateway 2, and checks that should take a matter of weeks are taking months, if not years. What is the Department doing to manage the performance of the regulator, ensure it has the resources it needs, and hold it to account, so that we get spades in the ground as soon as possible?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the operation of the Building Safety Regulator, which, while essential to upholding building safety standards, is causing delays in handling applications for building projects, and is having an impact on new supply in London. I hope he will take comfort not only from the £2 million the Government allocated to the BSR in February, but from the targeted package of reforms we announced last month, including the establishment of a new fast-track process to reduce delays and strengthen leadership and governance.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Government promised to increase housing delivery through grey-belt, not green-belt, development. Grey belt was described as "poor quality land, car parks and wasteland."

However, since the new guidance was published, Hertsmere has been inundated with applications that simply seek to rebrand green belt as grey belt. The lack of clarity and the inconsistent application of the rules mean that such applications are hard to resist. Will the Minister provide greater clarity and tighten the rules before large swathes of Radlett, Bushey, Shenley, Potters Bar and Borehamwood succumb to urban sprawl?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He cited the planning practice guidance we have issued, which has a very clear definition of the grey belt and the rules for it. When it comes to plan making, local authorities must take a sequential approach. On decision making for applications outside of local plans, he will know that we have imposed very strict laws to ensure viability assessments are not used on those sites. Where development comes forward and is judged to be appropriate by decision makers—and by the Planning Inspectorate in appeals—those golden rules will also ensure high levels of affordable housing, infrastructure and access to green space.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the Government's bold and ambitious plan to deliver more housing, especially affordable and social homes, in Wandsworth. The council is already delivering homes, but of the 800 homes in its plan, only 50 are accessible for wheelchairs. How will the Government deliver more accessible homes, and will the Minister agree to raise the default standard to the M4(2) standard of accessibility and adaptation, so that everybody has the opportunity to live in a safe and accessible home?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have a vague memory of certain parliamentary questions asking much the same, and I refer her to those

answers. We want to ensure that all people have accessible homes. We are considering the M4(2) standard, and we will make announcements in due course about the accessibility of new homes in general.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): When the Minister has met major house builders, what have they told him about the chances of hitting the Government's target of building 1.5 million new houses in this Parliament?

Matthew Pennycook: Those house builders have expressed their confidence, and their gratitude for the reforms that the Government have carried out. It is slightly peevish of the right hon. Lady, who stood for election on a manifesto that committed her party to 1.6 million homes, to say that our 1.5 million homes target is unachievable. We quite regularly hear from Conservative Members that we are concreting over every inch of England, but at the same time that we cannot meet our targets. We will meet that target of 1.5 million homes.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Lord knows who the Housing Minister is talking to, because time and again, developers have said that he cannot achieve his target of 1.5 million homes. As he knows, I have severe doubts about his ability to meet such unrealistic housing targets, and I suspect the Opposition will be proven right. However, if he does succeed, the quality of new homes must be maintained. Will he do what the New Homes Quality Board is calling for, and ensure mandatory board membership for developers of all shapes and sizes, and an empowered ombudsman, so that home occupiers are protected?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the shadow Minister for that question. He is absolutely right that our target of 1.5 million new homes, which is extremely stretching—we have never said anything other than that—does not entail units at any cost. The design and quality of new homes and new places are incredibly important. He rightly cites the new homes code of practice, and we are giving consideration in the round to whether that can be strengthened—for example, whether it needs to be put on a statutory footing. In general, we want to drive up the quality of new homes in the places and communities we are creating.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The Competition and Markets Authority recently found that major house builders were preventing and distorting competition, including by matching prices and incentives to buyers. That further damages public confidence in house buying, and will have pushed home ownership out of the reach of many people. House builders have agreed to pay £100 million towards affordable housing schemes, but what redress is available for homeowners who have been misled? How will the Government achieve oversight of that funding to ensure that builders are held accountable, the additional homes are delivered, and there are effective disincentives to stop this happening again?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Lady draws the attention of the House to an incredibly important point. The Government are clear that the house building sector can thrive only when there is fair and open competition. Where that is found not to be the case, it is right that the CMA acts decisively, as it has done in this instance by extracting £100 million for social and affordable housing from the seven house builders investigated. We are taking action to fix our broken housing system, as I have said, by overhauling the planning system, addressing our dysfunctional land market, and ending our over-reliance on a speculative model of development that produces sub-optimal outcomes and constrains housing supply. If she has evidence of any individuals being directly affected in the purchase of their home, I would be very grateful if she could bring it to my attention.

Council Tax Revenue: Student Accommodation

4. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of reductions in council tax revenue from student houses in multiple occupation on local authorities. [905167]

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): The Government believe it is right that students are disregarded for council tax. If the only residents of a household are full-time students, the dwelling will be exempt. In the recently published fair funding review 2.0, the Government proposed to fully account for the impact of student exemptions in the distribution of the settlement.

Wera Hobhouse: In 2013, my Bath council received £31 million through the revenue support grant. This year, it is just around £1 million. Students, who are exempt from council tax, are not being counted. Will the Minister ensure that, through the fair funding review, the issue is urgently addressed, and that councils such as Bath and North East Somerset are not missing out entirely on central Government support?

Jim McMahon: The fair funding review will do what it says on the tin: it will make sure that, for the first time ever, all component pressures that councils face in delivering public services, and in raising money locally, are taken into account. It is wrong that while this Parliament can decide on national exemptions that councils have to apply, which limit their ability to raise council tax locally, we do not account for that in the distribution of funding that follows. For the first time, we will do that.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool is a university city, and I have three universities in my constituency. Liverpool city council is estimated to lose £9 million in council tax revenue each year due to student exemptions. Will the Minister explain when and how those anomalies will be dealt with, so that the council does not lose that amount of funding every year?

Jim McMahon: The fair funding review 2.0 is out to consultation. We welcome contributions to the consultation from Members, local authorities and others. At heart, we want to fully account for the ability of an area to raise income locally. Nationally, there are 245,000 student exempt dwellings and 77,000 halls of residence. It is quite right that we take that into account when we assess how much council tax can be raised locally. In some cities and towns, that will make quite a material difference.

Homelessness Prevention

5. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase funding for homelessness prevention services. [905168]

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking with local councils to prevent homelessness. [905170]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): The Government have increased funding for homelessness services by £233 million, bringing the total to nearly £1 billion. The 2025 spending review protected that level of investment until 2028-29, and provided £100 million of additional funding from the transformation fund.

Patrick Hurley: The number of people in the UK who have no recourse to public funds has increased significantly in recent years. Lots of those people end up falling through the cracks in the system—some of them perhaps end up rough sleeping, and some engage in antisocial behaviour—but the one thing they all have in common is that they do not have the support needed to regularise their lifestyle, and there is not the enforcement that is needed to remove them from their situation. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken to ensure that people with no recourse to public funds are not left in a bureaucratic limbo, which helps nobody?

Rushanara Ali: It is important that migrants coming to the UK should be able to maintain and accommodate themselves without recourse to public funds. We encourage councils to exhaust all options when working with people with restricted eligibility for public funds. The funding for the rough sleeping prevention and recovery grant can be used to help anyone, provided actions are within the law.

Dr Huq: London boroughs now spend £4 million a day on temporary accommodation. While costs and rough sleeping have soared, central Government subsidy has been frozen for 14 years, pushing councils to the brink of bankruptcy. Do my hon. Friends on the Front Bench agree that it is time to lift the 2011 Tory cap, so that London councils can get the support they need to make homelessness history?

Rushanara Ali: The Department for Work and Pensions keeps the level of housing benefit subsidy for temporary accommodation under review, and any future decisions will be informed by the Government's wider housing ambitions, including tackling homelessness, and the broader fiscal context. Our fair funding review 2.0 consultation sets out our proposals to target money where it is most needed and will account for temporary accommodation costs.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Homelessness is a huge issue in my constituency, where housing costs are among the highest in the country and people cannot find social and affordable housing. The business rates reset proposed under the fair funding review would potentially lead to a 42% decrease in the net resources available to the council. Can the Minister

assure those living in the Cherwell district council area that the fair funding review will include protected support for tackling homelessness?

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we inherited a homelessness crisis, with record levels of people in temporary accommodation. Rough sleeping has gone up by 164% since 2010. The previous Labour Government cut homelessness and rough sleeping dramatically. We are investing to tackle the root causes of homelessness, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on those issues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Recent figures provided by CHAIN report a record 13,231 people sleeping rough in London—a 19% increase in the year since this Government took office, and a 63% increase since Sadiq Khan took office as Mayor of London. What conversations has the Minister had with the Mayor of London to tackle this failure in leadership, and will she commit to eliminating rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament? After a year of this Government, it has gone up.

Rushanara Ali: I gently remind the shadow Minister that rough sleeping has gone up by 164% since 2010, and that it was cut by two thirds by the previous Labour Government.

Paul Holmes: What about this one?

Rushanara Ali: Why does the hon. Gentleman not apologise for his party's record of 14 years of failure? We are taking action to tackle the root causes of rough sleeping and homelessness. He should apologise for the failures of his Government.

Elections: Participation

6. **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): What steps she plans to take to help to increase participation in UK elections. [905169]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): This Government are committed to increasing participation in our democracy. We will give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote in all elections, giving them a say in shaping their future. Where we find barriers to participation, we will work with the electoral sector and other stakeholders to tackle them.

Lisa Smart: I recently had the pleasure of getting a robust grilling from some 16 and 17-year-olds from Aquinas sixth-form college in my constituency, which left me filled with optimism and a real sense that our democracy is in good hands. My worry, though, is that these sixth-formers and young people like them might lose their enthusiasm for our democracy and for voting because they feel that our first-past-the-post voting system leads to politicians taking a majority of power on a minority of votes. With more than 40% of MPs elected with under 40% of the votes cast in their constituency, does the Minister agree with her own Government's statement on why they are scrapping first past the post for mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections, and should we expect a different voting system when the Aquinas sixth-formers vote at the next general election?

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Her party had the opportunity when in government to introduce electoral reform. This Government are focused on ensuring that young people are enfranchised. I look forward to working with her to deliver votes at 16 for young people in our country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited some wonderfully politically engaged sixth-formers at Sir Frederick Gibberd college in Harlow, including Luka and Finlay, who shadowed some of my office staff last week. Does the Minister agree that giving 16 and 17-year olds the vote will help to build a lifelong habit of democratic engagement and participation?

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence shows that when young people participate in politics, it positively affects them through their lifetime and increases participation. Young people can pay tax and join the Army at 16, so it is right that they should have a say in how our country is governed.

Deprived Areas: Funding

10. **Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to ensure that areas with higher levels of deprivation receive adequate funding. [905173]

18. **Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to ensure that areas with higher levels of deprivation receive adequate funding. [905181]

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): We are committed to improving how we assess need to ensure that central Government funding is distributed fairly to the places that need it most. We began at the last settlement with the £600 million recovery grant, and subject to the fair funding review 2.0 consultation, our proposed reforms mean that the most relatively deprived places will see larger increases in income than the least deprived places.

Adam Jogee: Newcastle-under-Lyme is at the heart of our industrial heartlands. In communities such as Silverdale, Knutton and Cross Heath, we see higher levels of health inequality and lower levels of life expectancy than in many wealthier areas. These communities were let down by those who went before us and were left behind. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how best to support industrial communities like mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme, so that we can finally tackle this entrenched inequality?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. There are two aspects to this. First, we must make sure that places get the investment they need to realise their full potential. We are working on that with our plan for communities, which the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris) is engaged in. But that has to be built on fair funding at the base of what the local authority does. There was nothing fair at all about the

previous Government impoverishing councils in the most deprived communities, sending many to the wire. We are putting that right.

Dr Tidball: I am grateful to the Minister, who has named Barnsley's local authority in the £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods. The spending review has confirmed neighbourhood-level investment for 350 deprived communities. However, Chapeltown and High Green in my constituency have communities in the bottom 10% nationally in the indices of multiple deprivation, while Dodworth has a community within the bottom 20% nationally. These areas would benefit significantly from neighbourhood-level investment to build a sense of pride in place for my constituents. Will the Minister consider including these three communities among the 275 areas that are yet to be announced?

Jim McMahon: I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley has heard those diligent representations. It is true that many parts of our country have talent and potential that are not being met by opportunity. This fund is about making sure that every area has seed investment to begin to rebuild, supported by fair funding for the local authority. We cannot underestimate the effect of the 14 years of constant hits and attacks from the previous Government. There is a reason why many communities have the resilience to stand up for themselves regardless of all that: the power of their unity. Finally, they now have a Government on their side.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is often harder to see because it is more sparsely spread across larger rural areas, but I remind the Minister of what I know he knows: deprivation exists in our rural areas. Can I urge him to ensure that this does not become an issue of north versus south or urban versus rural, but that the Government use taxes to address deprivation wherever and whenever it arises, including in my constituency?

Jim McMahon: I thank the former Minister for those representations. On the point about fair funding and unpicking where money is needed, there is a lot of commonality on this issue in the Chamber. We absolutely accept that in rural areas the cost of service delivery is higher in some cases, such as for refuse collection and adult social care. It is common sense that if people have to travel further to pick up bins or make a home care visit, it will cost more money as a result.

However, that is not the only thing we need to take into account. We must take into account deprivation and the ability of a council to raise money at a local level. Daytime visitor numbers are also a factor, where a council is not getting a tax take from those visitors but there is a public service take on the other side. Importantly, we must consider the ability of a local authority to raise tax at a local level to meet the demand. It is the Government's job to act as an equaliser in the system.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is absolutely right that funding follows need, but may I gently urge the Minister to look at how the proposed new funding formula for local authorities affects boroughs across London, given that it does not consider housing costs, which we know are the biggest driver of poverty and deprivation in London?

Jim McMahon: We are in a consultation now, so we are willing and ready to hear representations, but many people—I am not accusing the hon. Member of this—have jumped to conclusions based on headlines that are not supported by the evidence when we track where money ultimately goes. All the matters that she rightly said need to be taken into account are taken into account. In the consultation, we have included the cost of temporary accommodation in the base formula for the first time ever, so she will find that outer-London boroughs in particular will benefit from that. So far, they have been underappreciated for the cost of that pressure.

Planning System: Community Involvement

12. **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): What plans she has to increase community involvement in the planning process. [905175]

22. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What plans she has to increase community involvement in the planning process. [905186]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government strongly encourage broad community engagement in the planning process, and we want to see greater public participation in the development of local plans in particular. We are currently exploring new ways to increase and enhance community engagement in the planning process, including by improving access to planning data through its digitisation.

Harriet Cross: I am sure the Minister agrees it is vital that local residents' concerns are properly listened to, especially on major planning decisions. Having listened to many constituents in places such as New Deer, Kintore and Rothienorman who are facing huge amounts of energy infrastructure, I tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that would have created a statutory duty of consultation for infrastructure in Scotland. In Committee, the Minister argued against it and said that the Scottish Government's discretionary power was satisfactory. Will he please explain why the Government believe that a discretionary power, which my constituents fear will simply be ignored, provides meaningful engagement while the statutory right that I proposed would not?

Matthew Pennycook: I can do no better than to draw the hon. Lady's attention to the extensive remarks that I made in the Bill Committee.

Sarah Bool: In Towcester, when the DHL development was going through planning, more than 1,100 residents submitted objections to the council, thousands signed petitions, I spoke on their behalf as their MP against the plans and locally elected councillors voted 11 to one against it at the strategic planning committee meeting, but it was ultimately approved on appeal. Residents, naturally, are losing faith in engaging in the system. The Minister referred in a written question to there being a more democratic plan-led system taking in larger numbers of voices. In our case, how many more residents would need to be involved to have an impact?

Matthew Pennycook: I think that the hon. Lady—if I followed her argument—was speaking about objections lodged to an individual planning application. We are making no changes to that process. Residents all over

the country will still be able to object to any planning application that comes forward. We are making sensible changes to improve the certainty and speed at which planning decisions will be taken, with a two-tier approach—a consultation is live at the moment to which she can offer input—but when it comes to local plans, which are a slightly separate issue, we are looking to encourage greater participation upstream. Local plans are the best means by which local communities can shape the development coming forward in their area.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, the Tees Valley Mayor's development corporation has removed planning powers for large swathes of the town from all democratic control. In turn, much of the planning function has been outsourced to a private company with no connection to Hartlepool, which is ruling out any community involvement. Will the Minister look at curbing the powers of development corporations so that planning remains in the hands of democratically elected politicians?

Matthew Pennycook: I note my hon. Friend's concerns in relation to the Tees Valley. In general, we are looking to streamline the powers given to development corporations—we took measures in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to allow them, for example, to shape transport in areas—but if he wants to write to me or Ministers to raise more of the specifics of that case, we would be more than happy to take a look.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Community support is always vital for development, and with 95% of planning applications already decided by officials under delegated powers, it is clear that that democratic voice can be missing. Can the Minister tell the House why, taking that in tandem with the devolution White Paper, which envisages abolishing around 75% of councillors who represent their local residents on planning committees in England, local communities do not deserve more of a say, rather than less, in the planning process?

Matthew Pennycook: We do want local communities to have more of a say, particularly when it comes to the development of local plans, which are, as I have said, the best means for local communities to shape development in their areas. When it comes to the national scheme of delegation, which is the point the hon. Gentleman is really driving at, he knows that as things stand every local authority across the country has its own scheme of delegation. There is a huge amount of variation there. There is good practice and bad practice, and—as we debated at great length in the Bill Committee—we think there is a strong case for a national scheme of delegation to improve certainty and the speed of planning decisions. He is more than welcome to respond to the consultation that is live at present.

Community Regeneration Funding: Scotland

13. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What discussions she has had with local authorities in Scotland on community regeneration funding. [905176]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): We are committed to investing across all four nations and are delivering regeneration funding to many communities across Scotland, including the hon. Gentleman's. I have met representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which speaks for Scottish authorities, on a couple of occasions, and I really value its partnership and insight.

Torcuil Crichton: The £20 million community regeneration partnership with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Western Isles council, will help develop the marine economy of Vatersay and Barra, the cultural heritage of Eriskay and North Uist and the spinal route through the islands. It puts islanders in the driving seat using the muscle of the UK Government. Does the Minister agree that this is a template for other UK Government Departments and their relationships with Scottish councils, and does it not stand in contrast with the game of thrones being played by the Scottish National party Government, who hoard decision making and money in Edinburgh?

Alex Norris: I note the passion with which my hon. Friend speaks about this. His leadership is going to be crucial to the success of this project. It speaks exactly to why we have taken the approach we are taking: we need local communities in charge. They are the experts on their lives and on what they need, and they should be in the driving seat. That is why we will work with them on this project, and through our plans set out in the spending review we will put that at the heart of everything we do.

High Streets

14. **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What steps she is taking to support high streets. [905177]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): We are committed to rejuvenating our high streets and town centres. That includes tackling empty shops through high street rental auctions and legislating for a community right to buy to protect precious assets. That is set out in the spending review, providing funding to up to 350 places to help communities drive forward the changes they want to see in their areas.

Julia Lopez: I hear what the Minister is saying, but our high streets are under enormous pressure because of Labour's jobs tax and cuts to business rates relief. As good tax-paying shops shut down, they are being replaced by dodgy front businesses. To fight that in my constituency, Havering trading standards last week seized £17,000-worth of illicit goods from one shop in Upminster through a collaboration between the council, the public, the police and me as the MP. This vital work is at risk because the Government are planning to shift council grant money away from the capital and up to places in the north of England. Can the Minister assure me that Labour is not, in the Mayor of London's words, planning to "level down" the capital by threatening resources for councils here?

Alex Norris: I cannot accept the hon. Lady's characterisation. If we look at the history of the 2010 to 2024 Government, we can see that the pressure on local authorities, which we have heard about from across the House, was so great that we saw trading standards wither on the vine across the country. In many places, they are down to single individuals, never mind numbers in single figures. We are clear that we are rebuilding local government, and hopefully we will see lots more brilliant enforcement like we have seen in Havering.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Not far from here, on Whitehall and on Oxford Street, we have seen the proliferation of Harry Potter shops. These are not welcoming for our tourists and we do not believe that they are trading fairly. Will the Minister support me in encouraging His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to work with Westminster city council, which is doing great work in shutting these shops down, to ensure that we create space for thriving high street businesses?

Alex Norris: I entirely share my hon. Friend's view. We want to see thriving high streets. We want to see full shops, but we want to see them trading fairly, properly and in a quality way, working well with their staff and being a good part of the community. When that is not happening, it is really important that action is taken—she raises some high-profile examples—and we of course stand ready to support local authorities in whatever way we can.

Building Social and Affordable Homes

15. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What steps she is taking to build more social and affordable homes. [905178]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): We announced a record £39 billion investment into the new social and affordable homes programme at the spending review, which will create around 300,000 new homes over 10 years. Earlier this month, we published a five step plan that sets out how we will deliver the biggest increase in social housing in a generation to transform the safety and quality of social housing. My priority as Deputy Prime Minister is to get more social rent homes built, and that is what this Labour Government are delivering.

John Slinger: Planning authorities such as Rugby borough council are working hard to ensure that new housing developments contain as much affordable and social housing as possible. They work in partnership with housing developers, Government bodies such as Homes England, and others to that end, though it is not always an easy process and it often takes far too long. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will enhance their work, so that we can build as many high-quality affordable and social homes as possible and ensure that more people, particularly young people, get the homes they deserve?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will unlock a new scale of housing and infrastructure delivery across all tenures to help build 1.5 million homes in this Parliament. We are also taking action in the Bill to improve local decision making by modernising planning

committees and ensuring that planning departments are well resourced by allowing local planning authorities to set their own planning fees.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Will the Deputy Prime Minister please explain why her Government will not set a target for the provision of social housing? While I welcome the investment in the social and affordable homes programme that she set out, the reality is that it will meet only 10% of the total number of new homes anticipated and only 10% of the current demand for social housing. If she believes that setting national targets like the 1.5 million homes target is important to drive change, why will she not set a target for social housing?

Angela Rayner: The Government have not set an affordable housing target to date, but we continue to keep the matter under review. Accurately trying to forecast long-term delivery is inherently challenging, but we believe that our new social and affordable homes programme could deliver around 300,000 social and affordable homes over its lifetime, with around 180,000 for social rent. The measures we have taken, alongside the commitment for rent so that there is this long-term programme, will hopefully help with the supply, and I have made it categorically clear to the sector that we want more social rent housing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): There has been a 66% reduction in new affordable housing starts in London under Mayor Khan, and I note that Hillingdon Labour vigorously opposes the Conservative council's plans for a new affordable housing site at Otterfield Road in Yiewsley. Will the Secretary of State condemn the failings of these Labour politicians on housing, and will she acknowledge that whether someone is a homeless person, a rough sleeper or an aspirational first-time buyer, this Government are failing those in housing need?

Angela Rayner: I find that absolutely astonishing when the Conservatives failed to meet their housing targets year after year. The Mayor of London has welcomed the money through the affordable homes programme. There is the amount of money we have given, and we are permitted to increase rents by CPI plus 1%. We are consulting on rent conversion, when the Conservatives prevented social landlords from being able to raise the money to provide the social housing that we desperately need. We are making the changes to get social housing where they failed miserably.

Social Housing: Right to Buy

16. **Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of allowing local authorities to end the right to buy in their areas. [905179]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government do not intend to abolish the right to buy, either nationally or by giving local areas discretion to do so. We want to ensure that council tenants who have lived in and paid rent on their social

homes for many years can retain the opportunity to own their home. We are, however, progressing fundamental reform of the scheme to better protect much-needed social housing stock, boost council capacity and ensure that more social homes are built than lost.

Gideon Amos: My Somerset councillor colleagues have for decades steadfastly protected and managed our stock of council houses, which has declined through right to buy from tens of thousands a number of years ago to only 6,000 now. While I welcome the recent attention to this issue by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister, is it not time that communities decide for themselves whether to sell off council houses at all?

Matthew Pennycook: Although I respect the hon. Gentleman and his views, we have a principled difference of opinion on this matter. As I have made clear, the Government's considered view is that long-standing council tenants should be able to buy the homes that they have lived in for many years. I hope, however, that the right-to-buy reforms that we have made and announced today—reduced maximum cash discounts, allowing councils to retain 100% of receipts and exempting newly built social homes from the right to buy for 35 years—will create a fairer and more sustainable scheme.

Topical Questions

T1. [905189] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): I was pleased that the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill had its First Reading last Thursday. That landmark Bill will bring a radical reset to local government, deliver on our manifesto commitment to decentralise power, ignite regional growth with streamlined powers for mayors, and speed up new homes and infrastructure. It will empower communities to take back control of their beloved pubs and shops, helping local leaders to deliver a decade of national renewal, as promised in the plan for change.

Sarah Olney: I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues welcome the provisions in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, which recognise that first past the post is an unrepresentative electoral system. That is a welcome first step—although we would prefer alternative voting for mayoral elections—but if the Government admit that first past the post is not suitable for mayoral elections, why do they maintain that it is suitable for general elections?

Angela Rayner: Let me cover that point. Mayors serve many millions of people and manage multimillion-pound budgets, yet can be elected by just a fraction of the vote under the previous Government's changes—despite the fact that the supplementary vote system had worked effectively for over a decade. Given that the large populations that mayors and police and crime commissioners represent far exceed those represented by parliamentarians, we think that this is the right approach.

T4. [905192] **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Despite decades of hard work, not least by the Birnbeck Regeneration Trust, the restoration of Weston-super-Mare's nationally important Birnbeck pier is now at risk after the Royal National Lifeboat Institution pulled out, leaving a £5 million shortfall. Will the Minister outline how the Government might support the project, and will he meet me urgently to discuss next steps to restore that vital part of my town's soul?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I recognise the efforts of the Birnbeck Regeneration Trust. My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for his community. We announced support for 350 communities at the spending review, and further details will follow, but I would be delighted to meet him to speak about Birnbeck in particular.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The chair of the working group on anti-Muslim hatred/Islamophobia, Dominic Grieve, who was appointed by the Secretary of State, has previously stated a preference for a definition of Islamophobia that would shut down talk of religion in cases like the grooming gangs scandal. All other members of that committee—again, appointed by the Secretary of State—are adherents of the Muslim faith. Does the Secretary of State not share our concerns that their report and recommendations will be seen as predetermined and biased?

Angela Rayner: No, I do not. There is no blasphemy law in this country because the previous Labour Government got rid of it, whereas the Conservative party had kept it on the statute book for years. We will always protect free speech, including the right to criticise religions. That kind of incendiary language is beneath the shadow Secretary of State.

Kevin Hollinrake: Incendiary language? I was merely stating the facts; that is the reality. The right hon. Lady is right in one regard: freedom of speech is on the line. The current position is that the report will be for Government eyes only, and that the decision on a definition will be taken in private. Will she at least commit to making the full report publicly available so that it can be scrutinised in the House and elsewhere before a decision is taken?

Angela Rayner: As set out in the terms of reference, the independent working group will submit its findings to Ministers. We will then consider its recommendations and set out the next steps. I urge Members to let the independent group get on with its work. If the shadow Secretary of State has views, he should feed them in as part of the call for evidence.

T5. [905193] **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Residents in parts of East Cleveland are rightly sick of unscrupulous landlords dumping individuals with serious criminal histories in our villages. Will the Department support my call for the council to introduce selective licensing in the area, and what further support can the Secretary of State offer to help us take back control of our villages?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government support selective licensing as a tool to tackle the impact of poor housing management on local communities. The general approval that we granted in December gives councils full powers to introduce schemes, regardless of their size. My hon. Friend's own authority will have heard loud and clear his call for it to consider doing so.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the register of interests. This weekend was a fantastic economic boost for many seaside towns, but along with the visitors, towns such as Poole and Bournemouth are blighted with illegal parking on roundabouts and across driveways and pavements. The Minister knows exactly what I am about to say: with 1,700 tickets issued, with the most dangerous cars towed away and with fines fixed for 20 years, does he believe that it is reasonable that council tax payers should pick up the bill of up to £200 per towed-away car for an illegal driver?

Alex Norris: It is incumbent on all of us to park with a degree of responsibility, particularly at peak times. I think parking-related issues are the No. 1 feature of my mailbag. Our consultation on private parking opened last Friday. I am interested in working with the hon. Lady and all Members to ensure that we get the balance right.

T7. [905195] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Many people, from the Women and Equalities Committee to the Miscarriage Association and Myleene Klass, have fought for miscarriage bereavement leave. Similarly, Can't Buy My Silence and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) called for a ban on non-disclosure agreements. Thanks to the Deputy Prime Minister's cross-departmental role, these protections will be delivered by Labour. How and when will they come into force?

Angela Rayner: I am incredibly proud that the Government are introducing life-changing measures that will make a real difference when people are at their most vulnerable. I personally thank my hon. Friend for courageously telling her own story, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) for her incredible and tenacious campaigning. Their work will change the lives of so many. We want to bring the benefits of these vital measures to people as soon as possible. We will be consulting on them in the coming months, prior to commencement.

T2. [905190] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Home ownership feels increasingly out of reach for many first-time buyers, particularly for young families who want to remain in the beautiful Scottish Borders. What can the Government do to ensure that house builders deliver more affordable family-sized homes in all parts of the United Kingdom so that local people have the chance to own their home in the communities where they were brought up?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman will know that housing is a devolved matter. When it comes to affordability, we are taking steps not only to boost

housing supply significantly, as I have set out, but to ensure that more first-time buyers can get access, not least through the permanent mortgage guarantee scheme, on which the Chancellor will add more details in her Mansion House speech this week.

T8. [905196] **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): The latest evidence shows that the gap between average wages and rent in my constituency of Poole is one of the widest in the country. Can the Minister explain how we will ensure that the new homes that we build will be truly affordable and not subject to excessive rent increases?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend will have noted the £39 billion allocated at the spending review to our new 10-year social and affordable homes programme, which, as the Deputy Prime Minister has made clear, we think will deliver about 300,000 affordable homes over its lifetime, with about 180,000 for social rent. He will also know that our Renters' Rights Bill includes provisions that will empower tenants to challenge unreasonable rent increases.

T3. [905191] **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Two major reports—one from Shelter, which is coming, and one last week from Heriot-Watt University—have exposed something that I have observed myself in housing casework for many years, as a councillor and as an MP: people from some minority groups, even beyond the structural racism in society, experience worse outcomes and even direct discrimination from councils in regard to their access to housing. Will the Secretary of State commit to writing a formal response to me on the recommendations in those reports?

Mr Speaker: A “yes” will do.

Matthew Pennycook: If the hon. Lady writes to me about the issue, I will certainly respond to her.

T9. [905197] **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): Residents in Heather Gardens and Kett's Meadow in Hethersett have seen a 60% hike in fees from the residential management group, supposedly for playgrounds that are fenced off and just dust. What action will the Government be taking to stop these rip-off practices and support my residents in South Norfolk?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend raises a matter that I know is of concern to hon. Members across the House. It is precisely to protect residential freeholders in Hethersett and other freehold estates across the country from unfair charges that we will consult in the near future on how we implement the consumer protection provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 relating to the payment of estate management charges.

T6. [905194] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): On that note, many of my constituents living on new freehold developments such as Mortimer Park in Driffeld would like to see residents being given the power to strip those unaccountable estate management firms of their responsibility for shared space and let the local authority adopt that land. Is it the Government's intention to legislate to make that possible?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman draws the House's attention to an important point about freehold estates, and I direct his attention to the report by the Competition and Markets Authority on the matter if he wants to read further. There is a problem here: too many amenities and infrastructures are not being delivered to common adoptable standards, and therefore many local authorities rightly say that they do not expect to pick up the tab for bringing those amenities up to the relevant standard and then maintaining them. We have got to tackle both issues as we look to end the prevalence of these freehold estate arrangements going forward.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): In Suffolk Coastal, the housing crisis is no less severe than in other rural areas across the country, and my constituents are keen that future development builds in for nature. Will the Minister comment on what plans the Government have to ensure that we build in for nature, and specifically on the prospect of, and appetite for support for, swift bricks?

Matthew Pennycook: Although swift brick coverage is increasing, we want to drive up swift brick installation. As I made clear on Report of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, we are considering using a new sweep of national policies for decision making, to require swift bricks to be incorporated into new buildings unless there are compelling reasons that preclude their use or would make them ineffective.

T10. [905198] **Lewis Cocking** (Bromsbourne) (Con): Will the Minister outline what new planning powers could be provided to local councils to ensure that my local communities in Bromsbourne can say no to houses in multiple occupation—HMOs—where they are not wanted?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman—who I have great affection for, as we go through our tenure—is a highly experienced former councillor, and he will know that local authorities already have article 4 powers. If he has evidence that those powers are not proving effective, I would really like to have more information.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of the Government's determination to bring prosperity to coalfield communities like Doncaster, does the Minister share my desire for the fast delivery of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust industrial project? It is also important to transfer any potential funds directly to the CRT, so as not to delay any delivery with bureaucratic processes and bidding.

Alex Norris: The Government are committed to investing in coalfield communities, and I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend and Mayor Ros Jones to talk about their exciting plans in Doncaster, which we are investing in. We are looking very closely at what the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has sent us; the trust is, of course, a great legacy of the previous Labour Government, and we are committed to working with it.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): My constituent Ryan from Carpenders Park wrote me with concerns about the lack of community spaces, especially alongside the Government's housing targets.

Will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will ensure there are community spaces to support any new housing developments?

Matthew Pennycook: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. He will forgive me if he knows this already, but we did strengthen the provision for infrastructure in our recent changes to the national planning policy framework. Beyond that, we want to strengthen the existing system for developer contributions—where infrastructure and affordable housing comes through planning agreements—so that local authorities can extract more public gain from that process.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Cayton, a village in my constituency, could now become home to 2,500 new homes through the Government's new homes accelerator. To ensure the success of that project, it is essential that we deliver the appropriate infrastructure, such as GP services, proper drainage and roads, all of which have not accompanied previous developments. What steps is the Minister taking to develop a coastal strategy to ensure that new developments for coastal villages like Cayton are delivered alongside infrastructure?

Alex Norris: The Government take a similar interest in coastal communities. As Local Growth Minister, I work closely with coastal authorities and have a significant eye on coastal communities. We want to strengthen the system of developer contributions to make sure that the new developments provide that infrastructure, with further details to come. The changes in the national planning policy framework, mentioned by the Minister for Housing and Planning, will support increased provision and modernisation of infrastructure. With regards to the south of Cayton, the new homes accelerator is supporting the delivery of 2,500 homes.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Hard-working traders at Stockton's historic Shambles shopping centre were shocked to receive letters from Stockton's Labour council telling them that they were to be evicted and inviting them to a meeting with less than 24 hours' notice. I have been along to meet them and they are devastated, fearful for their futures and for their livelihoods. Does the Minister agree that councils should be backing small independent businesses, not making them homeless without alternatives?

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): The hon. Gentleman will know that it is Labour councils that are leading the charge at a local level to regenerate local communities and invest in local businesses—the evidence is there. They are supported by the plan for communities and the community right to buy; there is a real effort in this area. He did not give prior notice of his intention to raise the particular issue that he mentioned, but if he wants to follow up in writing, we will certainly look into it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): This afternoon, I visited Centrepont, where I spoke to young people living in self-contained flats

and met the staff who are working to support those young people. The Secretary of State will be aware that a coalition of 150 charities supporting young people are calling for a specific youth-focused section in the ending homelessness strategy; estimates show that would save £8.5 billion a year. Does the Minister agree that it is not only morally right but economically smart to have a youth-specific chapter in that new strategy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I commend my hon. Friend for her work on this really important agenda. I met representatives from the youth homelessness sector at a recent roundtable. We are determined to ensure that the concerns and interests of young people experiencing homelessness are integrated into our report on ending homelessness, and we are working with the sector to tackle the root causes of youth homelessness.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne's streets are being blighted by severely overgrown grass verges that attract litter, antisocial behaviour and crime. Will the Minister join me in urging Conservative-run East Sussex county council to urgently get a grip on verge maintenance in Eastbourne in order to help make our grass great again?

Jim McMahon: The real issue for most councils is that the Liberal Democrats did not make hay when the sun was shining in their coalition years. Let nobody in local government forget that the seeds of the erosion of local neighbourhood services started in those coalition years, when the Liberal Democrats more than ably abetted the Conservative Government at the time.

Mr Speaker: I call Perran Moon.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Cornwall is desperate to access the highest level of devolution, but because of our national minority status, Cornwall cannot and will not join a mayoral combined authority. Before this House is asked to vote on a devolution Bill that discriminates against the people of Cornwall, will the Secretary of State meet me and colleagues to discuss a Cornwall-only devolution deal?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend will know that, for the right reasons, we have put a significant amount of energy and time into meeting parliamentarians from across the House to discuss those local issues. Absolutely, we will meet; that will probably be the sixth meeting that we have had with Cornish MPs on this issue. We understand, respect and are investing in the Cornish identity, but we also need to ensure that the devolution agenda moves on at pace and that every part of England can realise its full potential. I am more than happy to meet on that basis.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): A new report by Crisis shows that only 2.6% of rental properties in my area of Leicester South are affordable to those on local housing allowance. That is a real-terms cut as rents soar, because the Government have frozen housing benefit until 2026. Will the Secretary of State explain how that freeze aligns with the Government's aim of

reducing homelessness, and will the Government urgently review the cap so that people can afford to keep a roof over their heads?

Rushanara Ali: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer: this Government have invested nearly £1 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. As the Secretary of State has pointed out, we are dealing with the root causes of homelessness. That means investing billions of pounds to ensure that some 300,000 social and affordable homes are created over the decade, so that we can get people into the housing that is urgently needed.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Last week, nearly 3,000 people across Stafford borough were told at short notice that Homes Plus, one of our housing associations, is effectively scrapping the current housing waiting list. It also said that nearly 2,000 people no longer had a housing need, but it has not explained how it has come to that conclusion. People are confused, angry and scared. Does the Minister agree that this is unacceptable, and will he meet me to help me find a way forward for those who have been left in limbo?

Matthew Pennycook: I will happily meet my hon. Friend about that concerning development. If she could write to me with the details in advance, that would be extremely useful.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is my understanding that South Hams district council is in an arguably more sound fiscal position than the neighbouring Plymouth city council. What can the Secretary of State say to reassure me that local government reorganisation will not mimic either a forced marriage or a bad marriage where the fiscally prudent one bails out the other?

Jim McMahon: We are now in a statutory process for local government reorganisation, and Devon will submit its final proposals to us by the end of November. We do not want to pre-empt those or say anything that will direct them, but I assure the hon. Member that there will be a consultation on the proposals that meet the threshold, and we will hear from that what local people say.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I know that reducing deprivation is a cause close to the hearts of all Ministers. What view do they have on the extent to which high housing costs contribute to deprivation and should be taken into account when we consider funding for our local councils?

Jim McMahon: We are in the consultation period for the fair funding review 2.0 until 15 August. The issue of housing costs being taken into account when we judge deprivation has been raised by Members previously, but I encourage all Members of the House and people beyond it to submit their responses to the consultation.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Can the Deputy Prime Minister guarantee that no Muslim Brotherhood affiliates will participate in the consultation on the definition of Islamophobia?

Angela Rayner: We have the terms of reference, and we have the consultation that is going on at the moment. I am not going to provide a running commentary on the work of the independent group. The Government have a non-engagement policy with the MCB, and that position has not changed.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): City of York council is the lowest funded unitary authority, but under the fair funding review we do not fare any better. Can the Minister extend the consultation guidelines? These are complex issues. Will he meet our council to look at the impact of the review?

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she has done to champion fair funding across local government, particularly for York. I absolutely understand the issues. The fair funding review is meant to do two things. It takes into account the need—the cost pressures driving local authorities—set against the resource, which is how much local authorities can raise in council tax at a local level. It is the Government's role to be the equaliser to ensure that every local authority can afford decent local services, but I absolutely take into account her representations.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In reply to an earlier question, the Planning Minister said that he wanted to increase the number of people who engage in the preparation of local plans. He will know that even if that number was doubled, it would still be a small proportion of the local community. When applications are being considered, local communities want them to be decided and determined by local authorities with minimal central input. Will the Minister guarantee that local authorities will continue to have that power?

Matthew Pennycook: Under our proposals in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill for a national scheme of delegation, it will still be local planning authorities that make recommendations and decisions. As the hon. Gentleman will know if he looks at the consultation, all we propose is a two-tier system in which a set of minor applications go to expert local planning officers. A separate tier can go to a planning committee, where the chair of planning and the chief planning officer decide that that is the case. Again, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to respond to the consultation.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): We are seeing massive investment in the regeneration of Derby city centre, including the opening of a new entertainment venue and the reopening of our market hall, which is bursting with small and independent businesses. Regeneration also means ensuring that our city feels safe, welcoming and inclusive. Will the Minister tell us how the Department is working with the Home Office to ensure that our cities and towns are thriving and safe?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend is tempting a Member of Parliament for Nottingham to say something nice about Derby, which is slightly challenging for my prospects when I go home on Thursday. I do recognise the characterisation of the exciting plans ahead for Derby,

and I share exactly her point on policing. We can have the most vibrant community possible, but people will not participate unless they feel safe. We are talking with the Home Office, and I would tell my hon. Friend to watch this space.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Last week, Hurstpierpoint's former Methodist church received permission to be converted into flats, despite the parish council registering it as an asset of community value and expressing its sincere wish to purchase it. Does the Minister think that the regulations for assets of community value are fit for purpose? How can they be improved?

Alex Norris: No, we do not think that the regulations are fit for purpose, which is why we are planning to amend them through the Bill that we published last week.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The "New life for city buildings" project in Truro is breathing new life into empty high street buildings and redeveloping them. I would love for the Minister to be able to see this for himself, so will he consider coming to Truro and attending our growth summit on 18 September?

Alex Norris: I do not have my diary for 18 September in front of me, but I do owe my hon. Friend a visit, and I will definitely make such a visit.

State of Climate and Nature

3.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the climate and nature crisis.

On the day that the Met Office publishes its “State of the UK Climate” report for 2024, the Environment Secretary and I want to share with the British people what we know about the scale of the crisis and explain the actions that we are taking in response. We intend this to become an annual statement to Parliament.

Let me start by setting out what we know from the science. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the past decade has seen the 10 warmest years on record globally. It says that long-term global warming, assessed by a range of methods, is estimated to be between 1.34°C and 1.41°C above pre-industrial levels, and last year was the first time we saw an individual year above 1.5°C.

Today’s Met Office report shows that, in line with what is happening globally, the UK’s climate is getting hotter and wetter, with more extreme events. The central England temperature series shows that recent warmth has far exceeded any temperatures observed in at least 300 years. Over the past 50 years, the number of days above 28°C has doubled, and the number of days above 30°C has trebled. This spring was the UK’s warmest on record, beating the record broken last year. Meanwhile, warming oceans and melting ice sheets have contributed to sea levels around the UK rising by 13.4 cm over the past three decades, and this is accelerating. The science is unequivocal about why this is happening. As the Met Office said this morning:

“This...is not a natural variation in our climate...human emissions of greenhouse gasses are warming the atmosphere and changing the weather we experience”.

We know that climate change and nature loss are fundamentally linked and contribute to each other. Globally, we are losing species at a much faster rate than at any other time in human history. Here in Britain, a quarter of our mammals and nearly half of our bird species are currently at risk of extinction, with birds such as starlings, turtle doves and grey partridges under threat. The abundance of species in England has fallen by an estimated third since 1970, and Britain has become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

The impacts of extreme weather and nature loss are not simply a future threat to our country; they are already here and having impacts on our way of life. We know that heavy rainfall made last year’s harvest the second worst in at least four decades, costing farmers hundreds of millions of pounds. According to the Environment Agency, more than half of our best agricultural land and over 6 million properties in England are already at risk of flooding. According to the UK Health Security Agency, there were more than 10,000 excess deaths—10,000 people losing their lives—during English heatwaves between 2020 and 2024.

As we know from recent events, rising temperatures place pressures on every aspect of our national life. We have seen this again over the past few days, with incidents of wildfires from Surrey to Scotland, disruption due to trains overheating, and hosepipe bans announced in Yorkshire, Kent and Sussex. The climate crisis is also a

massive threat to our economy; the Office for Budget Responsibility’s “Fiscal risks and sustainability” report, published last week, says that the damage caused by climate impacts in a near-3°C world is forecast to cut our GDP by 8% by the early 2070s. Based on current GDP, that will be roughly £200 billion.

These are uncomfortable, sobering facts, and we should make no mistake: we must act on the climate and nature crisis to protect our British way of life, because no sector or part of our society is immune from those risks. Unfortunately, all the evidence suggests that this is just the start of the threat we face.

I want to acknowledge in particular the anxieties that many young people feel about these issues. My candid message to them is this: yes, there are real reasons to worry about the world they will inherit, but we can do something about it. Every fraction of a degree of warming that we prevent, and every step we take to preserve nature, helps to limit the severity of impacts and protect our country from irreparable harm. It is our generations today who have a unique opportunity to act, because unlike previous generations, we can see the evidence of the climate and nature crisis all around us, yet we still have time to limit the worst effects. The only answer is to reduce emissions, protect and restore nature and adapt to the impacts that are now inevitable. Let me take those in turn.

To those who doubt whether Britain can have any impact on the pathway of global emissions, the lesson of history is that we can. Before the Paris climate agreement was negotiated 10 years ago, the world was on course for 4°C of global warming. Now, national commitments imply 2.6°C of global warming, or below 2°C if countries meet their full climate targets. We remain way off track from where we need to be as a world, but we in this country have helped make a difference across parties.

In 2008, this House came together to pass the world’s first Climate Change Act. That was under a Labour Government, supported by Lord Cameron, the Conservative party and parties across the House. Now, thanks to the power of our example, nearly 60 countries have similar legislation. In 2019, under Baroness May, the UK became the first major economy to legislate for net zero by 2050, supported by the Labour party and parties across this House. Now, in part thanks to the actions at COP26 in Glasgow, including the leadership of Lord Sharma as COP president, some 80% of global GDP is covered by net zero commitments. In 2021, England became the first country to introduce a legal duty to halt species decline by 2030, led by Boris Johnson and supported by parties across the House. Now, 196 countries are signed up to the global biodiversity framework to halt and reverse nature loss.

The lesson is clear. The choices we make as a country influence the course of global action and, in doing so, reduce the impact of the climate and nature crisis on future generations in Britain. To those who say that Britain cannot make a difference, I say, “You are wrong. Stop talking our country down. British leadership matters.”

We also know that climate and nature action has huge potential upsides, and not just for future generations. It has the potential for better lives today in energy security, lower bills, cleaner air, good jobs, better health and wellbeing, and improved access to nature. This Government believe in sticking to our traditions as a country of

[Ed Miliband]

climate and nature leadership. Indeed, turning away now, at this moment of all moments, when the threat and opportunity are clearer than ever, would be the greatest dereliction of duty and betrayal of future generations.

That is why one of the Government's five missions is to achieve clean power by 2030 and to accelerate to net zero across the economy. It is why at COP29 we announced a 1.5°C-aligned target for 2035, based on legislation passed under the last Conservative Government. It is why we are driving forward on our commitment to protect 30% of our land and seas for nature and to halt species loss by the end of the decade. It is why we made the most significant investment in clean energy, climate and nature in the UK's history at the spending review, which will drive jobs across the country.

Because the actions we need are not just about Government, we are also determined to help communities take climate and nature action in their own area, whether that is driving the expansion of local and community-owned clean energy projects through Great British Energy or supporting mayors and local government to accelerate action. At COP30 and beyond, we are determined once again to use the power of our example to work with others to uphold the objectives of the Paris agreement, including with ambitious climate targets, action to accelerate the clean energy revolution and the protection of nature and forests.

As I have said, action on emissions is not enough on its own. We must also protect the British people from the impacts that we already see, and sadly, the greater impacts that we are likely to see in the future. This work, led by my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary, requires action across society, from homes and buildings to critical infrastructure and our natural environment. We are now delivering Britain's largest ever flood defence programme, investing £7.9 billion over the next decade in flood barriers and nature-based solutions such as wetland restoration. That comes alongside pioneering local nature recovery strategies, with measures such as tree planting and peat restoration, which deliver adaptation and nature recovery together. In my Department, as we drive forward our plan to upgrade millions of homes, we have consulted on expanding the boiler upgrade scheme to include air-to-air heat pumps, which can offer cooling as well as heating.

However, I must be candid with the House: we know that this is just the beginning of the reckoning that we need on how our country needs to adapt across all parts of society in the years to come, and this Government are determined to put climate resilience at the heart of our decision-making.

We have been at our best in the House when we have worked across parties on these issues. I want to thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing the Climate and Nature Bill, and my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for our discussions earlier this year in the run-up to that Bill, as well as the other co-sponsors, who highlighted the need for today's statement. Let me also take this opportunity to pay tribute to current and former Members across the House for their tireless advocacy on climate and nature.

The safety of our citizens, our natural world and the country that we pass on is not a Labour cause, a Conservative cause, or the cause of any other party; it is a British cause, a cause of us all, and a cause that requires all of us to consider our responsibilities to the generations of today and the generations to come. I commend this statement to the House.

3.56 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a rare pleasure to see the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box today, given that he turned down the opportunity to defend his plan for clean power by 2030 or the report from the National Energy System Operator that was published earlier in the year. Perhaps that is why we are being given a slightly longer statement than usual, making up for missed opportunities. However, we welcome the Met Office's report, which makes for interesting reading. I think we can all attest to the fact that Britain today is warmer than it was before.

We all agree that the challenge of the changing climate is vast, and it is one of many challenges facing the United Kingdom today, but I must tell the House and the right hon. Gentleman that ridiculous statements such as that made this morning by the Environment Secretary, labelling opponents of net zero "unpatriotic", is as offensive as it is risible, and does nothing to advance the cause. I must also express my growing sense of unease, and that of many others, about the language emanating from those surrounding this Secretary of State, accusing anyone who dares to question the policies or plans being worked on by his Department of being "deniers" or being supportive of an "end to our British way of life". We need to bring back a sense of rationality, or proportion, to this debate, because out there, language such as this is alienating more and more people from the important cause of ensuring that the planet we pass on to our children and their children is in a better state than the one we have inherited.

The Secretary of State calls this "radical truth telling", but I am afraid that he is not being honest with the British people about the impact of the Government's plans on the climate, bills and jobs, or about the sacrifices it demands. The Leader of the Opposition has been very clear: chasing "Net Zero by 2050" is unachievable without making the country worse off. That is the truth. Global warming is a global issue, which we cannot face alone. The global climate challenge will not be solved by the UK alone, and it cannot be solved on the backs of British workers or British bill payers.

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to be careful about what we say. I think that the hon. Gentleman has suggested that the Secretary of State was not honest, and I think we are all honest Members here.

Andrew Bowie: I completely agree, Mr Speaker, and I apologise if I insinuated the opposite in any way.

The UK accounts for less than 1% of global emissions. That is also the truth. In fact, now that I come to think of it, it is rather shameful that the Secretary of State should be using this report from the Met Office as cover, while ratcheting up the language and increasing the shrill criticism of all who question the Department and its policies, all to distract from the fact that the plans mean that Britain will be poorer and that no one

looking at how we are decarbonising could ever claim that this is a model to follow. We are proud to have been a world leader—

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: Members do not give way when making or responding to a statement.

We are proud to have been a world leader, but it is not a race if no one else is running. If we are leading the way, we need to make sure that it is a path that others will follow. We must decarbonise in a way that creates energy security and prosperity, rather than forcing industry abroad and impoverishing British people. Why is that so hard for the Labour party to understand?

We see in the Met Office's report that the demand for cooling has approximately doubled—a strong case for introducing more air conditioning into homes, which would improve comfort and reduce the burden on the health system during heatwaves. Although I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to expand the boiler upgrade scheme to include air-to-air heat pumps, which, as he says, offer cooling as well as heating, may I urge him to speak to the Mayor of London and get the ridiculous restrictions on air conditioning units in newbuilds in London removed? We must move away from this poverty mindset on reducing energy usage. Paying for solar panels to be switched off, while refusing to absorb the excess demand to cool homes, is truly ridiculous.

It is time to take the global scale and nature of this challenge seriously. Offshoring manufacturing, like ceramics, does not solve global warming, but it does make Britain poorer and Brits unemployed. To build this Government's 1.5 million new homes, we will use more bricks than at any time since the second world war, but thanks to this Government, fewer than ever before will be made here in Britain. While the Secretary of State admired the fast-paced build out of new renewable generation, new nuclear and low-carbon energy on an unseen scale on his recent visit to the People's Republic of China, perhaps he was able to reflect on the factors enabling that: the opening of two new coal-fired power stations every week, and the cost of industrial energy in China being less than a third of our domestic cost. We cannot innovate, manufacture, and create growth and prosperity while our energy costs are killing manufacturing. I am afraid that this Government's plans will drive up the underlying cost of energy for industry, and Britain will pay the price.

Only a year ago, Labour candidates were trotting out lines on how they would cut bills by £300. Since then, network charges, which account for 22% of an energy bill, have risen by over £100 as a result of the rush to build out the grid for new renewables. Cornwall Insights, an independent energy analyst, has called for the Secretary of State to be

"transparent about what the money is being spent on".

Its principal consultant has urged the Secretary of State to be honest with the public about the impact of net zero policy costs on bills.

Of course, a clean, secure and reliable power source exists in the form of nuclear. We welcome the announcements of the commitment to Sizewell C and the small modular reactor programme, but the lack of ambition, the refusal to commit to a third gigawatt-scale reactor—preferably

on Anglesey—the decision to decommission the UK's stockpile of plutonium, the selection of only one small modular reactor technology, and the refusal to repeat the 24 GW ambition that we set out for the nuclear industry are frustrating. We could do so much more. Will the Secretary of State commit to protecting Wylfa for a new gigawatt-scale reactor in the future?

It is indeed time for a policy of radical honesty. Global warming is a global challenge, and I am afraid the Secretary of State's plans will have a negligible, or even negative, impact on global emissions. Sadly, he is driven by ideology, not by the practicalities of facing this challenge while growing the economy. We are telling the difficult truths; the Government are running from reality.

Ed Miliband: I will be honest, Mr Speaker: I just feel incredibly sad when I listen to the hon. Gentleman—and not in a good way. The trouble is that we are now in a situation in which the shadow Secretary of State goes into hiding when there is a statement about the climate crisis, because it is just too embarrassing to try to articulate the Opposition's position.

The central chasm at the heart of the hon. Gentleman's response is that he and his colleagues have taken the decision to abandon 20 years of bipartisanship on climate. Theresa May's promise to deliver net zero by 2050 was one of the great strides forward, but he is now trashing that and saying it was a disaster. Let us be honest: it is grossly irresponsible. We are expected to believe that the Conservatives oppose net zero because they know, 25 years in advance of the target, that it cannot be achieved, but they cannot possibly know that. Indeed, the Climate Change Committee says exactly the opposite in its latest report. The hon. Gentleman says he is worried about costs, but all the evidence suggests that delaying action costs more, not less. The CCC says net zero will cut energy bills and the cost of motoring.

We do not even know whether the Conservatives want a net zero target at all, or no net zero target ever. The hon. Gentleman said something the other week—I read his interviews with care in my spare time—about reaching net zero by 2050 not being based on the science, but he is absolutely wrong. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says:

"In model pathways with no or limited overshoot of 1.5°C, global net anthropogenic CO₂ emissions decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030...reaching net zero around 2050".

The point is that net zero was a target that Theresa May adopted, driven by the science.

What are the Conservatives? They are anti-science, anti-jobs, anti-energy security, and anti-future generations. I have to say that I cannot put it better than Theresa May—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) should be quiet, because he used to work for her. This is what Theresa May, the Conservative Prime Minister just five or so years ago, has said:

"Those of us who advocate accelerating our progress towards net zero emissions are labelled fanatics and zealots. Ironically, the name-calling often emanates from ideologues at the political extremes or from populists who offer only easy answers to complex questions."

I could not put it better myself.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Select Committees look at the evidence, follow the evidence and make recommendations on the basis of the evidence. Today, we have heard from the Secretary of State the evidence from the Met Office about the seriousness of the threat, the reality of the nature of the crisis and the fact that that will only grow. The shadow Minister missed something because he needs to acknowledge not just the costs of taking action but the costs of not doing so. The Secretary of State read out those costs: £200 billion or 8% of GDP if we get 3° of warming, according to the OBR.

Those opposing climate action in this place can also see the evidence that cheaper driving and home heating are already available to many people, and we should be making them available to as many people as possible. They also know that switching to low-carbon electricity as much and as fast as we can will make this country safer by getting control of our energy generation and supply. Does the Secretary of State agree that the patriotic approach is to work together to cut emissions for financial, security, nature and climate reasons?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it very well. As I have experienced over the last 20 years, we have not had a culture war on climate, because the Conservative party and the Labour party chose to say that this really matters. The Conservative party has apparently abandoned its belief in climate action at precisely the time, as the CCC has shown—in carbon budget 7, for example—that this is the way to reduce costs for people.

I would make another point. I notice there are young people watching in the Public Gallery and elsewhere. What message do we send to them by saying, “Look, we just can’t act on this”? It is such a betrayal of future generations, who have genuine anxiety about what world they are going to inherit from us.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I thank both the Energy Secretary and the Environment Secretary for today’s momentous statement, which I trust will be the first of many annual climate and nature statements. I also thank them for recognising the role of Zero Hour and the campaigners behind the Climate and Nature Bill—the private Member’s Bill that I am proud to have brought to this House, with cross-party support. I warmly welcome the move to more joined-up thinking between the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and applaud the willingness of the Government to work across the House, even if that willingness is not always reciprocated.

However, this statement has missed a trick. The Secretary of State promised collaboration with campaigners, non-governmental organisations and communities. In reality, engagement so far has been very limited. If stakeholders had been involved, he might have acknowledged calls from the Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to remove the threats to nature protection in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, or the Nature Friendly Farming Network’s concern over the suspension of the sustainable farming incentive. He

told the Environmental Audit Committee that this would be a “public participation issue”, yet there was no consultation of the Climate and Nature Bill campaigners ahead of this statement. If we want to bring communities with us, we have to include them and listen to them. People across the country are already driving change in their communities, schools, farms and businesses, and to build a better, greener future, the Government should be tapping into that Great British human energy—to coin a phrase.

The Liberal Democrats are proud to be doing exactly that, with policies such as an emergency home insulation programme, solar panels on every new build, investment in cheap renewable energy, support for community energy, local nature recovery strategies and an extra £1 billion for nature-friendly farming. People need hope and a role in shaping the solutions. Despair is not a strategy and action is not optional. It is essential and urgent to protect our health, our economy and our national security. So I ask again: when will the Secretary of State meet me, my fellow Liberal Democrats, Zero Hour and the environmental non-governmental organisations to create an annual climate and nature Bill that is bold and ambitious, brings transparency and hope, and shows that the Government are genuinely bridging the gap between policy and delivery?

Ed Miliband: Let me start off in the spirit of continued generosity by reiterating my praise for the hon. Lady for bringing forward the Bill, and for the Zero Hour campaigners whom I met in a previous incarnation of mine. Their role over a long period, in pushing forward the Bill, has been important. I am very happy to meet her and the campaigners. This will be a continuing process, as I discussed with her, and I am happy to take forward those discussions.

Let me address the substantive point the hon. Lady made about climate and nature, because it is important. What the Government are striving to do is build the low-carbon energy infrastructure that we need in a way that is nature-positive. For example, the nature recovery fund that we are putting in place is absolutely about doing that. Some people do not agree with that approach, but we are trying to do two things: build the clean energy infrastructure required to get us off fossil fuels, which I know she wants to see; and at the same time, protect and restore nature. I am convinced that we can do that.

The point that I will end on is this. I just urge the hon. Lady to think. If we are to fulfil our net zero ambitions—these are stretching targets—we have to build the infrastructure. I say to all Members that the easy thing is to say no, but the right thing to do is very often to say yes to the energy infrastructure we need.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the statement, in particular the importance and emphasis that my right hon. Friend places on how climate change and nature loss are fundamentally linked and contribute to each other. I also remind the House that after the national health service, the thing that this country loves the most is its natural environment. Understanding the vital role that nature itself plays in tackling climate change will be vital in the years ahead. I refer in particular to the importance of saltmarsh. I talk quite often with my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan

an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) about the importance of peatland, but saltmarsh is also vital as a valuable habitat. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in the light of what he has been talking about today, we will have a properly integrated spatial energy plan, national planning policy framework and land use framework, so that such climate-valuable habitats are properly protected?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority and conviction on these subjects, and she is absolutely right about the role of nature. I add—and I will come on to her question in a second—that the biggest threat to nature that we face is the climate crisis. The figures I read out from scientific authorities show the scale of the threat that is already there to our countryside. As I said in my statement, the threat will only get worse. On the land use framework, we are currently consulting and will come up with a final document later on this year. She makes a crucial point about the need for co-ordination between the land use framework and the strategic spatial energy plan, which together mean that we use our land in a sensible way and that we build the energy infrastructure we need.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I agree with the Secretary of State that it is very important that other countries follow our example. Of the five countries that are the worst emitters of greenhouse gases, emitting over 50% in total—the USA, Russia, Brazil, India and of course China—can he tell us how many have adopted similar legislation? What hope does he have that those five in particular will follow our example?

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman asks a good question. Let me give him three examples from those five. India has a target of 500 GW of renewable capacity by 2030, and a target of reaching net zero by 2070. China has nearly half the world's renewable capacity, is committing to peaking its emissions by 2030, and has a target to reach net zero by 2060, but of course I want it to do more. Brazil has set out an ambitious nationally determined contribution. I think I am right in saying that as of March 2025, fossil fuels accounted for less than 50% of electricity generation in the US. He is right to ask this question. Not every country is going at the same pace, and there are countries that are more sceptical, but there has been a decisive shift across the world on this matter; when I was Climate Change Secretary from 2008 to 2010, net zero was not even talked about. There has been a transformation in the extent to which countries are taking it seriously.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I really want to get everybody in—I am sure the Secretary of State wants that—so I need a lot of help from those on the Front Bench to speed things up. A good example will be set by Toby Perkins, the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I share the Secretary of State's despair at the fact that the consensus on these matters appears to be dissipating. Does he agree that this is incredibly damaging for investment in the sector? Investors really need to see that whoever is in government, and whatever happens in elections, they have a Government who are committed to this agenda.

Does he agree that it is completely wrong to say that Britain is the only country taking this issue seriously? In fact, China is absolutely leading the way in investing in the necessary technologies. We need to catch up and ensure that everyone knows that Britain is open for business in this sector.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend, who speaks with such expertise on these matters, is 100% right. The biggest enemy of investment is uncertainty. That is why I appeal to all parties to stick to what we have legislated for in this country, in order to give that certainty.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I rise not to call the Secretary of State an eco-warrior, as Members of this House are so keen on doing from time to time; in fact, I agree with him on the scale of the climate and nature emergency. I do not want to spoil the cross-party support here, but the fact is that when the Labour party was in opposition, it promised an investment of £28 billion in the just and green transition. Will he apologise to the people of Scotland—no, to the voters in Scotland—for reneging on that promise?

Ed Miliband: What I will say to the people of Scotland is that the Acorn carbon capture and storage project has been talked about for years, and it is happening because of a Labour Government. We have a publicly owned energy company, Great British Energy, and we have our clean industry bonus. This is a Government who are actually delivering for the people of Scotland, and those across the UK.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, not least because I called for such a measure before I was elected to this House, under the previous Conservative Government. This is a really important thing to do, not least because it underscores the Government's approach to clean energy, and to wider climate action to tackle and mitigate the many climate impacts that we already see; we have just had three heatwaves. This action will also lower bills, strengthen our economy and, in a patriotic way, ensure our national security. Does he, like me, lament the loss of the cross-party consensus that he mentioned? The leader of the Conservatives says that net zero is impossible, and the deputy leader of Reform says that climate science is garbage. One denies urgency, while the other denies reality, and both deny the evidence from the Met Office and climate scientists—and, indeed, the experience of their constituents. Does the Secretary of State agree that when young people and future generations ask who stood in the way of their precious inheritance of cleaner air and local green space, it will be the Conservatives and Reform—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please! I need Members to help me get colleagues in. All colleagues from all sides of the House want to get in on this statement. Without your help, that will not happen.

Ed Miliband: That bit was great, though. My hon. Friend is so right: that is not where the British people are on this issue. The British people want action on climate, not a culture war. Frankly, wherever they live in the country, people want to pass on a liveable country to their kids and grandkids.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Those of us who advocate for the North sea oil and gas sector are not climate change deniers. We are realists who understand that we will need oil and gas for years to come; that we would be replacing our domestic supply with imports that have four times the carbon intensity; that China emits in 10 days what we emit in a year; and that we will not transition to cleaner energy if we make ourselves poorer. I recognise what today's report says, but does the Secretary of State accept that increasing our use of imported gas will only make us more carbon intensive in the future?

Ed Miliband: We have to get our use of imported gas down, and that is why we have to build clean energy infrastructure. This is what the Conservatives just do not seem to understand. If they go around the country opposing our clean energy infrastructure, it keeps us stuck on fossil fuels for longer—and look where that took us: to the worst cost of living crisis in generations.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that my constituents know more than most what it means to host clean energy infrastructure. However, the failure of the cross-party consensus is giving rise to quite a lot of concern in my area, where we face job losses at Prax Lindsey oil refinery. Can the Secretary of State reassure the hundreds of workers who face a very uncertain time that this is the result not of a move towards clean energy, but of mismanagement by the company's owners?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks about an important issue, and I am deeply concerned for those workers and their families. There are serious questions to answer about the running of that company, and how it ended up in this state. On the day that the insolvency happened, I wrote to the Insolvency Service to ask it to look into this matter, because those workers have been badly let down by the company.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Nobody knows better than farmers the reality of climate change and the importance of tackling it immediately, so it is bizarre that their expertise is being ignored. We should stand with them. Extreme weather conditions are a threat to animal welfare, agricultural productivity and farming business survival. We desperately need a food security strategy. Already, we produce only 55% of the food that we eat in this country. How will the Secretary of State help our farmers to be resilient against the twin threats of drought and flooding?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great expertise on these matters, partly because of his constituency. He is right about the threat to farmers' livelihoods from the climate crisis, which I talked about in my statement, and the need for food security, which my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary takes incredibly seriously. Indeed, the land use framework is partly about making sure that we have the land we need for our food security.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for this statement; I have waited 14 years for it, and I look forward to such a statement being given to the House in each of the next 14 years. One of the key drivers of climate change is deforestation. One of the key drivers of deforestation is cattle ranching and

soy production. One of the key drivers of cattle ranching and soy production is City of London finance, which is used to bankroll what is happening. What restrictions can be placed on the financial giants of the City to make sure that we stop this at source?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about the role of the City of London. There is also its potentially positive role. We are consulting on a mandatory transition plan for large companies and financial institutions, including in the City of London, precisely so that we can make sure that investment goes to the right places.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, including what he said about the importance of Britain showing leadership and rebuilding cross-party consensus. Even if we have not quite got cross-party consensus on the need for a transition to a green economy, does he agree that the fact that we have seen hundreds of deaths in London alone in the second heatwave of the year, that our farmers are facing the driest start to a year in my lifetime, and that people around the country have suffered from floods in recent years means that our need for resilience in the face of a changing climate cannot be a political football? If so, would he support a sixth Government mission—a mission to protect the British public from changes in the climate?

Ed Miliband: On that last bit, that is very much part of our mission to tackle net zero. The first part of the hon. Member's question was very important. We hear what some folks say in the House, but we see what is happening all around us. It is not like we are gazing into a crystal ball, because some boffins have told us that something bad might happen in the future. This is happening now. If anyone had said 15 years ago that we would have wildfires in Surrey and in Scotland, people would have said, "You're mad. There's no way that's going to happen. We're not going to have wildfires in Britain." The hon. Member spoke well about something very important. We need to look with our own eyes at what is happening.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I very much welcome the Energy Secretary's statement. Adequate electric vehicle charging infrastructure, depot charging and onshore power for shipping are all critical to the Government's net zero challenge, and businesses and providers across the transport sector who are making investment decisions need a route map. What steps is he taking to prioritise grid connections? Will he commit to reforming the grid queuing system, so that projects that are essential to decarbonising our transport sector are brought forward more quickly?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks about an important subject. We are dealing with the grid zombies and the zombie queue. The reordering of the queue is designed to open it up to projects like those she talked about. The energy Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks)—is having a series of roundtables with the Department for Transport on precisely that.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that he wants to tell some hard truths, so can he tell the House directly—without spin and waffle, and without dodging the question—how much in cash terms it would cost the UK to get to net zero, who would pay the cost, and how much the UK getting to net zero would reduce global temperatures by?

Ed Miliband: All those details are set out in the Climate Change Committee report. The right hon. Member can look for herself. *[Interruption.]* They are set out in carbon budget 7. Actually, the cost of getting to net zero has been coming down. When I set the 80% target, the cost of getting there, according to the committee, was higher than the cost now of getting to net zero. I make the point gently that the costs of inaction are much greater than the costs of action.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for his statement. I share his view that we have a responsibility to generations to come, and my constituents want to be part of a just transition. Is he committed to a just transition that protects jobs and prevents decarbonisation through de-industrialisation?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As we take this journey, we must ensure that we do everything we can to protect existing industries and workers and give them a smooth transition. We do that by ensuring that we have levers that the Government can use, such as Great British Energy, the national wealth fund and our clean industries bonus, to intervene and create the jobs of the future. To give the example of the North sea, 70,000 jobs have been lost there in less than a decade because it is a declining basin. The answer must be to create the jobs of the future, and that is what the Government are determined to do.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The impact of climate change is being felt today in my constituency. At Pegtop farm, there is a race to bring in the harvest after such a dry, hot spring, and yields are expected to be less than half of what they would normally be. On 23 and 24 September last year, we had extensive surface flooding, which flooded many homes. What share of the flood defence budget will deal with surface flooding, rather than river flooding? How would the Secretary of State characterise the relevant responsibilities of national and local government, developers, water companies, insurers and householders?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Member asked a complex question, so I might volunteer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to write to him on that, so that we get it right. I know—because he was whispering the answer to me—that he takes this seriously.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State not just for his statement today, but for his continued commitment to tackling the climate and nature crisis facing us. He said that this is something we must all tackle together, and there are huge parts of our communities, the faith communities, that want to do exactly that. While we welcome Great British Energy's roll-out of solar panels on hospitals and on schools, can he outline any support that is available for religious buildings that want to do the same?

Ed Miliband: Following the successful roll-out to schools and hospitals, we have had a lot of requests to expand the scheme and I am very enthusiastic about doing so. It is something we are looking at.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am as passionate as the Secretary of State about achieving net zero across the world and about the decline in species in our natural environment, but that cannot be the only thing we worry about. I do not know whether he has had time to read the “Fiscal risks and sustainability” report produced last week, but it shows that the cost to the public Exchequer of achieving net zero will be 21% of GDP. We know that an argument is going on inside the Government and inside the Labour party about this very issue. This is a question of balancing the risks, because if the Government run out of money because they are overspending, there will not be any money to spend on reversing climate change.

Ed Miliband: I have read the report, and the bit that the hon. Gentleman did not mention is where it says that if we end up in a 3°C world, we will add 56% of GDP to net debt. That is the cost of inaction. This is the point. Nick Stern—Lord Stern—produced a report in the 2000s which said that the costs of inaction were greater than the costs of action. This Office for Budget Responsibility fiscal risks report sets out very clearly that we will lose 8% of our GDP by 2070 if we do not act. Of course there is a cost to acting, and the report sets out different scenarios for public and private investment, but the evidence in that report could not be clearer about the costs of inaction, and they are far greater than the costs of action.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I was privileged to host a net zero roundtable in my constituency involving many people from a wide variety of backgrounds, who were all appalled to see net zero becoming a political football and part of an ongoing culture war on the right. Will the Secretary of State join me in recognising the important work of organisations such as Humshaugh Net Zero and the North Tyne climate action group in bringing together widespread support for net zero, bringing it into our communities and embedding it across the body politic?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Hexham and it is with great pleasure that I recognise the role of those groups. He and I have talked on a number of occasions about the importance of climate action to so many of his constituents, and I look forward to working with him on these issues in the months ahead.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Last week, 20 of my constituents from the Climate Coalition, the Mothers' Climate Action Network, Our Grandchildren's Climate, the Hampstead Neighbourhood Forum and the Camden Fixing Factory came to see me. They were very clear that COP30 will be a pivotal moment to restore momentum on tackling climate change and to tackle the misinformation that is on the rise not just online but in mainstream political parties. Can I ask the Secretary of State what leadership the UK will be showing at COP30 to ensure that we tackle this misinformation? More importantly, what is he doing to ensure that powerful international partners who may not be on the same page as us when it comes to climate change are coming along with us on this journey, because it is only collective action that will solve this serious crisis?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great expertise and passion on these issues, and she is absolutely right. This is about what we do to engage with other countries. We had an environment dialogue with the Chinese Minister a couple of weeks ago in London. I engage with China, India and Brazil, all of which are absolutely key; Brazil is obviously the host of COP30. She is right to say that COP30 will be a crucial moment when we will show that we are continuing to take action, and that is what we are determined to do.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As a sponsor of the Climate and Nature Bill, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement this afternoon. He is right to highlight that this is a national crisis, and many of us across the House are right to point out that it cannot be ignored and that inaction has too great a cost, but he will be aware that the costs are politicising this issue for many people in this country. Legislation is before the House regarding where and how pension funds are invested. Can he assure the House that he is talking to Treasury and local government Ministers to ensure that the maximum amount from those pension funds—particularly, but not exclusively, the local government pension fund—can be invested in green energy projects? That will widen the investment base and therefore hopefully reduce costs, depoliticising the issue and resulting in the greening of our energy generation that we all want to see.

Ed Miliband: I warmly thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and his sponsorship of the Climate and Nature Bill. He is the voice of good sense—I hope that is not the kiss of death—on the Conservative Benches. He raises an important issue about pensions and pension investments, and it is one that I will take up.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I want to get all Members in, so can we please have shorter questions and answers?

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the fact that my local hospital will have solar panels on it thanks to this Labour Government, saving thousands of pounds that can go directly back into frontline services. What more can he do to ensure that public buildings like hospitals and prisons have solar panels fitted so that we can lower costs and contribute to our climate goals?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is completely right, and it is a scheme that we want to expand. It has been incredibly successful, and it is a no-brainer—using the natural resources of the sun to cut energy bills and release money for frontline services.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The statement from the Energy Secretary sounded like a desperate attempt to save his own job, but he is right that the British people need protecting: they need protecting from the Energy Secretary, because businesses that I visit say every single week that his madcap ideas are killing growth, business and jobs. But I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt if he can answer one simple question, which he has already refused to answer: by how much would the Earth's temperature be reduced if the UK became net zero tomorrow?

Ed Miliband: The answer, which the hon. Member just does not want to accept, is this—*[Interruption.]* If he just listens, the answer is this: I believe in British leadership and in Britain's ability to make a difference. The truth is, as I said in my statement, that when we passed the Climate Change Act 2008, 60 countries followed. When we legislated for net zero, many other countries followed. He talks Britain down; I believe in Britain.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank God there is somebody in this Chamber trying to actually save the planet! Net zero makes good common sense for lots of our constituents when they recognise that this is not just about climate security—those of us who have faced floods in our constituencies know how expensive that is—but about national security and the cost of living. Moving towards sustainable electricity would put both Rosebank and Putin out of business, but the Secretary of State will know that, on current plans, bill payers will be wasting £8 billion a year switching off wind farms by 2030 if we do not take action. How can we stop this transfer of wealth from citizens to corporations, so that we can invest in community energy?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The infrastructure we inherited was in a shocking state, and there was a failure to build grid infrastructure. The best thing we can do is accelerate building that grid infrastructure. If we can do that, we can reduce those constraint payments, and I look forward to support from all parts of the House on this.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State rightly says that British leadership matters and that the choices we make as a country will have an impact on future generations. I do not doubt his personal commitment to tackling climate change and delivering net zero, but is he sure that all his Cabinet colleagues are on the same page as him, not least the Chancellor of the Exchequer given her unwavering commitment to expanding not just Heathrow, but Gatwick, Luton, City and Stansted, despite the advice and concerns of the Climate Change Committee?

Ed Miliband: Yes. I can tell the hon. Member that we have never had a Chancellor of the Exchequer so committed to these issues because we had the biggest investment in clean, home-grown energy in our history in the recent spending review.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Welwyn Hatfield stands to be a big beneficiary of the social housing warm homes plan. It won a grant of £6 million, meaning that hundreds of homes will be upgraded and retrofitted, which will see bills and emissions coming down. Our colleagues from Reform have a flair for language, and they talk about “net stupid zero”. I am interested to know what language my right hon. Friend would use to describe a party that opposes a policy that will cut emissions and bills for people living in council homes in my community.

Ed Miliband: We are just advocating common sense. Why not use our natural resources to have warmer homes and cut emissions? I think that Reform Members are the extremists, frankly.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The real driver of this statement is the fact that the Secretary of State is losing the argument with his colleagues, who are now challenging the impact of his policies on economic growth. He is trying to cover up the cost, which the OBR revealed last week will be £30 billion per year and £800 billion over the period. Businesses are struggling with power bills that are bankrupting them, and consumers are resisting the net zero demands to fly less, eat less meat and buy cars that they do not want. Does he not see a connection between what he says about young people's anxiety and his disgraceful scare tactics today, all of which are to enable him to say that Britain is taking the lead? All I say to him is this: since the Paris agreement, emissions have gone up by 30%, so he might be leading, but he does not have too many followers.

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman and I have been arguing about these issues for about 20 years, so I think that I am unlikely to persuade him. We usually have good-natured discussions about this, but on the idea that this is scaremongering, we can see with our own eyes what is happening, as the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) said earlier. What the right hon. Gentleman is advocating would be a total betrayal not just of future generations but of today's generations.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has been a global leader in this space for 20 years. We all know about the Climate Change Act 2008, but without his singular intervention at COP15 in Copenhagen, the world would not have agreed and would be on a worse climate trajectory today—the whole House needs to hear that. We now need significant afforestation and the repair of the world's ecosystems—be they peat bogs, permafrost or seagrass—so what plans does he have to lead in that space at COP30 in Belém?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is very kind. To be frank with him, when I met a group of young people earlier today, I felt a sense of responsibility, because no country is yet doing enough on these issues and we need to do more. They are fearful about the world that they will inherit and look to the Government to show leadership. The issue that he mentions is important, and we will ensure that we make it part of our agenda at COP30.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Hosepipe bans rightly anger my constituents. The bans frustrate them and me because they speak to decades of failure to put in place provisions to prepare so that the changing climate is liveable for our children. How can people be expected to support large-scale house building, which those same children will need, when water companies fail to fix leaks, pollute our rivers and too often fail even to provide clean drinking water?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has commissioned a review of the whole system of regulation of the water companies. I think I am right in saying that a new reservoir has not been built in Britain for 30 years, but we have plans for nine new reservoirs as part of our action to address the issue the hon. Lady raises.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I had the real pleasure of visiting York Road nursery school in my constituency this morning to celebrate its securing Eco-Schools green flag status—with distinction no less. As well as being a sobering reminder of my inability to hold the attention of four-year-olds for very long, it was a powerful reminder that future generations will bear the brunt of our failure to take this crisis seriously. The truth is that we do not have to look to the future to see the cost—my local farmers are beset by flooding, for example. We in Hitchin are already feeling the pain of the failure to take climate change and the nature crisis seriously and to tackle them head-on. What assurances can the Secretary of State give my constituents that we will not shy away from tackling climate change at source, and that we will invest in mitigation schemes to tackle the issues that we are already facing right across our towns and villages?

Ed Miliband: I congratulate my hon. Friend's school on what it is doing and on its green flag status, which is really important. It shows that local action can really make a difference. Globally, I can give him the assurance that he seeks. What is so important—I say this to Members across the House—is that people look to Britain and say, "Are you going to lead? Are you going to show the power of example?" That is what we have done over 20 years, under Governments of both parties, and we need to keep doing it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Llinos Medi.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Madam Ddirprwy Lefarydd. Climate change is a huge threat to food security. In 2018, losses in the Welsh livestock sector due to extreme weather reached £175 million, which is equivalent to 9% of the total Welsh agricultural output. Farmers need support to protect their livestock and crops. Will the Secretary of State listen to the concerns of the farming unions about the removal of the ringfence for Welsh agricultural funding? It could mean less money for climate adaptations, at a time when they are most needed to safeguard food security.

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises an issue that I believe is essentially about devolved funding, but the wider issue she raises about the costs facing farmers is so important. We are not talking about theoretical events or theoretical future costs; they are happening now. Farmers are facing those costs, and the hon. Lady is right to draw attention to that.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): When I speak to young people in Kettering, and in fact when I have conversations with my friends, they tell me that they are worried about the future of the world that we have inherited. With that in mind, the climate delay rhetoric coming from the Tories and Reform is both deeply irresponsible and really disappointing. Can the Secretary of State outline that only if we work with urgency to take action will my constituents see the restoration of our natural world—a world that we can pass on to the next generation?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. This is an obligation that we owe to young people. We hold the planet in trust for future generations. The young

[Ed Miliband]

people of today speak for themselves, but they also speak for future generations. Frankly, we owe it to them to act when the evidence is before our eyes.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The Met Office report and the Climate Change Committee have made it clear that we are unprepared for climate change, with progress on food security and nature restoration either insufficient or limited. The Lang partnership in Curry Rivel has proudly championed regenerative farming and nature-friendly farming methods for more than 30 years. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his colleagues in DEFRA to ensure that farmers like the Langs can farm productively and sustainably and be resilient to climate crisis?

Ed Miliband: I congratulate the hon. Lady's constituents on what they are doing to find regenerative ways of farming. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary takes the matter incredibly seriously, and we have structures in place that can help to incentivise that, but I think he would say that of course we need to do more on these issues. The hon. Lady has put it very eloquently.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for making such a pertinent statement when the planet is in such a critical condition. I also thank him for his domestic and global leadership. The BioYorkshire project will create 4,000 jobs, helping us to see a green transition but also ensuring that we have future agriculture at the highest level of science. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that this Government, unlike the last, fund that sufficiently so that we can see a real transition in farming and in other areas of climate-mitigating science?

Ed Miliband: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising what sounds like an incredibly exciting project. On all sides of the House—well, on a number of sides of the House—we can hear fantastic examples of what local people are doing. In a sense, that should be our inspiration. Government is trying to do its bit, but local people in communities across Britain are doing theirs as well.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Tackling climate change is a top topic among children and young people when I visit schools and colleges across Telford. Switching to renewables is a top topic among employers; it will help to reduce the cost of their energy supply. Renewables companies tell me about the fantastic, well-paid jobs that are available. Climate security, environment security and energy security are national security. Does my right hon. Friend know a single reason why this is not a key mission to rebuild Britain and protect our planet for generations to come?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right, and the emphasis that he places on national security is important. Our exposure to fossil fuel markets, controlled by petrostates and dictators, leaves us exposed, and that is what the previous Government did. This is an energy security issue and a national security issue, and that is why we need clean, home-grown power.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): As the Secretary of State outlined, the climate crisis is also a nature crisis, especially in nature-depleted cities such as

London. In recognition of that, Ealing's Labour council has imaginative plans for a new regional park from Horsenden hill in the north, to Warren farm in my constituency, creating new habitats, wetlands, and rewilded areas. Does the Secretary of State agree that this Government's new nature recovery fund could help to support initiatives such as Ealing's regional park, and that in contrast to the piecemeal approach of the previous Government, the fund will allow a more strategic and effective approach to restoring our natural environment?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right, and if we think about the recent hot weather, access to green spaces is a massive issue. It is also a massive issue of inequality, because in certain parts of the country people have such access, and in certain parts they do not, so the project that my hon. Friend talks about sounds incredibly important.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for placing this issue on the agenda. Nothing could be more existential or vital than tackling our climate and nature crises, because we live within the natural system, not outside it. We and nature are in this together, and nothing could be more important, or better for building the foundation of how we shape our communities and economy into the future. Industry understands that, and I have had the chance to convene industry and bring forward ideas such as the diversification of technologies, which we support, and the build-up of strategic national clean energy reserves. Would the Secretary of State meet me to discuss those ideas that are coming from industry?

Ed Miliband: We definitely look forward to discussing those ideas, and my hon. Friend is right about the interlocking nature of the climate and nature crisis, and climate and nature solutions. Those things go together. There are big economic opportunities, and my hon. Friend is a great champion of them.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that rural and coastal communities are on the frontline of the climate and nature crisis, and that investment in clean energy, nature recovery, and resilient infrastructure is essential not only for protecting areas such as South East Cornwall, but also for unlocking new jobs, strengthening my local economy, and ensuring our future national security?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend was a fantastic champion of these issues in her previous incarnation, as she is in her current incarnation. I know her constituency, and I could not agree more with the work she is doing.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Rugby borough council and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust are hosting a "Nature in Focus" event this Sunday, and partnering together to buy trees for farmers to plant. In December 2024, my right hon. Friend joined me to visit the Urban&Civic-led Houlton development, where we saw Francis Jackson Homes fitting air-source heat pumps to its new build homes. We talked of our hope to go further, so does my right hon. Friend agree that through the future homes standard, which ensures that the vast majority of new builds will have solar panels, we are showing that a Labour Government and Labour-led councils believe in

the concept of government and taking responsibility, and that we can change things for the better for future generations?

Ed Miliband: I wish my hon. Friend luck with the event on Sunday, which sounds important. He is absolutely right: for millions of people the whole warm homes plans is about cutting their energy bills, creating warmer homes and cutting emissions—and they go together.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Today's Met Office report says that we need to put in place a highly localised network of rain gauges, as extreme rainfall can be very dangerous. In July 2021, Stockbridge in my constituency faced flooding after a torrential downpour one afternoon, following several days of soaring temperatures. A network of rain gauges will help to analyse the impact of climate change, and also help communities such as Stockbridge to prepare. Will my right hon. Friend outline the Government's plans in that regard?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend draws attention to what sounds like an important recommendation, and as somebody whose constituency saw two once-in-100-year flooding events within about a decade, I know from local experience how serious such issues are. I am glad she has drawn my attention to that recommendation, and we will look carefully at it.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I welcome this Government's focus on the urgency of the climate crisis, and I know that many climate activists in my constituency will as well, because the evidence is unequivocal: only sustained reductions in greenhouse gases will slow global warming and the only way to that it is to accelerate the transition to net zero. Will the Secretary of State commit to staying resolute in the face of opposition on the commitment to net zero? Does he agree with me that as the first country to industrialise, the UK has a special responsibility to show global leadership in this area?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. As the Prime Minister says, action on clean energy and net zero is "in the DNA" of this Government. I was in

the last Labour Government, but now we have a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who are more supportive of this agenda, and who have moved it from the margins to the mainstream more than anyone else before.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly his encouragement for Members from across the House to support the Government's efforts—and those of any future Government who maintain that commitment—to reach net zero by 2050. Does the Secretary of State agree that the announcement by the newly elected Reform county council in Kent that it will axe all investment in net zero is not only a betrayal of my constituents in Dartford and residents across Kent, but particularly of young people, who deserve to inherit a sustainable planet?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was not aware of that announcement, but it sounds like it is anti-job and a betrayal of future generations and will make people poorer.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for his important statement. I say to him gently that I was a Mili-fan before it was cool. When I visit schools in my constituency of Harlow, including the wonderful Freshwaters primary academy, which I visited on Friday, and the Downs primary school, where one young child asked me about the declining number of blackbirds, the No. 1 issue that students raise is climate change. What would the Secretary of State say to young people in Harlow about the action he has taken to protect my constituents, who will face the cost of inaction?

Ed Miliband: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words; I am not quite sure how to deal with them—it is a tough one. It has been so interesting to hear hon. Members from across the House talking about these issues in relation to the strong feelings of their constituents, so I reassure people in Harlow, including young people, that this Government are absolutely committed on these issues, and we are determined to ensure that they inherit a liveable planet.

UK-France Migration: Co-operation

4.57 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to update the House on new joint action between the UK and France to tackle dangerous small boat crossings—crossings that undermine both UK and French border security, put lives at risk in the channel, fuel organised crime, and cause disorder and damage, both here in the UK and in France.

The new agreement reached at the summit last week means stronger partnership working with source and transit countries to prevent illegal migration; stronger law enforcement action against criminal smuggler and trafficking gangs who profit from this trade in human lives; action to strengthen the border itself along the French coast and in the channel; a groundbreaking new returns arrangement so, for the first time, people arriving on small boats can be sent back to France; and stronger action here in the UK to stop illegal working and to tackle the long-term system failures that are exploited by criminal gangs to encourage people to travel to the UK. I hope that the whole House will welcome each of those important steps.

Global instability continues to drive irregular and illegal migration towards Europe and towards the UK, and it is exploited and encouraged by criminal gangs who seek to make maximum profit from human misery and insecurity. France faces challenges too, with over 150,000 people claiming asylum there in 2024. The most serious aspect that we face is the dangerous small boat crossings that undermine our border security and put lives at risk. Before 2018, we barely saw anyone trying to cross by boat, but in the years that followed a major criminal industry was allowed to grow and take deep hold along our border. In the space of just five years, the number of small boat crossings increased by more than a hundredfold, from less than 400 in 2018 to over 40,000 by 2023, weakening border security and badly damaging public trust in the state's ability to manage border control.

For too long, Britain's response has been underpowered and ineffective, and so too has the co-operation across Europe, letting criminal gangs get away with it and leaving the asylum system in chaos. The co-ordinated work across Europe has been far too weak for far too long, and so too has the work between the UK and our nearest neighbours. As we have set out before, smuggler and trafficking gangs make their money by operating across borders, so Governments need to co-operate across borders to take them down. That had not happened for years in the system we inherited.

Securing UK borders is a fundamental part of the Prime Minister's plan for change. That is why we are building the foundations of a new international approach, working with countries across Europe and beyond to strengthen and secure our borders, to prevent dangerous and illegal boat crossings and to stop criminal gangs, who are putting lives at risk. Let me take each of the five areas of co-operation in turn.

The first area is upstream co-operation. Much stronger joint action is needed with source and transit countries to prevent dangerous journeys in the first place. We have strengthened the key partnerships with the G7 and

the Calais Group, and have established a new joint upstream working group with France—chaired by the Border Security Commander and the Minister of the Interior's special representative on migration—to target action with source and transit countries, including on prevention campaigns, law enforcement and returns. For example, we are working jointly with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government to tackle the Iraqi Kurdish smuggler gangs that stretch their operations between Iraq, northern France and the UK.

Secondly, we are extending stronger law enforcement action against the criminal gangs. We have already introduced the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to introduce counter-terrorism-style powers on people smuggling. We have established the Border Security Command to mobilise UK agencies and funded extra specialist National Crime Agency intelligence and investigations officers, including staff stationed across Europe and in Europol. We also brought together representatives from more than 50 countries and international organisations at the border security summit earlier this year.

In comparison with the year before, we have increased disruptions against more high-end, high-harm targets by nearly a quarter; closed twice as many social media accounts—18,000 social media accounts used by smugglers to sell boat crossings are now down; and increased the cost to gangs of boat and engine packages being delivered to northern France, hitting their business model. That is all work done by the National Crime Agency this year. We are now going further, with additional recruitment of NCA officers and, crucially, a new specialist intelligence and judicial police unit in Dunkirk to speed up the arrest and prosecution of smugglers in France.

Thirdly, we are strengthening the border itself. French actions have prevented 496 boat crossings this year, but 385 boats have crossed. Criminal gangs are operating new tactics, increasing the overcrowding of boats so that more people arrive, loading them in shallow waters and exploiting the French rules that mean authorities have not been able to intervene in the water. Those tactics have driven appalling scenes, with people clambering on to crowded boats in shallow waters, disgraceful violence from gang members towards the French police and migrants, and people being crushed to death in the middle of overcrowded boats. We cannot stand for this.

That is why the new action agreed with France includes establishing a new French *Compagnie de Marche* of specialist enforcement officers, with stronger public order powers to address increases in violence on French beaches and prevent boat launches before they reach the water. It also includes providing training for additional drone pilots to intercept those launches and, crucially, supporting the new maritime review instigated by the French Minister of the Interior so that they can intervene more effectively, pursuing what last week's declaration describes as

“novel and innovative approaches to intercept boats, and enhanced Maritime co-operation, to ensure we adapt as the criminal gangs change their approach”.

Meanwhile, we are changing our domestic law through the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to criminalise those who endanger people's lives at sea, so that we can more easily prosecute those who crowd on to overcrowded boats and put other people's lives at risk. Action will be taken in both French and UK waters.

Fourthly, we are taking new, innovative approaches to returns. Since the election, we have already increased international returns for those with no right to be in the UK, but until now we have not been able to return people who have made these dangerous and illegal boat crossings to other safe countries they have travelled through. Previous Governments tried to achieve this—indeed, they even promised it—but they never secured an agreement to do so. Under the groundbreaking agreement announced by the Prime Minister and President Macron last week, for the first time individuals who arrive in the UK by small boat can be readmitted to France. That is the right thing to do, and is also an important step towards undermining the business model of the organised crime groups that are behind these crossings.

We have agreed to establish a safe, reciprocal exchange mechanism for individuals in France who apply with appropriate documentation to be transferred to the UK, subject to clear eligibility criteria and stringent security checks. Transfers to the UK under the new route will match the number readmitted to France on a one-for-one basis. Further details of the scheme will be set out in the immigration rules once final arrangements are in place. This innovative agreement means that people who undertake illegal, dangerous journeys to the UK—putting their own and other people's lives at risk and paying money to fuel an entire criminal industry—will be returned to France, where the boats set off from. In return, we will take people who apply lawfully and pass security checks, with priority given to those who have a connection with the UK, who are most likely to be refugees, or who are most vulnerable to smuggler gangs.

This is the right thing to do. It establishes the principle that, while the UK will always be ready to play its part alongside other countries in helping those fleeing persecution and conflict, we believe this should be done in a controlled and managed legal way, not through dangerous, illegal, uncontrolled or criminal routes. It is also the first step towards undermining the promises made by criminal gangs when they tell people that if they travel to the UK, they cannot be returned to the continent—now, they can be. We will develop the pilot step by step and will trial different approaches as part of it, varying the numbers and seeking the most effective ways to undermine the gangs, reduce boat crossings and help France to deal with the problems it faces in the Calais region. The Prime Minister and French President have set out their expectation that that pilot will be operationalised in the coming weeks.

Fifthly, we will take stronger action on illegal working and asylum failures here in the UK. For far too long, it has been too easy for people to work illegally in the UK and for employers to exploit them, undercutting responsible businesses. Since the election, we have already increased illegal working raids and arrests by 50%, and have more than tripled the value of employer penalties issued to over £89 million. We have also launched a new surge in enforcement linked to the gig economy, and the borders Bill contains changes to the law to compel companies to conduct proper checks on the right to work. We will also bring forward further reforms to the asylum system to prevent its operation being exploited—either by gangs to encourage travel to the UK, or by people who are here illegally to find unfair ways to stay.

We need to be part of the global response to irregular and illegal migration, not separate from it—working in partnership, not just shouting and pointing at the sea.

Everyone knows that there is no single silver bullet to tackle illegal migration and dangerous boat crossings, and that it takes time to unpick the deep roots that gangs have put down and to build the foundations of a new cross-border approach, but that is what we are determined to do. We are committed to stronger borders, to stronger law enforcement in France and in the UK, to increasing returns, and to building the foundations of a new long-term approach where countries co-operate to prevent illegal migration and ensure there is sanctuary for genuine refugees. No one should be making these dangerous boat journeys, which undermine our border security and put lives at risk. That is why this co-operation between the UK and France is so important.

I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.9 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. She comes to the Chamber today sounding rather pleased with herself, but I am afraid she has no reason to. A year ago, she promised to smash the gangs—she said again and again that that was her plan. Indeed, it was her only plan, yet today there is no mention of what was once her favourite catchphrase. That is because her claim to smash the gangs has become a joke—an embarrassment to her and to the Government. We warned that law enforcement alone would not be enough, as did the National Crime Agency, but she did not listen, and what then happened?

The 12 months following 5 July last year have been the worst such period in history, with small boat crossings at 44,359—up 40% year on year. The first 13 days of July have also been the worst in history, with 2,510 in less than two weeks—up 213% year on year. This calendar year so far has been the worst in history as well—up 57% on last year. The Home Secretary is setting records, just all the wrong ones. These boat crossings are now the worst ever. Does the Home Secretary accept that she has lost control of our borders and is failing in her most basic duty to protect the United Kingdom?

The Home Secretary says she has a new deal with France, yet President Macron says it needs EU agreement. Is that true? If so, has the EU provided it? A deal must of course involve an agreed number, yet when the Home Secretary is asked, she is unable to say what numbers are involved. Will she now come clean and tell Parliament what number, if any, has been agreed? If there is no agreement with the EU, and no agreed number as part of the deal, then there is no deal at all, only vacuous spin. The only number we have seen reported is just 50 illegal immigrants a week. That number was put to the Prime Minister last Thursday, and he did not deny it. Fifty a week represents only 6% of illegal arrivals, meaning 94% could stay. Does the Home Secretary seriously think that allowing 94% of illegal immigrants to stay will be any kind of deterrent? Her claim to smash the gangs was a gimmick and so is her 6% returns deal.

The truth is this: the only way to fix this is to remove, without judicial process, every single illegal arrival as soon as they get here, either to their country of origin or to a third country. That would be a real deterrent. We saw that approach work in Australia about 10 years ago and such a scheme—[Interruption.] I am glad hon.

[Chris Philp]

Members mention Rwanda. Such a scheme for the UK was ready to start in July last year. The previous Government had done all the legal and logistical work needed. All the Home Secretary had to do was press go, but she and the Prime Minister cancelled the scheme just days before it was due to start, and as a result we now see record numbers crossing. Will she now admit that she made a terrible mistake, and will she now start a proper 100% removals deterrent?

The damage done by illegal immigration at this scale is immense. Far from closing asylum hotels as the Government promised, there are now nearly 3,000 more people in asylum hotels than at the time of the last election. I have personally witnessed rampant illegal working from the very hotels that the Home Secretary runs. I saw Deliveroo, Uber Eats and Just Eat bikes in the compound of an asylum hotel whose residents have no right to work. Will she at least commit today to ending illegal working from the very hotels that she runs?

We also see reports of migrants based in hotels being charged with serious crimes, including rape and sexual assaults on women and children. Louise Casey has warned that a significant proportion of sexual offences are committed by those seeking asylum—cases like that of 29-year-old Afghan, Sadeq Nikzad, convicted of raping a 15-year-old girl. His defence counsel claimed that he did not understand that was wrong due to cultural differences.

This madness has to stop. The Home Secretary cancelled a proper deterrent plan just days before it was due to start. Her claim to smash the gangs lies in tatters. She has presided over the highest number of illegal small boat crossings in history. Will she now apologise to the House and to the country for her appalling failure?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Home Secretary just wants to pretend that the last eight years never happened. He knows that this crisis—this small boats chaos—went on for 340 weeks under the Tories. During that period, when he was in charge as Immigration Minister, overall migration nearly trebled and the number of small boat crossings increased tenfold. During those 340 weeks when the Tories were in charge, 128,000 people crossed the channel, and how many were returned to France? Zero. How many were sent to Rwanda? He said himself it was zero, because he did not even want to count the four volunteers. He keeps saying that somehow it was ready to start, but if it had been ready to start, the Conservatives would not have called the election. They would have introduced the scheme which had, in fact, been running for more than two years, at a cost of £700 million and with just four volunteers sent.

I can also tell the shadow Home Secretary that since the election this Government have returned more than 35,000 people who have no right to be here. That is a 24% increase in the number of enforced returns compared to the last year in which his party was in charge. It is a 28% increase in the number of failed asylum returns compared to the last year in which his party was in charge.

As for the agreement with France, which he does not seem to want to talk about very much, I asked him about exactly that back in 2020, when I was Chair of the Home Affairs Committee and he was Immigration Minister. I specifically asked:

“what chance do you put on being able to get a bilateral agreement, say with France, for them to take back people who have arrived here from France...?”

He said—this was five years ago—that that was what he was working on. Indeed, he told the Committee:

“one of our priorities will be to reach those agreements and... it is, I think, strongly in the French national interest to agree such a returns agreement... That gives me significant cause for optimism.”

Well, it turns out that he should have been optimistic—about the return of a Labour Government, reaching an agreement where he had failed.

He also said at the time:

“We intend to return as many illegal migrants who have arrived—

by small boats—

as possible... we have flights planned in the coming days to return these individuals back to France and we will be looking to ramp up this activity.”

Well, that was five years ago. The flights never went, and the activity was never ramped up. The shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), tried to return people to France. The shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), tried to return people to France, and even called for the UK

“to take one asylum seeker”

from France

“in return for one illegal migrant that we return to them. Or indeed more than one.”

As for interception in shallow waters, the right hon. Gentleman said, when he was Immigration Minister:

“Some boats that are just 250 yards away from the French coast have not been stopped by the authorities. This must change.”

I agree, but that was five years ago, and he did not change a thing. The Conservatives never understood that it is not possible to change things simply by jumping up and down and shouting about them. It needs partnership working and hard graft, and that is what this Government have done.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary on succeeding in agreeing a deal with France. It just shows that treating people with respect can result in positive action, and treating them with contempt, as the Conservatives did throughout this issue, was never going to provide a solution. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that each of those four volunteers whom the Conservative Government paid to be sent to Rwanda was paid, by the British taxpayer, £150,000 to provide free housing, a free university education and free private healthcare? Who approved that funding in the Department?

Yvette Cooper: I can confirm that the deal that the previous Government did with Rwanda involved paying £150,000 for every single individual, to cover food, accommodation and healthcare for five years. Those bills continue. A concern was raised by the accounting officer, so a direction had to be given, on the basis that Ministers had been advised that it was not value for money but they continued regardless.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

We all want to stop these dangerous channel crossings, which first ballooned under the former Conservative Government. Cross-border co-operation will be key to achieving that, and clearly a lot of work is needed after the Conservatives ripped up the returns agreement that allowed us to send irregular migrants back to Europe. I was very interested to hear the shadow Home Secretary quote President Macron, but he was a little selective in doing so—he did not mention the section of President Macron’s remarks that attributed the problem to the Brexit deal that the last Conservative Government cooked up.

This deal is a step in the right direction, and I sincerely hope that it works, but people will understandably be sceptical that such a small scheme will act as an effective deterrent at this stage. Questions still need to be answered about how and when the UK and French Governments will decide to scale up the pilot, so I would welcome more details from the Home Secretary.

Of course, deals like this are only part of the solution. The Home Secretary mentioned placing officers within Europol, but will she commit to negotiating a stronger leadership role for the UK in Europol, to make it easier to crack down on the trafficking gangs behind these crossings? Does she acknowledge that we will not be able to fully take the power out of the hands of the gangs until we provide regulated entry to the UK for genuine refugees?

One of the best deterrents to put people off the idea of coming here in the first place is for all asylum applications to be processed quickly, so that those who are granted refugee status can integrate and contribute to our community, and for those with no right to be here to be sent back swiftly. Can the Home Secretary update the House on the average time it takes to process an asylum application after arrival on British shores, and how has that changed over the past year? Until the Government act on these points, I fear that they risk repeating the Conservatives’ mistakes and failing to get to grips with the problem, which is something we all want them to do.

Yvette Cooper: The Prime Minister and the French President set out their expectation that we will be able to operationalise this agreement and begin the pilot in the coming weeks. The numbers will vary, and it is a pilot that will need to be developed. We will need to trial different approaches as part of it, and that is the right and sensible approach.

The principle underpinning the agreement is the right one: we should return people who have paid money to criminal gangs in order to come on this dangerous journey in small boats—which puts other people’s lives at risk, as well as their own, and undermines our border security—in exchange for taking people who apply legally, who are more likely to be genuine refugees and who have been through security checks, and prioritising people who have a connection to the UK. It is also a way to help undermine the business model of the criminal gangs, who tell people that there is no way to be returned to France or any other country if they get into one of these dangerous small boats. They use that as part of their advertising, which we should seek to undermine.

The hon. Lady is right to say that we also need stronger law enforcement. We have already been building stronger co-operation, including by setting up the new prosecution and investigation unit in Dunkirk, which

will work with our National Crime Agency and our Border Security Command, and we are significantly speeding up asylum decision making to bring the backlog down. We also need action to speed up the appeals process, because there are delays as a result of the broken system that we inherited.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): As the Home Secretary points out, we did not have small boat crossings 10 years ago, but we left the EU without incorporating a returns agreement into the withdrawal agreement. On a point of clarification, can the Home Secretary confirm that it is completely unprecedented for an EU country to allow returns from outwith the EU’s external borders? I note that it comes on the back of a highly successful state visit by President Macron. We have come a long way from having a Prime Minister question whether France is friend or foe—Macron is our friend, and our foes are the people smugglers. On the pilot, what are the Home Secretary’s parameters for success, how does she envisage it scaling up, and how does she envisage the UK-EU relationship will have to adapt in the future to accommodate it, if successful?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell my hon. Friend that we will want to develop this over time, and we will do so in partnership with France. He is right that we will secure this co-operation together and have an impact together, just as successive Governments over the years have strengthened security co-operation with France—through juxtaposed controls, different border security arrangements, and checks for lorries and clandestine journeys—and that co-operation strengthened our border security. That had just not been done on small boats, and that is what this agreement is all about. It is about building the security co-operation we have had in the past, but not on small boats, and that is now so important. We will build that co-operation, because we will best strengthen our border security by working with countries on the other side of our borders who face exactly the same challenges, and that is far better than just standing on the shoreline and shouting at the sea.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I always try to avoid rhetoric in this matter, and I fully concede—this bit is agreed—that my party lost a significant number of MPs because of our failure to deliver on a number of issues prior to the election. I listened very carefully to what the right hon. Lady said about stronger partnerships, stronger law enforcement action and groundbreaking returns agreement, but does she not recognise that the scale of the problem, as evidenced by the numbers since the general election, and the scale of public concern require a much bigger solution than what is proposed? Without a significant deterrent on a much bigger scale much sooner, she is not going to fix this problem to public satisfaction.

Yvette Cooper: No one should be making these dangerous boat crossings, which undermine border security and put lives at risk. We have seen a change in the way the criminal gangs have been operating over the past six months. First, they have increased overcrowding with a substantial increase in the number of people on the boats, which is putting more lives at risk. Secondly, they have exploited the French rules about not intervening in French waters by loading the boats in French waters, which is why we have seen the disgraceful scenes of people crowding on

[Yvette Cooper]

to boats from the water. We have to tackle those issues, which is why the UK is changing our law so we can prosecute people who are endangering other people's lives by climbing on to overcrowded boats, and it is also why France has instigated a French maritime review so that it can intervene in French waters.

The French Interior Minister and I have been working on these developments over several months, and I think it is right that we build that co-operation. It is also right to say that there is no single silver bullet. We need comprehensive action on every single aspect of this, to make a difference, strengthen our border security and save lives.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Home Secretary shares my frustration that we could have been much further along with a returns agreement, because the shadow Home Secretary—the former Immigration Minister—apparently admitted to a Conservative party members meeting in May that, before we left the European Union, his Government had worked out that we would not be able to return people under the hard Brexit deal they were providing.

Given the progress we have made by getting a returns agreement, could the Home Secretary outline for us what this will mean for somebody applying from France? This is going to be a safe route, and it is therefore very welcome movement for those of us who recognise the horrors in Calais and the limbo we leave people in. It is important to use this to dissuade people from getting on to a dangerous boat, because there is a legal mechanism they can use to be reunited with their families.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend's question is an important one. Once the final arrangements are ready to operationalise, we will set out in the immigration rules the precise detail of the way in which people will be able to apply from France. They will need to have proper identification and to go through security checks. Once people have applied, we will set prioritisation decisions, including on whether people have connections to the UK, and on the countries from which people are most likely to be refugees or to be targeted by smuggler and trafficking gangs. We will set out that detail in due course. Part of the reason for the one-for-one arrangement is that it has to go alongside returns to France for people who get on illegal boat crossings and end up paying huge amounts of money to fuel the criminal smuggler industry, which will make sure that we simultaneously strengthen our border security and save lives.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): This is a grubby, grotesque little deal, which in itself trades in lives with the selection of who qualifies for this one in, one out basis. This gimmick means we will now have different classes of the wretched, and it does nothing to address the crisis that compels so many people to make these dangerous journeys in the first place. It is a gimmick doomed to fail and it simply will not work. But there is one thing that could smash the gangs in one simple blow: establish the safe and legal routes, which have worked so perfectly in the past, for people to come to this country.

Yvette Cooper: The small boat crossings are dangerous and put lives at risk. We have seen people drown and people crushed to death on overcrowded boats. That is

being driven and organised by criminal gangs who will do anything they can to profit from these dangerous journeys. The whole point of having the one-for-one approach with France is that we have an agreement that means we will return people who come on those dangerous boat crossings, who pay money to the criminal gangs, and who, frankly, should be returned or should be part of the returns arrangements. In return, we will take those who apply lawfully through the application process and who have had security checks. I think that principle is the right one. The UK, as we have shown through the Ukraine and Hong Kong schemes, will always do its bit to help those fleeing persecution and conflict. However, we also think there should be much stronger enforcement, and we should not have the illegal migration that undermines border security and puts lives at risk in the channel.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Under the Tories, we had Liz Truss question whether France was actually an ally, so it was nice to hear in President Macron's words last week that Britain has friends once again. In the 340 weeks that the Conservative party was in charge of the small boats crisis, it sent no one back to France and just four people to Rwanda with cash stuffed in their pockets. Does the Home Secretary agree that the way we get results is by working with international partners, not berating them?

Yvette Cooper: I do think we should be working with international partners; that is how we will get co-operation. If criminal gangs operate across borders, then of course we need Governments and law enforcement to co-operate across borders to take those gangs down and to get returns in place. The Conservatives claimed that they were going to get bilateral returns agreements in place: that is what they claimed in 2020; that is what they claimed in 2021; that is what they claimed for years; and that is what they claimed they would seek to do again in 2023. But they failed to do it year after year, because all they did was shout at France and other countries, instead of doing the hard graft to get agreements in place.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This is about principle and practice. The principle is that every country has the right and indeed the duty to secure its borders, and in practice ours have become porous. I agree with the Home Secretary that global instability continues to drive illegal migration, I agree with her that we need co-operation upstream and I agree with her that previous Governments have done far too little, but the scale of the problem requires more than she is offering today. The trend is up. If it continues, 85,000 people will cross, each one knowing that they are coming here illegally. This requires much more emphatic action. Everyone who comes should be incarcerated and all those who can be returned should be. We must recognise that the asylum system is being gamed on an industrial scale. Will she answer this very straightforward question: what evidence does she have that hostile states and organised criminals are using this as a route to get people to this country to do still more harm?

Yvette Cooper: Let us be clear: we need action right across the board, from strengthening prevention—working in partnership with countries like Iraq—right through to law enforcement and increased action on the criminal gangs.

We are taking action on border security itself, with action along the French coast and in the channel in French waters, and strengthening the returns arrangements. We are also taking action here in the UK, whether on illegal working or on reforms to the asylum system. We need to be clear that there must be strong standards on issues of criminality: anybody who comes to the UK through whatever route needs to abide by our laws, and that must be enforced. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have put in place new measures to strengthen the criminality checks in the asylum system and to have much stronger action as part of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. I hope he will support that legislation rather than voting against it.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the fact that we have a Home Secretary who is willing to do what it takes to stop the small boats. The French claim that the ability to work illegally in the UK is what motivates those who are willing to take the dangerous journey across the channel. Does the Home Secretary agree, and will she outline the actions she is taking to crack down on illegal working and destroy those incentives?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. It has been way too easy to work illegally in this country for far too long. That is why, since the election, we have already increased illegal working raids by 50%, increased arrests for illegal working by 50%, and increased the penalties for employers that exploit illegal migration, which undercuts responsible and respectable businesses, by a third. However, we have to go further. We know in particular that illegal migration is being exploited in the gig economy, where there are not proper checks in place. We will therefore bring in new legislation to crack down on illegal working in the gig economy, alongside a surge of immigration enforcement activity and biometric checks that will enable us to use fingerprints to check who people are on the spot. We must have stronger enforcement and stronger rules in place. It is a real shame that the Opposition parties—the Conservatives and Reform—voted against those illegal working rules.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree with President Macron's analysis last week that the reason people want to come here is that the UK is perceived as being attractive to illegal migrants—what President Macron referred to as “pull factors”, with one of his MPs referring to Britain as “El Dorado”? If the Home Secretary does agree with the French President, what is she doing to reduce those pull factors?

Yvette Cooper: As I just set out in the previous answer, I think that it has frankly been too easy to work illegally in this country for too long. We know that the criminal gangs tell people it will be easy to get a job here; they even give people discounts if they will work for those same criminal gangs operating in the UK. We know that that is part of the way the criminal gangs try to advertise and promote their dangerous and illegal business. That is why we cannot stand for illegal working. It is why we are increasing not only the raids but the arrests, which are up by 50% just in the space of this year compared with the previous year, when the right hon. Gentleman's party was in power. We are also strengthening the law. I really hope he will urge his party to support our Bill, rather than continually voting against it.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the work the Government and the Home Secretary have done to get this arrangement with France and on the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which introduces anti-terror-style powers to tackle the crossings. As the Home Secretary has outlined, it is critical that we deal with the delivery companies that continue to hire people who arrive on the boats. She has said that she will introduce legislation to do that and to make that illegal. Can she confirm that that will be robustly implemented? It is these delivery companies—we all know who they are—that are incentivising the boat crossings and, ultimately, threatening our national security.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We know that although some delivery companies have said that they will do stronger checks, in practice it is just not happening. There are too many cases of our immigration enforcement teams doing raids and finding that the rules are being broken and that people are working who have no right to do so and who are here illegally. That is why we are increasing raids and arrests, and it is why we must change the law so that whether it be delivery companies or other organisations in the gig economy, they have to take responsibility and do not just find that they are making a profit from exploiting illegal migration, which in the end fuels the work of criminal gangs.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): War, persecution and climate change mean that more and more people are fleeing their homes for their own safety. The Home Secretary talks of the need for comprehensive action on every single aspect of this, yet her Government have cut international aid by £6 billion, while the US Government have cut their aid budget so drastically that it could result in 14 million preventable deaths by 2030. Does the Home Secretary not agree that without adequate international aid and co-operation to tackle such factors at their source, we are simply setting ourselves up for more humanitarian crises and more migration pressures?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member will know that we had to take a difficult decision on overseas aid to ensure that we can increase our defence investment, which we need to keep our country safe. She is right that we need to work internationally to prevent dangerous journeys and to make sure that people can get sanctuary and support so that they do not have to make those dangerous journeys in the first place. It is that kind of international co-operation that matters, whether through resettlement schemes such as the one we ran for Ukraine or much more targeted work closer to home.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): I welcome the Home Secretary's action today. She is taking this problem seriously and is producing serious solutions and a serious strategy. It is now 80 days since the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) told the world on social media that,

“The Reform UK policy unit has drafted a comprehensive strategy for the deportation of illegal migrants.”

Has the Home Secretary seen that strategy yet, or indeed any detail of Reform's plans? The Frenchman Jules Verne wrote that Phileas Fogg travelled the world in 80 days. Does she think that the leader of Reform has

[*Oliver Ryan*]

perhaps been too busy travelling the world, flogging gold and selling Cameos to produce any such strategy at all?

Yvette Cooper: Certainly, the hon. Member for Clacton has been travelling around the world, and sadly he is once again not here in Parliament when we are discussing these issues. If Reform Members are serious about taking action against the criminal gangs, why on earth did they vote against the counter-terrorism powers to go after them in the first place? Sadly, their one in, one out approach seems to simply be about their parliamentary party.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I have been a bit taken aback by the lack of humility shown by the Home Secretary in the face of what has been a catastrophic first 12 months in terms of crossing numbers. It might have been better for her to acknowledge that “smash the gangs”, which she was always told was going to be a complete failure, has indeed been so. I suppose we should be grateful that she has finally reached for the briefing notes left in the Home Office and No. 10—not about a returns agreement but about a swaps agreement. I suppose I offer her congratulations on getting that deal over the line with the French. However, I disagree with her about it not being a silver bullet; I think this has always been the only solution. But she will know that it will be effective only if we can get to a very high percentage of returns to France.

I have two questions. First, what further incentive could she offer to the French to go beyond this relatively small pilot? Given that we are offering swaps and the theory is that no one will then cross, would she be willing to go for a two-for-one swap? Secondly, as she pointed out, the gangs will react, so does she plan to cut a similar deal with the Belgians?

Yvette Cooper: I disagree with the right hon. Member about the criminal gangs. Whatever we do, we must have much stronger enforcement on the criminal gangs; otherwise, if they are given free rein to do whatever they want, they will find other ways around any arrangement and other ways to make money. It is crucial that stronger enforcement is part of any action we take against them. The National Crime Agency has delivered a 36% increase in high-impact disruptions in the last 12 months compared with the year before, and has been building that partnership with other European countries to be able to go further.

The right hon. Member has argued previously, when others were not doing so, for one-for-one returns, as well as for innovative approaches. I agree with him, and we want to develop that, but we need to start with a pilot arrangement that allows both the UK and France to trial things that we have never done before. The previous Government always made grand claims that somehow everything would be solved in the next three days, and repeatedly failed because they did not build up the credibility, the plans or a systematic approach, working in partnership. That is what we need to do.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I applaud the shadow Home Secretary for his valiant attempt to sound outraged. Is not the truth that while

the Conservatives picked fights on the world stage, the Government have rebuilt relationships and delivered a groundbreaking returns agreement that they would have given their eye teeth for? Does the Secretary of State agree that while sound and fury may make Conservative Members feel better, it is the Government who are systematically getting on with the job of stopping the boats?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. The previous Government tried at different stages to do the kinds of things that we are setting out, but they allowed the relationship with France to deteriorate to the point of diplomacy by tweets and social media, which did not get practical agreements in place. The work that we have done provides practical arrangements that we can build on, and we can trial different approaches. That is the best way to strengthen our border security, and it is what successive Governments had done until recent years.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I have never heard such pathetic drivel in all my life as I have from the Home Secretary and her Back Benchers. It is not the people smugglers bringing illegal migrants over the channel but the French warships who transport them halfway and give them to British border security, who bring them to our shores, put them in buses and take them to hotels. The real people smugglers are the French and British authorities. Does the Home Secretary agree that the British Border Force should take these illegal migrants straight back to France?

Yvette Cooper: No one should be making these dangerous boat crossings; they undermine border security and put lives at risk. If the hon. Member really cares about stopping boats and stopping the criminals who organise them, why have he and his party repeatedly voted against bringing in counter-terrorism powers to go after the gangs? Why have they repeatedly voted against the new laws on illegal working to clamp down on people in the gig economy? Why has he repeatedly voted against laws to have stronger and higher standards against criminality in our asylum system? Time and again, they vote against because they want not to solve the problem but just to moan about it. They do not actually want to change anything with France—to work to get France to intervene in French waters as the Government have been doing. Instead, all they want to do is shout at the sea.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday, the BBC interviewed an Egyptian economic migrant named Obaida in Calais who said that he had tried and failed four times to cross the channel but, since the Prime Minister's agreement with President Macron, he was giving up:

“I don't want to go to Britain any more, because they are making it much harder for us. Every time we try, they deflate our boats and remove the engine. If they make it even harder, I'll stop trying.”

Does that not prove that this new deal to send migrants back to France can be a genuine deterrent, unlike the last Government's pathetic attempt to claim credit?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. What we need is action on the boats in shallow waters as well as action against the criminal gangs and to prevent people reaching the French coast in the first place. We also need the ability to return people to France—as part of

this new agreement—and stronger action to stop people working illegally in the UK. We need action in each of those areas at every stage. That is hard graft—it is not about gimmicks—but that is how we will strengthen our border security and save lives.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Home Secretary is an intelligent woman, and she must realise that this UK-France migration co-operation is a drop in the ocean, given that since it was announced, another 1,375 people have made that dangerous and illegal crossing. She might not like Rwanda, but can she confirm that one of the other things she is working on is finding another safe third country where 100% of people who cross the channel illegally can be processed?

Yvette Cooper: The agreement that we have reached is a fundamentally different approach; it is groundbreaking. It is something that I have discussed with the Interior Minister in France for many months. It is also something that UK Governments have been working to try to do for around five years but without achieving it. This is a first step, but it is an important one in terms of establishing the principles around returns and around stronger law enforcement co-operation. We have also said that we will work with other European countries on looking at different approaches, including returns hubs and other innovative and novel approaches. There are other European countries who are interested in working with us on similar and different kinds of approaches, and we will continue to do that.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): In her earlier remarks, the Home Secretary referenced the memo that the shadow Justice Secretary wrote in March 2023, proposing exactly the kind of one in, one out deal that this Government have now secured. I was struck by the assertion in that memo that that kind of scheme would

“quickly break the business model of the smugglers”.

Does the Home Secretary agree that the Conservatives look utterly partisan, petty and two-faced as they now decide to oppose in public exactly the kind of deal that they were arguing for in private when in government?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. There are things that the Conservatives tried and failed to deliver when they were in government that they now suddenly want to oppose. In the end, that is the hole they have got themselves into. Instead of wanting to be practical and serious about measures that can make a difference, taken step by step, they just want to oppose everything. They fail to solve the problem, and just moan about it instead.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome these important first steps announced by the Home Secretary, as well as her commitment to working with wider European partners, but what safeguards have been put in place to ensure that international law is respected and that the rights of genuine asylum seekers are protected?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Member will be aware, France is a country that abides by international law and with which we have a long history of co-operation in a

whole series of areas around security and different policy issues over very many years; all of them are compliant with international law and we will continue to ensure that that is the case.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I applaud the Home Secretary for the months of hard work and serious negotiation that have resulted in this deal. We now have the real deterrent that the Conservatives failed for many years to secure for my constituents and others across the country. These deals make it more important that we keep pushing the strength of our domestic response to the smuggling gangs and illegal working, so I have two questions. First off, can the Home Secretary confirm to my constituents that the Metropole hotel in my constituency will be closed as an asylum hotel by this Government before the next election? Also, can she confirm when she expects the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to become law, and would it help if the Conservatives and Reform supported the Bill so that we can get the job done?

Yvette Cooper: We are committed to ending asylum hotels over the course of this Parliament. We will also continue to roll out this pilot programme so that it can be developed to tackle both returns and dangerous boat crossings. As for the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, it is really important. It contains a whole series of really important measures, and we would be able to get it through Parliament much, much faster if the Conservatives decided to support it.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I fear it is another week, another fig leaf from this Government on small boat crossings, which are up 40% under Labour. I hope this French deal works, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) says, the numbers of returns need to be very substantial, not just a modest pilot. We are also now waiting to hear from the EU about whether it will approve this very modest UK-French migration deal. We know from experience that the EU tends not to give such approval without extracting a heavy price, so can the Home Secretary guarantee that the UK will not sign up to any element of the EU pact on migration and asylum, when it launches next year, that could see us accepting much larger asylum transfers from the continent?

Yvette Cooper: We have been working with the EU Commission, as has France, and we have shared details on these proposals over many months as we have been developing them. The EU Commission has been very supportive. Indeed, that is why the UK-EU reset explicitly says that the EU Commission—the EU—will support action to tackle the dangerous boat crossings in the channel and to prevent illegal migration. This is something that we have worked on for some considerable time. We will continue to develop those partnerships with France and to ensure that we work closely with other countries, because the same challenges with criminal gangs operating are shared across Europe. That is why we need to act together.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. It was a real pleasure to hear President Macron's address last week with Members from across this House and the other place. Does she

[Chris Vince]

agree that it does not take Jules Maigret to realise that to tackle this issue effectively and humanely, we must work with our French allies? I think back to the terrible image of that boy dead on that beach. We should not forget the human cost of these small boat crossings.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. One of the stories that still haunts me is of a little girl who was crushed to death in one of the small boats because of the scale of overcrowding and the way these boats are, frankly, dangerous. As well as the risk of drowning, we have seen people crushed as a result of overcrowding. That is why we must do everything we can to prevent these dangerous crossings and ensure that across the world there are systems of sanctuary for those who have fled persecution. The criminal gangs exploit people's desperation and they should not be allowed to do so.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Will the Secretary of State explain to us what happens if one in, one out works? If the goal is to stop small boat crossings and it is successful, the outside of the equation drops to zero, which means the inside of the equation also needs to drop to zero and the UK will have got rid of the small sliver of a safe and regulated route scheme that it has just created. Does the Secretary of State not think that, if we did that, it would be more likely to push people back to the small boats and people smugglers?

Yvette Cooper: I am not fully sure about the logic of the hon. Member's argument. She seems to be arguing that if the scheme works, it will not work.

Carla Denyer indicated assent.

Yvette Cooper: That is what she seems to be arguing.

Look, I think we should be doing everything to prevent these dangerous boat crossings. We will continue, as we have done through the Ukraine scheme and through the support for Hong Kong, to ensure that the UK does its bit to help those fleeing persecution. For example, we made reference in the immigration White Paper to refugee study opportunities at our universities. These dangerous boat crossings are so damaging; they really undermine our border security and the credibility of the whole system, so we must ensure we take action to prevent them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement this afternoon. I shall allow a few moments for the Front Benchers to swap over.

Future of the Post Office

5.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Green Paper that we are publishing today on the future of the Post Office.

Post offices have stood as a cornerstone of British national life for generations, serving constituents in every part of the UK. They are a lot more than just places to send letters or collect parcels; they are hubs of economic and social activity. They are a lifeline to small businesses, provide access to essential services, including everyday banking services, and are a critical part of our high streets. They also have a unique role in rural areas, particularly permanent branches, and act as the beating heart of communities.

In recent years, however, the need for change has become clear. Twelve months ago, we inherited a Post Office in crisis—declining financial sustainability, unstable leadership, a network struggling to maintain services, and a reputation shattered by the Horizon scandal and its appalling treatment of sub-postmasters, as Sir Wyn Williams's first report last week underlined only too clearly. This Government are determined to strengthen the Post Office network, and today's Green Paper begins a national dialogue on the future of the Post Office so that we can create a modern, resilient and financially sustainable organisation.

We recognise that the Post Office, just like other postal services around the world, faces significant challenges that are driven in no small part by changing consumer habits fuelled by the digital transition, changing high streets and a changing economy. We want a Post Office network that the public uses, values and, above all, trusts. We want branches to be visible on the high street, in rural and urban areas, and in all communities, offering a wide range of in-person services.

I do not believe that people are ideologically wedded to a smaller or bigger Post Office; they just want a Post Office that works for them, their businesses and their communities. Our preferred approach is for the overall size and shape of the Post Office network to remain the same so that we minimise the impact on communities. We want to strengthen branches to modernise them and expand what they do. There are, though, a range of strong views on the Post Office network, so we will carefully consider all the views put to us about its future.

We need a Post Office that not only preserves its role in providing vital services to communities, but embraces the needs of modern Britain. The challenges are significant. Many branches are not profitable for the postmasters running them. Average weekly customer sessions have declined by 34% since 2007, and the shift to online services continues. While some services, such as parcel drop-offs and banking transactions, are growing, others, such as Government services, have seen significant decline. But we are also seeing innovation across the network. Drop and collect branches are being rolled out to meet the growing demand for parcel services. Over 160 banking hubs are now operational, with a commitment to roll out 350 by the end of the Parliament. As the banks continue to close branches, we are keen to support the Post Office to improve and develop the banking services

it provides. Working with our Treasury colleagues, we will host joint discussions on this issue with the Post Office and the banking sector in the coming months.

Above all else, we know the Post Office needs stability, which we are committed to providing. We are backing that commitment with over £500 million investment during this Parliament, including up to £136 million in this financial year to invest in new technology and replace Horizon. Horizon should have gone long ago. Instead, it will be many months yet before it is replaced. Fujitsu should only be part of the Post Office's grim past, not its current and immediate future. We are determined to end the use of Horizon and draw a line under Fujitsu's involvement with the Post Office. The task of replacing Horizon is hugely complex. It has been embedded in the Post Office network for more than two decades and remains critical to the delivery of the essential services that many of our constituents depend on from the Post Office. Never again must we allow the Post Office to put blind faith in its technology.

We will support the implementation of the Post Office's transformation plan, which aims to make the company more efficient, enabling it to continue offering cash and banking services in the coming years. We will also fund innovative equipment for postmasters to help customers beat the queues. Indeed, this plan aims to achieve operational and financial stability by 2030 and includes a commitment to boost annual postmaster incomes by £250 million by the end of the decade. Already, a £20 million uplift has been delivered in 2024-25, with £66 million planned for this financial year.

After all the Post Office has put its people through, it is now essential that it reorientates its culture towards postmasters, involving them in central decision making. The first steps have been taken with the creation of a consultative council and the election of postmaster non-execs. I am acutely aware that there are those who say that more is needed and, indeed, that is why in this Green Paper we are exploring options for further strengthening those structures.

In the longer term, we are open to more fundamental reforms. Two ideas that have been put to us include the potential mutualisation of the Post Office—giving postmasters and communities a much greater stake in the organisation—and a charter model that separates the Government's role in setting the purpose from the board's role in running the business. We will assess other suggestions for the Post Office's long-term future, including on its future commercial direction, such as closer working with Royal Mail. These are perhaps not decisions for the moment, but we want to begin the debate and conversation now, so we are ready to act when the time is right.

The Green Paper is an important step towards rebuilding trust in the Post Office and embedding a culture of transparency, accountability and compassion. It is important to stress that no decisions on changes to governance arrangements will be made until after the inquiry's final report to allow us all to consider Sir Wyn Williams's recommendations on governance issues together with Green Paper responses.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine the Post Office. The Green Paper is ambitious but grounded in reality. It asks difficult questions about how we ensure long-term sustainability while protecting essential services. We want to hear from everyone with a stake in

the Post Office's future. The Post Office must be modern, resilient and trusted. The Green Paper will be, I hope, the first step in delivering that vision, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

6.7 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The Post Office really is the Heineken of Government services: it reaches parts of the UK that other arms of government do not. The Post Office is much more than a business; it is a vital part of the UK's social and economic fabric. It connects communities, supports local economies and ensures access to essential services across the country. From rural villages in constituencies like mine to inner cities, postmasters are trusted figures who provide a lifeline for people who rely on face-to-face services, particularly the elderly, the digitally excluded and small businesses. The network plays an increasingly important role delivering banking services and hubs as the traditional bank network continues to close. While the number of letters sent has declined and more Government services are online or direct to bank accounts, there are areas where the Post Office has seen strong growth: bank deposits to post offices are up by 68%, parcels up by 68% and tracked priority mail has risen by 72%.

The Minister promised that the Government would publish the Green Paper on the Post Office in the first half of 2025, so I will give him that—it was nearly there. The Government clearly want to get this consultation out before recess when there is arguably less parliamentary scrutiny. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the public to respond to the consultation over the summer.

The Green Paper seeks to reduce the taxpayer subsidy over time, but of course, with 50,000 workers throughout Britain, the Post Office itself faces a £45 million hike in its bill from the national insurance jobs tax. The post offices that are eligible for retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief have seen a 140% increase in their business rates. The Employment Rights Bill will cost the Post Office another £8 million. It is no wonder that Nigel Railton, the Post Office chairman, blamed the autumn Budget for increasing costs and said that it was why the Post Office needs a fresh start.

The Minister told the House on 8 April that "access criteria have already been published that commit the Government to provide 11,500 post offices."—[*Official Report*, 8 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 750.]

He says in the Green Paper that his preference is to maintain the size of the network. Will he commit today to there being 11,500 post office outlets at the end of this Parliament? Did the Government consider reducing the branch requirement in the Green Paper? If so, why did they change their mind? Was he advised by his officials that it would take the closure of one in five post offices to end the network subsidy? If that is not what he was told, what was he told? Where is the cut-off point for that subsidy?

The Minister says that the Government will consult on a change to access requirements as it could be argued that they are too stringent, but for rural areas they are not. Approximately 14% of post office branches are the last shop in the village—there are many such branches

[Dame Harriett Baldwin]

in my constituency—so will the Minister confirm that rural branches will not be closed just to be replaced by others in city centres? Does he not realise that for many rural areas, the post office is the only shop for miles around and is therefore the only place one can access free cash?

How much did the Post Office get from the framework agreement with the banks? Should it not get a better and more long-term agreement? How much will the Government ask Fujitsu to pay towards the £2 billion estimated cost of compensating the postmasters who were wrongly accused over the Horizon system? The Minister appears to have kicked Post Office mutualisation into the long grass. I can see why he would not want to do it during the time of the inquiry, but could there be a pilot during this Parliament?

Post offices and the postmasters who run them are the backbone of our local communities, so I urge the public to take this opportunity to champion their local post office and reply to this summer consultation.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for encouraging sub-postmasters and anyone who is interested in the future of the Post Office to contribute their views to the Green Paper.

As the hon. Lady rightly set out, and as I hope I underlined in my statement—the Green Paper is certainly very clear on this—we think that branches up and down the country are a vital part of our country's economic and social fabric, and we are determined to strengthen the post office network so that they can play a continuing and even more effective role in our economic and social lives.

The hon. Lady rightly underlined the significance of banking services going forward. As an aside, she mentioned the decline of other traditional post offices—letter volumes have halved since 2011. That helps to underline the significance of banking to the future of the Post Office. We are clear that the Post Office could offer more if the banks are willing to work with it. The successful completion of the banking framework negotiations was an encouraging sign in that regard. As I set out in my opening remarks, we are, alongside Treasury colleagues, determined to sit down with the Post Office and the banks to see what more we can do together. There is a commitment to 350 banking hubs over the lifetime of this Parliament, but if we can improve the way in which the banks work with the Post Office, we could see a much more significant role for the Post Office in the provision of banking services on far more high streets up and down the UK.

On national insurance contributions, I gently say to the hon. Lady that difficult decisions had to be made in the Budget because of the financial situation that we inherited, but we have taken a range of decisions to steady the network. I am sure that she is grateful to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the additional finances put aside to invest in the future of the Post Office.

The hon. Lady quite rightly underlined the broader point that Fujitsu has a moral obligation to contribute towards the cost of the scandal. As I have said, we need to wait for the final report by Sir Wyn Williams to understand the full sense of Fujitsu's culpability.

Lastly, on mutualisation, as the hon. Lady alluded to, we think it right to concentrate in the short term on prioritising the financial and operational stability of the Post Office, given its significant challenges. In the longer term, it may well be possible to make serious and sustained governance changes. I have a genuinely open mind on that question and will look carefully at the views we receive on it in the Green Paper.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and the consultation on the Green Paper. Does he agree that we should see the withdrawal of banks from high streets like mine in Eltham as an opportunity for the Post Office to expand what it can offer, not just to individuals but to small businesses in local communities? That is an opportunity rather than a burden for post offices, and we should seek to maintain them wherever possible.

Gareth Thomas: I agree with my hon. Friend about the even greater role that banks could play on our high streets by working with the Post Office. It is one area that Post Office senior management has identified as key to the Post Office's commercial future. We have set aside significant sums of money to invest in new technology to make it easier to work with the banks and do even more. I hope that banks and the financial services community will recognise that they have a considerable opportunity to do more in providing services to all our constituents by working with the Post Office. I look forward to sitting down with the Post Office and the financial services industry, alongside Treasury colleagues, to see whether we can take advantage of that opportunity.

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

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats welcome today's announcement about putting local post offices on a more sustainable footing.

Post offices are an important part of our communities, providing a number of critical services on our local high streets, from community banking and foreign exchange to the provision of Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services. Often their services act as a lifeline, especially for the elderly, those with limited transport options and those in areas without reliable access to online services. Currently 99.7% of the population live within three miles of a post office, and 4,000 branches are open seven days a week. In the past three years, nearly 2,000 high street bank branches have closed across the UK, resulting in local post offices being the only place where local communities can access banking services.

As the Government bring forward their necessary reforms, it is vital that essential local services and post office jobs are protected. Will the Minister assure me that under this proposal no post office will be closed until a consultation with each local community has been undertaken? Although we welcome the increased digitisation of services, which will boost accessibility for those who cannot use face-to-face services, as well as productivity across the public sector, how will the Government ensure that post offices remain financially viable?

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her welcome for the Green Paper. She rightly underlines the significance of the Post Office, particularly to the digitally excluded, to the elderly and to people in rural areas. Given the other part of my ministerial brief, which is on small businesses, I recognise just how important the Post Office is to small businesses up and down the UK.

The hon. Lady also underlined the significance of banking services for the Post Office. I hope I have made it very clear today that we think that there is an opportunity to go even further to bring more banking services to all our communities through the Post Office.

The hon. Lady asked about what happens when individual post office changes are being contemplated. A set of consultation arrangements has been in place for some time, and we are not seeking to change it. Whenever an individual post office changes, I recognise that it can be unsettling for local communities; there is always an appetite for that branch to be put back in place as quickly as possible. It is therefore important that whenever such a change is contemplated, the Post Office moves quickly to engage with local communities, including the hon. Member who represents the community.

On financing, we have set aside at least £500 million over this Parliament to invest in the Post Office. More than half of the network is loss-making; not enough was being provided to the Post Office to fund the network, which is why we increased the funding to cover the loss-making part of it last year. We have done so again this year and will continue to do so.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. As a fellow Labour and Co-op MP, I welcome the inclusion of mutualisation among the long-term ideas for the Post Office. Does he agree that post offices, particularly in rural communities like Little Hallingbury in my constituency of Harlow, are a vital part of the community and that they therefore lend themselves to that model of business?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend for championing the Post Office branches in his constituency. He rightly underlines the importance of branches in rural communities; they have an essential role in communities up and down the UK.

As my hon. Friend will recognise, I have some history in the area of mutualisation. I am sympathetic to mutuals; I do think that it is important that we address the immediate challenges that the Post Office faces in its financial and operational sustainability before we contemplate long-term changes. There are risks with mutualisation, so we need to consider the pros as well as the cons before making any long-term change, but that is why the Green Paper is important: it will allow that debate to begin.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A number of semi-rural and suburban communities across my constituency—Newbridge, Blackhall, Ratho—have lost their post offices recently. Their banks have also gone, so there is a dearth of local facilities. At the same time, the Horizon scandal has undermined public trust across those communities. Does the Minister agree that one of the main problems in protecting the Post Office and making it sustainable will be that lack of public trust? How will he overcome it?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the reputation of the Post Office has taken a huge hit as a result of the Post Office scandal, and it will take a long time for trust to return. There is a series of steps that we have to take to rebuild that trust. There is the obvious challenge, which the House considered last week, of delivering redress to the victims of this appalling scandal, but there are also things we have to do to improve the trust between the existing postmasters in every community and the senior management of the Post Office from now on. The Post Office's establishment of a consultative council and a postmaster panel and its commitment to improving postmaster remuneration are important first steps in that regard. The Green Paper provides an opportunity to think about what else the Post Office can do.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): This is an issue that has been highlighted by others in the Chamber, and my constituency is no different: it has been subject to a significant number of bank closures and ATM removals. In Cumbernauld, the precincts or the surrounding villages, the post office is the one place where people in local communities can access cash. Given that so many small businesses are still cash-first, what will the Minister do to ensure that access to cash remains within a post office setting?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend for championing the post office in Cumbernauld and the communities around her constituency that depend on it and on the Post Office more generally. The most significant thing that we can do to help small businesses to access and deposit cash close to where they operate is to continue to try to improve the banking services provided through the Post Office. I hope that the banking industry will seize the opportunity of the Green Paper to work with the Post Office and with the Government to explore what more we can do collectively in that regard.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): In rural areas such as my Thornbury and Yate constituency, it can be difficult to travel to post offices in towns because of the lack of buses. If the Government are considering relaxing the distance and access criteria for post office provision, will they take that issue into account in setting new criteria?

Gareth Thomas: As I hope I made clear in my opening statement, and as the Green Paper certainly makes clear, our preference remains keeping the current size of the network and maintaining the access criteria. I say gently that there are strong views on that question, including some within the sub-postmaster community, but our preference at the moment is to maintain the current size of the network and the existing access criteria, because of the significance of the post office to every rural and urban community.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and his clear recognition of the importance that the post office plays in rural constituencies such as mine. Sadly, residents in some of the remotest parts of my Carlisle constituency have been adversely impacted in recent months by the sudden closure of post office outreach services. However, the closure of an outreach service is not currently subject to the same consultation requirements as the closure of a permanent branch.

[Ms Julie Minns]

As part of the proposals for the future of the Post Office, will the Minister consider strengthening the requirements relating to the closure of outreach services?

Gareth Thomas: I am happy to consider any submission that my hon. Friend wants to make to the Green Paper. Indeed, I am happy to consider the thoughts and ideas of hon. Members across the House. My hon. Friend mentioned a particular issue in her constituency; if it is helpful, I am happy to meet her to discuss it in more detail.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Scotland has seen an 8.3% decline in post offices, while London has seen an increase of 9.3% across the past decade. The Minister will know that outreach offices help people in rural areas and post offices to thrive. The Green Paper recognises that, but the Government seem to dismiss it. What is he going to do to help rural post offices? Will he reconsider his attitude and his views towards outreach offices? What will he do to reduce the number of post office closures in Scotland?

Gareth Thomas: The most important thing that we can do to help Post Office branches in rural areas in Scotland, and indeed across the UK, is to prioritise improving the commercial future of the Post Office. In that regard, it is important to invest in new technology—a replacement for Horizon is critical—and in technology to enable the banks to provide more banking services to all our communities using the Post Office, as I hope they will. The key priority for Governments across the UK, if we are to improve the opportunities for every branch to better serve every community across the UK, is to improve the commercial fortunes of the Post Office. The Green Paper sets out plans to do so, but I welcome views from across the House on what more we can do.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. He knows from previous questions I have asked that I am concerned for the future of the Chester-le-Street post office, which is moving from having directly managed branch status to franchise status. I also welcome what is going on with the post office in Stanley, which has become a much-needed banking hub. Does the Minister agree that with a little more commercial flair and imagination about what services are provided, the Post Office should not be a business in retreat but could play a significant role in increasing footfall on high streets up and down the country, helping to reverse their decline and encourage regeneration?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; with good will on all sides, and with financial and operational stability, which I think we are beginning to see, there is a significant future ahead for the Post Office. As he says, the Post Office can continue to play an important role in reviving our high streets. The opportunity for banks to work with the Government and the Post Office to provide more banking services to all our constituents through the Post Office, could play a key role in helping to revive the high street and meet the needs of our constituents.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Since the election, three post offices in my constituency have closed—in Churchstow, Aveton Gifford and Dittisham—through the resignation of postmasters and, in one case, the death of the local postmaster. Each time, the Post Office says that it is carrying out a review, and each time it quickly decides to close the post office and, as the Minister himself said, the beating heart of those communities is then lost. Dittisham residents must now travel nearly 5 miles to the nearest branch. There is no bus, so elderly residents who do not drive cannot get to the nearest post office. Will the Minister guarantee that while the consultation is ongoing, no more rural post offices will be lost, and that as part of the Government's thinking, more flexibility could be built into the Post Office's business model, so that innovative and enthusiastic potential postmasters who want to reopen post offices in some of these villages can be allowed to do so?

Gareth Thomas: One crucial issue that we considered when we developed the Green Paper was how to address postmaster remuneration, because in some communities the Post Office has struggled to find people who are willing to take on the running of a franchise. It is important that Post Office senior management have improved postmaster pay, with £20 million last financial year, a commitment to £66 million this financial year, and a plan to go even further. I hope that will make a significant difference to the ability to find people to take on franchises, and not just in urban areas but in the rural areas the hon. Lady describes. She will forgive me for not knowing her constituency as well as she does, but if she wants to contact me about particular issues with branch closures, I would be happy to look at those.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement, and the announcement of a national dialogue about the future of our Post Office. As a fellow Co-operative party Member, I welcome the model of mutualisation, which would also suit our local branch. Given the decline of Leigh's high street, the announcement of changes to our main post office was a major concern. Can he reassure staff in Leigh that they will not lose their jobs as a result of franchising? Will he confirm whether the Communication Workers Union has been fully consulted on the changes affecting our community?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend has long been a proud member of the Co-operative party and is interested in mutualisation, and I look forward to discussing these issues with her in due course. Discussions on the franchising of the remaining Crown post offices are still ongoing, both with franchisees and local communities, and specifically regarding arrangements for staff. The Post Office and the Communication Workers Union are continuing to talk to each other about how to manage the transition, and I welcome the positive dialogue that has taken place between them both.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the overall size and shape of the post office network should remain the same so that we can minimise the impact on communities, but in my constituency the size and shape of the Post Office is rapidly shrinking because of the fundamental fragility of the way it is set up. The retirement of a single sub-postmistress, because of rents going up on her shop,

has led to the closure of outreach services across the constituency. The access criteria consider someone to be within three miles of a post office if that post office is an outreach service and open for a single hour a week. That is not acceptable for rural communities, many of which do not have a bus for many hours during the day. Will the Minister commit to looking at a sustainable model for rural post offices, so that people can genuinely access cash and the other services they need, particularly if they do not have a car?

Gareth Thomas: I completely accept the significance of the Post Office in rural communities in particular, but it is equally essential that we have access to Post Office services in urban areas. The hon. Lady references the fragility of the Post Office, and that has certainly been the case in certain communities when finding postmasters who are willing to step forward and take on the role of running a Post Office franchise. That is why the initial steps that the Post Office management have taken to increase postmaster remuneration are important, by helping to make the role more attractive. It is also important that the Post Office has established a consultative council, to look properly at the way that postmasters are consulted and involved in big decisions about the future of the Post Office. If the hon. Lady thinks it would be useful, I would be happy to speak to her separately about the specific issues that her constituents face, and to understand a little more about the specific problems she has raised.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I add my thanks to our postmasters, including Andrew Hart in my constituency. Last year, residents in Knaresborough faced a prolonged period without a Post Office service. I had extensive communication with Post Office officials about service continuity, minimum standards, types and awards of contracts, and I found them evasive when I asked them questions about that. As the Minister says, such issues of governance will be addressed in the inquiry, but how might that feed into the Green Paper consultation? Will he meet me to address some of my concerns about the issues that we are facing locally?

Gareth Thomas: In principle, I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues with post offices in his constituency. He gives me the opportunity to put on the record my appreciation for the work that all our postmasters do. They are hugely important servants of all our communities, and they play a crucial role for our constituents—I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that opportunity. The Green Paper is an opportunity for people in rural areas as well as urban areas to come forward with their views about the future of the Post Office. I hope that all hon. Members will encourage their constituents to think about taking that opportunity, and take a moment to send in their comments.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am pleased that the Minister has announced that the overall size and shape of the network will remain the same, and he has also indicated that remuneration must be part of the consultation. As he will know—I have corresponded with him on this matter—the towns of Porthleven and Newlyn in my constituency have been without post offices for a number of years, because no one is prepared

to take them on at the remuneration levels that are available. Is the Minister prepared to consider whether he sees those post offices more as Government offices, and to expand their role in terms of information, connectivity, and feedback across a number of Government Departments, to build up the services available in post offices? If he is meeting people, will he meet me to discuss how we can resolve the situation in my constituency?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to make the task of running a post office more attractive. That is why improving both the culture, so that postmasters feel listened to, and the remuneration are hugely important immediate tasks. The best commercial opportunities for post offices lie in the provision of banking services, rather than Government services. I hope that the banks and the financial services industry will have heard the message from Members from all parts of the House: we want them to do more to work with Government to take advantage of the potential opportunities. As I have committed to meeting other hon. Members to discuss local issues, I had better do the same for the hon. Gentleman.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank sub-postmasters across Glastonbury and Somerton, and across the country, in particular Jim Gordon from Martock. Many post offices in my constituency have closed in recent years, including those in Somerton, Butleigh, Charlton Adam, Charlton Mackrell, Keinton Mandeville and Sparkford, depriving their communities of a vital service. I recently met Mr and Mrs Thievendran from Somerton Stores, who are interested in opening a post office on their premises but are unable to do so because of the prohibitive costs involved. The owner of the Baltonsborough Village Store was considering doing the same but told me that the costs are extraordinary. What steps will the Minister take not only to put existing post offices on a sustainable footing, but to help rural towns and villages without a post office to regain one?

Gareth Thomas: As I have said, in our view we should retain the current size of the network and the current access criteria, which are key to ensuring that every community, whether rural or urban, has good access to post office services. I encourage the hon. Lady to reach out to the Post Office to discuss the particular issues facing the businesses to which she has referred, which are interested in running post office branches but feel unable to do so, to see whether anything can be done to ease those local challenges.

More generally, the issue the hon. Lady raises partly speaks to the challenge of increasing postmaster remuneration. Post Office senior management clearly recognise that: there was a £20 million uplift in postmaster remuneration in the last financial year, there will be a £66 million increase this year, and Post Office management are committed to looking to go even further. I hope that will make the opportunity to run a post office much more attractive, and may address some of the financial challenges she raised.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I was slightly concerned that the franchising of Crown post offices, such as the one at Teignmouth in my constituency, has already gone ahead, prior to the consultation. Turning to a different issue, Royal Mail is obligated to provide a post box within half a mile of any house, but many new

[Martin Wrigley]

estates in my constituency have no access to a post box—they are just not there. Will the Minister put pressure on Royal Mail to ensure that post boxes are provided?

Gareth Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that specific matter. I will happily draw the attention of the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), who is responsible for Royal Mail, to that issue. The hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me, but I am not aware of the details of the issue in his constituency, but he may want to write to us at the Department so that we pass the details directly to Royal Mail.

Point of Order

6.44 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are elected to this House to hold the Executive to account and to ask questions on behalf of our constituents. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, in common with many Ministers, is treating this House and our constituents with contempt by not even attempting to answer the questions asked of him, probably because those answers would be embarrassing to him. There is getting to be very little point in asking questions of Ministers at the Dispatch Box. What can you do, as Deputy Speaker, to encourage Ministers to answer the questions that are asked of them?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the right hon. Lady for prior notice of her point of order. Has she notified the Secretary of State of it?

Esther McVey indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ministers are responsible for their answers, not the Chair, but the point has been made by the right hon. Lady and Ministers on the Treasury Bench will no doubt relay it back to the Secretary of State.

Privilege

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) have tabled a motion for debate on a matter of privilege, which Mr Speaker has agreed should take precedence today.

6.46 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,
That

(1) the transcript of unreported oral evidence taken from Mr Baxter by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in private session on 11 November 2009 be referred to the Committee of Privileges;

(2) the Committee consider the petition from the Secretary to the Omagh Bombing inquiry in relation to that evidence and take any advice it considers necessary;

(3) the Committee's powers, including the power to report and publish evidence if it considers it appropriate to do so, shall apply in respect of that evidence;

(4) the Committee report to the House on the actions it has taken and any other matters it considers relevant by 30 October 2025; and

(5) if the Committee considers the evidence should remain unreported, the Committee's report should include a recommendation on the desirability or otherwise of the release of the evidence to the Omagh Bombing Inquiry.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing this debate today. I raise the matter as a former Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, a current member of that Committee and the current Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which by dint of shadowing the Cabinet Office overlooks the Inquiries Act 2005. I have worked closely with the current Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), on the motion. We simply hope to take the procedural step needed to enable the important work of the Omagh bombing inquiry to be effective, while in tandem respecting the rights of the House.

On Wednesday last week, my hon. Friend for Gower—for she is a friend in respect of this work, as well as in many other respects—presented a petition from the secretary to the inquiry asking for access to unpublished Committee evidence. We must not forget what lies behind this motion, so let me quote from the 2008 report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee into the Omagh bombing:

“On Saturday 15 August 1998, a 500 lb car bomb exploded in Market Street, Omagh, County Tyrone, killing 29 people and two unborn children. The bombing caused more death than any other single atrocity committed during, or since, the Troubles in Northern Ireland. More than 250 people were treated in hospital and hundreds more were also injured. The Real IRA claimed responsibility for the attack three days later. No one has been convicted of causing the bombing.”

Like colleagues across the House, I think it is important that we remember and honour those innocent people who were killed and injured that day. Questions still remain and the inquiry seeks to answer them—let us hope that it does so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was born in Omagh a long, long time ago—70 years ago, to be precise. I do not remember very much about it, but Omagh has always been dear to my heart. I remember well the event

as it took place, the people that day and the tears we all shed for the people of Omagh, and we seek justice. Families have suffered for too long and I support their quest for justice. Does the hon. Member agree that justice should be at the forefront of the minds of all right hon. and hon. Members during this process?

Simon Hoare: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. If this place is not a champion of justice and its pursuit as a high court of Parliament, what is it?

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I have had the privilege of sharing time on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee with the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), in the names of whom this motion has been laid. It is crucial that the Omagh inquiry gets the information it requires, and we have raised concerns about the Irish Government and their reluctance. It would be useful for the Privileges Committee to hear very clearly from me and, I hope, from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that it would be entirely incongruous if in an inquiry set up under the Inquiries Act 2005, which was passed by this Parliament, to seek answers for the Omagh bombing families and construed in their names, information that Norman Baxter gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was available and could assist the inquiry, but was refused because of privilege. That would be an intolerable situation. I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that having gone through this process and agreed this motion, the information will be made available.

Simon Hoare: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I endorse it entirely. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and his Committee will look at the motion, if the House decides to pass it this evening, and I know he will have heard that. I echo what the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has said. I hope that if the House agrees to this motion, the Privileges Committee will look favourably on the request and do so in a timely manner.

The inquiry was established in February 2024 by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Its task is to investigate whether the bombing in the town of Omagh in August 1998 could reasonably have been prevented by UK state authorities. As part of its terms of reference, the inquiry was specifically asked to look at “the allegation made by Norman Baxter”—

a former senior investigating officer in the investigation into the Omagh bombing—

“in the course of his evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee on 11 November 2009, that police investigators into previous attacks in Moira (20 February 1998), Portadown (9 May 1998), Banbridge (1 August 1998) and Lisburn (30 April 1998) did not have access to intelligence materials which may reasonably have enabled them to disrupt the activities of dissident republican terrorists prior to the Omagh Bombing.”

I quote that because I think it is germane to our considerations.

The inquiry has established that some of the evidence taken from Mr Baxter by the Committee has not been reported to the House, so it remains unpublished and inaccessible. That is effectively the kernel of this motion. The petition asks for access to that evidence. We find ourselves in the strange position whereby in setting up the inquiry, specific reference is made to that piece of evidence submitted, but because of a procedural problem

[Simon Hoare]

here it was not published and is therefore not on the public record. That is why the inquiry has asked for the evidence.

At this stage, I express my gratitude to both Mr Baxter and the inquiry team. They immediately realised that if the evidence had not been published, it belonged to this House. They sought advice from the House authorities and received it. They have been careful to ensure that they have acted properly throughout.

There are two issues here. The first issue is that if a Committee wants to publish evidence, it must report it to the House and obtain an order to publish that evidence. If it wants material to be available to Members but no one else, it can simply report the evidence to the House. Evidence that is reported but not published is available to Members in subsequent Parliaments, but unreported evidence is accessible only to the Committee to which it belongs and in the Parliament in which it was taken. Once that Parliament is over—which, clearly, it is—no one has access to unreported evidence until the archives are open. There is no wriggle room here, hence the reason for this motion and the detailed explanation—I am sorry to detain the House.

If a Committee wishes to see unreported evidence from its counterpart in the previous Parliament, the House must refer it to that Committee. If anyone outside the House wants that evidence, they must petition for it, as the secretary to the inquiry has done. That is what this motion seeks to advance. It is very hard for the House to decide whether to release evidence that it has not seen and cannot see before the decision is made. It is particularly difficult in this case, as that evidence may contain sensitive information.

Accordingly, the motion invites the House to refer the evidence to the Committee of Privileges. That Committee can undoubtedly consider the matter and probably take advice. If it is advised that there is no reason not to publish the evidence, which was taken more than 15 years ago, it might simply decide to publish it—I hope that it can and does. Otherwise, it can consider the matter and report to the House with a recommendation on what would be appropriate. The House can then make an informed decision subsequent to the work of the Committee of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire.

The second issue is that article 9 of the Bill of Rights says:

“That the Freedome of Speech and Debates or Proceedings in Parlyament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any Court or Place out of Parlyament.”

That means that courts should not evaluate what is said in this place. That is not simply a matter of us being free to speak freely in Parliament; it extends to all those who participate in our proceedings, including our witnesses. It is clearly important that people should be free to give evidence to the House and its Committees without fear of legal consequences.

This is also a matter of the constitutional separation of powers between Parliament and the courts. A “Place out of Parlyament” does not mean anywhere outside Parliament: it has been taken to mean something with powers like those of a court. The ban on impeaching and questioning means not that no use can be made of parliamentary material, but that the use must be careful.

The Omagh statutory inquiry is like a court: it has power to take evidence on oath, and its Chair may direct people to attend as witnesses and/or to produce documents if requested to do so. The House authorities consider it a “Place out of Parlyament”. For that reason, the House authorities regularly contact statutory inquiries to draw their attention to the important provisions of article 9.

I am delighted to note that the petition is clear that “the Inquiry has taken advice on the application of Article 9 of the Bill of Rights to its proceedings and will be mindful of the privileges of the House.”

I am confident that Lord Turnbull, who has the onerous task of chairing the inquiry, and his team recognise the issues; their behaviour demonstrates that. I expect that if the Privileges Committee considers the petition should be granted, the key issues that the inquiry is invited to consider will be informed by the evidence without impeaching and questioning. I trust it will be possible for us to assist the inquiry in its work.

I hope that I have made as clear as I possibly can the genesis and importance of this motion, the lacuna that it seeks to fill and the requirements that this House has quite rightly guarded jealously for a long, long time on how evidence submitted to it is treated. I hope I have made clear and impressed on the House the importance of its passing this motion, and I urge it to do so. As I said in answer to the right hon. Member for Belfast East, we set a timeline in the motion to the Privileges Committee, but I know that it will tend to it with expedition.

I hope colleagues will agree to this motion, which will allow informed consideration of all the issues. It will hopefully bring justice or clarity to justice, as we have discussed with regard to the inquiry, which is looking into that terrible crime that blighted the lives of so many and ended the lives of so many prematurely, including two unborn children.

6.59 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): My comments will be necessarily brief, given the role that I play as Chair of the Committee of Privileges. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for the comments he has made and the respect with which he is conveying this motion to the Committee.

The Committee stands ready to deal with this matter, should the House decide shortly to refer it to us. I note that the motion asks us to report our conclusions back to the House by the end of October. We stand ready to carefully consider any issues arising from the release of the unreported evidence from the Northern Ireland Committee’s 2009 inquiry. We should also wish to consider issues arising from the inclusion in the terms of reference of a public inquiry of a document that is—as has been acknowledged—rightfully the property of the House. The principle established in the Bill of Rights 1689 that proceedings of Parliament ought not to be questioned or impeached in any place out of Parliament is potentially infringed by such a provision. I am mindful, however, that the solicitor to the Omagh bombing inquiry has very properly included in his petition to the House a respectful recognition of the constitutional principle involved, and is mindful of the privileges of the House. I put on record my gratitude to him for that consideration.

Finally, whatever the constitutional principles involved—and the Committee will take advice—it must be the case that we all wish the Omagh bombing inquiry well in its endeavour to establish whether anything could have been done to prevent a despicable terrorist act that killed 29 people—including a woman pregnant with twins, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said—and irrevocably affected the lives of many more. Our thoughts must ever be with the victims of that atrocious action, both living and dead. If it is within our power to be of aid to the inquiry, I am certain that my Committee and I would wish nothing other than to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

7.2 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I put on record my gratitude to the Minister for reaching out to me earlier to explain her position; to the Clerk of the Journals for briefing me this afternoon; and to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for talking me through this issue over the weekend. I will be unusually brief, because I wish to return to the debate in Westminster Hall—a lot of hon. Members who would otherwise be in the Chamber for this debate are currently engaged in another debate on Northern Ireland.

The Conservative party strongly supports the motion as worded on the Order Paper. The Omagh bombing inquiry was set up by my former right hon. Friend Chris Heaton-Harris in 2023 to deal with one of the very worst atrocities of the troubles, in which the Real IRA attempted to derail the peace process and, in doing so, killed many innocent civilians. As my right hon. Friend understood when he set up the inquiry, it was critical to

have a process that could compel witnesses and take evidence under oath to get to the bottom of exactly what happened. Consequently, it is of acute importance that that inquiry has access to all available information in reaching its conclusions. As the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made clear in his remarks, anything else would make a mockery of the process. On that note, and on a point that the right hon. Member made, it is essential that the Republic co-operates fully with this inquiry. We have had encouraging signs that it will, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

I was reassured to hear the remarks made by the Chair of the Privileges Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). I look forward to hearing that Committee's conclusions, but its members should be in no doubt that the Conservative party wishes to see this information handed over to the inquiry for its consideration.

7.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for bringing this matter before the House. I am also grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing the motion to be debated, and to the hon. Member for North Dorset for his careful explanation of the procedure involved. I thank everyone who has worked together to enable this motion to come before this House, with nothing but a desire to support the Omagh inquiry.

The Government are very supportive of the motion. Should it be agreed, the Government will await the work of the Committee of Privileges with interest.

Question put and agreed to.

Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Bill

Considered in Committee

Clause 1

DEPRIVATION OF CITIZENSHIP ORDER TO CONTINUE TO
HAVE EFFECT DURING APPEAL

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind Members that in Committee, Members should not address the Chair as “Deputy Speaker”. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. “Chair” and “Madam Chair” are also acceptable.

7.6 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 9, at end insert—

“(2BA) But a judge may determine that an order does not continue to have effect for a person “P” during the appeal period if, on granting leave to appeal at any stage, they are satisfied that—

(a) “P” faces a real and substantial threat of serious harm as a result of the order,

(b) continuation of the order would significantly prejudice their ability to mount an effective defence at a subsequent appeal, or

(c) the duration of the appeal process has been excessive because of an act or omission by a public authority.”

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider:

Clauses 1 and 2 stand part.

New clause 1—*Independent review*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within one year of the passing of this Act, commission an independent review of the effects of the changes made to section 40A of the British Nationality Act 1981 by section 1.

(2) The review must be completed within two years of the passing of this Act.

(3) As soon as practicable after a person has carried out the review, the person must—

(a) produce a report of the outcome of the review, and

(b) send a copy of the report to the Secretary of State.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay before each House of Parliament a copy of the report sent under subsection (3)(b) within one month of receiving the report.”

Kit Malthouse: I am pleased to be opening this debate, although, given the turnout in the Chamber, it seems to be a minority interest among Members of Parliament, notwithstanding the fact that the legislation affects some of our most basic freedoms and rights. Before I address amendment 1, I hope you will forgive me, Madam Chair, if I briefly indulge in a preamble. There are a couple of issues that I want to impress on the Minister in the hope that he will respond favourably and, if not accept my amendment, agree to consider the principles it raises in the other place. Given the number of senior lawyers there, this legislation will be examined by some pretty stringent legal eyes.

First, Madam Chair, I hope you will agree that we established on Second Reading that this Bill is highly discriminatory. One of the truisms we always utter in

this House is that we all stand equal before the law, but I am afraid that where this legislation is concerned, that is just not true. The Minister would be unable to wield against me the powers he is seeking to bring in under this Bill; it would not be countenanced because I have no right to citizenship elsewhere. However, there are Members of this House against whom the Minister could wield that power. Although he could not wield it against me, he could wield it against two of my children, although not against the other one—I have three. He could wield it against the children of the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak); against the children of the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt); and against the children of the former Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden). I am trying to illustrate to the Minister that this legislation is highly discriminatory, and unusually so. He is tampering with some of the basic tenets of British justice through this Bill—a principle has been established in the Supreme Court that he is attempting to reverse—and I want him to have in mind that he is trying to embed that discrimination in law. I hope and believe that that is not his primary motivation, but he must comprehend that before he takes this step.

Secondly, I say to the Minister, who has a distinguished record of service in the defence of this country and now serves as Security Minister, that much of the Bill is, let us face it, focused on those accused of committing terrorism here or overseas. Terrorists win in two ways: first, by the physical injury that they inflict and the fear of that physical injury that they are likely to inflict by exploding bombs, killing people and all the horrors we have seen in our lifetimes over the past 30 or 40 years, if not longer; and secondly, by a long, slow undermining of our way of life and by sowing division within our society. Their long game is to force us to twist ourselves in knots around the freedoms that make us different, which they despise, and slowly to erode our standard of living and the atmosphere in which we live, and we have seen that before in this country.

The Minister is old enough to remember the evolution of the Diplock courts in Northern Ireland, where hearings were held without juries. We dispensed with the basic freedom of the right to a jury trial in Northern Ireland for a while, largely because of accusations of violence towards juries. It was proven later that this was part of a known strategy by the IRA to make the Six Counties ungovernable, other than by military colonial means, so the IRA saw that move as a triumph. What terrorists want in the long term is a twisting of our natural freedoms. They want us to make compromises in our legislation that undermine our sense of belonging in our nation and create a division not just between the governed and the Government, but within society. This legislation, I am afraid, starts to do exactly that.

On Second Reading I pointed out, as I have possibly already done today—I hate to be repetitive—that this legislation and this power create two classes of citizenship in the UK. There are those who can have the order removed and those who never can have it removed. As use of the power has accelerated over the past two decades, and we are using it now more than we ever did, it creates a feeling of unease among those whose citizenship is conditional.

I will explain to the Minister why I tabled amendment 1. As I said on Second Reading, my view is that he is undermining some of the basic tenets of British justice with what he is attempting to do with this legislation. With this amendment, I am attempting to swing the pendulum back a little in the cause of fairness before the law. As he will know, individuals subject to this power have the right to appeal on a number of bases, and courts will decide whether to allow their appeal. Broadly, there are three areas on which they can appeal: the first is whether the decision was proportional; the second is whether it was procedurally fair; and the third is whether the Minister or the Home Secretary has made a mistake over whether the person has a right to citizenship elsewhere and so may in fact be rendered stateless. As he knows, that is not allowed under the legislation.

If I have had my citizenship deprived essentially at the stroke of a pen by the Home Secretary, and I win an appeal, it seems unfair, given that I have won that appeal on the basis of fact, that the Government can continue to deprive me of my citizenship pending a further appeal by them. Ordinarily, I would have got rid of this legislation, but the Minister seems insistent, and he won on principle at Second Reading, and that is fine. I am therefore appealing to his sense of good old British fair play to say, “This individual has won their first appeal on the basis of fact. Unless we have some profound reason to dispute that fact, we will not appeal, in which case they get their citizenship back.” On the basis of the fundamental British value of “innocent until proven guilty”, that person should get their citizenship back, particularly if a judge decides that the three conditions outlined in my amendment are satisfied.

7.15 pm

I have not spoken to the Minister about my amendment—rather disappointingly, he has not approached me to discuss it—but given that he is a man with a strong sense of fair play—[*Interruption.*] He is scoffing slightly, but normal practice when somebody puts down an amendment is that they are approached to discuss the nature of that amendment, if the Government think it will be spoken to. This is a small Bill with only two amendments tabled. Nevertheless, I assume he will oppose the amendment. I am trying to appeal to his sense of fair play.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Kit Malthouse: By all means. I know he is a busy man, and I do not mean to be critical.

Dan Jarvis: I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I think he is being a little unfair. He would have been entirely welcome to discuss his amendment with me. Had he chosen to do so, I would have happily sat down with him to discuss the detail of it.

Kit Malthouse: The Minister is a fair man and a fair-minded man. He is quite right, and I am willing to countenance his appeal and give him the benefit of the doubt, and that is exactly what I am asking for the individuals subject to this legislation. He will know that

we have certain inalienable constitutional rights as British citizens, which this legislation contravenes. The first is that we have a right to a fair hearing and that any action the Government take must be exercised fairly. That right has been established in the common law again and again, and most recently in 1994, in the case of *ex parte Doody*, when the court decided that Ministers must exercise their powers fairly.

The second inalienable right, which has been decided in the Supreme Court, is that we all have a right to access to the courts, and that cannot be unfairly restricted. As that has been decided by the Supreme Court, the Government cannot put up artificial barriers to our access, such as raising fees or making sure that we cannot physically get to the court. Indeed, as the Minister will know, I have an absolute right to defend myself in person at every stage of legal action, whether that is at first hearing or at subsequent appeal. All those powers or rights that I have as a citizen are affected by the legislation he is attempting to put through.

My amendment essentially says three things. If the Government failed to win an appeal, but wished to continue to deprive me of my citizenship pending a further appeal, they must, when seeking leave to appeal from the judge, also ask the judge for leave to continue the deprivation of citizenship. The judge basically could say no in three circumstances. First, the judge could say no if there is a real and substantial threat of serious harm to that individual if they were denied access to the United Kingdom. Some of these people will be living or operating from extremely dangerous places. If that person is likely to be killed pending further appeal on the denial of their citizenship, it would seem grossly unfair, their having already won an appeal, to deny them access to the country.

The second ground would be if their exclusion from the UK and the continuing of denial of citizenship would be deeply prejudicial to the conduct of their defence in an appeal that the Government subsequently decided to bring. In such a case, it would be impossible for me to defend myself at appeal in person, which should be my inalienable right as a British citizen. It would be impossible for me to do that remotely in some God-forsaken part of the world where I cannot Zoom in or I do not have the ability to communicate. It would be the same if I am unable to communicate with my legal team. I am sure the Minister can see that it would be unfair to interfere with someone’s ability to mount a proper defence—we should not forget that that person has already won an appeal—through the continuing denial of citizenship.

The third ground, which we covered on Second Reading, is the Government’s taking their time, achieving their objective merely by dragging their heels and playing for time, hoping that something, perhaps something untoward, will turn up. A judge should then make a judgment—the clue is in the name—on whether they are being efficient in their use of the legal system, rather than, as I am afraid happens from time to time, gaming it to their own advantage.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I have a huge amount of respect and affection for him, and he is right to refer to the inalienable rights that a British citizen has in terms of access to justice and so forth, but surely he must accept that

[Simon Hoare]

individuals facing deprivation of citizenship will have crossed a threshold of behaviour, or allegiance, so alien to our traditions, so alien to all the rights and responsibilities accrued over the decades of British citizenship, that in essence, in the court of public opinion, they will put themselves way beyond the pale when it comes to those issues. It would be an extreme hypocrisy for those who most seek to undermine our way of life to demand all the rights and privileges that they have sought to undermine, and possibly destroy, through their actions or foreign allegiances.

Kit Malthouse: I understand my hon. Friend's point, but I would have more faith, or confidence, in his view if it applied to me as well, which it does not. What we are saying is that we can have two British citizens who commit the same heinous acts but receive two different kinds of treatment. One can have his or her citizenship removed and be expelled from the country, but another—say I were to do that—cannot. My view is that this is highly discriminatory, and tramples over some of the inalienable rights that my hon. Friend has mentioned. We currently have plenty of British citizens in high-security prisons who have committed acts as heinous as those committed by people whom we have deprived of British citizenship, but we have decided to deprive them of British citizenship purely because of their heritage and background—purely because they may be second-generation immigrants.

As I pointed out on Second Reading, this legislation applies to every single Jewish member of the United Kingdom citizenry. They all have an inalienable right to Israeli citizenship, and as a result, in my view, they all have second-class citizenship. I do not think that that is right. I do not think that it is fair. I think that it drives a wedge into our society, and sows a seed of doubt at the back of everyone's mind.

This is the point that I was trying to make at the start. Those who perpetrate such heinous acts overseas absolutely should be punished. As my hon. Friend will know, over the past 10 years I have been at the forefront of trying to ensure that as many criminals as possible end up behind bars, whatever the criminality might be, but the fact is that there is a principle in British law—we are all supposed to be equal—and the Bill breaches that principle very significantly. Moreover, what the Government are attempting to do not only reinforces that breach, but aims to twist and skew fundamental tenets of British justice that have been our right for centuries.

Simon Hoare: Surely the fact that a remedy is not available to all does not mean that it is not a remedy. If we wish to argue for the two-tier approach, we can think of instances in which mental capacity has come into play, particularly in respect of capital offences, when those existed here. In abstract theory, that was a two-tier approach to justice, determined on the grounds of mental capacity or lack thereof. Surely remedies do not have to be applicable universally to be applied fairly and within the law.

Kit Malthouse: I am not sure that I accept the hon. Gentleman's logic. The test of mental capacity in the judicial system applies to everyone equally. If I were being prosecuted for an offence, I would be assessed for

mental capacity, just as my hon. Friend would. The court would accept that there might be mitigations for his actions, or a requirement for a different disposal if he lacks mental capacity, but that is an external influence on him. It may come about owing to mental illness or some other kind of disability—who knows?

The point is that this comes about through no reason other than birth. My citizenship, or my lack of citizenship, is conferred on me by reason of my birth—my parentage, or my heritage. I cannot do anything about it. I cannot be treated for it, as I can be for mental illness. This is purely because my parents may have come from another country, my skin may be of a different colour, or the country of the origin of my DNA may offer particular rights of citizenship. It is something arbitrary, about which I can do nothing. We might as well have a piece of legislation that says that people with red hair receive different treatment under the law, because there is nothing they can do about that.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this whole notion of heritage is not even an exact science? My first black ancestor to be born in this country was born in 1806, in Twyford; I have no idea where that is, but I know it is not that far from here. He was the son of a formerly enslaved person and a white domestic servant living in the house of his former master. I do not know what that particular ancestry is, but it goes quite far back. Just because someone called Thomas Birch-Freeman, who was living in the UK and would be deemed British by this legislation, travelled to Ghana as a missionary and settled there, and that is where my lineage comes from, I am now treated differently under the law, despite, perhaps, having heritage that may be similar to that of the right hon. Gentleman.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady has made a very good point. My problem with this legislation is that it places a question mark over certain citizens. I am not suggesting that the legislation is on everyone's lips every day, but when it is used with increasing frequency, it does place a question mark over people's status as citizens of the United Kingdom, and that, I think, should be a matter of concern.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman is making his points in a very considered way, but he is levelling quite serious charges against the Government. May I say to him, in absolute good faith, that our intentions here have nothing to do with someone's place of birth and everything to do with their behaviour?

Kit Malthouse: I understand what the Minister is saying, and, as I said to him on Second Reading, I am not concerned about this power falling into his hands, but we do not know who will be in his position in the future, and we are never quite sure how the power might develop. As I have said, over the years we have seen an acceleration and an increase in what is a very draconian power that we should be taking extremely seriously. To deprive people of their citizenship is a profoundly serious thing to do, which may well—indeed, will—affect them for the rest of their lives. No doubt it will be done in the face of extremely serious offences on the Minister's watch, but I am not sure that that will necessarily always be the case.

Given that under the power that is being created people can be expelled on the basis that their presence is not conducive to the public good, we could see its being used in combination with other powers that have been expanded recently. Just last week, in controversial terms, the Minister proscribed a particular organisation operating in this country. I am sure he will be able to explain, but in my experience—I think he referred to this at the time—proscription has been reserved for terrorist organisations. As the Minister has indicated, this power is reserved for those who are terrorists. Could it be used against individuals who are convicted of crimes under that proscription? That is the danger that I am trying to illustrate to him, and this is an area of law where I urge him to tread carefully and to think about the compromises that he is creating against our basic freedoms that we need to maintain, at the same time—I do not dispute his motivation—as protecting the United Kingdom in the best way he possibly can. I am just worried that he is taking a step too far.

7.30 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I rise to speak in favour of amendment 1, in the name of the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who is definitely on the other side of the House but who I am very much allied with in seeing the clear flaws in this Bill. Like him, I remain uncomfortable about the Bill as a whole, which I am sure will come as no surprise to the Minister.

I was quite clear on Second Reading about my concerns, which unfortunately the Minister failed to adequately respond to. Under the Bill, someone who successfully appeals against an order taking their British citizenship away will not get it back until it is no longer possible for the Government to challenge that appeal. At present, the length of time is indefinite, making this a measure that is effectively designed to circumvent the judiciary, and I want to fully understand why.

On Second Reading, I repeatedly asked the Minister to specify what act a person must commit to fall into the particularly unique situation in which the Government would want to revoke their citizenship, and why there is no existing legislation that can be used to take criminal proceedings against, or imprison, them as someone who is extremely dangerous. I would really like him to give a clear example—beyond the one case that has sparked this knee-jerk response—of where this legislation would be required. He has to recognise that, once law, it can be used in more than one way and in more than one case, as the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire has clearly laid out. Surely the Minister can understand the apprehension that many people will have if this legislation is being brought forward to address only one specific example, yet potentially has implications for dual nationals and for those with eligibility for citizenship elsewhere.

I mentioned on Second Reading that certain communities are often wary of legislation that touches on citizenship, because it almost always—whether it is the stated intention or not—disproportionately impacts them. To be clear, I am talking about people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and those with parents or grandparents who may have been born elsewhere; they will be particularly alarmed by this legislation. Those of us who are entitled to citizenship of other countries for no other reason than where our parents or grandparents may have been born,

or simply because of our ethnic origin, know that we are at a higher risk of having our British citizenship revoked. When such legislation is passed, it creates two tiers of citizenship. It creates second-class citizens, and we have known that since the Shamima Begum case.

As far as I am concerned, this Bill goes beyond keeping people safe and beyond a technical adjustment. It sends a message that certain people and certain communities are forever second-class citizens, and that no matter how long someone has contributed to this country, their citizenship is conditional, revocable and disposable. It seems that we have learned nothing at all from the Windrush scandal, because we continue to go through this cycle of creating pieces of legislation that may impact certain communities, noticing that they may impact those communities and passing them anyway.

As far as I am concerned, the power to remove someone's citizenship has its roots in colonial logic, whereby belonging is granted or revoked at the whim of empire, but there is no more empire. That logic has no place in a modern democratic society. Citizenship should never be a privilege to be granted or withdrawn based on the political agenda of the day. Citizenship is and should be a right, and it is the foundation of equality before the law; and even though this may not be the intention, the Bill undermines that right for some people while safeguarding it for others.

I am against this Bill not just because of what it does, but because of what it says. Why has the Minister not seen it fit to conduct an equality impact assessment? I know the Bill has an incredibly narrow scope, but its potential implications are vast and the potential impact is limited to specific communities. Steps should have been taken to understand the impact that this legislation might have.

I hope the Government will consider amendment 1. We know that these cases are lengthy and can last several years; I point again to the Shamima Begum case as an example. Leaving somebody essentially stateless as the Government exhaust the appeals process risks their freedom and safety. Although the Government may wish to wash their hands of the individual whom they are seeking to deprive of citizenship—as evidenced by the very nature of appeal—that person and their safety is and absolutely ought to be, by law, the responsibility of their Government. If rendering them stateless throughout their appeal, regardless of whether it lasts a few months or a few years, risks harm to the individual, then it is only right that a judge can rule that the order does not continue to take effect until the appeals process is exhausted.

Ultimately, I believe that this legislation is reactionary and has been born out of frustration at the failures of the existing legislation. If someone is deemed to pose a severe threat to public safety and the existing legislation does not allow the Government to deal with the matter appropriately, we must amend the existing legislation.

As I said before, I am against this Bill not just because of what it does, but because of what it says about who we are and whose rights matter, and about whether justice in this country is truly blind or whether it sees skin colour and migration history before it sees the individual and the citizen. I genuinely do not believe that this knee-jerk approach is the answer. Creating second-class citizens is not the answer. There surely has to be another way.

The Chairman: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I rise to speak in support of new clause 1, in my name. As I said on Second Reading, the Liberal Democrats believe there is a need for proper reform of the entire citizenship deprivation process. A transparent and accountable system for citizenship deprivation would ensure that this extraordinary power was used only in the most extreme circumstances, was never deployed for political reasons, and was consistently subjected to thorough parliamentary scrutiny. Sadly, the Bill before us falls short of that standard.

As I also said on Second Reading, the Home Secretary's description of this Bill as merely closing a legal loophole does not mean that its provisions should escape robust scrutiny and review—quite the opposite; any expansion of powers to deprive individuals of citizenship demands the highest level of oversight. Earlier this year, even before this Bill was introduced, the cross-party Joint Committee on Human Rights concluded that the Government's current approach to citizenship deprivation falls short of the UK's human rights obligations. It called for significantly greater safeguards, including stronger oversight and enhanced parliamentary scrutiny of these powers. The Liberal Democrats fully echo that call.

New clause 1 seeks to embed essential safeguards within the framework of these new powers in the same way. Specifically, the new clause would require the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the effects of the changes made to section 40A of the British Nationality Act 1981 by clause 1 of this legislation. The review must begin within one year and be completed within two years of the passing of the Act. A report of the review must be produced and sent to the Secretary of State, who must then lay it before Parliament within one month.

New clause 1 recognises that although the Bill may appear narrow in scope, its consequences are substantial. The power to deprive someone of their citizenship is one of the most significant powers the state can wield, engaging fundamental rights and liberties. It is particularly serious given that under the current legislation, deprivation can—in some circumstances—leave an individual stateless. This is especially important in the UK, which uses citizenship deprivation orders more frequently than almost any other country. The Home Secretary already needs only to be

“satisfied that deprivation is conducive to the public good” in order to strip someone of their citizenship—a threshold that is far too low. New clause 1 would simply ensure that any further power granted to the Secretary of State is at least balanced by proper oversight and transparency in its application.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To be honest, I think many of us have sympathy for the hon. Lady's new clause, but I am concerned about the security of this country, for which the Minister and the Government have responsibility. If someone contravenes that in any way or leads to any insecurity for the rest of the citizens, should they forfeit their right to citizenship?

Lisa Smart: The hon. Gentleman is right that one of the most serious jobs of any Government is to keep their citizens safe—I completely agree. There is, though, a need for robust scrutiny. The Government must have confidence that the legislation they are putting forward

has the support of this House and of the country, including that that legislation does what they say they want it to do and does not accidentally do something else. I think the most confident legislators are those who are open, transparent and welcoming of scrutiny, so I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments.

The Liberal Democrats support amendment 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), which would empower the courts to prevent the Secretary of State from issuing a deprivation order in cases where doing so would place an individual at risk of harm or undermine their ability to mount an effective defence, or in cases where a public authority has caused unreasonable delays in the appeals process. This is a measured and sensible proposal that places essential limits on the excessive powers currently wielded by the Secretary of State in matters of citizenship deprivation, and we will support the amendment if the right hon. Gentleman pushes it to a vote.

Kit Malthouse: To refer back to the intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), would the hon. Lady be interested to comment on this point? My understanding is that, under the terms of the Good Friday agreement, every UK citizen resident in Northern Ireland has a right to claim Irish citizenship. This Bill in effect means that every UK citizen resident in Northern Ireland can be deprived of their citizenship—have it removed by the Home Secretary—if that is conducive to the public good. That is another example of a whole group of people who would have a second class of citizenship.

Lisa Smart: I have listened very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman's comments this evening and on Second Reading, and I have a great deal of respect for him and the way he lays out his arguments. I am very much looking forward to the Minister's comments from the Dispatch Box shortly.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Further to the intervention by the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), is the hon. Member aware not only that Commonwealth countries allow people to claim citizenship from the birth of their parents or grandparents, but that some countries—notably Ghana and Kenya—specifically allow people to claim citizenship purely by being of African heritage, because they may not be able to trace their lineage due to enslavement?

Lisa Smart: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for those comments. We Liberal Democrats believe that the whole deprivation of citizenship regime needs fundamentally looking at and reviewing, and we would welcome any co-operation across the House with hon. and right hon. Members who want to work with us on that.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that deprivation of citizenship must remain an absolute exception, and never be a routine tool of Government policy. New clause 1 would provide the necessary guardrails to help ensure this remains the case, even as further powers are placed in the Secretary of State's hands. Ultimately, the integrity of British citizenship and our commitment to fundamental rights must never be compromised by practicality. New clause 1 would uphold those principles

and ensure that such a grave power was exercised only with full accountability and the closest scrutiny of this Parliament.

The Chairman: I call the shadow Minister.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I thank all Members for their contributions, Members who tabled amendments, and the Minister for his work and approach.

As has been set out, the Bill represents an important step towards tightening the existing rules on the deprivation of citizenship, as we discussed on Second Reading. This is a crucial tool that Home Secretaries must be able to exercise as part of their broader efforts to keep our country safe. Membership of a nation does not just imply rights; it also confers responsibilities. When British citizens engage in terrorism, support for terrorism or serious organised crime, they clearly disregard those responsibilities. We cannot deprive such people of citizenship in all cases, but where we can, we should.

Put simply, the intent of this Bill is to make sure that the Home Secretary's use of deprivation powers is effective. More broadly, it also intends to make it clear that, when considering the use of the deprivation powers, politically accountable Ministers must ultimately be responsible for the final decision. The amendments must be viewed in that light.

7.45 pm

First, I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for her new clause 1. She is right to highlight the need to keep the use of deprivation powers under review, particularly when changes are made to the scope of those powers. However, we do not believe that needs to be in the Bill.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) is absolutely right to point out, with amendment 1, that there is a balance to be struck. It goes without saying that deprivation of citizenship has a cost—in some cases, a very large one—for those who are deprived of their citizenship. Used improperly, it also has a cost for the rule of law, trust in our system and the delicate balances involved when we welcome people to make this country their home. He is right to counsel us to take this extremely seriously, as I believe the Minister does.

The hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) is similarly right to point out that the question of citizenship deprivation—I know that we are not today debating that principle in relation either to the amendments or to the Bill more broadly—goes to the heart of who we are and wish to be as a nation.

However, I believe that the Bill already strikes the right balance, and we should be very cautious about creating a situation in which judges are asked to apply subjective tests about when Ministers can or cannot exercise powers, particularly in such serious and time-sensitive circumstances. I am confident that no Home Secretary would use these powers lightly, and I am also confident that the only sustainable way to ensure that these powers are exercised properly is through the political process, including proper parliamentary scrutiny.

Dan Jarvis: I have listened very carefully to this debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for the points they have made. As I have said in this Chamber

many times, there is simply no greater priority than the safety of all those in the UK, and this Bill will help ensure the integrity of a vital tool in our ongoing efforts to protect the UK. As ever, I will endeavour to respond to the themes that have been raised.

I start with the Bill's sole substantive clause. Clause 1 inserts into the British Nationality Act 1981 proposed new section 40A, which will prevent those who have been deprived of British citizenship from automatically regaining citizenship if their appeal is successful. This will be in effect until onward appeals have been determined, and that extends up to the Supreme Court. It replicates the approach taken on asylum and human rights appeals. If all appeals have been determined and the Government prove unsuccessful, British citizenship would be reinstated with immediate and retrospective effect.

This clause and the Bill in its entirety do not change any existing right of appeal or widen the reasons for which a person could be deprived of their citizenship. I also reassure the Committee that the Government have to demonstrate a genuine case for an appeal in order for courts to allow the appeal to proceed. The courts carefully assess whether any appellant has a reasonable prospect of success, or there exists some other compelling public interest, before granting permission. Rules of court exist to prevent superfluous or unfounded appeals being pursued.

Clause 2 is necessary to make the Bill operational. The provisions are retrospective and will come into effect on Royal Assent. This is necessary to mitigate effectively the risk of cases currently in the system. The Bill extends and applies to all of the UK, the Crown dependencies and overseas territories, and I am sure that hon. Members will be glad to know that we have engaged closely with colleagues in the devolved Governments, Crown dependencies and overseas territories.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The Minister has made very clear exactly where the Bill will apply, but will he be clear about exactly who it will apply to? We have asked this question in different ways when talking about who we think will be disadvantaged, but can he be clear that those of British nationality who have no other claim to a nationality cannot be subject to such an order?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right about that specific point, but I will return to the points she has raised once I have responded to amendment 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). I am genuinely grateful to him—he is looking a bit cynical as to the extent of my gratitude—for providing an opportunity to address the important issues, and they are important, he raised and for the considered, measured and thoughtful way in which he approached this debate and the Second Reading debate a couple of weeks ago.

The right hon. Gentleman made the case for his amendment in his own typically considered way. I listened very carefully to it, as I am sure did other hon. Members. He made the claim that the Bill will create a two-tier citizenship, and my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) reinforced that point. He claimed, I think somewhat unfairly, that the Government, through these measures, are seeking to undermine fairness. I say to him and to other hon. Members that we are not trying to do that. What we are

[Dan Jarvis]

trying to do, very simply, is ensure that the Government have the powers and the tools they need to keep the country safe. I know that he would acknowledge—I have made this point to him quite recently—that these are powers that existed under all 14 years of the previous Government. We are seeking to ensure that we have the same powers to be able to do what we need to do to keep the country safe.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend that deprivation on conducive grounds is used very sparingly and against those who would pose a serious threat to the UK. It is essential that our legal framework protects our national security—I hope he would agree with that—but he made an interesting point about some of the fine balances and judgments that have to be made. I hope he would accept that, ultimately, deprivation of citizenship and matters relating to national security are matters for the Home Secretary.

The Supreme Court has been clear that the right to a fair hearing does not trump all other considerations, such as the safety of the public. I understand and respect the motivation behind the right hon. Member's amendment, but it does not take into account the impact of the Court's decision on national security. These are judgments and decisions that have to be taken by the Home Secretary. The fact that a court may have allowed an appeal against a deprivation decision does not mean that the person does not pose a threat to the UK, for example where the appeal is upheld on procedural issues. Furthermore, it is not controversial to delay the outcome of a lower court on a civil order while any further appeal is determined. It has nothing to do with being found guilty. As I mentioned earlier, the approach in the Bill is in line with the approach taken on asylum and human rights appeals.

Turning to the specific conditions set out in amendment 1, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that decisions to deprive are taken in accordance with our international obligations. It is also assessed whether deprivation would expose a person to a real risk of mistreatment, which would constitute a breach of articles 2 and 3 of the European convention on human rights, were those articles to apply. Additionally, an appeal can already be paused until a person is in a position to effectively take part. The timings for appeals are agreed by both parties and the courts can order case management reviews to resolve disagreements between the parties. For the reasons I have outlined, I respectfully ask the right hon. Gentleman that the amendment be withdrawn.

Kit Malthouse: I am very grateful to the Minister. I have just a couple of points to make, if I may. He is quite right that timetables are agreed and there can be case management reviews, but there is nothing the court can do to restore someone's citizenship even if the Government do drag their heels. If he could explain to us, perhaps in a little more detail, what recourse I would have were I somebody who had won an appeal, was awaiting a further appeal by the Government against me and mounting a defence but the Government were dragging their heels and basically ignoring the case management reviews. I do not think it is the case that the judge would just dismiss the appeal out of hand. The Government could effectively take their time.

I have a second question, if I may. Can the Minister tell the House whether, in his view, given that it is a subjective judgment by the Home Secretary, membership of a proscribed organisation would be *prima facie* grounds for the deprivation of citizenship?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman undoubtedly makes some important points, but he makes them from a stance and a point of view that is slightly different from the position of those of us who have to serve in government. He spoke about the Government seeking to drag their heels. This Government and, I am entirely prepared to accept, the previous Government are not seeking to drag our heels; we are seeking to keep the country safe. That is what this is about. It is about ensuring that we have a legal framework that provides the tools we need to make difficult decisions, yes, but also to keep the country safe. He will forgive me if I do not seek to move into a slightly separate debate about proscription, not least because I think I would be in trouble with you, Ms Ghani, but I also want to come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill.

My hon. Friend made the point that deprivation raises concern among certain communities. I am grateful to her for making that point and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond directly to it. Let me say to her and to other hon. Members that the power to deprive a person of British citizenship does not target ethnic minorities or people of particular faiths. It is used sparingly where a naturalised person has acquired citizenship fraudulently or where it is conducive to the public good. Deprivation on conducive grounds is used against those who pose a serious threat to the UK or whose conduct involves high harm. It is solely a person's behaviour that determines if they should be deprived of British citizenship, not their ethnicity or faith. Finally, my hon. Friend asked about an equalities impact assessment. I can say to her that the impact on equalities has been assessed at all stages of the legislation.

Turning now to new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), I appreciate the intention behind the amendment, specifically to ensure accountability in the use of deprivation powers. I recall that she is very consistent in raising her concerns about that. However, I must respectfully submit that the hon. Member's amendment is not necessary, for two reasons. First, the role of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration already provides a well-established framework for independent oversight. She may recall that I mentioned that to her previously. The role was created under the UK Borders Act 2007, which sets out its statutory function. That includes the exercise of deprivation powers by the Home Secretary and by any person acting on their behalf. The independent chief inspector has the authority to conduct inspections, publish reports and make recommendations, ensuring that the powers are subject to rigorous external scrutiny.

Secondly, the Secretary of State already publishes annual statistics on the deprivation of citizenship. Those figures are publicly available and provide transparency on how often the powers are used and the grounds for deprivation. That data enables Parliament and the public to monitor trends and assess the proportionality and fairness of the system. Taken together, the statutory oversight by the independent chief inspector and the

routine publication of deprivation statistics already provide a comprehensive framework for accountability. The amendment, therefore, duplicates existing oversight and reporting mechanisms. It would introduce unnecessary bureaucracy without adding meaningful value.

I would again like to thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I hope for their continued support in ensuring that these important changes can be made.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Malthouse, do you wish to withdraw the amendment?

Kit Malthouse: In the hope that the Minister will do the right thing, yes. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

7.59 pm

Dan Jarvis: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

I thank all Members across the House who have contributed to the debates on this Bill for their incisive and helpful contributions and their considered scrutiny. I know that hon. Members understand the importance and necessity of the Bill. Unfortunately, there are those who seek to do harm to our country and those within it. The deprivation of citizenship is an important tool to help us to maintain the safety and security of our country, and the Bill will ensure that it retains its effectiveness.

I thank the hon. Members for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for their work on the Opposition Front Benches and for the collegiate way in which they have worked with the Government on the Bill. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather), who has done such an excellent job in whipping the Bill through this place.

I also take this opportunity to pass on my thanks to the officials who work very hard in the Home Office and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel for their work in developing this legislation and supporting its passage through Parliament. I would particularly like to thank those who serve in our police, law enforcement and intelligence services, who work around the clock to keep us safe. Finally, I thank the fantastic House staff for their work in supporting the logistics of the Bill, in particular the Doorkeepers and the parliamentary Clerks' team.

To conclude, this small but vital Bill has passed through the House swiftly and with cross-party support. As it moves to the other place, I trust that colleagues there will agree with us on the Bill's importance and necessity and will work to ensure it continues its passage as smoothly as possible. I commend the Bill to the House.

8.1 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I rise simply to ask the Minister if he might publish the assessment. He has said continuously that the Bill is fair, but I want to impress upon him that it cannot possibly be fair that should such orders be brought about, they would impact me and not him. I do not think that is fair at all.

I would also like the Minister to address his statement that the Bill is not discriminatory. He must understand that some communities may have these provisions applied against them more than others, even though they may be used sparingly, and that fact makes it discriminatory. He has to accept that.

I would also be grateful if the Minister thought specifically about the fact that no matter how sparingly the legislation is applied, it is being used more than in the past, and that is giving people much cause for concern. As the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) pointed out, the Minister and the Secretary of State may not always be in this place, and there may be others who wish to use the legislation in a way that is not intended. I would be very grateful if the Minister could address those points and see exactly where our concerns remain.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

8.3 pm

Katie Lam: I start by thanking the Minister for his work on the Bill. It is always a pleasure to work across from him in defence of our great country and its people.

Keeping our country safe sometimes requires taking difficult decisions, including the decision to deprive a person of their British citizenship. Working flagrantly against our country's interests as, say, a terrorist does clearly demonstrates a disregard for the responsibilities of citizenship. Such people should not be able to hide behind a passport, and it is therefore right that the Home Secretary retains the power to deprive them of citizenship where it is possible to do so. It is also right that this power remains effective. We believe that the Bill is an important step towards ensuring that efficacy and clarifying Parliament's intention on how those powers can be used.

Given that we are in agreement on the substance of the Bill itself, I would like to briefly make a broader point about what the legislation represents in terms of our constitution and Parliament's role within it. As I mentioned on Second Reading, the main role of the judiciary in our system is to interpret and apply Parliament's will; it is not the highest arbiter of our constitution. In most cases, with the exception of some prerogative powers, its only role in reviewing ministerial powers is to ensure that they are exercised according to the guidelines set out by Parliament. When the judiciary makes a decision that runs contrary to the will of Parliament, Parliament is therefore perfectly entitled to overturn that decision and to clarify its will. This is a living and breathing institution, which should be at the centre of our political system, because Parliament is ultimately answerable to the British people themselves.

The Bill before us represents one such clarification. At a time when it can seem that many on the Government Benches are happy to defer to the judiciary as a matter

[Katie Lam]

of course, it is heartening to see the Minister take a different approach—one that recognises the fact that Parliament is the cornerstone of our system—and I thank him for that. We must never forget that the supreme authority in this country is Parliament. When the legal process produces a result that is not in the interests of the British people, not only is this House well within its rights to overturn it, but it must do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Question (8 July) again proposed, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

[Relevant documents: A statement on behalf of the promoter of the Bill in support of the Second Reading of the Bill is available on the Bill's webpage and in the Vote Office; and, a supplementary document additional to the Explanatory Memorandum on the face of the Bill is also available on the Bill's webpage and in the Vote Office.]

8.5 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to present this Bill on behalf of one of our great national institutions, the Corporation of the Hall of Arts and Sciences, known to most of us as the Royal Albert Hall. I do so as someone who has enjoyed many performances in the hall, ranging from artists like Muse and Eric Clapton to acts such as Cirque du Soleil, through to the Last Night—and many other nights—of the Proms concerts. I also speak as a previous trustee of the hall, a position I was appointed to between 2018 and 2020, having stepped down as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport; it was a great pleasure to take on the role of trustee, and I was disappointed that I then had to give it up because I was reappointed to the position now held by the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism. Nevertheless, I have maintained a close interest in the affairs of the hall, and I strongly support the measures that are being brought forward tonight. As a trustee, I was able to see in detail how the hall operates and how it pursues its charitable purposes.

It is worth saying a word about the hall, because it is a unique organisation. It was the brainchild of the late Prince consort, Prince Albert, before his death at just 42 years of age in 1861. The corporation was established by royal charter not long afterwards, in 1867, under the chairmanship of the Prince of Wales. The foundation stone of the hall was laid by Queen Victoria in 1867, when she apparently announced without any prior warning that it would not be called the Central Hall of Arts and Sciences, as had been proposed, but would instead be known as the Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences.

Since that time, for more than 150 years, the hall has been a beacon in the cultural life of our nation. It is a place of celebration, entertainment, enlightenment and indeed commemoration. It is one of the most recognisable and famous venues in the country, and attracts thousands, if not tens or hundreds of thousands, of visitors to the United Kingdom every year. I know that the Minister, who represents the interests of the creative industries and the arts, will also be aware of that fact in his capacity as the Minister responsible for tourism.

The building of the hall was not without difficulty. Initial funding came from the commissioners of the Great Exhibition of 1851, who also provided the site, but the actual cost of construction still needed to be raised. The remaining balance was raised through public subscription, which worked by selling seats in the hall prior to it being built; the potential seat owners agreed to invest their money in the building of the hall and,

in exchange, would own a seat in the hall for a lease of 999 years. I understand that over 1,000 seats were sold for roughly £100 each on that basis, 20 of them being taken up by Queen Victoria herself.

That unique model has sustained the hall throughout the period since. It is a public-private partnership, which is unique to the hall, I think—I certainly do not know of any others—and it has worked remarkably well. During that time the hall has thrived, despite some extraordinary challenges, including obviously the covid pandemic. The way it works is that the seat holders, who are in many cases either descendants or those who have purchased the seats from the original people who invested their money, are an integral part of the support for the hall. They obviously enjoy access to the seats that they have purchased, but at the same time they hold the hall in trust and have shown remarkable generosity in continuing to promote it.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): While I recognise that a lot of the seats have been bequeathed down through the generations, a lot of them are now sold on the open market for much more than what that £100 would fetch in today's money, keeping pace with inflation. They are now assets because of the amount of money that can be gained from reselling them on the open market.

Sir John Whittingdale: Of course, the hon. Lady is right. Essentially a seat in the hall is a property asset—in the same way, if one's grandfather purchased a property and the descendants eventually decided to sell, it is highly likely that they would receive an amount of money way greater than the original investment. That is a very important point. These are essentially property assets, without which the hall could not have been built. It was built on that understanding and on a 999-year lease, and those who own that lease are entitled to do what they wish with it.

As for those who buy seats in the hall, in my experience of talking to many of them during my time as a trustee, they did not regard it as a financial investment to obtain a huge return; they love the hall in the way that many people do. They wanted the pride of owning an asset while at the same time contributing to the upkeep of the hall. As I will come on to explain, I think that seat holders contribute far more towards the upkeep and maintenance of the hall than they might ever get in return for selling tickets, and they have their right to the use of that seat for events where they are able to do so.

Mrs Hodgson: On that basis, if it is not about making money off their assets, would they not therefore return the tickets to the hall for the hall to resell, which they can do? There is also a conflict of interest if they are a seat holder as well as a trustee of the hall. Would it not be better for the ticket to be returned to the hall for the hall to sell, which is what this Bill seeks? They would still get their face-value money back.

Sir John Whittingdale: I think the hon. Lady raises two separate points. There is the ticket return scheme, which the hall itself has put in place, but that operates on a basis where the sales are all pooled together and then distributed among the seat holders. A lot of seat holders prefer to use that, but they take a slight risk because it may be that not all the seats will be sold, and therefore they will not get the face value on their seat.

Essentially there is a matter of principle involved. If someone owns a property, it is certainly my view that they are entitled to do with it as they wish. The hon. Lady has rightly championed the cause against the exploitation of consumers through secondary ticket sales. I share her concern about bots buying up all the tickets for an event and those tickets appearing on a secondary ticket site 10 seconds later, but that is not the same thing. What we are talking about in this instance is tickets that are already under ownership. They have not been bought up in a primary market; they are owned by the seat holders, and the seat holders can choose how they handle them. As I say, a large number will choose to use the ticket return scheme, but one should not require them to do so. First, that would fly in the face of the principle that these are property assets belonging to the individuals. Secondly, it undermines the operation of the way in which they support the hall.

I want to continue setting out why the hall is such an invaluable institution to this country. It has about 500 employees. Some 400 events take place each year in the main auditorium and many more in other parts of the hall. As I said, there are something like 1.7 million visitors each year. The hall makes itself available on very favourable terms to a wide range of other organisations, such as Imperial College for graduation ceremonies, the Royal Navy for the Mountbatten Festival of Music, and the Teenage Cancer Trust for its fundraising concerts. It also has an engagement programme that reaches out to some 180,000 people of all ages in local communities and schools, giving them opportunities to learn about performing arts and experience live music.

There are something like 5,500 seats in the hall. As of the end of last year, 1,256 of those—roughly a quarter—were privately owned by 315 seat holders. They are people who have either inherited the seats or purchased them from the original owners of the seats. Under the constitution that was drawn up at the time of Queen Victoria, those seat owners are the members of the hall's corporation. Some may be private individuals, but there are also companies and charities. There is a strong and enduring bond between the hall and those members.

Of the board of trustees, which governs the hall, some 18 out of the 23 are seat holders, as was originally set down. There are five external trustees, one of whom—I was fortunate to hold this position—is appointed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Then there are the commissioners of the 1851 Exhibition, a representative of Imperial College, another from the Royal College of Music, and another from the Natural History Museum.

As I sought to explain, those who hold seats actually do put a lot back into the hall. Even though they own the seat, they nevertheless contribute on top of it to the maintenance of the hall. The first way is by paying an annual contribution known as the seat rate. This is voluntary but is paid by members every year. An independent committee recommends the amount—I think I sat on the seat committee for a time—and it is roughly a pro-rata proportion of the hall's maintenance costs. This year the seat rate, which members choose to pay, is £1,880 plus VAT per seat, amounting to about £2.3 million plus VAT.

The second way in which members support the hall—this is the crux of the Bill—is by agreeing to forgo their tickets for events on over 100 days each year. Originally when

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they purchased their seats way back in 1871, members could attend any event in the hall by sitting in the seat they had purchased, but over time, in order to support the hall, members have agreed to give up that entitlement for a set number of days each year, and that currently stands at over 100 events each year. By giving up the right to use their seat, they give it back to the hall, and obviously those tickets can then be sold. It also helps the hall to attract high-quality artists. Each time, a negotiation takes place with somebody wishing to perform at the hall as to how many events will be held on what is called an exclusive basis, for which seat holders will not have the right to utilise their seats. That method of support for the hall, which has evolved over the years, has been extraordinarily successful.

There is also a review of the constitution governing the hall. A working group has identified a range of potential reforms. The hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) referred in her intervention to the concerns expressed by the Charity Commission that there might be a conflict of interest because seat holders both own seats and sit on the council, but I think that is a misinterpretation of the position. As far as I am aware, there has never been any evidence of seat holders abusing their position. Indeed, there is a committee of the hall with a majority of independent members called the conflicts committee that considers whether there is any potential conflict. I was a member of that committee during my time as a trustee.

The Bill contains reforms to the position, which can be achieved only by Act of Parliament. I would therefore like briefly to run through the Bill's clauses. First, clause 3 removes the six-yearly cap on the amount that can be levied through the seat rate. In the interests of equivalence, it transfers the voting threshold of three quarters from the six-year cap to the annual seat rate. If anything, the six-year cap has sometimes prevented seat holders from contributing as much as they might—particularly during covid, when members were obviously unable to take up their rights because the hall was not available for public performance. None the less, members continued to pay the seat rate in support of the hall.

Secondly, clause 4 provides a mechanism whereby members can agree to exclusives—performances where they will not take advantage of their ownership of seats—in excess or of a different kind to those originally permitted by the Royal Albert Hall Act 1966. There is already statutory provision to allow some performances to be exclusive where members have given over their rights, but the hall has gone beyond the 1966 Act such that now a number of events above and beyond those covered by that Act are agreed to by members through voting. That is a way in which they have increased their support for the hall.

That has been agreed through the council and a majority of members—it is done by majority. The question as to whether that has a legal basis is what needs to be clarified through the Bill. Three members have commenced a challenge in the High Court, which, if it were to be successful, would prevent the hall from having as many exclusive events. That would obviously have a damaging effect on the income not of seat holders but of the hall itself. If the challenge were to be successful, the hall

could either continue with its practice—potentially in breach of a legal challenge—or decide that it was no longer possible to continue the practice, and therefore then lose the benefit, or it would no longer be able to contract some of the most attractive and valuable events that are staged there at the moment. The purpose of the clause is therefore to resolve the issue in order to allow the hall to proceed—as is the current position—without the risk of legal challenge.

The third clause that I want to address is clause 5, which was added to the Bill by amendment in the House of Lords. It was not part of the original Bill as agreed by the members and it was not sought by the hall. It is certainly the hall's view that its provisions, which cover both a requirement that extensions to exclusive events need to be agreed by a committee not without a majority of seat holders, and a requirement use the ticket return scheme, which the hon. Lady identified in her intervention, demonstrate a lack of understanding of the way in which the hall works and would be detrimental to the hall. It could mean that seat holders will no longer be able to support the Bill, which is an essential requirement if it is to become law. I know that the hall is very happy to discuss potential ways of addressing the concerns identified through the passage of that amendment when the Bill gets to Committee, which, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think you will be involved with.

At this stage, I ask that the House agrees to the Bill's Second Reading. We can return to address any particular concerns once it has been through Committee.

8.25 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I am thrilled to follow the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who I would like to call my right hon. Friend. We do a lot of work together on the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. He is a former leader of the British delegation—that role has now passed to me—and we still attend delegations together. He made a good opening speech in support of the Bill.

As Members will know, since 2010 I have served as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse, which I also set up in 2010. As the right hon. Gentleman highlighted, I have also fought tirelessly against touts scalping tickets away from fans to sell at massively inflated prices online. I was therefore horrified when tickets for events at the Royal Albert Hall—one of our country's most recognisable and cherished institutions—started appearing on sites such as Viagogo. That included, to name but one, Ed Sheeran tickets being listed online for just under £6,000 per ticket. I was even more horrified when I learned that those tickets belonged to seat holders, some of whom also sit on the council of trustees.

As we have heard tonight, and all know well, the Royal Albert Hall was opened in 1871 by Queen Victoria in commemoration of her husband Prince Albert and the furtherment of arts and sciences. As a thank you, some of the wealthy benefactors who financed the hall's construction were gifted seats in the hall on a 999-year lease to attend as many events as they wished. Those seats have passed down through the generations.

Fast-forward to today and things are very different. Seat holders can sell their seats for huge amounts of money—I will come to that in a moment—and sell their tickets for events they receive as seat holders but do not wish to attend personally. They could give those tickets to friends and family to use at no charge, and I know that some do. Many choose to return their tickets to the box office via the hall's ticket return scheme, receiving the face value of the ticket minus a small fee that goes towards the hall. That would obviously be the preferential option for the hall, because it would make a little bit of money from that. Increasingly, however, seat holders are choosing to sell their tickets through third party websites such as Viagogo and Hoorah Tickets—in some cases for sums that are many, many times their face value. This includes tickets for Roger Daltrey's annual Teenage Cancer Trust fundraising concert being sold for seat holders' personal gain.

These seats therefore represent a massive investment, and the seats themselves have been bought and sold over the years, with some individuals or families now amassing over 50 seats. Again, that was not the original intention of those altruistic benefactors funding the hall. Most recently, one 10-seat box was listed online for £3 million. The advertisement claimed that there were 12 seats in the box—pre-empting this Bill, which originally contained proposals to increase the number of seats in a box from 10 to 12, which would boost the portfolio of the box owners. Those clauses have fortunately been removed in the other place.

I understand that the Royal Albert Hall has said that it needs this Bill to pass in order to make necessary changes to its constitution and safeguard the future of the hall economically. The hall holds charitable status and received a £20 million loan out of public money as part of the covid-19 culture recovery fund, which I am aware it is paying back at the rate agreed. Part of this legislation would reasonably allow the hall to increase and formalise the number of exclusive events from which seat holders are excluded, which the right hon. Member for Maldon spoke about. The hall can then make that vital profit from all the seats, instead of the seat holders selling them on the open market. Obviously, I support that.

However, the main reason I support this Bill is the common-sense amendment introduced in the other place by my very good friend and namesake—although no relation—Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, supported by a cross-party majority of Lords. As the right hon. Member for Maldon explained, the Royal Albert Hall is controlled primarily by a council of 25 trustees, a majority of 19—equivalent to 75%—of whom, including the chairman of the board of trustees, must be seat holders, according to the hall's governance statutes. The council has a say over which acts are booked and decides how many and which events will be for the exclusive benefit of the hall. The seat holder majority of trustees, whether this has happened or not, can therefore prioritise booking and securing tickets to events that will maximise their income.

Those in the other place have taken the reasoned view that charity trustees must not benefit, or be seen to benefit, from decisions they take as trustees. Lord Hodgson's amendment first sets out that any power to exclude members from the hall can be exercised only when “approved by a sub-committee of the council of which the independent members of the council will form a majority”.

Secondly,

“any tickets for seats received from the exercise of the power to alter the number of events from which seat holders are excluded must only be sold by the trustee or relatives of the trustee through a ticket return scheme operated or approved by the Corporation.”

I believe that this is a moderate change that still gives seat holders a lot of freedom to resell their tickets. However, those who wish to govern the hall will receive only the face value of their tickets.

I genuinely believe that this is a vital step in bringing the hall into line with every other reputable charitable institution. There are obviously those at the hall who oppose this Bill, and it would be massively shameful if they took this opportunity to withdraw the Bill. Like many others, including the right hon. Member for Maldon, who spoke of it so fondly, I hold the hall in high esteem and have many fond memories of times enjoyed there. I really want it to survive and to thrive for future generations, so I hope that this serious conflict of interest in the running of this beloved charity comes to an end, and that the Bill is given safe passage.

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

8.33 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): Marking its 150th anniversary in 2021, the Royal Albert Hall continues not only to host world-class performances but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) mentioned, to do a tremendous amount of outreach work and to do so, crucially, without drawing on public funding for its operational costs—other than in the covid situation, which of course was exceptional. That is something for which it should certainly be commended and celebrated.

This Bill seems to have been going round and round for some time. I know that I was trying to deal with it when we were in government. It has been promoted by the hall, as we have heard, and seeks to provide legal clarity to an existing arrangement in which members, who own rights to approximately one quarter of the hall's seats, forgo their right to attend events and, when not attending, make those seats available for sale. As we have heard, the hall argues that without statutory backing, this arrangement remains vulnerable to legal challenge, which could have acute impacts on its financial stability.

During its consideration in the other place, the Bill attracted extensive scrutiny and was amended, as we heard. Concerns were raised by a number of Members, including Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, particularly in relation to the governance of the hall and the role of seat-holding trustees. He noted that although the hall has held charitable status since 1967, the current arrangements may allow some trustees to benefit financially from the reselling of tickets on the open market—sometimes at significant profits, as the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) said.

In response to the concerns, an amendment was passed that provides that any power to exclude members from the hall under the Bill's provisions can only be exercised by a sub-committee with a majority of independent members. It also requires that tickets made available under those provisions be sold through the hall's ticket return scheme, thereby seeking to address concerns over

[Stuart Andrew]

potential personal financial gains by trustees. I also note that Lord Harrington of Watford, a trustee of the hall, expressed the hall's position, stating that the Bill's primary objective is to formalise existing practices and mitigate legal uncertainty, rather than to reform governance structures. He also raised concerns that the amendment may place undue limitations on members, including financial disadvantages and restrictions on charitable donations of tickets.

In the light of these developments, it is evident that the Bill faces significant challenges in its current form. It also raises a broader issue relevant to many historic charitable institutions: the difficulty of updating foundational documents and governance arrangements under existing legislative mechanisms, which often require the introduction of private Bills. It may also beg the wider question of how many of our great establishments, which were founded in the Victorian era, can operate in a more modern era, but I accept that these are not easy issues to address.

In conclusion, although His Majesty's Opposition absolutely support the aim of securing operational clarity for the Royal Albert Hall, the concerns raised about governance and potential conflicts of interest are of some significance. We will therefore be abstaining on Second Reading. I know that this will certainly be an interesting Bill in Committee. I look forward to following it with great interest, and I hope that some of the concerns that are legitimately being raised can be ironed out.

8.37 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Well, this is a rum old affair, isn't it? I think we can definitely put this down as one of the recondite moments of parliamentary democracy. A number of people have asked me today, "What on earth is all this about?" and then said, "What is an opposed private Bill?" or "What has the Chairman of Ways and Means got to do with it?" and all the rest of it—so, yes, it is a strange little moment.

It is nice to see the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who listed about a fiftieth of all the things he has sat on in his time, and it still added up to rather a large number of things that he has been involved in at some point or other, including virtually every committee at the Royal Albert Hall, apart from selecting the music—

Sir John Whittingdale: It would have been very difficult.

Chris Bryant: Yes—well, it would have been endlessly hard rock, wouldn't it, if it was just to please him?

Of course, this debate is timely because the Proms are about to start. The Proms are one of the most renowned British cultural institutions in the UK, where the BBC meets the public in a more open way than in any other. The concerts are broadcast all around the world, and everybody knows about them—not just the last night, but the first night, the penultimate night and all the different bits that have tradition attached to them.

Of course, the Royal Albert Hall, as everybody has referred to, is one of the great cultural institutions of the UK. It is a phenomenally versatile space, apart from

anything else. People have mentioned concerts they have been to. Dua Lipa, of course, had a wonderful concert there last year. I think my husband has been to see Kylie there—well, he has been to see Kylie nearly everywhere. I have been to see Kylie nearly everywhere, too—it is always nice to live up to a stereotype, isn't it? What is amazing is that wrestling and so many other different styles of events can take place there—the right hon. Member for Maldon mentioned Cirque du Soleil, for example.

The Royal Albert Hall is a great part of the British cultural sector, and it is unique in the way it is structured financially and constitutionally. I do not think that anybody has said this evening that it is precisely how one would probably want to constitute it if one was starting from scratch. [Interruption.] I noted a slight Gallic shrug from the right hon. Member for Maldon, so I think he is sort of agreeing with me. I think most of the people who own the seats at the Royal Albert Hall would agree that it is not quite what anybody would design if they were starting again today.

It is worth reminding ourselves of precisely what we are doing with a private Bill, because it is different from a public Bill. "Erskine May" does not get to private Bills until page 1,024 or something, so we can tell that they are unusual. It states:

"In giving any bill a second reading, the House approves the general principle, or expediency, of the measure. There is, however, a distinction between the second reading of a public and of a private bill. A public bill is founded on public policy, and the House, in agreeing to its second reading, accepts and approves that policy; whereas the expediency of a private bill is founded upon allegations of fact which have not yet been proved, so that the House, in agreeing to its second reading, affirms the principle of the bill conditionally, subject to the proof of such allegations before the committee."

I am sure the Committee stage will be interesting, as the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) said, because these allegations of fact will have to be proven. That takes us to the several points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), who is one of the most redoubtable experts on the issue of ticket sales in this country. I very much hope that we will be able to put the biggest smile on her face later in this Parliament when we come up with legislation to tackle the issues around the secondary ticketing market, which we are determined to do.

I take issue slightly with something that the right hon. Member for Maldon said. He said, "Private property is private property and we never want to interfere with it." In one sense I agree with him, of course, but when it comes to the sale of tickets, I am not sure that that quite applies as cleanly as it might in other forms. If the value returns to the artists or the venue, I do not have a problem, but when the value from the secondary ticketing market simply disappears into the trousers of online touts and bots, many of which are not even based in this country, I think that that is a problem.

Sir John Whittingdale *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Oh dear.

Sir John Whittingdale: The Minister and I will undoubtedly debate the Government's proposals for secondary ticketing at a future date, but I want to make it clear that what we are talking about here is not touts

or bots, but people who own a seat and the right to sit in that seat and who choose to sell it to somebody else, which is a very different prospect from the one that he outlines.

Chris Bryant: Of course. I was merely responding to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South. If we had a debate in which there was a venue mentioned and she were not to stand up and make a speech about ticket touts, we would think that something was wrong; we would go and search all the A&Es in the country to find out what had happened to her. She said that she supports clauses 4 and 5. I think that the right hon. Gentleman supports clause 4, but he is not quite so keen on clause 5 because it was inserted in the House of Lords. As he knows, we are doing a very simple thing tonight: deciding whether to give the Bill its Second Reading. For a private Bill, it is traditional for the Government—as for the Opposition—not to stand in the way, nor to urge people one way or the other.

I repeat a point made in the House of Lords by my noble Friend Baroness Twycross, however: we are disappointed that some concerns about the potential conflict of interest between the hall's charitable objectives and the private financial interests of individuals have yet to be met. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Charity Commission has taken a view in this space. I think that some of those issues still need to be addressed more fervently; whether it happens through this Bill or through other means, at some point we will have to address them.

The right hon. Member for Daventry said that the Bill had been hovering around for some time, but it was interesting to hear the right hon. Member for Maldon say that people at the Royal Albert Hall are wondering what other constitutional changes should be brought about. One would hope that if we are to have a private Bill on the Royal Albert Hall, we can do it just once in a

Parliament, or in a decade—or in a lifetime, frankly. It would be good if we could address all the issues in a single Bill.

Nevertheless, as is the tradition with all private Bills, the Government neither support nor oppose this Bill. That sounds like a strange moment in British politics, doesn't it? But the last time I went to the Royal Albert Hall was for Emeli Sandé. I think one of her songs might be apposite at this point. [HON. MEMBERS: "Don't sing!"] No, I am not going to sing. What's wrong with Emeli Sandé?

Stuart Andrew: Nothing—it's you!

Chris Bryant: I think I will make sure that gets into *Hansard* now. The right hon. Gentleman is taking objection to me personally. Well, there we are.

Stuart Andrew: Go on, then—sing.

Chris Bryant: I am not going to sing. Do behave! The right hon. Gentleman is almost as bad as I used to be when I sat where he is sitting now.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Never!

Chris Bryant: And the former Minister for common sense has now completely abandoned common sense, clearly.

Anyway, Emeli Sandé sang:

"You've got the words to change a nation

But you're biting your tongue,

You've spent a lifetime stuck in silence

Afraid you'll say something wrong."

Since the Government do not have anything to say on this business, that is where I shall end.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed.

Condition of Roads: Cheshire

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

8.47 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to have secured today's Adjournment debate on an issue that affects communities across the country: the condition of our roads. Although I will focus on the situation in Cheshire and in my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury, and on what I believe is a failure by local authorities to get to grips with the issue, I will begin by setting the context and reflecting on the broader systemic problems with how we repair and maintain our road network.

The Public Accounts Committee recently published a report on the condition and maintenance of local roads in England. It shows that this problem is widespread; that the Department for Transport does not have a good grasp of the real condition of local roads in England; and that funding arrangements to local authorities are likely to be pushing them to focus spending on short-term, reactive work. In my view, this reactive rather than proactive approach to road maintenance in Cheshire urgently needs to change. Instead of neglected routes being identified and tackled, particularly in rural areas, we see a pattern of piecemeal patch-ups on individual potholes rather than long-term, cost-effective repairs that offer real value for money.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate; I spoke to her beforehand. I am reminded of the old wee rhyme that my mother used to say to me: a stitch in time saves nine. Does the hon. Lady agree that a pothole repaired in time can save lives? The Government must be more proactive in ensuring that we deal with the small issues and save money before they become costly, large issues.

Aphra Brandreth: That is exactly the point I am making—the hon. Gentleman says it very well. As I outline the issue in more detail, I urge the Minister to consider how local authorities might be encouraged to take a more strategic, preventive approach. I have lost count of the number of times that frustrated residents have asked me why a white circle of paint has been drawn around one pothole, while another right next to it is left untouched because it does not meet the criteria for repair. We all know that within a week or two a team will have to return to fix the one that was missed.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The hon. Member—my constituency neighbour—talks about residents. Does she agree that it is often our residents who know their areas best, because they live and breathe them every day? They are residents such as those on East Avenue in Weston, who I consulted widely over road repairs and traffic-calming measures, or those from Stewart Street in Crewe, which is a key arterial road that has been neglected for some time. Does she agree that our residents should be listened to as part of any plans to repair our roads?

Aphra Brandreth: The hon. Member makes an important point. This is about voicing the views of residents, and they know their area best. Residents have seen how a

short-term mindset has consequences. The condition of our roads is worsening, and the national repair backlog has grown, from estimates of between £7.6 billion and £11.7 billion in 2019, to over £15 billion today. That backlog in road repairs has rightly been called a “national embarrassment”, and it is a sign that the system we have in place is simply not working.

During her time on the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) rightly made the case for a more strategic approach to road repair and maintenance, alongside greater funding certainty and a simplified allocation process. I echo those calls today, both to the Minister and to Cheshire West and Chester council and Cheshire East council. This is not a partisan point—I know that Members across the House share frustrations with how local authorities manage road repairs. My intention is to offer a constructive perspective on how we might improve things in my constituency and across the country.

Cheshire is the best county to drive through. We have outstanding countryside, beautiful villages and scenic routes, but what should be a pleasure is too often spoiled by potholes. In my constituency, where public transport is minimal and key amenities such as a GP or post office are often too far to reach without a car, that is not just an inconvenience but a real barrier to daily life. Businesses depend on those roads, and crumbling surfaces damage vehicles, endanger road users, and hold back our local economy.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady—she is being very collegiate, as she always is. Does she agree that it is incredibly important in our beautiful Cheshire towns that our roads are maintained in good condition? I am thinking in particular of a stretch of road in Alsager, which is lovely and has a fantastic local café, but it is a major part of the town centre, and the degeneration of the road is making it look less attractive than it otherwise could be. Does she agree that those are important points, not simply for the state of the road, but for the whole local economy?

Aphra Brandreth: That is an important point. This issue is having an impact on that road, but also on a village, and on businesses and people who are trying to use that area. That is why we need a better system—one that delivers better roads and better value for the taxpayer. We must not settle for the status quo piecemeal approach that councils such as Cheshire West and Chester, and Cheshire East currently seem to take.

Potholes are one of the top issues in my inbox, as they are for many right hon. and hon. Members, yet as Members of Parliament we do not have direct control over local roads. Highways are a devolved responsibility, so when constituents raise concerns, I encourage them to report issues to the council, and work with them to follow up with officials and draw attention to where repairs are urgently needed. But people are rightly frustrated and, as we have heard, local voices need to be heard. That is why I have secured this Adjournment debate, to do what I can in Parliament to raise this issue, highlight its severity in Cheshire, and push for a better approach to tackling our county's, and the UK's growing roads crisis.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In common with what the hon. Lady hears from residents in Cheshire, I often hear from my constituents

about the problems caused by potholes. The Government have recently committed £6.7 million to South Yorkshire and £9.8 million to north Lincolnshire, which is a huge step forward, but strategic leadership at a local level from Mayor Ros Jones has meant that significantly more than that has been put towards pothole repairs. Some 144 streets have been resurfaced and we have the lowest ever level of streets needing to be looked at in that area. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that that strategic leadership at a local level is vital, and that we must not focus only on potholes in roads, but on what our pavements look like, particularly for people who have access issues?

Aphra Brandreth: I thank the hon. Member for his point, and I will go on to say that it is not just an issue of funding, as there are serious issues about how that strategic approach is taken.

As I was saying, this is a crisis. Whether from knocking on doors or through people contacting my office, I have dealt with hundreds of cases relating to road maintenance, from potholes to overgrown hedges, poor road signage and other highways issues. To really understand the impact on people locally, I want to take a few moments to share some personal stories from those affected by the poor state of the roads in Chester South and Eddisbury.

David Doyle runs a taxi company just outside Tarporley, and he came to see me at one of my mobile advice surgeries to share his growing concerns about the state of our roads. As someone who drives across Cheshire all day, every day, for a living, he sees the problem daily. We all know how frustrating, and at times dangerous, it is to dodge potholes, or that moment when we wince because we have hit one and we feel the jolt through the car. But for David, the issue is not just about inconvenience or even the rising cost of repairs, for new tyres or suspension; it is also about lost income. If his car is damaged, he cannot work—he may even have to cancel bookings or leave passengers stranded—so someone's livelihood is being put at risk by the failure to maintain our roads properly.

It is not just motorists who are affected by poor road conditions. Paul Kerr, a keen cyclist, came to see me recently at a surgery in Huxley. He cycles over 1,000 km a month across the UK, and he told me that the worst roads he has ridden are in Cheshire. Potholes are inconvenient and sometimes dangerous for drivers, but they pose a serious safety risk for cyclists. The issue is often made worse because repairs tend to be done with motorists in mind. Potholes near the edge of the carriageway may be ignored or dismissed as too shallow to bother with, yet for cyclists, who are more exposed and ride closer to the verge, even a small defect can be hazardous. Of course, when drivers instinctively swerve to avoid a damaged section of road, they can unintentionally put cyclists at greater risk. We must do more to recognise cyclists' right to safe, well-maintained roads, especially in Cheshire, where cycling is not only good for our health and the environment, but one of the best ways to enjoy our beautiful countryside.

Those two examples come from constituents living in the Cheshire West and Chester part of my constituency, but the roads are no better in Cheshire East. I recently went with Councillor Janet Clowes, our excellent councillor for Wybunbury ward, to see the state of the Newcastle Road, leading up to the roundabout serving the Wychwood

Village and Wychwood Park estates. Councillor Clowes described the inaction of Cheshire East council to fix the deteriorating road surface and intermittent potholes, where the speed limit on Newcastle Road is 60 miles per hour. Traffic weaving in and out of this pothole slalom on the approach to the roundabout has led to multiple accidents.

Despite repeated requests over a two-year period for the road to be top-dressed, or at least to have sections of level 2 patching to make this section safer, her requests have been denied, with funds being channelled to more urban areas elsewhere in Cheshire East. Herein lies another issue: some £53 million has been allocated to Cheshire East's highways department this year, but not a penny is being spent in the Wybunbury ward in my constituency.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I completely concur with what my hon. Friend and neighbour has said about Cheshire West and Cheshire, but the roads in Cheshire East are a disgrace. As for the money—the £53 million that my hon. Friend mentioned—I have tried to get to the bottom of where that money has been spent. In fact, I have had to resort to freedom of information requests to find out where Cheshire East is spending the money—the council supposedly does not know the location, the area or the postcode; it has merely a job number. I find that hard to understand, because how do the council tell the contractors where to go? Does my hon. Friend share my concern that this money is being spent neither properly nor fairly across the council area?

Aphra Brandreth: My right hon. Friend makes such an important point and really hits the nail on the head.

It is just not acceptable that wards such as the large ward of Wybunbury in Cheshire East in my constituency are consistently neglected, with funding being diverted elsewhere—as my right hon. Friend points out, we do not know where. Cheshire East council may forget the rural areas of the borough, as its counterpart in Cheshire West does, but I will not stop speaking up for Wybunbury, and neither will Councillor Clowes.

Let me briefly share one more example from Cheshire East. Wrenbury-cum-Frith was temporarily renamed “Wrenbury-cum-Pothole” by locals. The main issue in Wrenbury was on Station Road, a 650-foot thoroughfare leading into the heart of the village and therefore used frequently by residents. Frustration with the state of the roads ran so high that villagers actually amended their own welcome sign and erected another on the road, warning drivers that the condition of this road would “break your vehicle and your soul.”

On 650 feet of road, there were 174 potholes and countless reports to Cheshire East council, and campaigns led by Councillor James Pearson and the parish council followed. Only after the issue got national coverage did Cheshire East council finally commit to repairing the road.

In those examples, we can see three clear issues emerging with the current approach to road maintenance in Cheshire. First, while both councils seek to follow the national “Well Managed Highway Infrastructure” code of practice, it has resulted in maintenance strategies that are reactive, rather than proactive, leading to wasted council tax and Government highway maintenance and

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pothole allocations. Secondly, there has been a failure from the councils to think about the wider impacts that poor roads have on individuals, businesses and communities. Thirdly, there is a failure fully to understand the need to more effectively prioritise rural roads, often where public transport is not viable or simply non-existent, across constituencies such as Chester South and Eddisbury, where there is a far greater social, educational and economic dependency on the rural highway network.

As I begin to conclude my remarks, I will reflect briefly on the funding allocated to Cheshire West and Chester council and Cheshire East council and how it is being used by their respective highways departments. Frankly, I do not believe that a lack of funding justifies the poor performance we have seen, and the figures tell their own story. Over the past few years, both councils have significantly increased the number of potholes being filled; in Cheshire West and Chester, the number of potholes being repaired has more than tripled since 2021. That might sound like progress, but I suggest it points to something else: that repairs are not being done to a lasting standard and that the “patch it up” strategy means the wider network is deteriorating at a faster and faster rate. In one case alone, a single pothole on the A51 at Blakenhall had to be repaired nine times in just 18 months.

In addition, the focus primarily on urban networks has exacerbated a culture of managed decline on rural carriageways, where repairs are too often delayed or overlooked altogether. The specific challenges faced by rural roads are often ignored—the wear and tear caused by heavy vehicles such as tractors and HGVs, the lack of alternative transport options and the need to travel greater distances just to access basic amenities. I urge the Minister to ensure that all councils are considering not just our urban streets, but the needs of the rural road networks.

What makes that even more frustrating is that Conservative councillors in Cheshire West and Chester have repeatedly put forward reasonable, fully costed proposals to improve the highways network that would have made a meaningful difference, particularly for rural areas. Over the past two years alone, they included more than £3 million in additional investment for core maintenance, gully clearing, pavement safety and public rights of way, and every single one was rejected by the Labour-led council. At the same time, the council has steadily reduced its own funding contribution to highways maintenance, cutting it from £4.5 million under the previous Conservative administration to just £2.05 million in 2023-24. Had it simply maintained earlier spending levels, it could have invested an additional £14 million in the network by now. That is not a funding problem from central Government—it is a political choice at a local level, and residents are paying the price.

The situation is made worse by outdated guidance from the Department for Transport, which lacks clear direction from local authorities on the use of new technologies for assessing road conditions and repairing potholes, as well as on how to adapt to the challenges posed by climate change. As the condition of our roads has worsened, we have seen large sums paid out in compensation; Cheshire West and Chester paid out over £200,000 last year alone. Meanwhile, Cheshire East has faced more than 2,500 legal claims related to

pothole damage since 2021, but only a fraction of those claims have been accepted. Astonishingly, tens of thousands of pounds have been spent on legal fees just to review those applications. That is not an efficient use of public money.

All of this points to a system that is reactive, wasteful, and deeply frustrating for residents. According to the industry, it costs around £57 to repair a pothole as part of a planned, proactive approach—that is a fraction of the cost of dealing with compensation claims, not to mention the inconvenience for drivers and the damage to vehicles. I am certain that my constituents would far rather see durable, well-maintained roads than have to battle with the council for months to claim compensation for damage that should never have occurred in the first place.

I hope I have made clear just how strongly my constituents and I feel about the state of our roads in Cheshire. The answer is not endless pots of money, but a fundamental change in approach, one that tackles the problem proactively and makes sustainable, long-term, value-for-money repairs. People do not want their council tax or Government grants to be wasted on crumbling repairs and short-term fixes. Many Members in the Chamber today will have had similar experiences, so with collaborative and constructive intent, my ask of the Minister is for the Department to recognise that Cheshire’s roads are in an unacceptable condition. I ask for his support in advocating for a better approach to road repairs, so that all my constituents, whatever their mode of transport, can have confidence in Cheshire’s roads.

9.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) on securing this debate on the condition of roads in Cheshire, and on her admirable efforts to highlight her constituents’ concerns. I also thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate.

Like everyone else in the Chamber, I appreciate that this country is suffering from a plague of potholes and poor road conditions. Not only are those a costly nuisance to drivers, but they are a great risk to all road users, including cyclists and motorcyclists, who are more vulnerable. The public are the ones facing the repercussions of our poor roads and the maintenance backlog that has built up everywhere over the past decade, and I believe we are all in complete agreement that this must stop. This Government are up to that challenge, and are determined to improve conditions for all road users.

We are already putting our money where our mouth is by providing £500 million of extra funding for highway maintenance this year, taking overall spending through the highways maintenance block to nearly £1.6 billion this year. That is the largest ever amount of funding for local highway maintenance in England in one year, and means a huge increase in funding for nearly every local highways authority in England, including in Cheshire. In the hon. Member’s area, Cheshire East council will receive up to an additional £5.54 million of highways maintenance funding this year on top of around £15.5 million in baseline funding, while Cheshire West and Chester council will receive an additional £4 million of highways maintenance funding this year on top of

around £11.4 million in baseline funding. The Government are determined to transform the condition of the country's highways.

The hon. Member will also note that 25% of this year's funding uplift is contingent on each local highway authority meeting the requirements announced by the Secretary of State in March this year. We are making sure that road users, such as the people of Cheshire, have full transparency from local authorities over how this investment will be spent in transforming their roads. All 154 highway authorities were required by 30 June to publish clear information about the condition of their networks and their plans for how they will use the additional funding.

I am pleased to confirm that both Cheshire highway authorities have returned their reports. The hon. Member's constituents will be able to see that last year in Cheshire East, for example, the council estimated that the number of potholes they filled increased by nearly 50% compared with the year before. In Cheshire West and Chester, the council is committed—the hon. Member talked about the issues with continuous patching-up—to delivering 12 major resurfacing schemes during this financial year, including on the A559 Chester Way in Northwich and the B5153 in Kingsley.

Everyone in England should now have access to these reports by logging on to their council's website. I was reliably informed that Cheshire East council has an interactive map, and I am sure that the hon. Member, as soon as she leaves the Chamber, will be heading straight to a computer to take a look at that. Everyone will be able to log on to their local council's website to understand more about what their local highway authority is doing to improve their roads and to see at first hand the

difference that this Government's funding is making. Crucially, it will also help people to challenge their local authority if it is not delivering.

However, our funding for local roads does not stop there. The hon. Member should already be aware of the results of the spending review, where it was announced that the Government will provide £24 billion in capital funding between 2026-27 and 2029-30 to maintain and improve motorways and local roads across the country. That funding will allow National Highways and local authorities to invest in significantly improving the long-term condition of England's road network, delivering faster, safer and more reliable journeys. We will announce allocations for individual authorities in due course.

The capital funding for highways also included a £1 billion investment to enhance the road network and create a new structures fund, which will inject cash into repairing roads and rundown bridges, decaying flyovers and worn-out tunnels across the country. Further funding of more than £6 million has been granted for active travel schemes for Cheshire West and Chester and for Cheshire East, for a total of 13 schemes. I am also delighted that on 8 July the Department confirmed that it will provide £48 million of funding towards Cheshire East council's important Middlewich eastern bypass scheme, which is intended to help tackle congestion and safety concerns in the town centre.

To conclude, this Government are dedicated to supporting local highway authorities to improve and maintain roads for all users, and we will continue to prove our dedication through funding, transparency and support for local highway authorities.

Question put and agreed to.

9.13 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 14 July 2025

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

Northern Ireland Veterans: Prosecution

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 21 May, 7 May, 23 April, 19 March and 26 February, on the Government's new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland HC 586; and Correspondence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on the Government's new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, reported to the House on 11 June.]

4.30 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): Before we begin the debate, I wish to make a statement about the House's rule relating to matters sub judice. As the House will know, there are ongoing criminal cases involving the prosecution of British veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles. And, while there are as yet no criminal cases arising from the Clonoe inquest, the Government have initiated a judicial review of the inquest's findings.

Mr Speaker has today granted a waiver to allow limited reference to active legal proceedings relating to historical troubles-related deaths. References to these cases should be limited to the context, and to the events that led to the cases, but not to the detail of the cases themselves, nor the names of those involved in them. Members should, as always, be mindful of the fact that these are properly matters for the courts, and not for this House, and take special care to avoid saying anything that might interfere with the course of justice.

4.31 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 725716 relating to the prosecution of Northern Ireland veterans.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I am pleased to fulfil my duty in opening today's debate and presenting this petition, which has been signed by more than 170,000 people.

I thank the petition's creator, Ian Liles, who joins us in the Public Gallery today. Ian spent 36 years in the Army, including 13 years in Northern Ireland. I know that Members will thank him, and all the veterans in the Gallery and those watching across the country, for their service.

The petition states:

"We think that the Government should not make any changes to legislation that would allow Northern Ireland Veterans to be prosecuted for doing their duty in combating terrorism as part of 'Operation Banner'."

The role that British soldiers play in keeping our country safe cannot be overstated. They put their lives on the line to defend our country, and they put themselves in harm's way to do so. But there is a shadow that hangs over our armed forces today—a political and legal attack that is targeting veterans of Northern Ireland who served under Operation Banner.

In recent weeks, I have had the privilege of speaking to organisations and campaigners across communities in Northern Ireland. I have also heard from many of my constituents in the Scottish Borders who feel passionately about the need to protect our veterans from prosecution. I thank hon. and right hon. Members across this House for their advice and guidance in preparing for today's debate. I pay tribute to the tireless campaigning of my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), who raised this issue at Prime Minister's questions last week, as well as the Minister for Veterans in the last Government, Johnny Mercer, for his work to protect and defend Northern Ireland veterans during his time around the Cabinet table.

This Labour Government have taken the decision to repeal the Northern Ireland (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. I believe that decision will shame our country for decades to come. Operation Banner took place between 1969 and 2007. It was a name given to the operations by British forces in Northern Ireland to stop IRA attacks, spanning Labour and Conservative Governments and seven Prime Ministers. The previous Conservative Government introduced the legacy Act, which was designed to end the shameful spectacle of British veterans being dragged through the courts for actions taken decades ago, when they were simply following the orders of the Government of the day.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Military personnel have a term for passing the buck: sloping shoulders. Is the hon. Gentleman concerned that, with the measures we are discussing, the state risks sloping shoulders on to personnel who swore an oath of allegiance?

John Lamont: The hon. Member makes an excellent point, which I will consider more fully later.

In 1998, as the then Prime Minister Tony Blair approached the end of his negotiations on the Good Friday agreement, one final demand was made. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness said that they could not go ahead with the deal—they were fearful of community pushback and wanted to give terrorists amnesty from prosecution. So a deal was done. On-the-run letters were given to suspected IRA terrorists, telling them that they were no longer wanted. The letters gave protection to terrorists, but nothing was offered to the soldiers who served in Northern Ireland.

The years that followed saw historical cases, which were investigated at the time, being re-examined. Veterans were dragged to court on politically motivated charges—a witch hunt—and that is why we needed the legacy Act. The Secretary of State and this Labour Government now want to repeal the protection afforded to soldiers as a result of that legislation. We are told that will be achieved by removing parts of the legacy Act via a remedial order, and that the Government will later introduce new primary legislation.

The Prime Minister's Northern Ireland veterans tsar has said that this immoral "two-tier justice" will lead to "vexatious lawfare" against former soldiers. It sets a dangerous historical precedent. Are we now saying that if the Government send our troops into conflict, soldiers could be held to account in years to come for following the instructions given to them by this Government? If that is the case, why would anybody choose to serve our country? That is the reality facing many of our Northern

[John Lamont]

Ireland veterans today. During my preparations for this debate, I spoke to one group who said that, should the legacy Act be revoked, the number of veterans prosecuted would be only in the low single figures, but that is still too many. It fails to recognise the worry and anxiety that it will cause our veterans, many of whom are in old age, and their families.

Let me be clear: if soldiers went out with murderous intent, they should be held to account. The rule of law should apply to those soldiers as it applies to the rest of us. However, the petition creator told me that he knows of no soldier who went out deliberately to murder. It is also important to remember that, when someone was killed during the troubles, it was investigated—sometimes three times, by the Director of Public Prosecutions, the police and the coroner's court.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I am grateful to him. Last week, I met a number of veterans of the Northern Ireland troubles in my constituency, and they made the exact point that he is making: they never went out to kill; they went out to defend British citizens. Is it not particularly outrageous that the proposal suggests some sort of equivalence between the killers and those who were appointed to protect? As he says, it will impose a terrible chilling effect on recruitment to our services.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There is no equivalence between a terrorist—somebody who sets out in the morning with murderous intent—and a soldier who is defending democracy and our country. Sadly, we seem to be creating some sort of equivalence, which should not be allowed to happen.

Dennis Hutchings was a former member of the Life Guards Regiment. He was a terminally ill, 80-year-old veteran who was dragged to Northern Ireland during the pandemic in 2021. He died of covid just three days into his court case. Dennis was hounded for several years—told he was cleared, and then not—and then forced to fly to Belfast to stand trial. There was no new compelling evidence, and it was simply not in the public interest. It was a barbaric way to treat an elderly man who had served our country. His lawyer said that the case contributed to his death, and that it was likely that he would not have died at that point if he had not been forced to go to Northern Ireland to stand trial for an incident that occurred in 1974.

It is all too easy for us to sit here, look at the evidence and try to justify why a trial is in the public interest, but doing so fails to recognise the instant, life-or-death decisions that these soldiers in Northern Ireland had to take every single day. It is a rewriting of history. Decades on, people sit and judge events in retrospect, with little new evidence, and come to conclusions entirely at odds with the legal investigations at the time. The Government cannot and must not lose sight of their moral responsibility and commitment to our veterans, and to the armed forces covenant.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Can the hon. Member confirm that the unlawful nature of the legacy Act meant that investigations into the deaths of more than 200 Operation Banner soldiers were shut down, against the wishes of soldiers' families?

John Lamont: The hon. Member makes an important point about the supposed unlawful nature of the Act. I do not accept that it is unlawful. Yes, the court said that, but it is up to this Government to appeal. The question is why they dropped that appeal. There is a winnable case to be made, on behalf of the British nation, to uphold the legacy Act and defend our veterans. By not doing so, the Government are letting down our veterans.

The Government must not lose sight of their moral responsibility and commitment to our veterans, and to the armed forces covenant. That responsibility is just as important for veterans who served decades ago in Northern Ireland as it is for former and current service personnel who served in more recent conflicts.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When Jack Straw introduced the Bill that became the Human Rights Act 1998, he made it clear from the Dispatch Box, in terms, that Parliament was not under any obligation, in any way, to introduce a remedial order after a declaration of incompatibility by a court. There is no need to win another court case. Parliament is supreme. The Act stands.

John Lamont: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and he highlights the grave concerns that many of us have about how human rights legislation is being applied in ways that were not intended, and that undermine and attack the sovereignty of this place.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Most who served in Northern Ireland did so with absolute honour, including many of my former colleagues. It is precisely because of that record that they deserve a system based on truth, not a blanket immunity that casts a shadow over everyone's service. Does the hon. Member therefore agree that equal application of the rule of law is in the interests of both veterans and serving personnel?

John Lamont: The rule of law absolutely needs to be applied equally, which is why I said earlier that those soldiers who are found to have set out with the wrong intention should be held to account, but there is no equivalence between the actions of a terrorist and the actions of British soldiers acting to defend democracy and all the communities in Northern Ireland.

I will now talk about what soldiers serving in Northern Ireland did to ensure that they were doing everything required. Soldiers serving in Northern Ireland followed the yellow card—the rules of engagement for when they could open fire—which was approved at Cabinet level. They were given orders by the Government of the day, and they followed those orders.

The Government have said that they want to repeal sections of the Northern Ireland legacy Act, and that decision will have two major ramifications. First, it will remove key parts of the legacy Act designed to protect Operation Banner veterans from endless pursuit in the courts. That raises deep concern and anger for those who signed the petition, for many across the House and for organisations such as the Royal British Legion, which has expressed its concern about the impact on veterans.

Secondly, it will permit Gerry Adams and former terrorists to sue the Government, and effectively British taxpayers, for potentially hundreds of millions of pounds. Should the remedial order be endorsed by Parliament,

it could result in a six-figure payout to Mr Adams, simply because his interim custody order was considered not by the Secretary of State but by a junior Minister. That is simply outrageous.

We have seen many examples of two-tier justice since the Labour Government came to power, but that may be the worst of all. Are the Government really contemplating creating a system to drag Northern Ireland veterans through the courts, while potentially paying millions to terrorists? How do those on the Government Benches expect to go back to their constituencies and explain why they have just voted for the prosecution of veterans while allowing terrorists to sue the taxpayer? They know that is not right.

We should also be clear about the differences between the actions of soldiers and terrorists. When terrorists get up in the morning, they go out with murderous intent: to use violence to attack our democracy. Soldiers do not: they put themselves in harm's way to keep people safe and to protect our nation. The difference is the intent. Soldiers serving our country are not lawyers sat behind a desk, able to gather a team and spend days deciding whether to act or not. They do their job in high-pressure, dangerous environments, and must take instant decisions to protect themselves. It is what we train them to do.

The legacy Act is by no means perfect, but it is better than the disgraceful spectacle of veterans being dragged through the courts. Doing so is not sustainable legally or morally. The alternative is constant legal battles, civil claims that go on indefinitely and the erosion of public trust in both justice and Government. Veterans who served in Northern Ireland have been through thorough, intense and extensive scrutiny already. What the Government plan to do to the legacy Act undermines the peace process that our veterans fought so hard to achieve.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to our armed forces. He has made some very good points, but does he not accept that the Act that he is defending, and that the Government are committed to repealing, has been opposed by all major political parties in Northern Ireland? Is it not important, when paying tribute to and protecting our armed forces, that the solution has the consent of the people and politicians of Northern Ireland?

John Lamont: I accept that in Northern Ireland the political reaction to the legacy Act is mixed, but it was the decision of this Parliament to enact the Act. The reaction of veterans groups, many of whom are in the room with us today, has been almost universal in its condemnation of the Government's decision to try to repeal key parts of that Act. I am in no doubt whose side I am on: I am standing with the veterans who fought so hard to achieve peace and defend our country.

Today's debate is hugely important. I am pleased to see the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland here to listen to the concerns of the petitioner, and those of myself and I am sure many other colleagues. But we need answers from the Secretary of State, not least on when the remedial order will be debated and voted on. What other primary legislation do the Government intend to bring forward, and what is the timescale for doing so? Lastly, will the Government commit to ensuring

that soldiers who were subject to reviews at the time will not be subject to further risk of prosecution under the new legislation?

There are nearly 2 million veterans across our country. The sad truth is that many feel that their service is no longer respected. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have spoken about the need to support our armed forces. If that is the case, it is a completely hypocritical decision to allow prosecutions even to be contemplated.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree it is time that the hand-picked Attorney General, Lord Hermer, from whom the Prime Minister is taking legal advice on repealing the Act, should be sacked, taking his unpatriotic views with him? We all need to stand by our veterans.

John Lamont: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She is absolutely right that we should be with our veterans 100%, which is what I am hopefully doing during this speech.

Veterans are only demanding protection for following orders from high command and from vexatious, politically charged lawsuits. The Government's position is destroying morale in the armed forces and is deeply unjust to veterans. The Government of the day, whatever Government that may be, must have the backs of our soldiers. They are extraordinary men and women who keep us safe and who go on difficult missions in dangerous and challenging places. They must be backed from cradle to grave. They protected our society, our freedom and justice in Northern Ireland. Surely, we owe them their own freedom in return.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Mundell (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Mundell. Before the debate, I spoke to you, the Speaker's Office and the shadow Minister. Many of us here would love to participate in the other debate in the main Chamber, but we cannot because we cannot be in two debates at one time—some people have tried that; I have tried in the past, and it does not work. If possible, we would like for MPs from Northern Ireland to be able to make at least an intervention, and maybe ask a question in the other debate. I seek some guidance from you, Mr Mundell—I hate to put you on the spot, and I apologise for doing so—because there are not just MPs from Northern Ireland here, but others who served, who probably wish to do the same.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you for that point of order, and for highlighting the conflict between this debate and the matter to be considered in the House later. I have considerable discretion in who is called and when they are called, and I will seek to exercise that in the most effective way possible.

4.51 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I begin by acknowledging the outstanding service of the many British service personnel who worked so hard on an incredibly difficult operation to protect the communities of Northern Ireland. We should be in no doubt that they

[Louise Jones]

upheld British military ethics to the highest standard and rigorously trained, with operations carefully planned and professionally carried out. As a veteran, I was honoured to serve with other veterans of that conflict, albeit at a later time. We must never forget the 722 veterans who paid the ultimate price and did not return. We must never forget their sacrifice, or that of those who were injured. We must remember them and honour their service with pride.

The Northern Ireland legacy Act is a prime example of how to get legislation very wrong. In 2014, as part of the Stormont House agreement, the UK and Irish Governments agreed a way forward to deal with legacy investigations, which had broad support from—crucially—victims and political parties. Instead, in 2020, the Conservative Government decided to push on, by themselves, in a completely different direction, and introduced legislation that made false promises to veterans that could not be kept, introducing chaos to the system, and which has immediately failed in the courts.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Louise Jones: I will make some progress and then come back to the right hon. Gentleman. It was a law that was forced through to try to curry favour in a desperate attempt to save the dying Administration of Boris Johnson. Among all the complicated arguments around how best to properly deal with the impact of the troubles, there is one huge, incontrovertible fact, which was ignored in the previous speech, and which no amount of clever talk or posturing can obscure: the legacy Act, as it stands, gives immunity to terrorists. That is abhorrent.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): You sent them letters of comfort.

Louise Jones: To address that point, the head of the Police Service of Northern Ireland said that the letters that the right hon. Gentleman refers to grant no immunity. The only thing that grants immunity to former members of the IRA is the Northern Ireland legacy Act as it stands. That is a simple fact. If we want to protect veterans—I know that everybody in this room wants to—we must remember those who were murdered in cold blood by terrorists. Those terrorists now sleep soundly in their beds, free from the threat of prosecution—the threat of justice—precisely because of the Northern Ireland legacy Act. They were given that by a British Government. A British Government have given terrorists who have murdered British personnel complete immunity.

There was an article in *The Guardian* today about the family of Tony Harrison, a British para who was murdered in east Belfast. He was shot while at home with his fiancée. He was not on military operations—there was no firefight. He was shot in the back in his own home. He was just 21 years old. Under the Northern Ireland legacy Act as it stands, there is no route for his murderers to be held to account. No wonder his family have now launched a legal challenge to the Act, because they refuse to have Tony be denied justice. We must never forget, but always remember, the 200 personnel whose

families are being denied justice because of this Act and how it stands. That is fundamental to why the legacy Act must be repealed and replaced.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady has made an eloquent case for how defective the legislation was. Why did the Government not oppose sections 46 and 47 when they were in opposition? Does she think that they were wrong not to oppose them? She evidently thinks that the legislation was faulty, so why did her own party support it?

Louise Jones: I think that is a bit of a moot question when we are debating repealing the Act. The right hon. Gentleman is asking me if we opposed it in Parliament before I got elected—I am stood right here making the case to repeal parts of the Act and replace it. [Interruption.]

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. This is not an ongoing conversation. Ms Jones, please continue.

Louise Jones: I say to anybody who signed the petition or is here today because they fear the raking over of every firefight, weapon discharge or contact from 50 years ago: that fear is false. I say again: it is complete scaremongering spread by people who are at best naive—perhaps they do not know the details of the legislation or are ill informed on the content.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I have just been outside with a load of veterans who, like me, served on Op Banner. Is the hon. Lady saying that they are naive and misunderstand this?

Louise Jones: I have said—the hon. Gentleman can read back—that scaremongering has been spread by people who should know better. They know fully the details of the legislation and the context of Northern Ireland and have gone out to these veterans and said, “There’s going to be lots of malicious lawfare against you if this Act is repealed”, when everybody here knows that is not the case at all. They are pushing a cynical political agenda.

I and my colleagues who are veterans are vehemently opposed to spurious prosecution, to dragging people through the courts where there is absolutely no case to answer and to malicious lawfare. I cannot repeat that enough. I do not want to see a single veteran who has not committed a crime in any sense being hounded. Op Banner was an incredibly complex campaign. I find abhorrent the idea that any veteran should be at risk of malicious lawfare simply for doing their job on a very difficult operation. I call on the Secretary of State to explain how we will protect any veteran who is accused of any wrongdoing in Northern Ireland.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Surely the hon. Lady has come to the crux of the point, which is that no Minister has so far been able to give us that reassurance. She sincerely states her desire not to see veterans subject to lawfare, but they have not had that reassurance. Whatever the inadequacies of the current legislation, it provides protections, and we have no reassurance that they will not be removed.

Louise Jones: All I have heard is a very strong defence of the Act as it currently stands. I more than welcome a discussion about how we can move forward and repair what

several Members have already said are the inadequacies in the current Act. That is the key point: there are inadequacies in the current Act.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Louise Jones: I will make a little progress, and then I will.

The hard truth to acknowledge here, as others already have and others no doubt will, is that a very small number of military colleagues did commit a crime. None the less, it is a central belief of mine that it does not matter who you are or what you do, you should be held accountable without fear or favour if you commit a crime. That is a hard truth. I know that every single veteran here would say that any person who has been a member of the military and committed a crime should be held to account.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Louise Jones: I will give way to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), if she would like to jump in.

Rachel Gilmour: This is a deeply sensitive debate. Two of my brothers served as officers in Northern Ireland, and the memory of Operation Banner has been raised time and again by many of my constituents. The truth is that many of the soldiers in Northern Ireland were young lads from working-class communities sent by their Government and deployed to areas not dissimilar to those they had grown up in. They found themselves operating in some of the most stressful scenarios imaginable.

I had a meeting with the Minister for Veterans an hour ago; does the hon. Lady with me and with him that we must focus on the orders that were given higher up the chain of command rather than pursuing non-commissioned veterans in their old age? Does she also agree that there is a desperate need for reform to ensure that avenues to justice for bereaved families are reopened and that all armed forces personnel are treated with dignity and understanding of the complexities of their experiences?

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady made important points, but interventions must be short.

Louise Jones: I agree with the hon. Lady. I am a former officer, and one thing that was really drummed into us at Sandhurst is the responsibility we have for those who serve under us. It is often the lot of those of lower ranks to make the most difficult of decisions, and the responsibility is on officers to make sure that when soldiers go into a difficult situation, they have the training and the cover that they need. It is right that officers be held to account for any role that they play, and it is definitely something that I will be keeping a close eye on.

I say, as a proud veteran of the British Army, that we do ourselves a huge disservice if we do not hold ourselves to the highest standards and ensure accountability when or if a comrade has failed those tests.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am thankful to the hon. Lady for her service. She has not yet mentioned the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which precludes anybody who has been found guilty, even of murder, from serving more than two years in jail, whether they are a veteran or whether they are a terrorist. Does she accept that a degree of equality and of compromise have crept in, and will she bear that in mind when she talks about accountability for terrible crimes?

Louise Jones: I thank the right hon. Member for making that point. It is important to note that only one soldier has been convicted in the past 13 years. I do not have time to go into the details of that case, but I urge him and anybody present to look into them. Whether or not a prosecution was in the public interest there, I note that he served only a suspended sentence.

The legacy Act has been found to be unlawful. It gives immunity to terrorists. No more needs to be said: it gives immunity to terrorists, and it denies justice to the families of the 200 service personnel who were murdered by terrorists during the troubles. It is not supported in its current form by victims, it is not supported by any Northern Irish party and many veterans are troubled by it. It must go and be replaced. Again, I call on the Minister to outline how we can protect veterans from malicious lawfare in relation to any conflict.

Lincoln Jopp: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Louise Jones: No, I really must finish.

I end by remembering all the victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Far too many innocent lives were lost and families changed forever. The peace process and the Good Friday agreement stand testament to the immense courage shown every day by communities in Northern Ireland—communities who every day choose peace. We have a huge duty here in Westminster to work with those communities, not against them, and I hope all Members present will reflect on that important undertaking.

5.3 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Today, we speak on behalf of our veterans and the 176,000 members of the public who have so far signed the petition to give veterans protection against the vexatious legal pursuit of our brave heroes. Last week, when I raised this in the House, the Prime Minister dismissed it as “political point scoring.” He is wrong; it is a matter of justice, a matter of ensuring that those who risked their lives to protect our citizens during the troubles know that the state stands behind them.

The Veterans Commissioners for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—not naive people—issued a joint statement last week in which they said:

“Inconsistent application of justice—particularly where it revisits incidents already thoroughly investigated—serves only to retraumatise veterans and undermine public confidence.”

I agree with that statement entirely. It is exactly consistent with the views of every veteran I have spoken to, and I have spoken to a rather large number of them since February, when I first raised this matter.

Getting this right is not just a matter of historical justice. The legal witch hunt will not end in Northern Ireland; it will cast a shadow over every future conflict

[David Davis]

that our armed forces engage in and undermine their abilities to defend us. I am a strong advocate of human rights. I think I am the only person in the House to have defeated Governments from both sides, both in the House and in court, on matters of human rights. I take those rights extremely seriously, but this issue is driven more by politics and its exigencies than by human rights.

Take the inquiry process, which both my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) referred to. The Secretary of State will tell us later, but I imagine that by reinstating the inquiry process, the Government believe they are addressing the implied article 2 right to investigate purportedly unlawful killings. I imagine that is what they are trying to do. Indeed, *The Guardian* this morning, as we have heard, referred again to the Secretary of State claiming that the Government are protecting the right to investigate 202 murders of British Army soldiers. Really?

I wonder whether that claim comes with an undertaking to take witness statements from the 200 terrorists who committed those murders—who, incidentally, I say to the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire, were given pardons by Tony Blair as part of a peace process that began some 40 years ago. I think 423 were released from prison with pardons, and approximately 200 so-called “on-the-runs” received comfort letters. That is not this Act—that is then, yet it continues to exist now.

The Veterans Commissioners continued:

“There can be no moral equivalence between those who served in uniform to uphold peace and the rule of law, and those who sought to destroy it through acts of terrorism.”

Again, I could not agree more. The largest group of people killed during the troubles, by a vast margin, were murdered by paramilitaries, to use the current euphemism for terrorists. They were killed by terrorists. Every single one of those 2,000 people killed was an unlawful killing, to use the phrasing of the coroners courts these days. We do not need a court to establish that. How many of those IRA murders will be subject to inquiry? On the current listing—we have 33 listed—just two such cases, out of 2,000. That is because the major driver for these inquiries is the IRA-Sinn Féin effort to hide their own barbaric acts behind a freedom-fighting façade, trying to rewrite history with themselves as the heroes and the British state as the villains. That is why battles such as Coagh, Clonoe and, very likely soon, Loughgall feature so large in the demands for inquiries and the prosecution of long-retired, innocent British soldiers. All three of those actions were humiliating defeats for the IRA.

Let me be clear: all of the IRA members who died in those exchanges—so-called “victims” in this context—were actively in the process of committing atrocities. They were trying to murder innocent people. At Coagh, they planned to murder an off-duty Ulster Defence Regiment officer. At Clonoe, they attacked the Coalisland police station using an armour-piercing machine gun in an attempt to murder the officers inside. At Loughgall, they drove a bomb-laden digger to blow up a police station and were armed and ready to murder any survivors. All were armed, dangerous and intent on murder. Many of them had killed before, making them a fatal risk to our soldiers—a risk our soldiers had to cope with in

split-second decisions. Those are the people we will put on trial if we allow them to lose their protection that we ought to be giving our veterans today.

Look at the individuals involved, starting with Coagh where the inquest heard about Michael Ryan. Ryan was probably responsible for many murders; I can cite two. He shot two UDR officers—one in front of little children at a crossing, the other in front of the officer’s 13-year-old son. That is the sort of people we are dealing with.

As for the IRA’s greatest defeat, Loughgall, the weapons recovered at the scene had been used in over 40 previous murders—there is no doubt about that. Of the IRA members there, McKearney and Arthurs were both involved in the Ballygawley police station attack, which killed a further two policemen. James Lynagh—nicknamed “The Executioner” by the Royal Ulster Constabulary—was believed to have been involved in more than 30 killings, including the cold-blooded assassination of the 80-year-old Sir Norman Stronge, who was largely blind and deaf, as well as his son in front of him.

As for Patrick Kelly, who was the leader of that attack, he led the self-styled East Tyrone brigade, which is believed to have killed around 250 people before Loughgall. By the way, he also took part in the second attempt to assassinate brave UDR officer Glen Espie, who is sitting behind me in the Gallery. He fought off the assassins on two occasions—he was shot twice and fought off IRA assassins twice. If they had not been stopped, there is no doubt that all of these killers would have continued their psychopathic campaign of murder.

The IRA’s campaign of violence was indiscriminate and extended far beyond the island of Ireland. I say to the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire that the number was not 722 if you include the police officers and UDR officers. If you include them, 1,073 servants of the British state were killed in the course of defending innocent civilians from those murderers. The IRA is trying to equate the British Government’s actions with that psychopathic behaviour, but of course nothing could be further from the truth.

There is ample evidence of the Army taking enormous risks to arrest rather than take the often safer option of killing the terrorists. Consider the arrest—not the killing—of the South Armagh sniper. He killed seven people, but he was arrested and not killed. Consider the arrest—not the killing—of the killers of Captain Westmacott. They were arrested—not killed—by the rest of his patrol. Even today’s *Daily Mail* mentioned the rescue of Bernadette McAliskey. There was an attempt to kill her by the Ulster Defence Association. British soldiers rescued her even though she was effectively a political arm of the Irish National Liberation Army.

The clearest demonstration of our real strategy is that, while 1,073 British forces, soldiers and policemen were killed by republican terrorists up until 1994, 145 paramilitaries were killed and 428 were taken prisoner. That means that around three or four were taken prisoner for every one killed. Seven British soldiers or policemen died for every IRA person who was killed. That tells us the strategy and it tells us what the IRA is trying to reverse.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend marvel at the remarkable restraint shown by British soldiers, no matter where

these officers or personnel were from across the UK, in dealing with this and never once stepping over the mark in regard to these cases?

David Davis: Absolutely—the phrase I would use is “heroic restraint”. Under those circumstances, restraint means putting their own lives and the lives of their comrades on the line. That is what was going on there, that was the decision that was being taken, and that is what is being challenged today. My right hon. Friend is right about that, and that restraint was institutional. It was not simply heroic soldiers, although of course it was that as well. The yellow card system demanded restraint and issued warnings of proportionality.

Every time a British soldier killed a paramilitary, it was subject to rigorous judicial scrutiny, and when that process failed we ensured the matter was properly investigated. Remember the Saville inquiry, which cost £200 million, took 12 years and consisted of 5,000 pages. What other country in the world would review its own behaviour in that way? I am not going to actually give all the answers, but Members should consider in their own mind whether some of our allies might not have gone quite so far to give everybody justice.

Our soldiers were held to the highest standards of law, yet our Government are rewarding that by effectively threatening them in their retirement. Remember: we have been talking about human rights. That is not a proper reflection of their human rights. They are human beings too, and they have human rights. We should remind ourselves that human rights are founded in natural justice. They do not spring out of the air; they are founded in natural justice. In this process, there is no natural justice for our brave veterans nor, frankly, for the real innocent victims of the troubles. The process gives neither.

The Government are understandably struggling to find a solution, and the Secretary of State knows that I have some sympathy for his position. Let me tell him the criterion for success, because it is very simple. The Government must completely remove the threat of prosecution from our brave veterans who have served their country well and who have already been through the judicial review of every action they took. If the Government repeal the legacy Act without a robust replacement—that is the key point—we hand the narrative back to those who seek to rewrite history. I accept that mistakes were sometimes made, and where they were, those responsible must be held to account. That has been done. But we must not allow politically motivated lawfare to dismantle the very capabilities that make our armed forces precise, lawful, effective and among the best in the world.

Helen Maguire: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Davis: No, I will not.

What young person today would sign up to serve, knowing that their reward could be a courtroom in retirement? It was through our soldiers' measured actions that the IRA's barbaric campaign of terror was confronted and diminished. The number of people killed by the IRA fell by 94% between the periods 1970 to 1974 and 1994 to 1998. That outcome matters. Our soldiers' intervention prevented countless more deaths. I have now called on the Government six times to end this

campaign of a retrospective parody of justice, but I have so far received no meaningful answer. I hope we get one today.

We talk a lot about human rights. In my related Adjournment debate, I read a poem that I first heard at a regimental Remembrance Day service, and I will read it again today because it is extraordinarily relevant:

“It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the peace camp organiser, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag.

It is the soldier, not the politician...who has given these freedoms.” Those who freely talk about human rights would do well to remember that our rights, our law, our democracy and our nation were protected by the very veterans who are at risk today. Let us all make one promise: that no British soldier will ever again be abandoned by the very nation they have so bravely protected.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear! [*Applause.*]

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. We do not have clapping in the House of Commons, so please restrain yourselves. I have allowed substantial contributions to enable the debate to get under way, but we will now have to move to contributions of around five minutes.

5.18 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

Like many other Members present, I was proud to have served my country. In my case, it was with the Royal Marines in 2006, when I deployed to Afghanistan shortly after basic training. I was a very young and green marine, and it was quite unexpected to go into a hostile and unknown environment. I see many colleagues in the Gallery who may have done something similar several years earlier.

In preparation, we did all that we would normally expect to do as a young marine or soldier: we practised troop attacks, battle casualty evacuations, mine clearances and everything else we might do on the battlefield. But we also spent a long time studying the law of armed conflict and the rules of engagement. I know that the people we were fighting against in Afghanistan—the Taliban—had no qualms about the rules of engagement or the law of armed conflict. Back in the generation before me, my colleagues were fighting an enemy—the IRA and others—that had no qualms about the rules of engagement or the law of armed conflict. It must have been terrifying to go into that situation. But I am proud to say that, as with my generation, there were many hundreds and thousands of people who served on Op Banner with distinction, bravery and real integrity.

Under the legacy Act introduced by the last Government, groups such as the IRA, the UVF and the other terrorist paramilitaries we have heard about have been given immunity. I do not believe it is acceptable that people who have committed crimes and been involved in the killing of thousands of civilians and veterans on our side of the table should be given such immunity. It is unacceptable, and we cannot let such an unlawful and unacceptable Act stand.

[Alex Ballinger]

My granddad is from Belfast, and when I was in the city earlier this year, I was honoured to meet survivors of the troubles at the Wave trauma centre. We met people who had been targeted or caught up as collateral damage in republican terror attacks—victims whose only crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They deserve the right to seek justice and the opportunity to receive answers. One of them was Máiría Cahill, who was the target of years of sexual abuse at the hands of the IRA. This is what she said about the Conservatives' legacy Act:

"This bill is, quite simply, disgraceful. The Government say they take sexual violence seriously. Yet they are prepared to grant amnesty to those accused of conflict related sexual offences...in NI or England. It is an affront to victims, to justice and is gross hypocrisy."

Of course, she is completely right.

The legacy Act has given immunity to those who targeted servicemen and women. Families of the Hyde Park and Regent's Park bombings, where 11 British soldiers were killed by the IRA, were unhappy. One family member said:

"People deserve justice, and their hurt will never heal until that happens."

The challenge is that the legacy Act has created a moral equivalence, on which I agree with the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis). Those who have committed crimes—the terrorists—are given the same immunities as those who bravely served in our armed forces.

As well as failing the test of victims, the legacy Act has failed the legal test. The Belfast High Court found the legacy Act unlawful. After a challenge from Martina Dillon, whose husband was killed in 1997, the Court found the immunity offered to members of the Loyalist Volunteer Force to be in breach of her human rights. Of course it was in breach of her human rights. She deserves to get the justice and the answers that she pursues.

The Conservatives' legacy Act has allowed blanket amnesty to terrorists and the perpetrators of offences including murder and torture. The terrorists responsible for 90% of troubles-related deaths have been given a free pass. This is a travesty of justice. The Government have no choice but to amend the Act.

Stuart Anderson: Are the Government going to reopen all those cases?

Alex Ballinger: We will hear later from the Secretary of State about some of the protections afforded to veterans, but it is also important to note that in the last 13 years only one veteran has been prosecuted and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones), he received a suspended sentence. So the chance of any veterans who served in Northern Ireland being pulled over the coals again and being sent to prison is vanishingly small, and we need to be realistic about that. We need to be honest with those who signed the petition.

David Davis: The hon. Gentleman says the chance is vanishingly small, yet the Clonoe inquest found there were four unlawful killings, which implies that four cases will go to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Alex Ballinger: I would like to hear more from the Secretary of State about the protections that veterans will be given, one of which, I understand, is that no veteran will be asked to travel to Northern Ireland; rather, they can give evidence remotely, which is important. There does need to be more on protections, but—*[Interruption.]* Let me finish. It is not acceptable that we have an Act that has been rejected by victims and the families of veterans and found to be unlawful, as well as being unacceptable to many members of the parties in Northern Ireland.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I want to make one thing very clear: the vexatious pursuit of veterans is the key here. Some never finally made it into court, but they were pursued; some died before they got to court. It is not a good comparison to say that only one was actually found guilty, when so many have been pursued vexatiously from start to finish. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman understands how it feels to be pursued—to have to go to Northern Ireland, to have to come back, to be arrested by the police and then taken away. That is what was wrong with the legislation that existed previously.

Alex Ballinger: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The nub of the matter is that we must ensure that veterans have the right protections and that they are not taken through additional tests, but we have to change the legislation, because it was unlawful. We have no choice. It has let down victims. The new legislation that we are putting in place will involve deep co-operation with the Ministry of Defence—I note that the Minister for Veterans and People is here—to ensure that every protection that is available, within the law, will be provided to veterans. I am sure some of that will be outlined in the Secretary of State's response.

5.25 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I give thanks to the armed forces of our country: those who came and served with us in Northern Ireland—people from Culloden coming to Coleraine, from Folkestone to Fermanagh, from Birmingham to Belfast and from London to Londonderry. They joined with us in defence of peace and in defence of the values of our nation.

A number of figures have already been shared this afternoon. Some 1,441 armed forces personnel died in Northern Ireland during Operation Banner—not 722, not 1,043, but 1,441. They did so in support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, GC, of whose members 302 were murdered by terrorists in Northern Ireland. It is right, and we will hear it in this debate, that every party in Northern Ireland opposed the legacy Act, but I remind Members that they did so for incredibly different reasons. I do not share Sinn Féin's opposition, because I do not defend the IRA; I do not defend those who decided to destroy, or attempt to destroy, our part of this United Kingdom.

My colleagues and I spend time in this House asking for our UK Government to protect those who protected us, so when I hear naive platitudes about the legacy Act simply offering an amnesty to soldiers, I have to say this: it was the Labour Government who released 435 prisoners from Maze prison following the Belfast agreement.

They included Patrick Magee, who was responsible for blowing up the hotel in Brighton, killing a Member of our House, Sir Anthony Berry, and injuring Norman Tebbit and his wife. A week after Norman Tebbit's death, can we not reflect that heinous men such as Patrick Magee should not be released from prison? There were others: Sean Kelly, an IRA bomber—a brave man who believed in republican ideals who walked into a fish and chip shop on a Saturday and blew up nine innocent people, and families, on the Shankill road—was released by the Labour Government.

After that, republicans did not stop in their pursuit. They asked the Labour Government to encourage their comrades to come home. People who had been engaged in terrorism and evaded justice for years, who hid in the Irish Republic, were not extradited, because the Irish Republic said they could not get a fair trial in this United Kingdom. Or individuals fled to the United States, like Gabriel Megahey, who was the IRA officer commanding in the United States of America during the '80s and '90s. He was imprisoned by the FBI for trying to purchase surface-to-air missiles to support the IRA in destroying our country. Didn't he get a grubby deal with President Clinton, and has he not been allowed to stay in the United States, until President Trump deports him?

It was a Labour Government who introduced the Northern Ireland (Offences) Bill in 2003, and who asked Parliament to agree a process to allow on-the-runs to come back to this United Kingdom to retire with dignity. Thank God they had the resolve to withdraw that pernicious piece of legislation, but what did they then do? They engaged in a process of signing on-the-runs letters. People will say that they were not an amnesty, but tell that to the families of the four members of the Household Cavalry who were murdered in the Hyde Park bomb, to the seven horses that were put down as a result of the Hyde Park bomb, or to the 50 others who were injured in the Hyde Park bomb, because when John Downey was taken to the High Court in London, he produced his letter—a secret scheme by the Labour Government to allow him to walk out of court with no justice for his victims. That is not all: 365 royal prerogatives of mercy, from both Conservative and Labour Governments, were offered in Northern Ireland to give amnesty to terrorists.

Yet, throughout all that time of prison releases, on-the-runs, the 2003 Northern Ireland (Offences) Bill and royal prerogatives of mercy, how many were given to those who defended the rule of law and order? None. So let us be very clear about the danger of going down a line of allowing inquests to recommence.

The Clonoe inquest is a classic example of how a judge goes beyond the terms of his brief. An inquest is to determine who died, where they died, when they died and how they died, but not why. A coroner's court is not there to determine whether there is criminal liability, yet that is exactly what the judge did—a judge who, in his judgment, made no reference to the context, to who was killed that day or to the terrorist campaign of the East Tyrone Brigade, which was the bloodiest of them all. Yet the very same coroner could do so when he did the Coagh inquest a number of months before.

Why do people pursue these inquests, which the Secretary of State seems keen to recommence? Because those lawyers who do wish to rewrite history in Northern

Ireland are laying the foundations for prosecutions. The reason why closing down those inquests was important was that it stopped this pernicious ability to put the building blocks in place to see our veterans in court. Yet the Secretary of State met with Mairead Kelly, the sister of Patrick Kelly—the officer commanding the East Tyrone Brigade of the IRA—on 24 March this year. Darragh Mackin, a solicitor from Phoenix Law, put out a statement immediately after, salivating at having got a commitment from our Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that inquests would recommence.

Their sights are on Loughgall; their sights are on building a pernicious and never-ending pursuit against those who served in Northern Ireland. Our responsibility, as parliamentarians from across this United Kingdom, is to say, "No. We will not assist your quest to rewrite the history of the past, nor will we assist in the IRA's pursuit to try and attain some level of honour towards their retirement." They tried to destroy this country through war, and they failed. Let us not create the conditions for them to try to destroy the reputation of this country through peace.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear! [*Applause.*]

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. Please refrain from applause.

5.33 pm

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on introducing this important debate. I pay tribute to the strength of argument and strength of feeling that we have heard from hon. Members so far.

I would like to put on record that no one in this Chamber wants to assist the IRA in any way to clean their record. I hope that this debate can be held with both sides of the House in firm agreement that no one here wants to do that. That is not what this is about; this is about one piece of legislation. It is not about an old piece of legislation, or some instrument that brought about the so far quite consistent peace that we have had in the UK for a generation; it is about something very new, passed about a year and a half ago. We have heard Opposition Members—many of whom served many years in this place without that piece of legislation, and without asking for or campaigning for it—say that they passionately support it. Since it came in a year and a half ago, some people are very much for it.

There are problems on both sides with this legislation, and I would like to hear balance in this argument. On one side, we have the absolute desire to prosecute, go after and bring justice against IRA terrorists for what they have done. They should absolutely not be walking free. There are victims' families in this country—British people—who cannot see justice because of this Act.

On the other side of the argument, in the interests of balance, we need to protect our veterans. We have to do that. I have a personal interest in this issue because I represent Plymouth Moor View, where 500 people signed the petition. People do not need to organise a veterans' coffee morning to meet a veteran in Plymouth; they can just go out of the house and have a chat with a neighbour.

[Fred Thomas]

I served in the Royal Marines, where most of the men who trained me would do so by saying, "This is how we did it in Northern Ireland." That memory lives very long.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member is giving a powerful speech. Will he put on record whether he thinks that any of the 500 veterans who he has met are naive?

Fred Thomas: To clarify, I said there are 500 veterans in Plymouth Moor View who signed the petition, so I am not sure that I can answer the hon. Member because I did not meet with them recently to talk about this issue. I do not think that anyone is suggesting that veterans themselves are naive.

Stuart Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Fred Thomas: I have just taken an intervention, so I will not.

Context is king. We have had peace for a generation. Hon. Members have passionately laid out the wrongs, ills and evils of the IRA, going through operational detail, which I appreciate. No one is suggesting that any of those things were justified—that is not the argument that anyone is making—but we are discussing a piece of legislation that, in order to buy the protection of veterans, allows for the protection of terrorists. We are saying, "I don't think that's correct." We need to be able to go after those terrorists. There is a bigger context, isn't there?

David Davis: Will the hon. Member give way?

Fred Thomas: Not quite yet. The bigger context is that the world is extremely insecure at the moment. We all hope and pray that this country never has to go to war again. Personally, I think we might have to in the foreseeable future. We hope that does not happen, but when and if it does we need the moral, legal and total legitimacy to go in with extreme force and do what needs to be done. If we pass laws, as we did a year and a half ago, that nibble away at our international reputation for having a lawful and professional military, we are going to struggle in years to come. That is the bigger context that we need to keep in mind.

Stuart Anderson: The Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021, for which I sat on the Bill Committee, covered that. I also sat on the Bill Committee that considered the Northern Ireland legacy Act, and I saw the months of trying to agree something that we could get through the House to protect veterans. We mentioned naivety; people might be doing things for the right reason, but if we adjust and change that Act, our veterans will face prosecution. I defy anybody who thinks otherwise.

Fred Thomas: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his service on those Bill Committees. I do not agree with what he said, but that is the nature of this debate, and I am willing to have it.

To close, it has been alluded to that we are yet to see from the Government what the safeguards will be for veterans. I will say this openly: I need to see those. We all need to see those. I ask Opposition Members, and all

hon. Members of the House, to bear in mind the big bits of context that I hope I have introduced: peace for a generation, a very threatening world picture, and the need for moral legitimacy.

5.39 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank all the residents of South Shropshire who signed the petition or came to see me, and all the veterans who have come down today. My dad was one of the first SAS troops to serve in Northern Ireland in the '70s, and I served 18 months during the troubles on Op Banner, so I have first-hand experience of that. How do I share some of that experience to set out the reality of what it is like to be a soldier on operations?

I was a teenager when I deployed on my first tour to Belfast. I had little understanding of the big political situation, but I knew everything I needed to do, what I could and could not do, and all the rules of engagement, and everybody on the tour followed those. Our pre-deployment training, which the hon. Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas) mentioned, was extensive. For months we covered every possible scenario that we could face when in Northern Ireland on operations. I was a rifleman with the 2nd Battalion the Royal Green Jackets. They were tough soldiers, but professional and knew what they could and could not do.

Let us throw a little context on what it can be like on operations in Northern Ireland. Let us imagine patrolling what could be a normal housing estate in the UK—some areas would be more rundown than others, but the structure is the same. When we walk past somebody, we do not know if that person is going to buy something from a shop, pick up their children, or plan to kill us. We do not know what their intentions are. When a car speeds around the corner, as we see every day on our streets, we do not know if that person is late to pick something up, going to an event, a joyrider, or somebody driving past to kill me and my colleagues in a drive-by shooting. We do not know that, but these things happen all the time. We never really knew anybody's intention.

In 1996, in the middle of my tour, there was a decision not to allow a march to go through Drumcree, and what was a semi-stable environment turned within a matter of hours into complete carnage, with rioting and people being burned out of houses up and down the whole area. All of a sudden, law and order—the whole rule of law—had completely broken down. In about four days, I believe some 750 RUC were injured, of whom four were shot on patrol with us in one night. So whatever people thought it was like, when discussing this many years later people have to add the extreme pressure, the mental pressure, that we faced as we looked under the vehicle every single day to see whether it was a car bomb.

When we were in the riots and somebody goes to throw a brick or a stone, we have a split second to react: is that a grenade? Is it an improvised weapon? Every one of those is designed to cause harm and some are designed to kill. We have a split second to decide whether to open fire—or do me and my colleagues get killed? We do not know. There is pressure. We might have been out for many hours with very little sleep, but we knew what we had to do.

Many soldiers who served in Northern Ireland spend every day remembering their colleagues who did not return, trying to forget what they saw and what they witnessed, and are woken at night by screams. That has not left many people. We asked them to do the most extreme things in the most difficult conditions.

I was proud when the previous Government—too late, in my mind at least—introduced the legacy Act. I sat on the Bill Committee. The Act meant protection for our veterans, which is what I had campaigned for. I had spoken about that many times before, and I had seen new colleagues who were facing prosecution, or the threat of prosecution, for their time. I believe the whole veteran community at the moment sees the repealing of the legislation as a body blow. I do not think the Government realise the anger that the community will feel.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): My son is a serving soldier, and he tells me that many are leaving the forces because of this issue. We are tens of thousands below our recruitment level. Does the hon. Member think he is right and that this is damaging our ability to defend our country?

Stuart Anderson: I thank the hon. Member's son for his service. Mine joins in two months at the age of 16. I hope that 30 years down the line, when he has defended his country as the hon. Member's son has, they do not go through this, because morale is at rock bottom. There is no naivety among veterans.

Louise Jones: The hon. Member is welcome to check *Hansard* after the debate, but I was referring specifically to people—we all know they exist—who are scaremongering without knowing the details of the Bill and naively making up things that are not based on evidence. At no point did I say that any veteran is naive, and I know that he has too much respect for our procedures and for colleagues to keep repeating that when it is not true.

Stuart Anderson: I think that all the veterans in this room believe that the Government's current route is wrong—are they misguided, or are they naive? If we go down the route of changing the law in this way, I can guarantee that our veterans will face prosecution for the service that they gave their country for many years.

David Davis: Our veterans do not need to read the Bill; they just need to look at the outcome of the Clonoe inquiry—four potential manslaughter prosecutions.

Stuart Anderson: As I said, we asked our veterans to defend us and to do the hardest things while others slept soundly in their beds at night. I hope that we never face more conflicts in the future, but I believe we will, and we must have a moral compass that means we protect those who protect us. I demand that the Government set out that the route they are taking will ensure that no prosecution of our veterans happens. The Secretary of State has even heard from Members of his own party that they are not reassured about that. We need to see that no veterans are thrown to the wolves, and we need to protect those who have served their country with the utmost pride.

5.46 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in today's debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank those who signed the petition that has brought us here today.

The petitioners are absolutely clear: the Government must do nothing that would allow Northern Ireland veterans to be prosecuted for doing their duty—those are the critical three words—in combating terrorism as part of Operation Banner. On that sentiment, I stand resolutely with them. It is a simple and powerful demand that should be respected, understood and agreed to. It is not just a legal matter; it is about justice, trust in public service and the promises we make to those who risk their lives in the name of our country.

I understand that, as my hon. and gallant Friends have said—it is a privilege to serve in this place with them—the legislation passed by the Conservatives has been found unlawful, and that it is not supported by any political party in Northern Ireland, for the various reasons that the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) highlighted. I understand that it gave an amnesty to terrorists—murderers of British soldiers. However, any legislation replacing it must uphold one central commitment: we will protect our veterans. I have met constituents in Hartlepool who served in Northern Ireland with distinction, professionalism and bravery. Last month I met one constituent who served with honour, carrying out his duties at great risk to himself. Not only does he have to live with the scars of the past, like almost every veteran of any conflict, but he told me that he now lives every day with the thought that one knock on the door could mean being dragged into a vexatious legal nightmare. We cannot allow that to happen.

These people are not looking for special treatment. They are asking only for fairness—fairness in the recognition that they served under the command of the state; fairness in the understanding that investigations too numerous to count have already been carried out, many of them at the time when the events occurred; and fairness in not being treated as political scapegoats decades after the events in question. The legacy of the conflict should not be ignored, but we cannot have a system in which those who served the state under its orders face endless scrutiny for the rest of their lives.

The current framework fails everyone, and it also fails the future, because it undermines the possibility of truth and reconciliation by giving neither side confidence that the process is fair or final. The Conservative Government claimed that their legislation would draw a line under the past, but it was a hollow claim. It has done the opposite. It has stirred up more anger, reopened more wounds and brought more uncertainty to people who have already given enough. I urge the Government to think very carefully about the next steps they take if they want to restore the faith of the veteran community in this country.

We routinely ask our armed forces to do extraordinary things in impossible circumstances. We must not abandon them decades later for doing what they were asked to do. If we are serious about supporting veterans, it cannot just be words; it must be action. The Government must deliver for those who served. The veterans of Operation Banner deserve nothing less.

5.50 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Like many in this place, I have skin in this game. In my case, members of my family were brought up in Northern Ireland. I remember my first trip there as a small boy and seeing for the first time armed police on the streets, something we now hardly stop to think about. I remember many years later, my father, a veteran himself, talking about the Good Friday agreement. He said that, since the IRA had put down its guns and its bombs, Sinn Féin should be free to participate in politics, just as any political party is free to do—a dividend for peace. My father passed away in 1995 and my mother in 1998, just a few months before the dreadful Omagh bombing, and I remember thinking at the time, “Thank God she did not have to witness that in the beloved town of her birth.”

Truth and reconciliation is important. Its implementation in South Africa was a great thing, but it needs trust and it needs full disclosure to be true to itself. Going forward, the Government are seeking to repeal the legacy Act. Good reasons have been put forward for it to go. It could be argued that it has interrupted the process of truth and reconciliation, which still leaves more than a thousand families in limbo, including those of our veterans and their families.

If the Government are to do away with the legacy Act, they need to leave something better in its place—something that is perhaps akin to the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa and that families from all sides and none in the troubles can rely on for closure, with protection for our veterans.

5.52 pm

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Mundell, for allowing me to contribute to today’s petition debate; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will not take any interventions, and I will be as short as I can to allow as many Members as possible to speak.

I start by reminding everyone once again that I am a proud retired Royal Engineer. Although I did not serve in Op Banner, many colleagues and friends did. The Op Banner veterans did their duty in exceptionally challenging circumstances, and I commend them all—each and every one of them. I would also point out to colleagues that, despite not serving in Op Banner, I was in Quebec barracks in Osnabrück in Germany when it was attacked by the IRA in June 1996. I get it, I really do.

What is of the utmost importance is that we deal in facts, and facts alone. Fact one: the previous Conservative Government pushed through the legacy Act in 2023. The Act created one route for dealing with the past, through the creation of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. It received almost unanimous condemnation from victims groups and the political parties in Northern Ireland, for differing reasons, as has been said.

Fact two: the previous Conservative Government publicly stated at the time, despite numerous challenges, that the Act would be fully compliant with the European

convention on human rights, the Windsor framework and the Good Friday agreement, and they knew that that most certainly was not the case. In February ’24, the Northern Ireland High Court found that the Act was in fact incompatible with the European convention on human rights, specifically articles 2, 3 and 6, and it was therefore deemed unlawful. It also found that it was incompatible with article 2 of the Windsor framework, and that it should therefore be disapplied. If the previous Government knew that this was the case, they should never have proceeded in pushing the legacy Act through Parliament. It was a deliberate and wholly irresponsible course of action.

Stuart Anderson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Foster: No, I am making progress.

Fact three: in January 2024, the Irish Government launched an inter-state application against the United Kingdom before the European Court of Human Rights, on the basis of the legacy Act violating articles 2, 3, 6, 13 and 14 of the convention. This case against the United Kingdom Government is still live.

These are indisputable facts. If an Act of Parliament is found to be unlawful, the Government must act. However, the repealing of the legacy Act is not a simple exercise—we all understand that—and any changes introduced must offer the protections that our veterans, victims and impacted families all deserve. My deep concern is that, with any new legislation, we must ensure a wholly comprehensive approach to dealing with the past in Northern Ireland that recognises the unique position our Op Banner veterans find themselves in. They deserve our continued and unwavering support.

I am also profoundly concerned at the continued politicisation of our veterans, and at the misinformation being continually spouted by Conservative Members of Parliament, who should know better. This is an issue that Members of all political persuasions should be working on together, not using to seek political gain with inaccurate and misleading statements.

The unlawful legacy Act made false and undeliverable promises to our veterans about immunity, and—I say again—it has been repeatedly ruled unlawful. It generated false expectations, legal uncertainty, and delays for victims, survivors and veterans alike. It was opposed by many, including armed forces families who lost relatives serving in Northern Ireland. It gives immunity to terrorists who murdered British soldiers. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Defence Secretary and the Minister for Veterans are working tirelessly to put in place protections for our veterans, and to ensure that legacy mechanisms are fair, lawful and proportionate.

The Minister for Veterans has met hundreds of veterans and veteran organisations since taking office, including the Royal British Legion and representatives from all major military associations with Northern Ireland service experience, listening to their concerns and incorporating their feedback into the new approach. These are not new arguments, and we have had alternative solutions before, which have just not worked.

This is a hugely complex and emotive issue. All Members of Parliament should be working as one to bring about a lawful solution, supporting Ministers and veterans alike, not spreading a fake narrative. Our veterans

will continue to receive the full support of this Government, and any new legislation must be carefully considered. I give my word that it will be.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Mundell (in the Chair): The Chair will change during the next contribution. If not everyone is able to be called to speak, it is my responsibility and not Ms Lewell's, because I chose to allow more substantial contributions for the benefit of the debate.

5.59 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful for your tolerance, Mr Mundell. I start by saying to the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), and one or two others on the Government Benches, that to accuse people like myself who served in Northern Ireland of supporting the legacy Act and then demeaning ourselves by apparently attacking others is utter nonsense. We are after one purpose and one purpose only: to find a way to protect veterans who have been pursued through the courts in a vexatious manner and had their lives destroyed in their latter years. That was the sole purpose of my support for the legacy Act. Even though I had my doubts about it, I supported it for that reason. There was nothing else on the table to provide support for those veterans, so I really take it ill, and the hon. Member for South Ribble demeans himself by attacking people on that personal basis.

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

This is an issue about inconsistency, and it covers all previous Governments. The problem is that we were originally involved in the law of armed conflict, which settled these issues, and we have had a collision with the Human Rights Act 1998, which has changed everything. The real point is that there is no moral equivalence between people who set out to kill, maim and destroy in a democracy, which happened in Northern Ireland, as the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) laid out, and the British servicemen who were ordered to go to Northern Ireland. They went out of their duty to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland against a violent and destructive insurrection.

I have to tell anybody with the idea that there is some kind of equivalence here—that if we cannot proceed against IRA terrorists we have taken them out of the equation—to go back and find out about when we pursued IRA terrorists through the court. There is no evidence. There were no records kept. They know that very well. If anyone thinks they will get 400 witness statements from people who know they are protected by the lack of evidence, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) said, they must be living in a different world from the one that I am living in.

The reality is that the only people who will be prosecuted, unless this Government do something to end that process, will be the veterans. Even if they are not prosecuted and eventually found guilty, the persecution and the chasing of people who served their country ruins their lives and makes them worry for the rest of their lives.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): That point cannot be overstated, because many Northern Ireland veterans already suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health problems. I speak as a

vice-president of the mental health charity Combat Stress. The very idea that there are people who are nowhere near a prosecution or potential prosecution but are now haunted by not only the trauma of their service but the possibility that they will be dragged to a court and exposed in some way, with their families saying, “Daddy, did you really do something wrong?”—it cannot be overstated how utterly brutal this is. It is a deliberate campaign by those who are trying to bring these prosecutions.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend: that is what is really hanging over us. If nothing is done and the existing Act is repealed, we are left with the single problem we started with: how do we protect veterans from the vexatious persecution that has been going on? I have lots of respect for many Government Members, particularly the Veterans Minister. He knows very well that that is their interest. I say to them simply that they cannot repeal the Act without replacing it with protection for the veterans who served their country.

I served in Northern Ireland. I did not ask to go to Northern Ireland. I went out with my regiment, the Scots Guards, and we served, I think, pretty well in Northern Ireland, but we did not want to be there—to be spat at by people in the United Kingdom and wonder, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) said, what was coming around the corner next. We put up with all that in the United Kingdom. It is a unique experience—it is not like going abroad to fight a war. Being on the streets of the United Kingdom, carrying a rifle and trying to protect those who are also under attack from those who would will their destruction is something very peculiar, yet my soldiers and many others acted with the most phenomenal restraint. Provocation was there all the time, but they acted with the utmost restraint. I know of no other country whose soldiers would have ever done that, no matter what their background was. I am immensely proud to have been one of them. We should stop demeaning each other about politics in this. This is about protection, and we should be talking about that.

I lost a very good friend in Northern Ireland. It is pretty awful, really, when I think back to what actually happened. Robert Nairac was kidnapped. He was tortured for a long time. We know not what happened to his body, although we may guess. He was executed after having escaped—that much we do know. No one from the IRA who committed that atrocity will ever, I suspect, be held to account in any court of law. That is the injustice of this process. His parents died never knowing where his body was, and his family today still do not know. Talk about injustice—that is injustice.

Alex Ballinger: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his service. I agree that that is a gross injustice. Would he support a new investigation into his friend's death, if new evidence were to emerge, and does he appreciate that the existing legacy Act would prevent that, which is one of the reasons it needs to be repealed?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I was attacking equivalence. The reality is that if we get rid of the legacy Act right now, we will go back to a one-sided process where veterans will be pursued but nobody in the IRA will come in front of the courts. Many of them have these

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

ridiculous letters of comfort given to them, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said. That equivalence is a distraction. I want to see those people prosecuted, but are we going to get witness statements from people who have run to and hidden in other countries? I doubt it very much.

Sir Julian Lewis: The only likelihood of ever finding out what happened to Captain Nairac's body would be if somebody came forward to the truth and reconciliation body, which is part of the legacy Act, in return for immunity, and told people where it was. There will be no other way of finding out.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I was going to come to that point. My right hon. Friend guessed what was on my mind—not that it was that deep for him to get to it. That was the whole reason why, in the end, even though we had our doubts, we supported the legacy Act: because we thought that, on balance, there was at least the likelihood of getting to the bottom of many unexposed cases, and of the deaths and violence that took place, knowing full well that those from the IRA will never be prosecuted for it and we will never know otherwise.

The Government cannot proceed unless they are able categorically to clarify that legislation will protect veterans from the vexatious pursuit that has been so much in their minds and worries throughout this period. If we cannot give them that—if the Government cannot legislate for that—then there is no purpose in getting rid of the existing Act. That has to be the point. The Government may not like it, but they must face this reality: there cannot be pursuit of veterans if previous inquiries, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington said, have cleared them of whatever the charge was before. This repeat process that has been taking place, on absolutely no evidence whatever, is what has caused all the worry for our veterans.

If we care about our veterans, we should not rush to change the existing legislation until we can confirm protection for these brave men and women who served their country so loyally, on behalf of civilians in Northern Ireland. If we cannot find a solution, it is ours and the Government's duty not to tamper with what exists, for fear of destroying the one protection we have given those veterans.

6.8 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I rise to represent my constituency, which is home to the 22nd SAS Regiment, the Special Reconnaissance Regiment and the 18th Signal Regiment. I am sure the House will wish to join me in recognising the professionalism and dedication of the men and women who make up those regiments, who are such an integral and highly respected part of the Herefordshire community. That is reflected by more than 1,000 of my constituents signing the petition, which is second only to the number of signatories in the neighbouring Hereford and South Herefordshire constituency.

Northern Ireland legacy matters are, of course, incredibly sensitive, as we have seen today. It is vital that legacy processes are based on a fair, balanced and comprehensive approach, and that those processes are implemented

with the necessary rigour, independence and, crucially, consultation with all the affected communities, including armed forces veterans. For all the communities affected by the troubles, legacy processes should provide as much certainty and expediency as possible. It is hugely regrettable that the unworkable Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 did not deliver that, not least because of its failure to comply with the UK's obligations under the ECHR. It is important to recognise that the result of that has been enormous uncertainty, stress and loss of trust felt across all communities affected by the troubles, and it is vital to now apply the necessary rigour to avoid further mistakes.

During the past months, I have had the privilege of meeting many serving and veteran members of the armed forces—including UK special forces and those who served in Northern Ireland during Operation Banner—to listen to their views and concerns about the Government's proposals to repeal and replace the legacy Act. I have heard how strongly my constituents believe in accountability and the rule of law, and the pride that they have always taken in conducting themselves with the utmost professionalism. It has also come across loud and clear just how many have lost trust in the handling of legacy processes. My constituents have said:

“Veterans feel badly let down by successive governments; many are still caught up in legacy processes, facing additional years of uncertainty and stress after decades of the same...veterans have lost trust in attempts to achieve reconciliation; the anger, frustration and embitterment at their treatment will need to be addressed if they are to be persuaded to take part in future reviews and investigations.”

That is all deeply regrettable.

After I wrote to both the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State for Defence to outline my constituents' concerns several months ago, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland responded, commending the bravery of the Northern Ireland veterans who did so much to keep people safe during the troubles, recognising the extreme circumstances under which they were operating. He also stated that with the passage of time, the likelihood of further prosecutions is increasingly unlikely. He gave an assurance that

“there will be no rewriting of history”

and that he will engage fully with the veteran community as the Government move forward with their plans to repeal and replace the legacy Act. I welcome that commitment to engagement.

The Government have announced that they will bring forward primary legislation “when parliamentary time allows”, but for the communities left in limbo by the legacy Act and the subsequent legal challenges, that is a vague commitment with no clear timeframe, which does not reflect the anxiety and uncertainty currently felt. Will the Government therefore provide greater clarity about the timetable of plans and commit to bringing forward primary legislation in this Parliament?

Ending the uncertainty and finding a workable resolution to legacy issues is imperative. It is therefore critical that the Government get this right. Can the Secretary of State respond to the concerns that have been raised about the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, especially in relation to independence, powers and accountability? Given the Secretary of State's assurance that he will engage fully

with communities, will he commit to visiting North Herefordshire to meet my constituents and hear their concerns directly?

I would like to end on this point: throughout my meetings with constituents and veterans over the past few months, they emphasised the meticulous planning, preparation and professionalism that goes into armed forces operations. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the same level of rigour will be applied by the Government as they move forward in repealing and replacing the legacy legislation?

6.13 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): It is very good to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. As a member of the shadow Cabinet, I am speaking with the permission of Mr Speaker and the Clerk, because this is a matter of the utmost importance to my constituents. On the petition map, Herefordshire is a dark brown colour, showing that the two Herefordshire constituencies have the highest proportion of constituents who have signed the petition—and mine has the highest of all.

That is because so many of my constituents—1,159—are veterans of special forces and other regiments, and I speak on their behalf. These are men—many of them now in their 70s—who have had their lives blighted. It is a nonsense to suggest somehow that there is political scaremongering here; these men have sat in front of me, and with all the astonishing bravery, vigour and fortitude they have shown, they have flinched in the face of the legal challenge, and the vexation and worry it has caused them, their families and their communities. We must recognise that.

I also speak on behalf of Anthony Daly, a great friend of mine who died at the age of 23 in the Hyde Park bombing, on the soil of England, because of the IRA. Let it never be forgotten that the IRA is not just any other terrorist organisation. It was the most professional terrorist organisation in the world at the time. It trained and supplied other organisations of a similar kind around the world. It was therefore astonishing for this country to send young men and some women into that cauldron to defend all the rights that we take for granted today. They were men who acted under orders and in a chain of command—on the Queen's business—and who cannot now respond, in many of my constituents' cases, to the terrible injustice that is being wrought at the moment, which is itself already proving, even among this group, dangerous and deleterious to morale.

There is something fundamentally dishonest about the Government's position, which is that they have not bothered to explain the basis of the legal reasoning that is used. I invite the Secretary of State to clarify that basis in this Chamber today, and if he cannot, I want him to write to me so that we can share, in public, the basis of the legal reasoning.

Sections 46 and 47 were not controversial when they were passed. They were passed with the support of the then Opposition, who are now the Government. It is therefore absurd to hear colleagues from across the Chamber suggest that they somehow always disagreed with them, or that they have now suddenly discovered some Whips' interest.

Will the Secretary of State give us all the answer to the following questions? Why did the Government abandon the appeal? How exactly is the legislation in sections 46 and 47 incompatible with the convention rights? Did the Government give thought to allowing that supposed incompatibility to continue, given that they are under no legal obligation to cure it? Why did they not simply allow the pattern of the normal course of law to proceed and let the Supreme Court make that decision? Above all, why did they not decide on their own solution before they decided to create all this uncertainty by abandoning the appeal?

6.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I commend the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for setting the scene on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

We have all spoken about this subject repeatedly, but let me be very clear that I will not tire of speaking up for our veterans about these entirely vexatious prosecutions. I declare an interest as somebody who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years as a part-time soldier in an anti-terrorism role, and served for 11 and a half years as a member of the Royal Artillery—that was obviously a cold war role. The fact was that to be a soldier in Northern Ireland, whether in the Ulster Defence Regiment or any other regiment, was to be under threat.

I want to take up the comment of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk about the yellow card. As 18, 19 or 20-year-olds, we read out our yellow card every night before we left. Not one of the soldiers I served alongside, or any I knew, ever disregarded that yellow card. The role that a soldier had to play was quite clear.

We all know why these cases exist. To say that they are seeking justice does not paint the whole picture. The cases are pressed by republicans in an attempt to whitewash the history into a Hollywood version that paints them as freedom fighters oppressed by an evil regime. Well, they were not. The blood of those who were murdered at chip shops, burned alive with a napalm-like substance when out for a meal in a restaurant or mowed down with machine guns when attending their church—the blood of these innocent victims cries out against all attempts to change that appearance from pure evil to justifiable. These atrocities and crimes can never, ever be justified. There is no Hollywood lens that could make the Omagh bombing—there will be a debate about that in the main Chamber shortly—seem like it was in pursuit of a noble cause. It was not, and it never could have been.

The reason why these soldiers were stationed in Northern Ireland was to deal with the very real and lethal threat from paramilitaries of all beliefs—loyalist and republican alike. It was under that threat that the soldiers operated. I was just saying this to one of the girls in the office last week. In March 1971, three off-duty Scottish soldiers were lured from a bar by an IRA operative and murdered along the road on the way to a party. They were not on duty; they were off duty, but the IRA saw them as targets.

When our British Army personnel were on duty, they were checking cars at road checkpoints to find razors hidden in car seats with the express purpose of injuring them.

[Jim Shannon]

They were ambushed on the roads, shot at and killed or maimed. The circumstances in which they operated were not those of war as it had been known—it was guerrilla warfare, and these men were on constant high alert. Indeed, their mental health continues to pay the price today for that high state of alert.

The reason why I highlight that is twofold. First, the high state of alert in a situation that is highly charged and in which men know that their life is on the line at any second means that a split-second decision that they took 40 or 50 years ago may be difficult for them to remember and justify now. To expect these men to come to court to give an account on the detail of cases is simply untenable, especially as they were previously investigated and told that there was no case to answer, so you can understand, Ms Lewell, why we ask the question, “Why do it again?” Secondly, there is the harm from men trying to put themselves back in these positions. In terms of their mental stability, it is incredibly difficult and, indeed, can be damaging. To ask them to go back there is simply traumatising those who did nothing but follow an order.

Were we to be discussing cases in which soldiers or personnel went off on their own cognisance and carried out an attack, by all means hold them accountable and let them mount their defence, but that is not what we are questioning here. Today, we are asking 80-year-old men how they carried out the order 50 years ago, what they saw when they carried it out and why they did that. This is simply not fair or just.

The Army reviewed decisions taken at the time and brought people to justice for miscarriages of justice. The Government cannot come into a civil court 50 years later and retraumatise these men for doing what their officers required of them when there is no case to answer. That is why I believe these vexatious claims must stop. There can be no true justice from them when these men were acting under orders, and we cannot send this message to serving personnel today.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will my hon. Friend take an intervention?

Jim Shannon: A pithy one, Sammy, if you know what pithy is.

Sammy Wilson: Will my hon. Friend accept that people being dragged to court, sometimes for the second or third time, is not about justice or accountability, but about harassment and an attempt to find ways of rewriting history, and that is why this is so wrong?

Jim Shannon: Yes, that was pithy—well done. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is the rewriting of history and an injustice done to soldiers who served. There are many in this room who served; indeed, the Minister for Veterans and People is an honourable and gallant Member.

I will conclude with these words, because I am conscious that others want to speak and I am certainly not going to take any more than my five minutes. These men served in circumstances that I can well remember, because I served alongside them. Many in this Chamber may not be able to imagine what that all meant. They laid it

on the line to protect us, and we have, I believe, a duty to protect them from the reimagining that Sinn Féin-IRA seek to carry out to justify their evil events. We can never believe that this was a fight for freedom. This was a fight against a faceless, brutal, murderous enemy that haunts service personnel to this day.

6.24 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the 170,000 people who signed the petition, particularly those from my Spelthorne constituency.

I served four tours in Northern Ireland and dedicated three and a half years of my life to trying to bring peace to that place. My first tour was in Belfast in 1992. It was a guinea a minute—a young Captain Jopp and a young Lieutenant Ben Wallace were on the same tour. The IRA at the time was fully aware of our rules of engagement—the so-called yellow card that has been referred to today. In fact, the IRA designed a whole weapons system around it. It was called the coffee jar bomb. It was a coffee jar, funnily enough—usually Nescafé, although other coffees are available. The IRA would take a small piece of scaffolding and put it in the coffee jar alongside a detonator, a small amount of Semtex and what was affectionately known as “shipyard confetti”. The coffee jar also held a switch from a fridge so that when the jar was thrown and broke on the ground, the bomb went off and the bits went everywhere. We knew that these bombs were incredibly lethal because, a year before, one had been thrown at a dog handler called Darren, who had been feeding his dog. He had watched as his left leg flew 20 metres away, his other leg a smouldering wreck. We knew they were very dangerous.

When we were training to deal with these bombs, we went to a cine range. We would be there with a sub-cal, looking at a movie screen that showed a street scene. The film would stop and we would see a threat. We were trained, when we went to Northern Ireland, to identify the presence of the abnormal or the absence of the normal in order to set the context. We would see a perceived threat, the threat would build up and we would be invited to fire the round. A little yellow dot would go on to the screen, and our instructor would say, “Congratulations—you have successfully carried out the rules of engagement”.

However, the coffee jar bomb presented a massive dilemma. Could we shoot someone simply for having a coffee jar in their hand or being in the process of throwing one? It was purely designed to put soldiers, like me and the 24,000 others who served there, under incredible pressure. I remember one moment with a real dilemma in the cine film. I said, “Can I fire now?” The instructor said, “This is a very tough moment, but it is a moment to remind yourself, Sir, that it is sometimes better to be tried by 12 men than carried by six.”

Pretty chilling—particularly when two of our guardsmen on that tour subsequently had to make a judgment in a shooting situation. One of them believed they had seen a coffee jar in a plastic bag. It turns out that they did not get tried by 12 men; they were tried by one. They were convicted and given life imprisonment. That is the point: all the cases that we have come here to talk about went through a rigorous judicial process at the time. It is horrific double jeopardy, and in some cases treble jeopardy, to put our veterans through that process again.

The Veterans Minister knows this well, but there are three components to fighting power: the moral, the physical and the conceptual. It is a very well-known model; Napoleon said,

“the moral is to the physical as three is to one.”

We undermine the moral component of fighting power at our peril. I was recently appalled to see a GIF that a veteran sent me on my phone. It was a picture of the Prime Minister very recently addressing a number of troops. The subtitle underneath said: “We want you to go to Ukraine to do things which we are going to prosecute you for in 30 years’ time.”

We undermine the moral component at our peril.

To understand the context in which these mendacious and vexatious prosecutions will be pursued, I remind the Secretary of State of the moment when Stormont was recalled because someone had put a vase of flowers in the lobby, and the whole Assembly had to be recalled to debate the colour of the flowers. Why? Because after the Good Friday agreement, everything becomes a proxy answer to the question: who won? The Good Friday agreement was, by necessity, a compromise—it was a peace agreement. However, ever since, everyone has been trying to relitigate the question of who won. It is essential that we do not allow our veterans and their prosecution to become pawns in that proxy game.

I will leave it at that. I think the Veterans Minister and the Secretary of State are having a lively debate behind the scenes, but I invite the Secretary of State to listen very carefully to the Veterans Minister, who has the ear of veterans. I think I know where the Veterans Minister is coming from, and I expect the Government to do the right thing.

6.29 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Petitions Committee for allowing this debate, as well as the 176,000 petitioners.

The right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) finished with a poem. Thinking about today’s debate and how to set the scene for other hon. Members in this place, I thought I would start with a poem:

“As poppy petals gently fall,
Remember us who gave our all,
Not in the mud of foreign lands,
Not buried in the desert sands.
In Ulster field and farm and town,
Fermanagh’s lanes and drumlin’d Down,
We died that violent death should cease,
And Ulstermen should live in peace.
We did not serve because we hate,
Nor bitterness our hearts dictate,
But we were they who must aspire,
To quench the flame of terror’s fire.
As buglers sound and pipers play
The proud Battalions march away.
Now may the weary violence cease,
And let our country live in peace.”

That poem will be remembered by many sitting behind me, because it is “The UDR Soldier”, by Major John Potter. However, it could reflect all those who served in Northern Ireland, no matter what cap badge they wore, as has been mentioned by many in this debate.

As we speak of those brave servicemen from across this United Kingdom who came to Northern Ireland to protect democracy and our citizens—the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) spoke of the honour and the thanks we owe to them—we must never forget that special corps of veterans who served in Northern Ireland: namely, those members of the Ulster Defence Regiment, the home battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Some servicemen who proudly served did not return home, but many others returned to their barracks and homes across the country after their tour of duty. But members of the UDR, and the men and women of the RUC and home battalions, went home every night and day to their own homes and workplaces. As hon. Members have rightly said, they never knew who might be around the corner or what the drive-by backfire of a car might have meant. So many of those proud servicemen fell victim to workmates who passed along information about their service and the duty they had carried out.

When it comes to that defence and protection—regardless of the Government in power, whether red, blue or any other colour; and the point scoring has been a disservice to the veterans who are listening and to all who served—there is now a duty to get this right, and to ensure that those who served are not dragged through the courts.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On that point, would the hon. Gentleman agree that what we must avoid at all costs is equating those who went out meticulously planning—over days, weeks or even months—to take innocent life with the split-second decisions, as he alluded to, made by the forces of law and order, which may have resulted in death? We must avoid that equation across society at all costs in the future.

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because there can be no equivalence between someone who went out with murder and mayhem in mind and those who put on a uniform to stand in front of society, showing that they were there to defend law and order and protect, not take, innocent life.

The concern for those who served in Northern Ireland and across the UK, as has been mentioned, is that the knock at the door, the entry into the yard or the car coming up the lane in the past, which may have meant someone was coming to end their lives, now has been replaced by the fear that someone is coming to summon them to court because of an action they may or may not have done 50 years ago. I think that was the point the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was making.

I am conscious of time and could say so much more but, in conclusion, much has been said about what can be done to this piece of legislation and how it can be replaced. I am sure that the Secretary of State, in his closing remarks as in many other debates, will make much of the contribution of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. The lawfare against that body has already commenced. Already, today, the chief commissioner to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is on the front page of one of the Irish newspapers denigrating, and calling into question the positions of, Sir Declan Morgan, the chief commissioner of ICIRI and Peter Sheridan, its commissioner for investigations. There is already a

[Robin Swann]

movement to have those commissioners dismissed to undermine ICRIR. In the past, I have heard the Secretary of State say that ICRIR will be the answer and the solution to all legacy problems in Northern Ireland. Will he make a commitment today that, no matter what solution comes forward from the Government, he will not let the lawfare from republicanism and those organisations, displace what should be legally and rightfully done to support our veterans? I leave the Secretary of State with that line of Major John Potter's poem:

"Remember us who gave our all,"

and do not see them unnecessarily prosecuted.

6.35 pm

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell, an honour to speak on this important and emotive issue, and an honour to speak to this petition, which means so much to me and my constituents.

The treatment of our brave Northern Ireland veterans by this Government, and by previous Governments, is a national disgrace. I speak from the heart, as someone whose father served in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles. He was prepared to die to protect every single one of us in this Chamber, either directly or indirectly. We should not be having this debate about honour and patriotism being rewarded with betrayal by our Government. The IRA wants to rewrite history. It is shameful that the British Government are allowing hundreds of our special forces veterans to be investigated over incidents that occurred decades ago to appease the Irish Government.

Alex Ballinger: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: Not yet. Those courageous men should be enjoying their hard-earned retirement, not facing prosecution for defending the British people from IRA terrorists. Those same British people value these soldiers, and are outraged at the unfair and unjust action of this Government. Why would a British Government of any political leaning include this commitment in their manifesto? Those brave soldiers were doing nothing more than carrying out orders from the Government of the day, as they are trained to do, without fear or question. These soldiers are fiercely loyal to their regiment, their Government and their monarch. Many were awarded bravery medals signed off by our late monarch Queen Elizabeth II, yet this Government are looking to renege on that.

These soldiers faced extreme danger on our behalf. They were fearless on our behalf. They would have sacrificed their lives for us, and hundreds did. Many of the so-called IRA victims killed were murderers and terrorists. How on earth can anyone stand up to defend those people over our special forces? Yet, this Government reward our bravest service personnel by bringing these prosecutions, by threatening legal action, by putting them through the stress of a trial—

Alex Ballinger: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: Not yet. The Government reward them by ruining their lives when they deserve nothing but our respect, support and gratitude. These prosecutions should not be allowed to happen. Why would we not defend

those who defended us—those who put their lives on the line for us? I will defend them, and my party will stand up for them. I will not stand by and remain silent. I will speak for them. I am humbled by what they did for us, and I know that the British people feel the same.

6.39 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I share the dismay shown by the hon. and gallant Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) and others, when decrying the fact that the legacy legislation gave—I use her own words—"immunity to terrorists". What nobody has yet spelled out is why it gave immunity to terrorists. There is a simple answer to that: it could not give immunity to our armed forces without giving immunity to terrorists as well.

Unless hon. and right hon. Members can come up with some brand new alternative—one that defeated the scrutiny and the inventiveness of successive Governments in trying to grapple with that problem—the question they have to ask themselves is, if the price of giving immunity to our veterans is that we have to give theoretical immunity to terrorists, most of whom have had practical immunity from prosecution for many years, and hardly any of whom are ever likely to be prosecuted, is that price worth paying? We cannot have it both ways.

Something that was rightly said earlier in the debate is that people should be trying to work across party lines to come to a solution on this, and I think that I can honestly claim to have been trying to do that for rather a long time. In 2017, the Defence Committee, which I was then chairing, published a report entitled "Investigations into Fatalities in Northern Ireland involving British Military Personnel"—HC 1064, if anyone is interested. The purpose of that report was to examine in great detail what the legal options were to enable the Government of the day to protect our veterans.

That report was published in April 2017 but, prior to that, on 7 March, we had a hearing—of which I have made the Secretary of State and the Veterans Minister aware—in which no fewer than four top professors of law took part, with a variety of views, preferences and personal attitudes towards what had happened in Northern Ireland and so forth. We were not asking them whether they approved of amnesties; we were asking them what was and was not legally possible. What they told us was this, and I am quite disappointed that no one has uttered these words, as far as I can tell, in the entire debate: it is possible to bring in a statute of limitation, and the requirement by law that something being investigated need not lead to somebody being prosecuted. Professor Philippe Sands, someone not unknown to the Government, stated in that hearing:

"The obligation to investigate is not an obligation to prosecute. It is not an obligation to take any particular steps. It is simply an obligation to find out the facts of what has happened, and ascertain."

What was made clear in that discussion with the four professors of law was that if a Government were not to find themselves guilty of behaving with impunity, a statute of limitation had to apply to everyone. That is where people get upset, because the people who support our armed forces do not want it to apply to the terrorists, and the people from the republican movement do not want it to apply to our armed forces. But the fact is that if we are to protect anyone from prosecution in these

circumstances, we have to protect everyone. Someone who just focuses on the group of which they disapprove being protected is ducking the hard choice that we have to face.

Someone mentioned trying to follow the model of Nelson Mandela. That is a very good point, and it is precisely what the legislation was intended to do. We satisfied ourselves that a truth recovery process, coupled with a statute of limitation—in other words, immunity—for people who gave their evidence to the truth recovery process, similar to what Mandela did in South Africa, was a way in which this problem could be laid to rest. When the Government say that they plan to give our soldiers every support, it sounds to me that they accept the fact that cases are going to be brought, and they are going to try and support the soldiers. But the punishment is the process. It is true that probably hardly anyone will end up going through the process to the end.

Let me insert something else that I referred to in an earlier intervention: people on both sides of the debate say we must not equate this and that, and I certainly do not equate soldiers with terrorists morally, but in applying the law, the law has to be equal for everybody. In fact, that has already been recognised in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which limits the time that anybody can serve in jail, even for the most heinous murders, to two years. That is the only time someone can serve in jail. There may be people who have had relatives murdered who will derive great satisfaction from the fact that, after all this time, the murderer will go to jail for such a short period. But the reality is that the punishment does not fit the crime, and at first some of us thought that this was just a free pass for the IRA. I will not name the Minister concerned, but I and someone from the Labour Benches with a strong service background, who is now a Minister, went to meet the Sinn Féin MPs in Parliament—because they do have a presence here, even though they do not come to the Chamber. They said that they believed that the two-year limit applied to the soldiers as well as to their own allies. We looked into it and checked it with Ministers, and that was found to be correct. The fact is that we are already compromising. We are already treating both groups the same.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir Julian Lewis: I was about to finish, but I will give way.

David Smith: I have to declare, having set up another peacemaking programme in Northern Ireland myself and done a master's degree in reconciliation studies, that the legacy Act was very much not a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission. The right hon. Member is talking about the equating of terrorists on one hand and our armed forces on the other; I simply ask, what would he say to victims on how they could pursue justice under the legacy Act as was?

Sir Julian Lewis: When we are talking about victims of terrorists, I would ask, first of all, how likely is it that terrorists who have not been prosecuted all these years are going to be prosecuted in the future? Secondly, how do people think the victims felt in South Africa when a line was drawn for the sake of enabling the society to move forward?

What the legacy Act did was the least worst option. As we have heard, the reality is that there is no obligation to act on the finding of incompatibility with the ECHR. The Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report entitled “Proposal for a Draft Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (Remedial) Order 2024”, which states in paragraph 20:

“It is a discretionary remedy, meaning the courts do not have to issue such a declaration”—

of incompatibility with the ECHR—

“when they find a provision to be incompatible with Convention rights. A declaration of incompatibility has no legal effect and does not affect the ongoing validity of the incompatible legislation. It is merely a tool by which the courts can draw attention to an incompatibility; it is then for the Government and Parliament to decide what action, if any, to take.”

Indeed, section 4 of the Human Rights Act 1998 states that a declaration of incompatibility

“does not affect the validity, continuing operation or enforcement of the provision in respect of which it is given; and...is not binding on the parties to the proceedings in which it is made.”

I accept that there are other legal problems, but the impression that I get from the Secretary of State, whom I have known for many years and much admire, is that he has set his face against this route of a statute of limitation, coupled with a truth recovery process, and is not really listening. That is why we are not fighting to keep in place the one thing that could give protection to our Northern Ireland military veterans.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): If the next speaker keeps their contribution to four to five minutes, we might be able to get in two more Back Benchers before I call the Front Benchers for their contributions. I call Jim Allister.

6.51 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Thank you, Ms Lewell. I note the selective stricture following a speech that exceeded twice the limit that was allegedly set, but I will do my best.

May I begin, as a Member from a Northern Ireland constituency, by placing on record the heartfelt thanks of the people of Northern Ireland for the service of our military within Northern Ireland during our darkest days—those who stood between us and the horrendous terrorist threat that we faced? I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) and include the gallant local security services of the UDR and the RIR in that. All of us in this House who daily exercise freedoms need to be mindful that when those freedoms were under the most horrendous terrorist attack, it was our security forces who stood between us and their destruction. For the many who paid the ultimate sacrifice, we want to remember their service and sacrifice today.

The route to the prosecution of our security services is now through the inquest process. It is the inquest process that is poisoning the well of justice in Northern Ireland. Remember this: an inquest, as has been said, is supposed to be about who died, where they died and how they died. Our Government have allowed inquests in Northern Ireland to become unfettered in their overreach, as illustrated most dramatically in the Clonoe inquest, where every outcome was explored to the point where

[Jim Allister]

the judge presiding over that inquest reached wholly prejudicial findings, which then resulted in him saying, “I am now referring this to the PPS.”

Let us remember this: inquests operate on the balance of probabilities. That is how we reach a verdict in an inquest, whereas in a criminal prosecution we reach a verdict by proving beyond all reasonable doubt. Yet four SAS soldiers, according to the presiding judge, were meant to step forward and say to nine approaching fully armed IRA men, with a huge machine gun on the back of their lorry, “Hands up, please surrender”. According to the coroner, that is what they were supposed to do, even though those IRA men had just shot up a police station, returned celebrating their actions by firing over the house of a deceased terrorist who had been one of their own, and then arrived at a car park. In the most outrageous overreach, the coroner said that they were ambushed by the SAS, and the soldiers should have said “Hands up, please surrender”, with no regard to the fact that when facing nine fully armed terrorists, a split-second decision has to be made.

In England, that could not have happened, because under the inquest rules there, when a coroner reaches the view that there may have been some unlawful activity, he must stop the inquest and refer the matter to the prosecution service. That is the right way to go, because it is for the PPS, not the coroner, to look at the matter and decide the approach. The Secretary of State needs to bring into effect in Northern Ireland the same rules that govern inquests in England, so that if there is an allegation of illegality—or it occurs to the coroner there might be—he stops the inquests and sends it to the PPS, rather than giving an outlandish ruling that creates the public perception that there is huge criminality. That is the lawful and proper way to go.

I must say I regret the fact that when I wrote to the Secretary of State pointing that out a few weeks ago, I got a limp response that really it is a matter for the Justice Department in Northern Ireland. No—this Government are said to be tackling legacy issues, and if they are to do so, they need to tackle inquests and cut off the root that is now producing the potential prosecution of some of the bravest of our citizens.

6.57 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the more than 175,000 people who signed this e-petition, of whom 403 are my Huntingdon constituents. I would like to start by paying particular tribute to the military personnel who served in Northern Ireland on Operation Banner between August 1969 and July 2007 in what was the longest continuous operational deployment of our armed forces, and in which 722 service people lost their lives as a result of terrorist action, and 1,441 in total.

Over the last decade, we have seen myriad bodies established to investigate injuries and deaths during the troubles. In this time, many have raised concerns about the reliability and credibility of evidence and witness statements—some from over 50 years ago—and reopened some investigations that had long since concluded and had a line drawn beneath them. I am a veteran myself of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is 15 years since I served in

Afghanistan, and I would hate to think that someone could now quiz me on where I was stood on a particular day, who I was stood next to, and which direction I was facing, and for those answers to perhaps dictate my freedom, and how my family and those around me would be impacted. To ask people to remember what they were doing over 50 years ago is absolutely ludicrous.

This Government have said that the last Government’s legislation was flawed, that it failed, and that they will amend it in a way that

“honours our duty towards...veterans”.—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 10.]

Amid so much anxiety being felt by veterans of Northern Ireland and their families, I would like to hear clarity from the Secretary of State in his wind-up on how the Government will honour their duty towards veterans in their actions and exactly what they plan to do on taking the IRA to task on this. The words from Back Benchers on the Government side have very much indicated that the aim of this legislation is to prosecute the IRA going forward, and I would like to hear from the Secretary of State what his plans are to make that process occur.

Although I am a veteran myself, I never served on Operation Banner. My own service overlapped with the tail end of our operations in Northern Ireland, but the lessons learned and the skills won across nearly four decades characterised so much of my training. Those were skills that we applied to counter-insurgency operations in Iraq: fives and 20s, rummages, public order et al. Without such hard-won knowledge, my own experience on operations might have been very difficult, and my generation of soldiers, and now veterans, owe a debt of gratitude to those who served on Operation Banner.

Growing up in the ’80s, the sight on the news of British soldiers patrolling in a place that looks so familiar, but felt so distant, was a stalwart—a visual cue for a conflict I did not then understand. It was a time when the word “terrorist” simply meant the IRA and only the IRA. In the wake of Iraq and then Afghanistan, it is difficult to fully comprehend how dangerous the operations in Northern Ireland truly were. We lost 178 service personnel over a decade on Operation Telic, including the invasion of Iraq and subsequent warfighting operations. We lost 170 service personnel on Operation Banner in 1972 alone.

We must stand behind those who have served this nation and fought against terrorism. The Government must stand behind our armed forces post service to ensure protection, safety and support for all veterans. It is therefore a grave concern that the Government did not support the legacy and reconciliation Act, which would have shut down 38 legacy inquests.

If the Government go the way that many feel they will, they may get their legacy legislation catastrophically wrong. We could see those cases and more reopen with, to quote my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis),

“at least 50 innocent retired veterans will be exposed to legal persecution for crimes they did not commit.”—[*Official Report*, 9 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 944.]

We simply cannot let that happen. Constituents who served in Northern Ireland have contacted me to express their dismay at what they feel is this Government’s attitude towards them and those they served alongside.

Veterans in my constituency and the country at large are at a loss to think that historical, often baseless, cases might be opened, reopened and vexatiously pursued. That is causing unfathomable worries for many, some now at the end of their days. Where are the reassurances that the Government's future legislation will protect rather than persecute veterans? Not only will that have an impact on veterans, but I am concerned about the impact on future retention and recruitment of our armed forces if people feel the orders they give, or their actions, will be subject to public investigation in perpetuity. Members from both sides of the Chamber who have served may well be brought within the scope of that.

I urge the Government to bring clarity to the minds of those who served in Operation Banner. I urge the Government not to betray those who fought for this country, and to commend, rather than condemn, their courageous restraint. I urge them to go about this matter in the right way and stand with our veterans, rather than playing into the hands of those who wish to rewrite history, settle scores and drag our veterans through the mire.

7.2 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contribution to this important debate, and the 175,000 petitioners who have brought this issue into the public domain.

I join others in paying tribute to our extraordinary armed forces personnel who have fought and defended our freedoms. I think today about my grandfather. Although he was too early to serve in Northern Ireland, he knew precisely what was meant by fighting against terrorism: he was placed in Mandatory Palestine shortly after the second world war, dodging the bombs and bullets of the Lehi and the Haganah and narrowly avoiding being blown up in the King David hotel.

I open with a statement that should be entirely self-evident: families bereaved by the troubles deserve clear, credible answers and access to justice. This is not about ideology or party politics; it is about the foundational principles of decency, dignity and the right to truth, something that many victims' families in Northern Ireland and beyond have waited decades for.

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 sadly fell short of that aim and those principles. By shutting down investigations and offering conditional immunity, it extinguished the remaining legal pathways for families across Northern Ireland's political spectrum. It told victims that time had run out on reconciliation, a key tenet of which is legal accountability. Tellingly, every major Northern Ireland political party, as well as victims' groups and others, opposed the legislation—albeit, at times, for vastly different reasons.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to place on record my thanks to the veterans and servicepeople in my Taunton and Wellington constituency, including 40 Commando, and to the 412 people who signed the petition. I am a man who is willing to believe that we should approach this issue on a cross-party basis and try to seek a solution that protects our veterans

across party lines. Is it not the challenge for the Government to convince veterans that their interests will be looked after before announcing the repeal of the legacy Act?

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the issue of trust, and the lack of trust in multiple constituencies that have an interest in this question, which applies to communities in Northern Ireland as much as it does to veterans. I hope that what this Government do in pursuing a repeal and replace approach will be, at the very least, an attempt to try to rebuild trust in this process.

Despite the opposition, the legacy Act passed, leaving families in limbo, irrespective of their religious or cultural identity. Although the Liberal Democrats recognise the legal necessity to repeal and replace the Act, I have serious doubt about the Government's commitment to meaningful consultation with those who they should be listening to most closely. On visits to Northern Ireland with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I have spoken to survivors and families from across Northern Ireland communities. Victims made it clear to me that they do not seek prosecutions; what they want is honest, truthful information about how and why their loved ones died.

If the Government are serious about making progress, they must act swiftly to restore faith in the investigatory process, which has been diminished by the creation of the ICRIR as a product of the legacy Act. The Liberal Democrats support the creation of a new independent, ECHR-compliant information retrieval body, to be established in consultation with victims and survivors. That would include meaningful participation from next of kin, as proposed by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Such a body should have statutory powers to compel disclosure, backed by robust oversight. Victims must have access to records, with exemptions limited to tightly defined national security grounds.

If such a body worked properly, it could deliver long-awaited answers, support societal reconciliation and offer some reassurance to British veterans, by establishing the truth without the perceived necessity to pursue a prosecutorial pathway. However, that will only be possible with genuine cross-border co-operation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and, importantly, the Irish Government, who have been remarkably reluctant to participate in such processes up to now. All stakeholders must contribute to a clear and credible record of the past.

Let me now directly address the concerns about and from British armed forces veterans. If the rule of law is to mean anything in this country, its application must be fair and equal for everyone across all parts of the United Kingdom. The UK armed forces proudly operate within the law, and that culture is instilled from day one of training for officers and soldiers alike. We do no honour to their service by weakening or suspending the legal standards under which they serve. Supporting our forces means applying the law fairly, not shielding wrongdoing or applying unequal scrutiny.

Many paramilitary actions were never formally recorded and now depend on memory. By contrast, British forces left extensive records, making them more visible and sometimes more vulnerable to investigation. That imbalance has created the perception of unfairness and injustice. Between 1998 and 2022, six members of the UK armed

[Dr Pinkerton]

forces were charged with troubles-related offences out of more than 250,000 personnel who served during Operation Banner. That is 0.003% of the serving population.

Stuart Anderson: It is not just about the final prosecution, but about what people have had to go through over all these years. Will the hon. Member say how many people have actually had the knock at the door, or the call, or had to give evidence? That is the issue that is really hurting people?

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): I call Al Pinkerton, who I assume is coming to the end of his contribution.

Dr Pinkerton: I was not, but I will endeavour to do so, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, because he puts his finger on the point that it is not just about the numbers—I had been going to make that point myself—but the actual experience of those veterans.

In conclusion, I absolutely recognise the deep anxiety felt by many veterans. That concern—that fear—must not and should not be diminished or dismissed; but nor should it be unjustifiably stoked for political ends. If the Government are serious about restoring confidence, they must listen to victims, veterans and legal experts.

In the last few days before the Government announce what I think will be new legislation, may I put a couple of questions to the Secretary of State? First, what steps is he taking to ensure that any new legacy framework is compliant with the ECHR? Secondly, following this turbulent hiatus, how will he ensure that our armed forces veterans are protected from the most vexatious of legal actions, and that the investigation does not become the punishment?

7.9 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell, as we debate this critical petition, which has over 176,000 signatures, some 6,000 of which were added today. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who introduced the debate so ably. It is a privilege to have in the Public Gallery some 30 veterans who served their country bravely in Northern Ireland, including five from the Royal Hospital Chelsea. For obvious reasons, these veterans have a very strong interest in our proceedings today. I say to them, and to all those who served alongside them, “Thank you for your service.”

For context, some 300,000 British soldiers served in what became known as Operation Banner, the British Army’s mission to uphold the rule of law in Northern Ireland. Of those, well over 700 were murdered, and thousands more suffered life-changing injuries, at the hands of both republican and so-called loyalist terrorists. If we include the UDR and the RUC GC, as the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), the leader of the DUP, rightly said, the total comes to more than 1,400 dead.

The previous Conservative Government introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 to try to assist the community in Northern Ireland to move on from the difficult history of the troubles and to provide protection for many of those veterans from an endless cycle of investigation and reinvestigation, often inspired by Sinn Féin. The Labour

party’s election manifesto stated their intention to repeal that Act in favour of new legislation, although no such legislation has been forthcoming, even in draft form. Labour has even sought to claim that the legacy Act somehow protected alleged IRA terrorists from prosecution, when it was the Blair Government that famously handed hundreds of such men letters of comfort so that they could not be prosecuted anyway—and, even if they were, they would only get a maximum of two years, even for murder, as brilliantly pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis).

Pending new legislation, the Government have produced a so-called remedial order under the auspices of the Human Rights Act 1998. By this method, they seek to remove some provisions of the legacy Act that, they state, have been found in the lower courts to be incompatible with the 1998 Act—even though the incoming Government could have appealed to the UK Supreme Court but, seemingly deliberately, did not.

The net effect of that remedial order is twofold. First, it would allow the conveyor belt of coronial inquests in Northern Ireland to resume, a number of which have led to verdicts against the soldiers—at Clonoe, for instance—

Alex Ballinger: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Mr Francois: No.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) brilliantly highlighted Clonoe in his very moving speech. The remedial order would also remove the clauses in the legacy Act that currently prevent Gerry Adams and several hundred of his associates from attempting to sue the British Government, and thus the taxpayer, for compensation.

At Prime Minister’s questions on 15 January, the Prime Minister faithfully made this promise:

“We are working on a draft remedial order and replacement legislation, and we will look at every conceivable way to prevent these types of cases from claiming damages—it is important that I say that on the record.—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 324.]

Nevertheless, the remedial order, pushed through the Joint Committee on Human Rights barely a month later with Labour and, I am sad to say, Liberal votes, remained unchanged, and still does.

These proposals have evoked considerable concern, not least from the Royal British Legion, which stated in its briefing note:

“The Royal British Legion calls for the Government to urgently provide clarity and their intent regarding the process of legacy prosecution. We believe that the anxiety and uncertainty created by the current situation is unfair and is having a substantial negative impact on veterans and their families.”

I cannot speak for the Royal British Legion—but, having met the organisation recently, were the Government to proceed with this ill-advised course so obviously injurious to veterans, I cannot foresee the legion standing idly by. Moreover, the three Veterans Commissioners for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who are neither ill-informed nor naive, recently issued a powerful joint statement that

“we stand united in our firm support of the motion to be debated in Westminster on 14 July...we are deeply concerned by the prospect of retrospective legal action being taken against veterans who were carrying out their lawful duties, often under immense pressure and threat.”

Incidentally, the Government have been dragging their feet for months on their absolute promise to create an English Veterans Commissioner, and we now know why. Indeed, we now understand that the British Government and their counterparts in the Irish Republic have been negotiating some form of sordid backstairs deal, part of which, we fear, will lead to further attempted prosecutions of veterans while assisting Gerry Adams in return.

This form of Government-sanctioned lawfare is self-evidently a case of two-tier justice at its worst, and that is why we on the Opposition Benches are utterly against it. Will the Secretary of State therefore provide absolute clarity on whether the Government still intend to proceed with a remedial order, which would likely result in a high-stakes vote this autumn, or whether they now intend to go straight to primary legislation instead? Our veterans, who unlike the provisionals never received letters of comfort from the Blair Government, and many of whom now effectively have a sword of Damocles hanging over them yet again, deserve a straight answer from the Secretary of State this afternoon.

In addition to the powerful moral argument against this misguided policy, as made by many of my hon. Friends and others today, there is also its potential adverse effect on recruitment and retention.

Alex Ballinger: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: No. Who would wish to serve a Government—

Alex Ballinger: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: Later.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. The shadow Minister has made it clear that he is not going to give way.

Mr Francois: Who would wish to serve a Government who may ask them to risk their life fighting for the state, only to be prosecuted in a courtroom half a century later? As General Lord Dannatt, a highly respected former Chief of the General Staff, put it so well:

“Why would any sensible young person think of putting on the Queen’s uniform if they thought they could be tapped on the shoulder years after an operation and questioned over false allegations?”

The Secretary of State will already be aware from his colleagues in the MOD, some of whom have a distinguished special forces background, that this process is having an adverse effect on morale in the special forces community, and in the Army more widely. It would be an act of sheer folly, and aid to our enemies, to continue with this act of military self-harm so that, put bluntly, even fewer people will join the Army and even more will leave. This is therefore not just morally but operationally mad, and a gift to our adversaries to boot.

Alex Ballinger: The right hon. Member talks about recruitment. Does he recognise that 14 years of Conservative government wrecked our armed forces, and that what the Labour Government are doing to invest in our armed forces and in their housing has led to an increase in recruitment, because new people recognise how important that is?

Mr Francois: I will answer the hon. Gentleman on recruitment. If it had not been for the brave men sitting in the Public Gallery, there would be no Good Friday agreement. Thank God they joined up and had the courage to serve.

I say to the Secretary of State, in all candour, that what he is doing is wrong. Many of the soldiers who served bravely in Northern Ireland were recruited from so-called red wall seats, from Blackburn to Bury and from Bolton to Burnley, and they served in proud regiments in Northern Ireland to uphold the rule of law. Surely the Secretary of State will not try to dragoon Labour MPs through the Division Lobby to throw veterans to the wolves while doing Gerry Adams a favour. The events of the past fortnight show that Labour Back Benchers can no longer be taken for granted—and surely not on this. How could they possibly go back to their constituencies and look local veterans and their descendants in the eye after voting for such a pernicious proposal?

Perhaps I can conclude with a poem. It is by Rudyard Kipling, and is called “Tommy”, about the ordinary British soldier and the ingratitude of his country after he had fought for it in war. Perhaps the Secretary of State will recognise the final stanza:

“For it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ “Chuck him out, the brute!”

But it’s “Saviour of ‘is country” when the guns begin to shoot;
An’ it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ anything you please;
An’ Tommy ain’t a bloomin’ fool—you bet that Tommy sees!”

Secretary of State, these brave men fought against the IRA, one of the most ruthless and vicious terrorist organisations the world has ever seen. They did their duty to their country. They defended us. Do not aid and abet their former mortal enemy. Let these brave men live out their lives in peace.

7.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I am grateful to the organisers of the petition, to the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for his opening remarks, and to all Members who have spoken. In the very short time I have, I will try to answer as many points as possible. I want to say at the outset that I recognise the very real fears that many veterans have, especially those who have been called to give evidence a number of times. I have heard that in my meetings with veterans, and the Government take those concerns very seriously.

A number of things are clear from the debate. The first—I join the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), in this—is that we are united in our appreciation of the extraordinary service of our brave armed forces, police, security services and others, who served with distinction in the most difficult circumstances, described chillingly by the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe during the troubles. We will forever be in their debt, and in the debt of all the veterans in the Public Gallery and the Members in the Chamber who have served in our armed forces.

We all agree that there can be no rewriting of history. I agree with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) that there is

[Hilary Benn]

no equivalence between soldiers and terrorists. I say to him, however, that the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains—he mentioned Robert Nairac—was created not by the legacy Act, but by a treaty reached between the United Kingdom and the Irish Government in 1999. It has recovered the remains of a number of those taken, murdered and buried by the IRA, but sadly not yet the remains of Robert Nairac. I also say this: we cannot have any more false promises or undeliverable pledges—pledges that our courts have found to be unlawful. That is why we will fix the mess we inherited from the previous Government, whatever their intentions were, and we will protect our veterans as we do so.

On inquests, I understand why the Clonoe inquest has caused such consternation and, frankly, incredulity. It was an operation in which an armed IRA gang who had just tried to kill members of the RUC were confronted by British soldiers. The Government are clear that the findings did not reflect the context in which the incident took place, and that is why we have the backs of the veterans involved, by seeking a judicial review to try to protect them. The MOD is also funding the veterans to bring their own JR.

Not all Northern Ireland inquests end like that, however. Other inquests have found that the use of lethal force by our military was justified, including two inquest verdicts delivered last year. The truth is that our legal system is independent. Why is it independent? Because we all believe in the rule of law. If I heard the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk correctly, he talked about politically motivated charges. I presume he is talking about criminal charges. I point out in all gentleness that if he is claiming that there are politically motivated charges, he is saying that the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland is politically motivated. I utterly reject that, and I hope all Members will too.

Jesse Norman: The Secretary of State described the situation in law as illegal, but he never pressed the question of the appeal to the Supreme Court, which would have decided the question of whether it was in fact illegal. Was that decision taken on the basis of law, and if so, what were the grounds for it?

Hilary Benn: I did not say it was illegal; I said it was unlawful. I shall come directly to the right hon. Gentleman's point. Look at the facts: of the 250,000 veterans who served so bravely in Operation Banner, as we heard, the number who have been prosecuted for offences has been very small. The Centre for Military Justice records that only one soldier has been convicted since the Good Friday agreement. The House might want to reflect on that, because for almost all of those 27 years, immunity was not on the statute book—the legacy Act was not passed. [Interruption.]

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. Do not shout.

Hilary Benn: If the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me, we have also heard it said that terrorists are not being prosecuted and have somehow been given immunity. I want to challenge that, both because the only thing that gave terrorists immunity was the legacy Act, and because during the troubles an estimated 25,000 to

35,000 republicans and loyalists were tried and convicted, many of them serving sentences for murder and bombings. Indeed, there have been five convictions for terrorist-related offences connected to the troubles since 2012.

The so-called “on-the-run” letters had no legal force and did not give anyone any immunity. On interim custody orders, I made it clear in a written answer a couple of weeks ago that we will bring forward legislation to deal with that. By the way, I say to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford that the remedial order does not bring back inquests—he was incorrect when he suggested that.

The fact that the legacy Act enabled terrorists to be given immunity was, as we have heard, one of the principal reasons why so many people in Northern Ireland were strongly opposed to it. We need to have in mind the people of Northern Ireland when we discuss these matters. Across all the political parties, among many victims and survivors—and I have met many of them myself—and Northern Ireland veteran groups, some of which I met last year, there is not just one view on this.

I know that there are some—and we have heard the argument in this debate—who say there should be absolute immunity for anyone who served in Operation Banner. I would simply say to them that, as a country, we either believe in the rule of law—[Interruption.] Well, that there should be no prosecutions. We either believe in the rule of law, or we do not. That was a point forcefully made by my hon. Friends the Members for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) and for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger).

As the former Conservative Defence Secretary Ben Wallace put it,

“the British Army is not above the law, and nor should it be. That is the difference between us and the terrorist.”—[Official Report, 18 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 678.]

In a joint statement last Friday, the Veterans Commissioners for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales said that they do not call for immunity from the law but “for fairness under it”. I could not agree with them more.

Because immunity was struck down by the domestic courts even before the Government were elected—and we came into office committed to repealing the Act—any incoming Administration would have had to fix it. It is wrong for anyone to suggest anything different. [Interruption.] The answer is because we do not agree with it.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. Members will refrain from shouting out and having dialogue with the Secretary of State. Please intervene in the normal manner.

Hilary Benn: Legacy is hard. This is the unfinished business of the Good Friday agreement.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: I am afraid that because of the time I am not able to.

That is why, as well as listening carefully to veterans, which we are doing, we also need to listen to the many families who lost loved ones, including the families of British service personnel who served so bravely.

More than 200 families of UK military personnel are still searching for answers about the murder of their loved ones 30, 40 or 50 years ago. The Police Service of Northern Ireland confirmed on 30 April 2024 that it had 202 live investigations into troubles-related killings of members of our armed forces, and a further 33 into the killings of veterans. The following day, on 1 May, each and every one of those investigations was forced to close by the legacy Act.

Mr Francois: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: I am not going to give way.

The other challenge that all of us have to face is the lack of confidence in the Act on the part of communities

in Northern Ireland, and in the commission it created, which we will seek to reform so that it is more capable of commanding confidence for those who are searching for answers. We owe it to all those families; the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) reminded us to remember them and their search for answers. We owe it to them and to all communities to get this right, including trying to reach an agreement with the Irish Government. Doing nothing is not credible.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Monday 14 July 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Future of the Post Office: Green Paper

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The Post Office is a vital part of the UK's social and economic fabric. It supports communities, high streets, and small businesses across the UK. This Government inherited a Post Office in crisis, but we are determined to tackle the root causes of the issues the Post Office faces, provide the stability it needs, and put the organisation on a solid and sustainable footing.

It has been 15 years since the Government last set out their vision for the Post Office, during which time there have been significant consumer changes and wider pressures on the Post Office, as well as the need to address the legacy of the Horizon scandal.

Today, we are publishing a Green Paper that seeks to open a dialogue on the future of the Post Office. It explores difficult questions about how we ensure a modern, trusted and financially resilient Post Office, while protecting essential services. This Government's ambition is to strengthen the Post Office network. We want a network that the public use and value. We want branches to be visible on the high street, operating full working hours, and we want them to have a strong retail offer, alongside a wide range of in-person services.

In a fast-changing world, the Post Office is in a unique position to bridge the digital divide for the millions of people who rely on face-to-face services. We want to support the Post Office to continue to improve and develop the banking and other critical services it provides.

We must also be honest about the challenges. People use post offices differently from how they used to, presenting challenges for the Post Office and postmasters alike. These are not challenges unique to the UK; many countries have needed to adapt and modernise their postal services to reflect changing consumer behaviour.

Through this Green Paper, we are looking to reaffirm what the Post Office does best, while recognising the need to make the network more sustainable and less reliant on Government funding. We are also clear that cultural change is essential. We are committed to learning from the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry and ensuring a transparent, accountable, and postmaster-focused culture. Our Green Paper proposals explore short-term ways to improve Post Office's governance, as well as long-term structural reforms—such as mutualisation or a charter model—once financial stability is achieved.

This consultation represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure the Post Office's future, and we want to hear from everyone with a stake in it—postmasters, businesses, community organisations and members of the public.

I am also pleased to announce that the Government plan to provide up to £118 million of additional investment funding to the Post Office this financial year. This will support the implementation of the Post Office's transformation plan, which aims to put the company on a path to operational and financial stability, and enable the delivery of a new deal for postmasters that includes improving postmaster remuneration and involving postmasters in central decision making. This funding will also contribute to the costs of making necessary network investments, to support the continued delivery of services in communities. This funding is subject to the completion of subsidy control processes and compliance with the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

I am laying before Parliament the Green Paper, "Future of Post Office", and depositing copies of "The Value of the Post Office Network" report and supplementary data tables in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS814]

UK-Turkey Enhanced Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The first round of negotiations on an enhanced free trade agreement with Turkey took place in Ankara between 23 June and 2 July 2025.

During this initial round, talks focused on gathering insights across policy areas and building a shared understanding of each other's initial positions. Negotiations were constructive, with both countries working towards agreeing ambitious outcomes in key areas, including services and digital trade. The talks also facilitated UK-Turkey co-operation and dialogue in areas of mutual interest that support growth.

Economic growth is our first mission in Government, and FTAs have an important role to play in achieving this. A stronger trade relationship with Turkey will contribute to jobs and prosperity in the UK. Total trade between the UK and Turkey was worth £27.8 billion in 2024.

Negotiators made significant progress in a number of areas:

Sustainability and collaboration

Negotiators discussed areas of future co-operation relating to innovation, small and medium-sized enterprises and trade and development. The round also covered women's economic empowerment and labour rights, identifying joint priorities and reaffirming relevant international commitments. Commitments being sought will help foster joint initiatives to, for instance, improve women's access to global markets and reduce trade barriers for SMEs.

Regulatory environment

Negotiations also covered technical issues relating to the regulatory environments of both parties, including consumer protection and competition. Discussions centred around rules and provisions to promote fair competition and safeguard the interests and rights of consumers engaged in cross-border trade between the UK and Turkey.

Trade in services

Productive discussions were held on key technical issues, including digital, financial and professional business services. Initial discussions aimed to identify areas of

alignment and explore commercially meaningful opportunities to build on the existing agreement's limited services provisions.

Goods

Turkey was the UK's 16th largest trading partner in 2024 and UK goods exports to Turkey were worth £6.1 billion. The UK's existing FTA with Turkey replicates the effect of the EU-Turkey customs unions. Industrial products are fully liberalised and agricultural goods are partially liberalised in the current FTA. During the first round of negotiations, both sides worked to establish baselines and respective ambitions, as well as agree a forward process for future rounds.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement that aligns with the UK's national interests and upholds our high standards across a range of sectors, including as regards protections for the national health service.

The second round of negotiations is expected to take place in autumn 2025. Ministers will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with Turkey as they continue to develop.

[HCWS813]

TREASURY

Disability Premium Compensation Scheme: Income Tax Exemption

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government will legislate to ensure that payments made across the UK under the Department for Work and Pension disability premium compensation scheme are exempt from income tax. This legislation will apply retrospectively from December 2024, when payments from the scheme started.

[HCWS815]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

State of the Climate and Nature

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): Today, I am making a statement on the state of climate and nature, on behalf of myself and my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This is the first of its kind and provides the British public with an assessment of the climate and nature crises we face and the action that this Government are taking in response. This follows the publication of the Met Office's "State of the UK Climate 2024", which shows that the UK's climate is getting hotter and wetter, with more extreme weather events.

We have also today published the "Environmental Improvement Plan 2024-2025 Annual Progress Report" and the first report on the protected landscapes targets and outcomes framework, which highlight the steps the Government have taken over the last year to clean up our water and air, reduce waste and restore nature.

Alongside this, the UK Government special representative for nature is today launching a report on "Unlocking benefits for people, nature and climate: Actions to jointly address climate change and biodiversity

loss". This report showcases how the Government are implementing joined-up solutions to meet their global commitments on climate change and tackling biodiversity loss.

Government action

The Government have restored the UK as an international leader on climate change and are reversing nature's decline after years of neglect. In this year's spending review, the Government secured the largest investment in clean power in a generation, as well as record levels of funding for nature restoration. This puts the UK on the path to clean power by 2030, bringing bills down in the long term, and creating thousands of good jobs for our country, while restoring our natural environment and tackling the climate crisis.

By taking steps like making homes more energy efficient and planting trees, we are mitigating the crises we face while also helping to cut bills and improve access to nature. At the same time, we are also committed to improving the resilience of our communities to adapt to the climate change that is already happening. We have announced the largest flooding programme in history, which commits a record £7.9 billion capital investment over 10 years to protect hundreds of thousands of homes, small business, and vital infrastructure. To help us improve further, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has announced that it will explore how stronger adaptation objectives can be set to improve preparedness for the impacts of climate change, which will be crucial to an ambitious and impactful fourth national adaptation programme due in 2028.

Finally, I want to take the opportunity to update Parliament on the actions on climate and nature that we agreed with the sponsors of the Climate and Nature Bill. The first action was to deliver an annual statement on the state of the climate and nature. Alongside today's statement, we are moving at pace to take the other actions forward:

Nature recovery: In June we announced that the Government will introduce a Bill by the end of the year to enable ratification of the "biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction" agreement. The Environment Secretary has also appointed 48 county and combined authorities to lead the creation of local nature recovery strategies. Last week, Essex and Leicestershire's responsible authorities became the latest authorities to publish their strategies.

Consumption emissions and carbon leakage: We are ensuring that our UK decarbonisation efforts lead to a true reduction in global emissions, through developing the UK's carbon border adjustment mechanism to tackle the risk of carbon leakage, and encouraging a circular economy, both domestically and internationally, which will reduce waste and emissions. Today, we are also launching the production and consumption transformation centre, a new partnership between the Universities of Leeds, Lancaster and Sussex, co-funded by UK Research and Innovation and Government.

Public engagement and participation: We will continue to engage with the public through this statement and beyond. Our net zero public participation strategy will be published later in the year and will lay out our objectives for engaging the public.

Improved join-up between JNCC and CCC: Finally, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Climate Change Committee have committed to a data-sharing agreement to help tackle these intertwined crises. This partnership will bring to bear a wealth of expertise in an integrated way, helping Government shape the right solutions for climate and nature.

The fight to protect our home is a deeply British cause. It is about protecting our way of life and our natural world from significant dangers. Only by bringing down carbon emissions, protecting nature, and working internationally can we deliver energy security today, and climate security for future generations.

[HCWS817]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

International Health Regulations Amendments

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I would like to update the House that the UK Government have accepted the amendments to the International Health Regulations 2005, which were agreed by countries at the World Health Assembly on 1 June 2024.

The IHRs are an important, legally binding technical framework that helps to prevent and protect against the international spread of disease. The existing IHRs, agreed to in 2005, have helped the UK to prevent, detect and respond to global health emergencies such as Ebola and avian influenza by giving the UK timely access to verified information not in the public domain, helping us to mount a rapid and appropriate public health response.

The amendments to the IHRs, agreed at the WHA on 1 June 2024, aim to reflect lessons learned from recent global health emergencies, such as the covid-19 pandemic, including by improving information sharing and collaboration for public health emergency response. On 19 September 2024, the World Health Organisation's director general formally notified all states parties of the official amendments adopted by the WHA. From that date of notification, the UK had 10 months in which to complete the domestic review of IHR amendments and then notify the WHO director general on whether the UK wished to reject or reserve on any or all of the amendments by 19 July 2025. The amendments, all of which are adopted, will come into force for the UK in September 2025.

Department of Health and Social Care officials led work across Government to confirm the implications of the amendments for the UK. Officials also worked with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations and in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies to ensure that all relevant territories are considered. This analysis concluded that the amendments are in the national interest of the UK and informed the decision to accept all of the amendments. Acceptance of, and compliance with, the amendments does not impact the UK's right to make domestic decisions on national measures concerning public health. The analysis found that where the amendments placed new obligations on

the UK and other member states, the UK is already compliant with all but three areas. To be compliant with these amendments, the UK will:

Designate the UK Health Security Agency as the national IHR authority to oversee overall implementation of the IHR and ensure co-ordination within the UK;

Factor the new tier of alert "pandemic emergency" into domestic pandemic preparedness planning across Government, the devolved Governments, the Crown dependencies and the UK overseas territories; and

Provide representation for the UK on the WHO member state-led IHR implementation committee and provide representation, as required, on the technical sub-committee of the implementation committee.

Please be assured that respect for member state sovereignty is an underlying principle of the IHR, and at no point during negotiations about the amendments were there proposals that would give the WHO powers to impose domestic decisions on the UK, such as those regarding lockdowns, mandatory vaccinations, mask wearing or border restrictions. While the WHO director general may make recommendations on international responses following the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern or a pandemic emergency, these recommendations are non-binding and it is for member states to determine their domestic response.

[HCWS818]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Syrian Nationals with Protection Claims

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): Following the fall of the Assad regime, the Home Office paused all Syrian asylum interviews and decisions, as announced to Parliament on 11 December 2024. This pause extended to settlement protection applications from Syrian nationals, including those who were brought to the UK under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme and have completed their five years of refugee status. During this period, we continued to register all Syrian applications.

This was a necessary step while there was no stable, objective information available to make robust assessments of risk on return to Syria. The Home Office has worked to lift the pause as soon as there was sufficient information to make accurate and well-evidenced determinations.

Today the Government will publish updated country information, which will enable decision making to resume. With this, protection claims can be processed and safe return reviews conducted in line with published policy for any Syrian nationals applying for settlement protection.

[HCWS816]

ORAL ANSWERS

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Monday 21 July 2025**

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Motion—(Simon Hoare)—agreed to

Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Bill [Col. 87]
Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords] [Col. 104]
Motion for Second Reading—(Sir John Whittingdale)—agreed to

Condition of Roads: Cheshire [Col. 115]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Northern Ireland Veterans: Prosecution [Col. 1WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]
